

Bheja Fry

The compulsive use of AI in study, work, and play has created a new kind of exhaustion that is reshaping how the brain focuses, remembers, and thinks to our detriment

By ANJALI AWASTHI

Many newbies in the world of Artificial Intelligence presume AI is supposed to make work easier. For Karishma Pramanik, a digital marketer in Delhi, it did. Until it didn't. She recalls when ChatGPT was simply an extra pair of eyes. She would paste an important email on it to catch the occasional typo or smoothen an awkward sentence. Soon, she began to upload PPTs. Then articles to rewrite and even write. Before long, almost every piece of her work was processed by an AI chatbot before it reached another human. The shift was so gradual she barely noticed it. What she did notice, eventually, was harder to explain. "Initially I used AI to catch grammar mistakes and polish my writing," she says. "But over time, I found myself checking stuff I would never have questioned before. Even when I knew it was right, I wanted AI to confirm it. I was experiencing severe burnout not from writing but from constantly seeking reassurance from a bot. At some point, I stopped trusting my own judgment. I realised I was burned out by answers." The shape of the crisis is almost philosophical. Humans built machines to do more of the thinking so that we might have more room to be human: to reflect, create, connect, rest.

Instead, we have placed ourselves in the loop of machines that never rest, demanding that we match their pace, verify their work, and keep them calibrated. We have made ourselves the quality-control department for an intelligence that does not tire.

Hundreds of kilometres away from Delhi, in Jaipur, first-year school teacher Navya Bhatnagar found herself facing a different version of the same dilemma. She had entered the profession hoping to develop her own teaching style, experimenting with lesson plans and discovering what worked in her classroom and what didn't. Instead, almost every lesson of hers began making a detour through AI. It certainly saved her time, but it also left her wondering whether she was relying on AI because it genuinely improved her work or because she had stopped trusting her instincts. The questions from her students only made that uncertainty louder. "They ask me, 'Ma'am, how will we stay relevant if AI can do everything?' AI burnout isn't just about using new tools. It's the constant pressure to keep up while wondering if you're still enough."

Kerala-based researchers at Marian College Kuttikkanam, published in *Frontiers in Psychology* (April 2025), which examines AI's impact in educational settings explored "the cognitive paradox of AI in education: between enhancement and erosion". It argues that while AI-based adaptive learning systems can improve outcomes, they simultaneously question cognitive development, particularly in critical thinking, problem-solving, and autonomous learning. The resonance with workplace dynamics is unmistakable.

There is a Fear Economy at Work

A Boston Consulting Group study titled *Four Keys to Boosting Inclusion and Beating Burnout* found that 58 per cent of India's workforce is burnt out: 10 per cent worse than the global average of 48 per cent. Australia trailed at 53 per cent; Japan and Germany registered significantly lower rates. India did not have a burnout problem when AI arrived. The first and most documented dimension of AI-related distress in India is not AI burnout, but the worker's chronic anticipatory anxiety that fears being replaced by it. In an IIM Ahmedabad study of white-collar workers, 55 per cent have adopted

must adopt the tools they fear in order to protect themselves from those very tools.

Psychologists have a name for what Indian IT workers are experiencing: technostress. A peer-reviewed study published in the *International Journal of Indian Psychology* found that negative perceptions of AI around job insecurity and task complexity were directly associated with higher stress levels across IT, finance, and education sectors. India's IT sector shed between 25,000 and 30,000 positions in 2025, with companies citing AI-driven realignment. The emotional toll of the AI transition in India is registering most acutely among younger workers. A 2024 Emotional Wellness State of Employees Report from the wellness platform YourDOST found that 64 per cent of employees aged 21 to 30 are battling high stress levels; a 31 per cent year-on-year increase. Among women, it is 72.2 per cent. India's Corporate Health Study (2026) found, only 11 per cent of organisations use predictive analytics to monitor workforce health, and the concept of

CORTISOL SPIKE
Persistent digital overload and work-related AI demands may contribute to keeping cortisol—the body's primary stress hormone—higher than normal

AI tools; 48 per cent have received some training, and a huge 68 per cent fear their jobs could be partially or fully automated within five years. A further 40 per cent believe their current skills will become redundant. Among millennials specifically, a report by Great Place To Work India found that nearly 49 per cent fear AI-driven job replacement, making it a persistent undercurrent in their working lives. Data released by Astrotalk in December 2025 revealed that career-related anxiety rose by 50 per cent in 2025, with "Is AI going to take my job?" becoming the single most common question on the platform. New surveys indicate that 96 per cent of Indian professionals use AI or generative AI tools in their work, and 94 per cent perceive that mastering these technologies is essential for career progression. Many of them, however, are deeply concerned about potential job displacement if they do not upskill fast enough. The result is a peculiar double bind: workers

The Digital Wellbeing Gap is Fuelling Unhealthy Choices

Now many Indian enterprises are accelerating AI adoption, cloud transformation, and hybrid work models. The average Indian employee already works 46.7 hours a week, significantly higher than the global ILO average. The new employment crisis worldwide is job loss to AI—both white and blue collar. The Indian IT office model is built on thousands of junior employees doing manual 'grunt work', to support the small top management. Now, systemic inefficiencies are being mended using AI. In April 2026 alone, Oracle, which has shifted much of its ops to AI, reportedly sacked 12,000 employees in India. TCS made 12,000 jobs redundant. Cognizant, Freshworks, and

tracking 'Psychological Safety Scores' is largely aspirational. The infrastructure for addressing this crisis, in other words, is as underdeveloped as the crisis itself is developing exponentially.

TECHNOSTRESS

The pressure to constantly adapt to new AI tools, notifications, and digital workflows can trigger chronic stress and fatigue



COGNITIVE SATURATION

Constant AI-assisted multitasking overloads the brain, reducing its ability to process, prioritise, and retain information effectively



SuperOps are choosing lean, mean teams driven by AI. But AI may not always have the right answer. Ford has rehired more than 300 veteran quality engineers after discovering that AI systems could not fully match the expertise and judgement of experienced human inspectors. The company said it had underestimated the value of seasoned engineers whose experience across multiple product cycles proved difficult to replicate with AI. But as most companies still move to AI, employment anxiety is on the rise. This is a cause for concern, given India's mental

health infrastructure is too thin. The corporate sector's response is wellness apps and stipends; all of which global research has shown to be inadequate.

In a survey-based study of 1,488 full-time US-located workers, researchers identified a phenomenon they labelled "AI brain fry".

Its definition was the mental fatigue caused by excessive use of AI tools beyond the user's cognitive capacity. Some participants reported a persistent mental fog, while their decision-making faculty slowed. Some even got persistent headaches. A Harvard Business Review study of nearly 1,500 full-time AI users found that AI burnout happens not just because of task volumes, but also the worker's need to continuously evaluate, verify, and refine AI-generated outputs. This leaves them in a perennial state of cerebral engagement. Many workers confess they are mentally crowded despite having more tools to use at work than ever. They struggle to sustain attention, second-guess decisions they once made confidently; how they log into AI before attempting to find solutions on their own. At the same time, the rapid cycle of prompts and instant responses continually stimulates the brain's reward system, particularly dopamine pathways, conditioning us to expect immediate feedback. Over time, this low-effort, high-frequency stimulation may make slower, effortful thinking feel unusually taxing. The end result is a brain that tires more quickly, struggles with uncertainty and increasingly seeks external validation. Add the low-level stress of constant digital engagement which can elevate cortisol levels: the more mentally fatigued we feel, the more we lean on AI, and the more difficult independent thinking seems.

Digital Dependency is a Paradox
Every prompt on an AI app promises clarity. Every answer appears helpful. Every shortcut seems to save time.

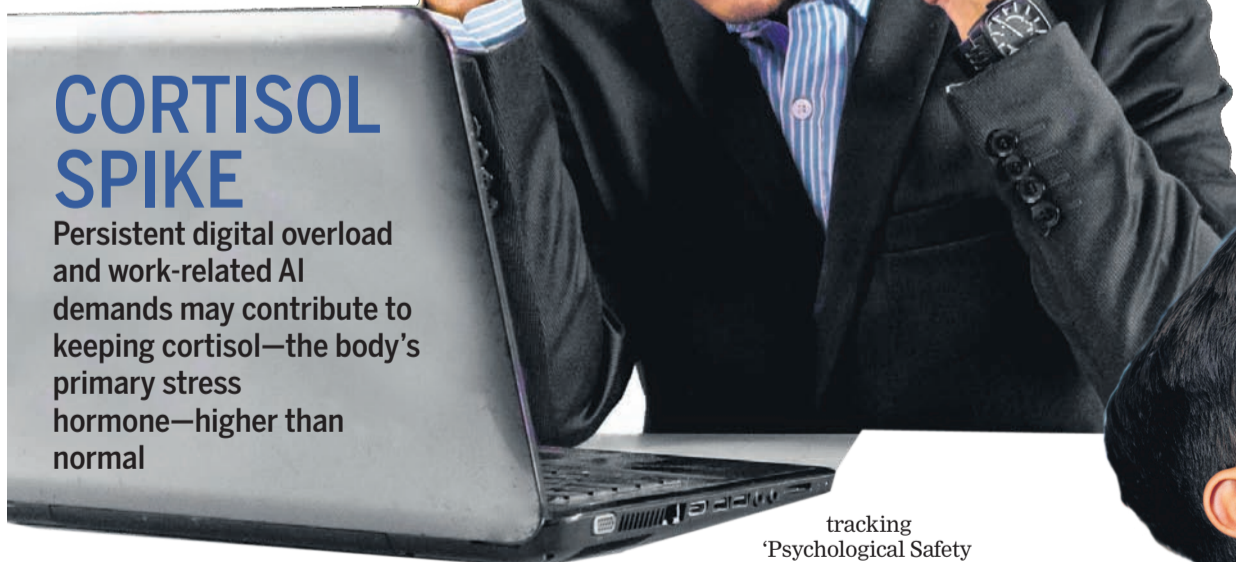
Until one day, the hardest question isn't what to ask AI. It's whether you've forgotten how

to trust your own answer. Take the case of Appurva Pandey, 38, who lives in Mumbai and spent more time planning her daughter's life than actually experiencing it. At first she turned to AI for practical help, meal plans, weekend activities, sleep schedules, educational games. Suggestions kept coming. What began as convenience slowly turned into a habit. "At some point, I realised I was spending more time improving my life than living it," she says. That feeling sits at the heart of AI burnout. Not exhaustion from work, but the exhaustion from constant optimisation. Researchers at Microsoft and Carnegie Mellon University say the more humans lean on AI to complete their tasks, the more their critical thinking abilities shrink. HR professional Ahana Walawalkar from Mumbai has lost count of the number of AI tools people tell her they're trying to master. She interviews candidates across industries, and lately, has noticed a familiar anxiety creeping into almost every conversation. It isn't that workers dislike technology or resist change. They are racing to learn every new chatbot, image generator, coding assistant and productivity app, terrified that missing the next breakthrough will make them unemployable. "They're afraid that no matter how much they learn, it will never be enough. That's AI burnout," she says.

Bengaluru-based software engineer Rohan MK and Mumbai-based marketing executive Priya Khanna say AI entered their workplaces as a productivity tool but quickly became an expectation. Today, their workdays involve switching between ChatGPT, GitHub Copilot, image generators, and internal AI assistants, not just to complete tasks faster but to keep pace with the relentless stream of new tools. "Earlier, I was judged on how well I solved a problem. Now I'm expected to deliver in half the time because everyone assumes AI is doing the heavy lifting," says Rohan. Khanna echoes the sentiment: "Every week there's a new tool everyone says you must know. You feel guilty if you're not using the latest one." Both admit that instead of reducing mental effort, AI has created decision fatigue. The result, they say, is a growing sense of burnout and a nagging fear that constant dependence on AI may be dulling the very analytical and creative skills that made them valuable in the first place.

Brains are being fried not just at work. The burnout of Mumbai-based Meeta Shukla, a 45-year-old chartered accountant, arrived much more quietly. It began with her daughter, Jwisha. Questions that once were discussed and debated at the dining table—about homework, science facts or random curiosities—now went straight to an AI app. Meeta admired Jwisha's instinctive embrace of the technology. "I'm proud of how naturally she embraces technology, but I also found myself staying up late, reading about AI to keep up with her. It took me a while to realise I wasn't learning out of curiosity anymore; I was learning out of fear," she says.

AI burnout comes not from producing information, but from constantly processing it. Every prompt produces possibilities. Every answer comes with alternatives. Every recommendation invites another question. But the brain is no longer spending energy just



BRAIN FOG

Excessive reliance on AI and prolonged screen time can leave users feeling mentally sluggish, unfocused, and less able to think clearly

Continued from page 1

searching for information. It is deciding what to do with an endless supply of information. Psychologists describe this as cognitive overload, a state where the volume of information exceeds our ability to comfortably process it. "I believe we are already seeing signs of a shift from physical exhaustion to cognitive and emotional saturation," says counselling psychologist Pranati Kapoor. Researchers are beginning to see evidence of this shift. One of the most discussed studies comes from MIT Media Lab, where brain activity of 54 participants aged 18 to 39 were monitored as they completed essay-writing tasks using either ChatGPT or Google Search, and without digital assistance. ChatGPT users demonstrated weaker memory recall. Counselling psychologist Dr Shiromi Chaturvedi says, "Research shows our brains need time to transition between tasks. AI allows us to switch contexts almost instantly, but our nervous systems operate differently. The end result is to feel being mentally scattered despite being technologically efficient."

When Trusting AI is to Doubt Yourself

AI burnout is particularly visible among younger users. Deloitte's global survey found Gen Z and millennials are deeply focused on skill development and staying relevant in a rapidly changing workplace. Another study found 56 per cent of Gen Z workers use AI to find ways to communicate with a boss or colleague. Psychologists say users are beginning to outsource something deeper than doing tasks. They are outsourcing confidence. A grammar check becomes a second opinion. A second opinion becomes validation. Over time, this habit can make people less certain about their own instincts, even in situations where they already know the answer. Says Kapoor, "In some cases, AI can become a psychological buffer between a person and an uncomfortable experience. Instead of having a difficult conversation, tolerating uncertainty, or sitting with painful emotions, people may turn to AI for immediate answers, reassurance, validation, or emotional processing." For Mumbai banker Shraddha Awasthi, the algorithmic shift was gradual. AI initially helped her structure emails and presentations. Soon, she used AI to navigate disagreements at work, family conversations and personal decisions. "It felt helpful at first, but after a while, I realised I was checking AI before trusting myself," she says.

Psychologists have long argued that boredom serves an important purpose. It drives the brain to process experiences, reflect, daydream and make unexpected connections. Creativity often emerges

not while actively searching for answers but while the mind is allowed to wander. Kapoor says, "Growth requires reflection, patience, and sometimes simply sitting with not knowing." AI short-circuits some of that process. The space between question and answer, where reflection often happens, keeps shrinking. For Mohd Harshad, a software developer and content creator in Bengaluru, it wasn't the answers. It was the feeling that there were too many of them. "Every week there seems to be a new model, a new tool, a new update. You start feeling like you're always behind." Researchers describe this phenomenon as a form of information overload. The challenge is no longer accessing



knowledge, but deciding what deserves attention. The result is a strange contradiction. Technologies designed to create more time often leave people feeling as though they have less mental space. Dr Shiromi Chaturvedi believes this constant state of engagement comes at a cost. "Our brains need periods of rest and transition," she says.

Every generation inherits a tool that changes how people think. Calculators reduced the need for mental arithmetic. GPS changed how people navigate. Search engines made it unnecessary to remember endless facts. AI is obviously different. For Shagun Pandey, a designer, the shift happened gradually. "It started with work. Then it became brainstorming, research, writing, planning and eventually almost everything." Many experts compare excessive AI dependence to outsourcing a workout. The task gets completed, but the mental exercise never happens. Rishabh Thakur, who has spent years working in content and branding, believes a less visible consequence of AI burnout is the gradual erosion of creative confidence. "Good ideas rarely arrive fully formed in the human brain. When every challenge is immediately solved or refined by AI, people lose patience with their own thinking process," he says. That loss of patience has consequences beyond creativity. This does not mean AI is

making people less creative or less capable. Only, the role of human contribution is changing. For Mumbai-based art student Vrindali Rathod, somewhere between assignments and creative projects, AI had become her default collaborator. Every idea, every concept and every creative block was met with an instant prompt instead of a pause for reflection. "We grew up being told to think differently," Rathod says. "Now it feels like we're constantly being encouraged to think faster. I think that's where AI burnout begins."

When Burnout Moves into the Body

The brain fry may begin as a thinking problem, but it does not remain one for long. Mental fatigue has a way of showing up physically. Concentration



entertainment and PR industry in Mumbai, found the fatigue came less from generating content and more from deciding when to stop. "My biggest gripe with AI is figuring out which response is a good-enough response and where to draw the line," he says. Unlike traditional search engines, AI systems do not simply provide information. Every answer can become another version. Every version can become another decision. Mental health researchers describe this developed as

Therapy (DBT), alongside mindfulness, family counselling and supervised reintroduction to technology. The response is not limited to private providers. While Tulsi Healthcare has expanded its behavioural addiction services to address unhealthy AI dependence, public institutions are also strengthening support for digital overuse. The Behavioural Addictions Clinic at All India Institute of Medical Sciences already treats compulsive internet, smartphone, gaming and social media use, and clinicians say these therapeutic approaches are proving equally relevant for emerging AI-related dependency. More recently, JSS Medical College & Hospital launched a Special Clinic for Behavioural Addiction & Digital Well-Being to tackle excessive technology use, reflecting growing recognition of digital and AI-related behavioural health concerns in India. Internationally, the risks are no longer hypothetical. One widely reported case is that of Joe Alary, a 57-year-old video editor from Ontario, Canada, who developed an intense emotional attachment to a customised AI chatbot after a personal crisis. He reportedly spent up to 20 hours a day interacting with it, neglected work and personal relationships, and was eventually hospitalised before beginning recovery through therapy and complete disengagement from the chatbot.

The Good, the Bad, and the Complicated

India's AI picture is not uniformly bleak. Boston Consulting Group researchers reported that when it is used to replace repetitive tasks and routines, burnout scores were actually lower: "This highlights the subtle-but-important distinction between the types of stress that AI can alleviate and those that it may worsen," the survey said. The problem, then, is not AI per se. It is how AI is being integrated. Is it a tool that substitutes for drudgery, or as an engine that just raises the floor of how much a single worker is expected to produce. India has its own specific vulnerabilities: a massive workforce concentrated in sectors where automation is high, and a culture of unsustainable extreme working hours, and a mental health system that has only recently begun to receive serious policy attention. The country has the capacity to reskill between eight and 10 million professionals by 2030. But talent without psychological wellbeing is talent operating below its potential. The question for India's technology leadership, its policymakers, and its institutions is whether the human cost of AI transition at the workplace will be treated as a signal worth acting on, or just as background noise to be managed until it becomes a crisis that can no longer be ignored.

The engineers who built India's technology century deserve better than that answer.

The Quiet Exhaustion

OPINION

Kamna Sarin

Clinical Psychologist,
Adayu, A Fortis
Group Company



For centuries, technology has helped us think more efficiently. Calculators took over arithmetic. GPS replaced navigation. Each innovation reduced mental effort while leaving the business of thinking largely untouched.

Artificial Intelligence feels different. It isn't memory or calculation being outsourced anymore. It's brainstorming, drafting, analysing and deciding. Thinking itself is becoming something that can be delegated. In that quiet handover, a new kind of exhaustion is taking root.

Welcome to AI burnout.

Clients arrive with anxiety they cannot quite locate, a compulsive need to second-guess themselves, and a persistent sense of professional inadequacy. Recent research has found that heavy AI use is associated with lower critical thinking through cognitive offloading, relying on external tools instead of engaging in deep, reflective thought. Used in moderation, this is efficient. In excess, it quietly weakens our willingness to tolerate uncertainty or wrestle with difficult ideas ourselves.

Confidence begins to migrate from our own judgment to a machine's output. Psychologists call this erosion of self-efficacy: the gradual loss of belief that you can solve problems on your own. Clients also describe work that no longer feels like theirs. The words are technically their own, yet somehow unfamiliar. AI creates a peculiar

kind of self-doubt: the feeling of being an imposter despite having completed the work yourself.

AI also changes the nature of mental effort. Rather than removing judgement, it often multiplies it. Multiple polished answers still require someone to evaluate, compare and decide. The cognitive load hasn't disappeared; it has simply changed shape while stripping away the satisfaction of arriving at an answer yourself. These effects don't stop at the workplace. They are beginning to appear in classrooms too.

School was never simply about producing the right answer. It was about learning to tolerate uncertainty, make mistakes, and reason your way towards understanding. That struggle creates the cognitive friction essential for learning and, with it, genuine confidence. AI can bypass that process entirely.

Students may submit polished assignments without developing the patience, curiosity or persistence that real learning demands.

None of this makes AI the villain. Like any cognitive tool, its psychological impact depends

on how we use it. The question isn't whether AI should think with us. It's whether it is beginning to think instead of us.

Perhaps what we now need is AI hygiene. Attempt the first draft before opening the app. Stay with the difficult problem a little longer. Use AI to challenge ideas you've already formed rather than forming them for you. The discomfort of not immediately knowing the answer isn't a flaw in your thinking. More often than not, it's where thinking begins.

AI can generate ideas and mimic expertise. What it cannot build for us is judgement. That remains irreducibly human. But only if we continue to practise it.



Psychological Patterns Behind AI Burnout

Seeking Constant Reassurance
Repeatedly asking AI to validate decisions, conversations, opinions or feelings

Mental Shortcuts
Choosing instant answers over deeper reflection, research or critical thinking

Automation Bias
Trusting AI-generated responses without adequately questioning or verifying them

The Convenience Trap
Turning to AI by default because it is faster and easier than working through a problem independently

Blind Trust
Assuming AI is correct simply because its responses sound confident and authoritative

The Black Box Effect
Accepting AI-generated conclusions without understanding how the system arrived at them

The Illusion of Understanding
Feeling informed or knowledgeable without fully processing or engaging with the information

Personalised Validation
Becoming reliant on AI because it mirrors your language, concerns and viewpoints

The Reward Loop
Positive experiences encouraging users to consult AI more frequently and for increasingly important decisions

Fear-Driven Dependence
Using AI to avoid uncertainty, mistakes or the discomfort of making decisions independently

Prompt Perfectionism
Spending excessive time refining prompts, comparing outputs and chasing a "better" answer

becomes harder. Sleep becomes lighter. Small decisions begin to feel disproportionately difficult. The body starts reacting to a strain that is often difficult to identify because, on the surface, nothing appears wrong.

Psychiatrist Dr Era Dutta says, "People often assume burnout only comes from overwork, but the brain can become exhausted by the constant decision-making, uncertainty and information processing." Researchers have long understood that the brain and body do not operate separately. When mental demands remain elevated for extended periods, stress responses can become more persistent. Dr Chaturvedi believes this constant state of engagement is becoming common. "Reflection, rest and transition are not luxuries. They are part of how healthy thinking happens," she says. A recent *Nature* paper describes AI burnout using the 3R Principle: Results, Responses, and Responsibility. AI can generate results, but turning those results into meaningful responses still requires human judgement, context, and experience. The responsibility remains ours.

India is among the fastest generative adopter in the world. According to OpenAI-commissioned research, around 36 per cent of Indian users turn to ChatGPT daily: more than double the global average of 17 per cent. Kashyap Vora, a senior content manager in the

Cognitive Offloading
Handing over thinking, remembering, analysing and problem-solving tasks to AI instead of engaging with them yourself

"AI allows us to switch contexts almost instantly, but our nervous systems operate differently. The end result is to feel being mentally scattered despite being technologically efficient."

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"People often assume burnout only comes from overwork, but the brain can become exhausted by the constant decision-making, uncertainty and information processing."

DR ERA DUTTA,
Psychiatrist

Adapted from a 2026 ScienceDirect review on AI overdependence, cognitive decline and the psychological mechanisms driving AI reliance



Art OK, Please

With poetry, portraits and slogans, one family of painters has been telling the story of road travel using brush and paint

By SUHAIL BHAT

The first rays of the morning sun spill over the endless rows of trucks at Sanjay Gandhi Transport Nagar, Delhi's sprawling trucking hub. Diesel engines rumble awake, mechanics clang metal tools against steel, and drivers sip steaming cups of *chai* before setting off on journeys that will take them across the length and breadth of India. But before many of these trucks hit the highways, they make one final stop at a small paint shop tucked inside the depot.

Here, blank metal panels slowly transform into vibrant canvases. Layers of bright enamel paint erase faded colours. Steady brushstrokes bring to life handwritten couplets in Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi, portraits of saints and singers, tigers, peacocks and horses, and playful slogans that have become synonymous with Indian highways. Amid the noise and grime of one of the country's busiest transport hubs, three brothers are keeping alive a tradition that has travelled India's roads for generations.

Raju Kumar, 44, Harish Kumar, 43, and Kamal Kumar, 57, belong to a family of truck painters whose story stretches back three generations. Their grandfather and father worked on these very lanes, transforming ordinary trucks into rolling expressions of faith, longing, humour and regional pride. Today, the brothers continue that legacy, blending painstaking hand-painted craftsmanship with changing tastes and modern techniques.

"Truck painting is our livelihood," says Raju, carefully mixing shades of red and yellow before dipping his brush into the paint. "Drivers spend weeks away from their families, so they want their trucks to carry messages, images and blessings for safety. For them, it is their identity."

Truck painting in India dates back to the early decades of the 20th century, when expanding highways and commercial transport reshaped the movement of goods. As truckers spent weeks—and often months—away from home, their vehicles became deeply personal spaces. Religious symbols were painted for divine protection, film stars and folk heroes watched over the roads, colourful floral borders reflected regional aesthetics, while handwritten poetry and witty one-liners offered companionship through lonely highways. Over time, every state developed its own visual vocabulary, turning India's highways into moving galleries of folk art.

Punjabi trucks often carry portraits of Sidhu Moose Wala or Babu Maan, while those from Uttar Pradesh feature familiar slogans such as '*Buri nazar wale tera muh kaala*' alongside local deities and saints. "It's more than decoration," Raju says. "It's tradition."

Known simply as 'Deepu' among transporters, Sanjay Gandhi Transport Nagar is Asia's largest trucking hub, spread across more than 75 acres. Every day, thousands of trucks from Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Jammu and Kashmir, and Uttar Pradesh roll in for servicing, repairs—and often, a fresh coat of personality. Though computer-generated graphics and vinyl decals have become commonplace, many truck owners still seek hand-painted artwork for the individuality it offers. "Our job is to paint as per the customer's demand," says Harish. "These days, slogans like '*Beti Padhao, Beti Bachao*' and '*Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan*' are popular. About 20 or 25 years



Truck art often uses folk and local imagery to give the truckers a sense of belonging and protection

Truck painting in India dates back to the early 20th century, when expanding highways and commercial transport reshaped the movement of goods

ago, people wanted '*Hum Do, Humare Do*'. Trends change with society and government, but the love for hand-painted trucks never fades."

Their workshop rarely falls silent. Drivers leaf through design books, point to old photographs, or simply describe what they want while the brothers sketch directly onto metal with practiced ease. "Many customers ask for poetry," says Harish, dipping his brush into bright yellow enamel. "Some want love poems, others prefer verses about family and companionship. A common design is a girl sitting on the bank of a river with the words '*Ghar Kab Aoge*'. Many also request paintings of the Taj Mahal; it's very popular."

Like the trucks themselves, the art has evolved with time.

What once relied on a limited palette has grown richer and more elaborate, often combining intricate brushwork with vinyl backdrops and digital elements. Yet the heart of the craft, the brothers insist, still lies in the human hand. "Truck art takes years of practice. That's why customers prefer us," says Harish. "The colours we use change with time. Earlier, golden brown was in demand; now white and yellow are more popular. We even mix digital techniques and vinyl backdrops. But our art is always in the human touch."

For truckers, the appeal lies in something no vinyl print can replicate: personality. Every commission begins with a conversation—about faith, family, favourite singers, hometowns and memories that deserve a place on the road. Sandeep, a truck driver from Punjab, recently entrusted the Kumar brothers with decorating his vehicle. As fresh coats of emerald green, crimson and gold dried under the Delhi sun, he watched the artists add poetry and intricate borders by hand. "I could have used stickers or prints, but nothing beats truck art," he says. "The colours, the poetry, the way every detail is done by hand—it's like carrying a piece of my home and my beliefs wherever I go."

The brothers, too, see themselves as custodians of a legacy rather than merely painters. "Our grandfather started this, then our father, and now we do this work" says Raju.

the design in chalk, another fills broad swathes of colour, while the third adds delicate flourishes, lettering and finishing touches. Working in perfect sync, they can transform an entire truck in just three to four hours. "There are certain things people ask us to include, like the Indian flag or quotes on social issues, so that the message reaches every corner of the country," Kamal adds. "It is also a form of communication."

Yet, despite the years of experience and painstaking labour behind every truck, the financial rewards remain modest. "Each of us usually earns around Rs 700 to Rs 800 a day. Sometimes customers give a little extra out of love," Kamal says. The reputation they have built over decades has taken them well beyond Delhi. "We have customers from across India, and sometimes we travel to other states such as Punjab and Haryana to decorate trucks," Kamal shares. For him, every brushstroke carries a deeply personal memory. "Whenever we pick up the brush, it feels like our father is still with us, guiding our hands. This is not just work for us; it is his memory that we carry forward every day."

Even as technology reshapes traditional trades, the brothers have learned to adapt without surrendering the essence of their craft. Vinyl backdrops and digital elements may find their way into some designs, but every truck still begins with a conversation rather than a computer template. "Every truck we paint is unique," says Harish. "We talk to the customer; understand what they want, and create something they can call their own. That's why hand painting will never go out of style." That connection keeps customers returning year after year. One of their regulars, Dinesh Singh, has been driving trucks since 2001. To him, the vehicle is far more than a machine. "The truck has become my home," Singh says. "We spend most of our time in it. We eat here, sleep here, and even relax here." Whenever he wants to repaint his truck, he returns to the Kumar brothers. Alongside social messages, he asks them to paint portraits of his favourite singers and actors, turning the vehicle into a moving reflection of his own identity.

That craftsmanship comes at a price—but one many truck owners are happy to pay. "If someone else charges two thousand for a job, we can charge six thousand, and people still come to us because they trust our work," Harish



For truckers, the appeal lies in something no vinyl print can replicate: personality. The painters, too, see themselves as custodians of a legacy

"We are proud to carry on this art. As long as trucks run on Indian roads, this art will live with them."

As children, the brothers would accompany their father to transport hubs, watching him sketch freehand patterns before carefully filling them with colour. What began as helping him clean brushes and mix paint

slowly became a lifelong apprenticeship. Today, they represent the third generation of the family to wield the brush. "Earlier, only one or two colours were used, but now customers want multiple colours and more detailed work," Kamal reflects.

Inside the workshop, the rhythm is almost choreographed. One brother outlines

remarks.

As another freshly painted truck rumbles out of Sanjay Gandhi Transport Nagar, its rear panel gleaming with bold colours, poetry and blessings, it carries much more than cargo. It carries stories of homes left behind, journeys yet to be made, and an art form that refuses to fade. In an age of machine-made decals and mass-produced graphics, the Kumar brothers continue to prove that the most enduring designs are still those painted by hand—one brushstroke, one conversation and one highway at a time.

(From left) Raju Kumar, Harish Kumar, and Kamal Kumar



Kamal Kumar painting a nazar battu (amulet) on a truck

From Gulamgiri to The Immortals of Meluha

RESURRECTING FAITH

Devdutt
Pattanaik

Mythologist,
Author, Speaker



Jyotiba Phule did in the 19th century what Amish Tripathi did in the 21st century. Both wrote mytho-fictions, but for very different reasons. Phule used his tale to expose power; Tripathi used his tale to restore confidence in power.

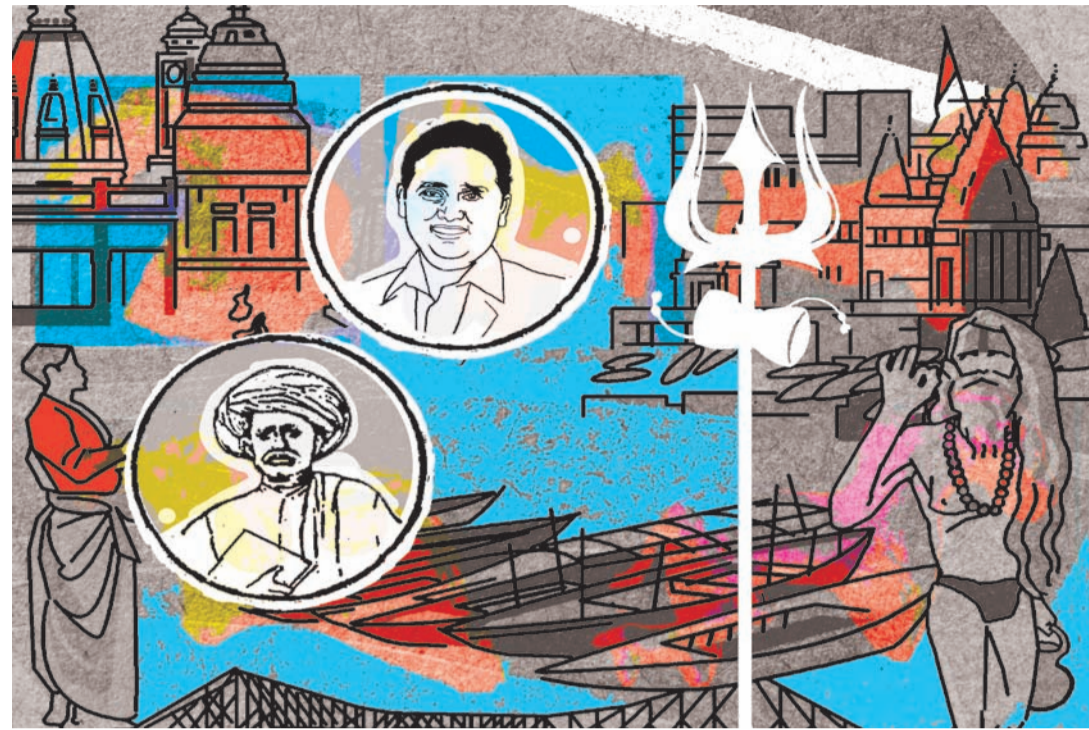
Jyotirao Govindrao Phule was a Mali, from a marginalised gardening and cultivating community classified as Shudra under the varna system. Educated by Christian missionaries, he wrote *Gulamgiri* in 1873, when colonial modernity and Brahmin reform movements were jointly reshaping Indian public life while leaving caste hierarchy largely intact. Amish Tripathi is an urban Brahmin, educated in IIM, with roots in Varanasi. He published the highly successful Shiva Trilogy beginning with *The Immortals of Meluha* in 2010, in the economic and cultural confidence of post-liberalisation India, when a resurgent Hindu nationalism was seeking civilisational validation in popular culture.

Phule wrote working with the intellectual tools available to 19th-century India. The Aryan invasion theory was widely accepted at that time by Euro-

pean Indologists, colonial administrators, and most educated Indians including upper-caste nationalists who used it to claim kinship with a superior Indo-European stock. The Harappan archeological sites had not yet been discovered; they would be excavated only in the 1920s. Phule knew nothing of that urban world.

Phule's central move was to read the Dashavatara as a sequential military record of that conquest. Matsya, the fish avatar, was his example: not a divine miracle but the mocking nickname given by indigenous people to the first Aryan leader who arrived by sea. Each subsequent avatar encoded a further wave of territorial, military, cultural conquest. His most powerful illustration was King Bali, whom Brahmanic tradition remembers as a demon king rightfully subdued by Vamana, the dwarf. Phule reversed the verdict. Bali was a benevolent indigenous ruler, treacherously destroyed by a Brahmin invader through deception. The folk prayer still sung by local Marathi women, "May all troubles go and Bali's kingdom come," was in Phule's reading, a trace of suppressed collective memory that the Puranic overlay had failed to erase. Mythology in this reading is not culture. It is a cover story. The folk custom is the testimony the cover story tried to suppress.

Today, equating Harappan civilisation with the Vedic world is a ferocious battle in social media, much like the Creationism-Evolution battle in American



schools. The academic consensus, firmly based on ancient DNA evidence, comparative linguistics, and archaeozoology, holds that the Harappan cities had disappeared centuries before the Vedic pastoral tradition arose.

The single most embarrassing piece of evidence for anyone wishing to merge them is the horse. The Rigveda mentions *ashva* over 200 times; the Ashvins are horsemen gods; the *ashvamedha* is the supreme royal ritual. Horse remains and horse imagery are conspicuously absent from Harappan archaeo-

logical sites. And DNA evidence now shows horses were domesticated in Eurasia in 2200 BC and spread around the world only by 1500 BC.

Tripathi's Meluha was written before horse-domestication related genetic evidence was published. He sidesteps the Harappa-Vedic issue not by addressing it but by fictionally dissolving it. The Indus Valley Civilisation is renamed Meluha, populated with Suryavanshis living along the sacred Saraswati, governed by Lord Ram's laws, organised around Vedic dharma.

Shiva enters this city from Tibet, on a horse, in 1900 BC, a date deliberately chosen as historians believe this is when the city civilisation drew to a close.

Phule, a Shudra writing in the 19th century without access to Harappan archaeology, worked from caste violence itself as his evidence, reasoning backwards from the existence of untouchability to the military conquest that must have produced it. Those communities forced into the most stigmatised labour were, in his framework, the last to have resisted Aryan conquest,

reduced to degradation as punishment for resistance. He gave stigma an external origin and therefore a refutable one.

Tripathi, a Brahmin writing in the 21st century with full knowledge of that archaeology, constructs a fictional world designed to make its findings irrelevant. The Nagas, his deformed, excluded community, are eventually reintegrated through Shiva's moral awakening, not through dismantling the civilisational order that produced their exclusion. The tradition corrects its own excess from within. The structure is preserved; cruelty is softened.

Phule's Aryan invasion argument was not primarily a historiographical claim; it was a delegitimising move. If Brahmin scriptural authority is colonial authority, if the Vedas arrived with the conqueror, then that authority carries no deeper legitimacy than any other occupation. It can be refused.

Tripathi's civilisational argument makes the opposite move: if Vedic dharma is autochthonous, if it was present before the Muslims and before the British, then it has a claim on the soil that supersedes all subsequent challenges. The tradition becomes inseparable from the land, and to question it becomes, by implication, to question belonging itself.

Phule's work is insurgent literature that anticipates evidence from below. Tripathi's 21st century civilisational literature evades it from above.

Posts on X: @devduttmyth

The Wild Pays for Our Convenience

WILD LIVES

Neha
Sinha

Conservation biologist and author



There's a joke amongst environmentalists: when you are searching for wildlife, look at garbage dumps and places where food is thrown.

Birds and mammals, big and small, are likely to be at such places, foraging on the things we have left behind. In Guwahati, you are much more likely to see towering Greater adjutant storks 'fishing' at a garbage dump—places steaming with disembodied non-vegetarian waste—than at the adjoining Deepor beel wetland (where the bird can find real, whole fish). For long dumps were considered the domain of the carnivorous or scavenging animals—jackals at garbage heaps at dusk, migratory eagles at landfills in winter. Yet increasingly one is seeing more herbivorous animals at the places we callously leave our waste.

A recent video shows an elephant picking at a huge rubbish heap near Karnataka's Male Mahadeshwara Hills (MM Hills). The animal is in a sea of plastic, a heart-breaking sight. In earlier instances, elephants have died in tiger

reserves after eating plastic thrown around temples. Many more animals may be dying in this manner—elephant carcasses are more prominent (and sometimes found in waterbodies, where the animal goes to suffer its agonising death).

The irony here is that badly disposed garbage is a human problem too, leaching into groundwater, contaminating soil and causing disease. And if municipalities—as well as communities and individuals—won't solve the problem for the sake of us, they are unlikely to do so for elephants.

Yet precisely for these reasons—for

Garbage does not 'go away' after we have thrown it away. Like horrible secrets, garbage will re-emerge at the worst of times and places

their far-reaching, visible and invisible impacts—garbage is a problem that has to be solved immediately. The scale for re-use and recycling needs to be made larger, plastic needs to be reduced, and segregation needs to be made more accessible (and fashionable). This has to be done nationally, even as the global plastic treaty has fallen through.

Growing up, there was always one area—usually stony, dry, and perhaps with a depression—that people designated as the local garbage spot. Everyone

went there to throw garbage, municipal dumps be damned. It was as if the majority had decided that that particular spot needed to be publicly condemned. Of course, designated municipal dumps themselves are at fault too—often made close to wetlands, ecologically sensitive areas, and hills.

Garbage does not 'go away' after we have thrown it away. Like horrible secrets, garbage will re-emerge at the worst of times and places.

Several times, on visits to forests, I have witnessed remnants of our modern civilisation: a plastic bag, strung up a tall tree, hanging like a dirty lantern, there for posterity, or till an unfortunate bird gets tangled in it.

And after inundations by rivers, riversides and their vegetation get covered by plastic and other waste—the river's way of returning all that is thrown in the water, and ultimately into the sea. There is an old story of a fish's stomach revealing a mythical ring. Today, the fish's stomach will likely reveal microplastics.

Each year, I watch mynas—Brahminy mynas, Common mynas—build nests in summer. The nests are made with twigs and leaves, but often also with bits of plastic. It's hard to blame the birds, when single-use plastic is so omnipotent that it feels like a norm. One day, the nest will be all plastic. In the mean time, it is time to clean up.

Views expressed are personal
Posts on X: @neha_sinha

The Hunger Games are No Longer Relevant

PROVOCATEUR

Ravi
Shankar

ravinewindianexpress.com



Wangchuk, who inspired a Bollywood film that took urban India on a guilt trip through Ladakh's angst, must realise he will not trend. Dipke won't make Amit Shah lose a night's sleep. The problem is not the messenger. It is their model of dissent: the fast, the march, the moral outrage, the appeal to public conscience—all so 20th century.

The belief that Gandhi invented Indian resistance is a myth. The struggle against British rule began centuries before he returned from South Africa. It was not one, unified movement, but an archipelago of contradictions. Dadabhai Naoroji, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, and the early Congress petitioners genuinely believed the empire could be shamed through conscience; Dyer's guns exposed their error. Nationalist Bal Gangadhar Tilak was known as the "Father of the Indian Unrest". Aurobindo set religious sentiment afire. Bhagat Singh and Chandra Shekhar Azad responded in the only language the Brits knew—violence. There were *swadeshi* agitators, mill workers who struck work and were shot, peasant rebellions, tribal uprisings—all which colonial administrators called banditry and historians later named proto-nationalist resistance. Gandhi did not replace this multiplicity. The fast as a weapon is not ancient Hindu tradition transplanted into modern politics; Gandhi only dressed it in those robes. He authored a resistance perfectly calibrated to the specific vulnerabilities of a specific opponent: the optics of colonial brutality at an unarmed man in a loin cloth whose crime was just refusing to eat. Publicly self-inflicted suffering and its public visibility forced the empire into a quandary: respond with force and confirm the charge of tyranny; negotiate and confirm that the weapon worked. The post war world and the growing worldwide anti-imperial sentiment created the moral theatre for Gandhi's suffering to turn into political leverage. The Raj had its enemies to bother about: Westminster liberals, American media and progressives, the League of Nations. Narendra Modi's government has no equivalent vulnerability. It is not an occupying power, but a democratically elected majoritarian government with a genuine electoral mandate, an extraordinarily disciplined media management apparatus, and a political base that does not empathise with the suffering of a Ladakhi activist or a US-returned student protester.

Wangchuk and Dipke are competing against an indifferent government, IPL highlights, Bollywood, contradictory takes on the economy, and the infinite scrolling that has become the default texture of Indian consciousness. The UPA handled protest stupidly. It arrested Hazare and created a martyr. It fumbled its optics in real time and gave AAP needed momentum. Anna Hazare, that most poignant of anachronisms, has threatened to fast again to reclaim a forever lost relevance. It won't work. The current establishment believes engagement is the enemy and reaction is oxygen. Its response to a protest is not with state repression that always generates heroes, international coverage, and documentaries. Its strategy is to create managed irrelevance. Protest is not banned; it is simply absent on prime-time and editorials. In rural India, where the majority of the electorate lives, literacy is uneven, and digital access is mediated through village WhatsApp groups and regional television. The BJP understood that the battle for political reality is won or lost at the level of the village, the *mohalla*, the family dinner table *et al*.

The BJP has effectively colonised India's cultural sphere by understanding popular cinema, religious festivals, folk music, and WhatsApp mythology are the very mediums in which politics is conducted today. The Opposition has ceded its terrain, and retreated into a secular, English-medium, metropolitan register that is politically suicidal in a country where the deepest currents of collective identity run through temples, local saints, and regional myths. Gandhi won his war with a strategic invention. He studied the battlefield contours, his opponent's weaknesses, and engineered a brand new movement that flourished in that climate; and the secular ecosystem to come later. Modi is not Mountbatten. BJP's algorithm is not the Raj. Wangchuk's despair is real, but the audience is elsewhere. The next person who could actually make this establishment get up and take notice will not be fasting. They will be building a storm of change in the opposite India of today—quietly, unglamorously, and in languages that don't trend on English X (formerly Twitter) and in villages which no longer watch TV. Wangchuk, Dipke, the farmer, the Muslim activist, and Leftist student are not that person.

So, Amit Shah will continue to sleep soundly. He always does.



Manipur's Expanding Fault Lines

BY INVITATION

Ajai
Sahni

Executive Director, Institute
for Conflict Management,
South Asia Terrorism Portal



New Delhi's self-inflicted wound in Manipur has deepened. The devastating confrontation engineered between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities has evolved into a far more complex crisis, with the fractured security landscape compounded by growing Kuki-Naga conflict. The killing of three tribal church pastors from the Thadou Baptist Association of India while they were returning from peace talks on May 13, resulted in retaliatory abductions, and the subsequent killing of six abducted Naga civilians by Kuki insurgents, despite the safe return of Kuki abductees by Naga groups, demonstrating how rapidly the conflict had descended into increasingly barbaric forms. As identity politics is weaponised and ethnic hatred normalised, violence is inflating well beyond its original protagonists.

Three years after the ethnic violence erupted in May 2023, Manipur remains physically divided, thousands remain displaced, villages have been destroyed, livelihoods disrupted, and confidence in state institutions is virtually non-existent. Massive deployments of Central security forces have prevented an

even greater catastrophe, but military containment cannot substitute for political resolution.

Kuki-Naga tensions in Manipur have a long history, and periodic low-grade conflict is not unusual over contested territories and political frictions. Indeed, between 1992 and 1997, escalating violence between militant elements of the two groups resulted in hundreds of fatalities, though the conflict thereafter remained largely dormant or sporadic. The current crisis, however, overlaps with a collapse of government authority and credibility, as well as public trust, with non-state armed actors steadily expanding their role and influence.

Crucially, simmering disputes were transformed into sustained ethnic warfare as a result of the systematic mobilisation of ethnic hatred and fear by political actors, militant organisations and sections of civil society that have increasingly sought to harness a vicious and polarising identity politics.

The descent into mutually reinforcing hatred in Manipur represents one of the gravest failures of democratic politics in India since Independence. Instead of moderating conflict, reassuring competing communities and preserving confidence in the neutrality of the state, the political leadership, both Central and State, did the opposite, inflaming passions and destroying faith in administrative impartiality. Administrative decisions are now viewed

through ethnic lenses, political rhetoric has deepened communal suspicions, and trust in public institutions has steadily evaporated. While the state government was essentially part of the mischief that provoked the initial conflagration, the Union Government failed to articulate a credible political roadmap capable of rebuilding trust among Manipur's fractured communities. Massive deployments of Central security forces may suppress violence, but they cannot reconcile communities. Without sustained political engagement, ethnic segregation and the extremist narrative has strengthened month after month, making coexistence virtually impossible.

The consequences extend beyond Manipur. Bordering an unstable Myanmar, the state lies astride expanding narcotics trafficking networks and long-established insurgent corridors that exploit weak governance and porous frontiers. Continuing political fragmentation is creating vulnerabilities extending across India's fragile Northeast.



The symbolic character of the recent violence is particularly disturbing. The murder of church leaders engaged in peace initiatives sends an unmistakable message that moderation itself has become a target. Those seeking dialogue increasingly find themselves threatened by extremists on all sides whose political relevance depends on perpetuating fear and radical communal mobilisation. Every successful effort at reconciliation weakens the influence of armed organisations and ethnic entrepreneurs; every fresh atrocity strengthens their claim that coexistence has become impossible. The killing of religious leaders was not merely another criminal act but an assault on the very possibility of political reconciliation.

Manipur today suffers not merely from ethnic division but from a collapse of political responsibility. The killing of peace emissaries, the descent into reciprocal hostage-taking and the murder of abducted civilians should dispel any illusion that the crisis is a conventional law-and-order problem. The conflict is becoming progressively more fragmented, more communal, and more resistant to resolution. Unless India's political leadership rejects the cynical politics of hatred and restores confidence in constitutional governance, Manipur risks becoming a permanent theatre of overlapping ethnic conflicts whose consequences will reach far beyond the state's borders.

ajaisahni@gmail.com

Ozempic Games

As millions turn to GLP-1 drugs, a new question is emerging: can these medications change not just how people look, but also how they feel, think, and interact with the world?



WHAT IS OZEMPIC PERSONALITY?

'Ozempic Personality' is not a recognised medical diagnosis. The term emerged online as users began describing changes in their emotional responses, social behaviour, motivation, and mood after starting GLP-1 medications.

By MEDHA DUTTA YADAV

For the past two years, Ozempic, Wegovy, Mounjaro, and other GLP-1 receptor agonists have dominated conversations around weight loss. Originally developed for diabetes and obesity management, these drugs have become cultural phenomena, promising dramatic weight reduction without the punishing diets and exercise regimens traditionally associated with slimming down. Celebrity transformations, social media testimonials, and growing scientific evidence have fuelled demand across the world. In India too, prescriptions have surged as newer formulations enter the market and prices gradually become more accessible. The celebrity fascination has only intensified the trend. Actor Ram Kapoor's dramatic weight loss sparked widespread speculation about Ozempic use. Similar rumours surrounded filmmaker Karan Johar's transformation. Regardless of whether these celebrities used GLP-1 drugs, the speculation itself reflects how deeply these medications have entered the public imagination. As access expands, so does scrutiny of their lesser-known effects—including reports of what social media has dubbed 'Ozempic Personality'.

PEOPLE REPORTING 'OZEMPIC PERSONALITY' COMMONLY DESCRIBE:

- Feeling emotionally flatter or less excitable
- Reduced interest in food-centred social activities
- Becoming quieter or more withdrawn
- Less impulsive behaviour
- Reduced cravings not only for food but sometimes for shopping, alcohol, or other rewards
- Feeling calmer but occasionally less enthusiastic

WHO IS MOST LIKELY TO NOTICE MOOD CHANGES ON GLP-1 DRUGS?

- People with a history of depression or anxiety
- Those with emotional eating habits
- Individuals who have used food as a coping mechanism
- Patients undergoing rapid weight loss
- People with pre-existing psychiatric conditions

WHY GLP-1 DRUGS MAY AFFECT YOUR MOOD

Scientists believe any mood changes may stem from the way GLP-1 drugs interact with the brain. These medications do much more than suppress appetite. GLP-1 receptors are present in areas of the brain involved in reward, motivation, stress response, and emotional regulation. Emerging research suggests these drugs may influence dopamine pathways, reduce neuroinflammation, and alter how the brain processes rewards. Another explanation is behavioural rather than biological. Food often serves as a source of comfort, pleasure, stress relief, and social connection. When appetite and food cravings diminish dramatically, some people may experience a temporary adjustment period that feels like an emotional shift. Weight loss itself can also trigger psychological changes. Some users report improved confidence and mood, while others struggle to adapt to a rapidly changing body image.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU NOTICE MOOD CHANGES

- Track symptoms in a journal
- Monitor sleep, stress levels, and eating patterns
- Stay socially connected
- Avoid stopping medication without medical advice
- Consider speaking with a psychologist if changes persist

WHEN TO CONSULT YOUR DOCTOR

- Persistent sadness
- Increased anxiety
- Loss of interest in daily activities
- Significant personality changes noticed by family members
- Thoughts of self-harm or suicide
- Severe mood swings



DR SHASHANK JOSHI, Endocrinologist, Mumbai

"GLP-1 medications certainly change appetite regulation and food-related reward pathways. When eating patterns, body weight, confidence levels, and daily routines change dramatically, people may perceive themselves differently."

DOES OZEMPIC CAUSE DEPRESSION OR ANXIETY?

The evidence remains mixed. Some studies have reported higher rates of depression, anxiety, and other psychiatric symptoms among GLP-1 users. However, other research has found the opposite—showing improvements in depression, anxiety, and overall mental wellbeing, possibly because weight loss improves physical health, self-esteem, and quality of life. Importantly, the US Food and Drug Administration says its ongoing review has not found evidence that GLP-1 drugs cause suicidal thoughts or actions. The current scientific consensus is that the relationship between GLP-1 drugs and mental health is still being studied.

DOES OZEMPIC PERSONALITY GO AWAY?

For most people who report emotional changes, the effects appear to lessen over time as the body adjusts to the medication and weight stabilises. Experts believe many of these experiences may be temporary adaptations to changes in appetite, reward processing, and lifestyle habits. Others may simply reflect the psychological impact of major weight loss rather than a direct drug effect.

SKINNING IT Dr Deepali Bhardwaj



The Myth About Glass Skin

If there is one beauty trend that has taken over the world in the past few years, it is "glass skin"—luminous, poreless, almost translucent complexion made famous by Korean beauty culture. Thanks to K-dramas, K-pop stars and social media influencers, millions of people now walk into dermatology clinics carrying photographs of flawless Korean celebrities and asking the same question: "Doctor, how can I get skin like this?"

I hear this question almost every week. But here's the truth: glass skin is not a skincare product. It is not a serum or a facial. And it is certainly not something that appears overnight. In fact, much of what social media sells as glass skin is built on a myth.

The obsession with glass skin has created an unrealistic standard that can leave many people feeling inadequate. Social media filters, studio lighting and digital editing have blurred the line between reality and fantasy. **The first myth is that Korean skin is fundamentally different from Indian skin.**

While there are some biological differences, the gap is not nearly as dramatic as beauty marketing would have us believe. Both Indian and Korean skin largely fall within similar Fitzpatrick skin categories. The major difference is that Indian skin tends to be more prone to pigmentation. We tan more easily and often develop post-inflammatory marks that linger longer.

This means that skincare routines that work beautifully for a Korean influencer may not produce identical results on Indian skin.

The second myth is that expensive products create flawless skin.

But the reality is far less glamorous. The Korean skincare philosophy is rooted in consistency rather than miracle products. It focuses on protecting the skin barrier, maintaining hydration and following a disciplined routine over years. Koreans prioritise skincare over make-up because they understand a simple principle: No amount of make-up can make up for healthy skin.

Many people spend thousands on foundations, concealers and highlighters while neglecting the fundamentals of skin health.

The third myth is that everyone needs a ten-step Korean skincare routine.

The famous ten-step regimen has become legendary in beauty circles. Cleansing oils, water-based cleansers, exfoliators, toners, essences, masks, serums, eye creams and moisturisers are often presented as non-negotiable requirements for achieving glass skin.

Dermatologists, often caution patients against blindly copying routines from social media. A ten-step routine may work for some individuals, but it is not universally necessary. For people with sensitive skin, pigmentation issues or allergies, overloading the skin with multiple products can sometimes create more problems than solutions. Skincare should be personalised, not copied.

In fact, one of the biggest misconceptions in modern beauty is that more products automatically equal better skin.

The fourth myth is that glass skin is purely external.

This is perhaps the most important misunderstanding. Skin reflects what is happening inside the body. Hydration, sleep quality, stress levels, nutrition and gut health all influence how skin looks and behaves.

One reason Korean skincare succeeds is because it is supported by dietary. Traditional Korean diets include fermented foods, vegetables and nutrient-dense ingredients that support gut health and reduce inflammation. You cannot expect your skin to thrive if your lifestyle is working against it.

The final myth is that Indian skin cannot achieve similar radiance.

India possesses an extraordinary heritage of natural skincare traditions that are often overlooked in favour of imported trends. Ingredients such as sandalwood, fermented preparations, thermal water and other traditional remedies have supported skin health for generations.

Rather than chasing unrealistic beauty standards, we should focus on understanding our own skin type, climate and lifestyle. Indian skin does not need to become Korean. It simply needs to become healthier.

Anti-Skin Allergy Specialist & Dermatologist at Centre for Skin and Hair Pvt Ltd, Defence Colony, Delhi askdrdeepali@yahoo.com

FIT BIT



MARKING DRUGS

In a move to protect consumers from fake or counterfeit drugs, the Centre has recently mandated that all vaccines, antimicrobials, narcotics and addictive drugs, and anti-cancer drugs will carry a bar code or QR code—enabling the tracking of each vial or blister pack of the medicine. Under the newly amended provisions of the Drugs Rules, 1945, pharma companies are now legally required to print or affix either a Bar Code or a QR Code directly onto their drug products. Moreover, the new track-and-trace mechanism allows regulators as well as the companies to follow the entire journey of every single unit of the product right from the manufacturing plant to the retail store.



LIVING LONGER AND STRONGER

Strength training has long been associated with aesthetic physique. But a new *British Journal of Sports Medicine* Research, claims lifting weight can help one live longer. And surprisingly you don't need to become a gym-rat for this. It suggests spending 90-120 minutes in the gym per week lowers the risk of dying by 13 per cent. The research followed nearly 150,000 nurses and other health professionals for up to 30 years. Over the three decades almost 36,000 of them died, which let the researchers establish the connection between muscle-strengthening activity and lower risk of dying.

Murph's the Word



What began as a military tribute has become a reckoning, pulling ordinary people off their treadmills and into something far more demanding

By RISHABH THAKUR

Until a few months ago, if someone had told Rohit Mehra he would voluntarily sign up for a workout involving a kilometre run, 100 pull-ups, 200 push-ups, 300 air squats, and another kilometre run—all without rest—he would have laughed it off. The 34-year-old Delhi marketing executive was neither particularly athletic nor someone who lived at the gym. Yet, on a sweltering June morning, he found himself standing at the start line, determined to give the challenge a shot.

As expected, he did not finish gloriously. But the experience left a deeper mark than he anticipated. "It changed something," he says. "Not about how I look. About what I think I can do." Mehra's ambition was to complete a Murph—one of the world's hardest workouts. Like him,

increasingly many are seeking something a regular gym session simply cannot give them.

The workout is named after Navy SEAL Lieutenant Michael P Murphy, killed in action in Afghanistan in June 2005 at 29. Murphy's favourite workout, a one-mile run, 100 pull-ups, 200 push-ups, 300 squats, another one-mile run,

ideally in a 20-pound vest, was renamed the Murph by his CrossFit community after his death.

Soon it migrated well beyond US borders. Globally, the 2024 CrossFit Open, the world's largest functional fitness competition, of which the Murph is among the most iconic workouts, drew 3,44,396 athletes, a 6.7 per cent increase over the

previous year, with roughly 1,17,000 of those completing their first Open.

Fitness communities across Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru and Pune now programme the Murph into their annual calendars. "The growing popularity of Murph reflects a broader shift in how people view fitness today," says Dr Akhilesh Rathi, Director of Orthopaedics and Sports Injury at Sri Balaji Action Medical Institute, New Delhi. "More individuals are looking beyond aesthetics and focusing on performance, endurance, discipline, and mental resilience," he adds.

But for all its appeal, it's not without risks. "Murph combines prolonged cardiovascular exertion with a high volume of bodyweight exercises, placing considerable stress on the muscles, joints, and tissues," he adds.

A hundred pull-ups loads the shoulder's rotator cuff repeatedly in a fatigued state. Three hundred squats, deceptively simple in isolation, grind down the knees and lower back when performed after everything preceding them.

In the end, the Murph isn't a test of muscle alone; it's a lesson in respecting both grit and recovery.

THE MURPH

LT. MICHAEL P. MURPHY

- 1 MILE RUN
- 100 PULL-UPS
- 200 PUSH-UPS
- 300 SQUATS
- 1 MILE RUN



PRODUCT REVIEW

Nailing It

I've tried my fair share of nail polishes over the years, but OPI RapiDry has genuinely earned a permanent spot in my beauty kit. From the very first swipe, the difference is obvious. The formula glides on effortlessly without streaking, levels beautifully on the nail, and delivers rich, saturated colour that looks salon-perfect in just two coats. What I appreciate most is the finish. Whether I choose a classic crème, a subtle shimmer or a bold statement shade, every colour has an impressive depth and shine that lasts for days. Even without a professional manicure, my nails look polished and elegant. Durability is another reason I keep going back to OPI RapiDry. It holds up remarkably well through everyday life—typing, cooking, household chores, and constant handwashing—without chipping too quickly. With a good base and top coat, I can easily enjoy a fresh-looking manicure for over a week. The brush deserves a special mention too. It fans out evenly across the nail, making application incredibly easy, even on my non-dominant hand. The polish dries at a comfortable pace, giving me enough time to perfect each stroke without worrying about dragging or patchiness. There seems to be a shade for every mood, season, and occasion. If you're looking for a nail polish that combines beautiful colour, excellent wear and consistently high quality, OPI RapiDry is one of the best bets.

—Medha Dutta Yadav

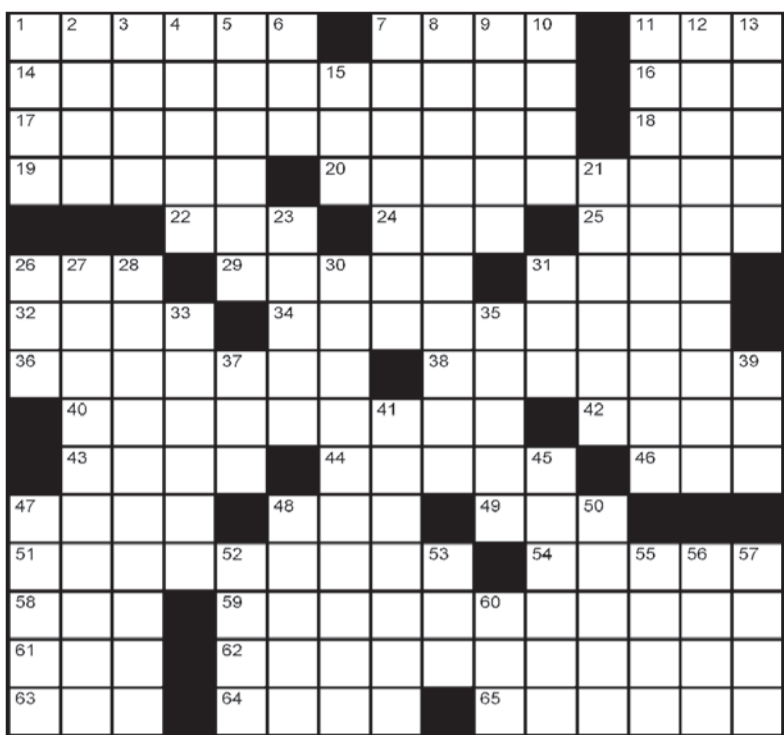
OPI RapiDry Price: ₹550

★★★★★

Available: online



CROSSWORD | FAST WALKER — 507



- Across**
- Vector's counterpart, in physics
 - Took a dip
 - Org. for birdie enthusiasts
 - Like someone who knows their angles
 - ___com
 - "Is it not the case?"
 - Netflix's "___ Wong: Single Lady"
 - Commotions
 - "Scoot over so I can handle this"
 - Omaha's home, for short
 - Don, with "on" ... or delay, with "off"
 - ___lechess cake
 - Superlative suffix
 - "I'm serious," informally
 - Primary
 - One of 10 leapers in a Christmas carol
 - Certain content creator
 - Capitalize on a day off, say
 - Misbehaved
 - "Sure, but I have a different opinion"
 - Lone
 - Breakfast chain with a Happy Face Pancake
- Down**
- "Go away!"
 - Paintball garb, for short
 - At the center of
 - Iced tea garnish
 - Up for the day
 - Dorm VIPs
 - Cushion for a chair
 - Eye-opener
 - Skilled
 - Talkative Asian bird: Var.
 - Burrowing animal that isn't a canine, despite its name
 - Guiding principle
 - Female French friends
 - Begins a board game turn, perhaps
 - Understand
 - "___ Flux" ('90s sci-fi series)
 - aid_jime_ff
 - Sighs of relief
 - Grim genre for a 34-Across
 - Now, in Spanish
 - Beast that brays
 - First three words of a flowery poem?
 - Tuna tartare topping
 - Spirit realm
 - Business connections
 - Sticky situation
 - Nonstick coating brand
 - Shares on "the bird app," before Jul. 2023
 - Declares
 - Toy you can hit
 - Chicago trains
 - Powers through, despite a setback
 - High buildings?
 - Masters of swindling
 - Year-round hrs. in Phoenix
 - Fillet
 - Amtrak express train
 - ___ smear
 - Poetry's counterpart
 - Bookcase part
 - Pull an all-nighter, say
 - ___mujer (that woman, in Mexico)
 - Word before "history" or "cavity"
 - Nevada tourist city
 - Yemeni port city hidden in "sad ending"
 - Ctrl-___Del

Solution to last week's puzzle in the bottom right corner of the page

HOW OPTIMISTIC ARE YOU? (Adult Female)

- 1: You receive a letter through the mail stating that you've won a car and all you have to do to claim is ring a telephone number. What would be your reaction?
- Rush to the telephone and make your claim
 - Throw the letter away without reading it
 - Read the small print at the bottom of the letter
- 2: A group of your friends has invited you to go ice-skating with them, but you've never skated before. How do you think you'll get on?
- In no time you'll be skating like an expert
 - It might take you some time to get used to the ice
 - You won't even be able to stand up
- 3: For what reason would you buy a lottery ticket?
- In the hope that you might win a small prize
 - For a bit of fun
 - For the chance of becoming very rich
- 4: How many lucky charms do you have?
- Just one
 - Loads
 - None, because you don't believe in them
- 5: You have applied for a job that you would really love to do. What are your feelings as you are interviewed for the vacancy?
- I will get this job
 - I won't get this job
 - I might get this job
- 6: Do you believe that there is one true love in the world for everyone?
- You'd like to think there was, but aren't sure
 - Yes and you've already met him
 - No, that's a ridiculous idea
- 7: Your partner promised to pick you up from work, but he's 15 minutes late. What do you think?
- He's got held up somewhere, probably in traffic
 - If he's not here soon I'll telephone the hospitals because he may have had an accident
 - He's so unreliable, he's probably forgotten he was going to meet me
- 8: A friend is having a birthday meal at a Vietnamese restaurant and has invited you along. You have never eaten Vietnamese food before. What are your thoughts as you arrive for the meal?
- I'm not going to like this food. I'd rather eat somewhere else
 - This is going to be fun, experimenting with new tastes
 - It's my friend's birthday, doesn't matter what food I eat
- 9: You have a big date on Saturday with a guy you've fancied for months, but you are coming down with a cold. There's two days to go until the big date, so you
- Call off the date
 - Hope for the best
 - Take loads of cold remedies
- 10: The firm you work for is taken over by another company and there are rumours of redundancies. How would you feel if you lost your job?
- Devastated and dreading the thought of trying to find another
 - A little upset, but confident to start anew
 - Take it as the push you needed to start your own business

HOW TO SCORE:

	a	b	c
1.	3	2	1
2.	3	2	1
3.	2	3	1
4.	2	3	1
5.	3	1	2
6.	2	3	1
7.	3	1	2
8.	1	3	2
9.	1	3	2
10.	1	2	3

What your score means:
Between 0-10: It is apparent that you have a very downbeat view on life, and clearly a person who is easily disheartened. You need to learn to become more positive. Try to turn your thoughts around. Instead of thinking, "I can't", change it to "I can." Having an optimistic outlook will change your life for the better and enable you to feel more confident and cheerful.
Between 11-20: You are an optimistic person, but on a part-time basis. You can be a positive person, but when you encounter a problem, all your optimism vanishes. As you know, it is very easy to be optimistic when everything is going well. But strength of character is needed when you have to force yourself to look on the bright side. Try to work towards becoming a full-time optimist.
Between 21-30: Your attitude is clearly a bright and optimistic one. You see a silver lining in even the darkest cloud. You can never envisage the downside to anything. But keep in mind that not everything goes well; there will be times when you have to face setbacks. Make sure that you are equally prepared to deal with the disadvantages you will encounter, as you are for the advantages.

GARFIELD by Jim Davis



DO JUST ONE THING BY DANNY SEO

Drones look cool, but to animals, they can feel like predators or noisy intruders. Low, fast or unpredictable flights can cause birds to abandon nests, prompt mammals to stop feeding or hide (wasting energy), and even increase stress levels that harm reproduction and survival. If you are using a drone, keep your distance and stay high, avoid buzzing close to animals, never fly over nests and avoid night flights if possible.

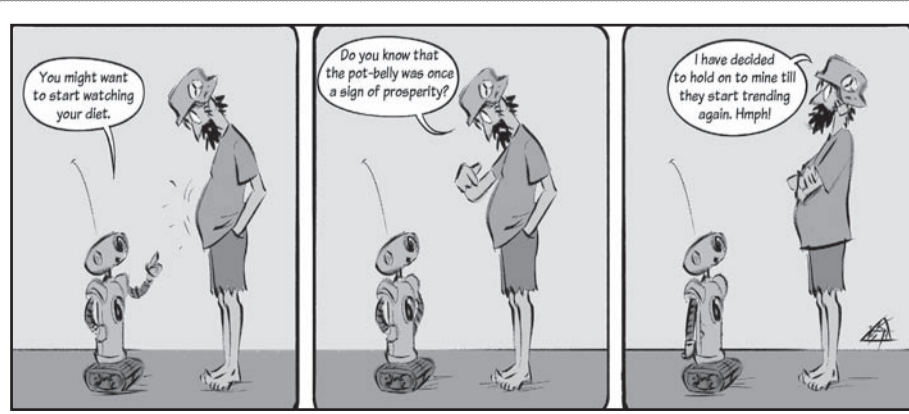
DRAWING CONCLUSIONS by Arun Ramkumar



PEANUTS by Charles M Schulz



FUTUREPAST by Kishore Mohan



Shortcuts Searching For Sprites

Transient Luminous Events, or TLEs, are brief, glowing electrical phenomena that occur high above thunderstorms in the Earth's upper atmosphere. TLEs include cone-shaped beams of blue light called "blue jets," massive rings of light called "elves," and intricately shaped red flashes called "sprites." Sprites are the most common type of TLE.

Great Balls Of Fire
Extremely high-speed cameras have shown that sprites are actually clusters of ionized balls about 10 to 100 m (33 to 330 ft.) in diameter that move at nearly one-tenth the speed of light. Their movement is so quick that conventional cameras make them appear to be long trails of light.

Light It Up
Sprites are not nearly as hot as conventional lightning. Sprites are more like the light that comes from a fluorescent light.

Sprites are much larger than conventional lightning. Some measure nearly 50 km (30 mi.) in diameter. Most thunderstorms do not produce sprites.

Streak Of Luck
Can you help this scientist find her camera?

Word Search
Can you find the hidden words? Search carefully because some words are backward or diagonal.

THUNDER CLOUD BALL CLUSTER STRIKE BLUE COLUMN SHAPE BOB TENDRIL STUDY HOT CARROT ELVES RED SPRITE BRIEF JET LOUISA ARMSTRONG PENNY ETOE JESSA SUNSDOT HDWEED SPOTCESNBDOVLT CARRROUGHROLL ALLISHLACLIET RUNKTACUBLPEE RBLEUEMOMAOUF OLUDEBAHNLUF TINYYESSABALD

What do you get when you cross a sprite with a skull? A flash in the pan.

Sprites are usually associated with powerful positive lightning strikes between a thundercloud and the ground. Only about 10% of all lightning strikes are positively charged.

Sprites are mostly red in color, but their lower edges often fade to blue. They get their red color from the excitement of nitrogen atoms in the atmosphere.

The first image of a sprite was captured accidentally in 1989 by scientists from the University of Minnesota who were testing a low-light video camera.

Sprites occur in a wide variety of shapes. Some appear as columns, while others are shaped like carrots, with long trailing tendrils. Some are shaped like jellyfish, with a large bell-shaped "head" atop a series of hanging "tentacles" below.

Sprites are difficult to study because they last for only a few milliseconds.

What is the best way to learn about sprites? Flash cards.

What do you call a ball full of sprites? A bucket of bolts.

For more information: www.youtube.com/watch?v=16PQ9u2T1g or www.space.com/red-lightning Download hundreds of your favorite past issues at: www.shortcutscomic.com Distributed by Andrews McMeel for UPS, Inc. © Jeff Himm 2023 7/28

SUDOKU | EVIL AND HARD

		2	5			9			
	8		1		2				
2			6			5			
	9	6					7		
	4				8				
7			2	1					
	3		2				8		
	7	3		5					
9		7	4						

7	9							4	
6			3	8					1
	3						8		
	7	3		4					
2									5
	8	9		7					
	5						1		
1				2	6			9	
8						5			2

Test your number crunching with our unique 2-in-1 puzzle

Fill in the grid with digits in such a manner that every row, every column and every 3x3 box accommodates the digits 1 to 9, without repeating any. Each w has a unique solution that can be reached logically without guessing

QUESTION TIME by Lalitha Balakrishnan

- Which European city hosted the 2024 Summer Olympics?
(a) Rome (b) Paris (c) Berlin
- Where does the Haast river flow?
(a) New Zealand (b) Indonesia (c) Australia
- Which of these is not Barbie's sister?
(a) Skipper (b) Stacie (c) Moana
- Where in India is the Chakeri Airport?
(a) Lucknow (b) Kanpur (c) Varanasi
- In banking terminology, what is NPA?
(a) Non-performing Asset (b) Non-payment Account (c) Non-performing Agreement
- Who is the defending champion in Men's Singles Tennis at Wimbledon 2026?
(a) Nadal (b) Djokovic (c) Sinner
- Which of these animals has no bones?
(a) Octopus (b) Shark (c) Turtle
- Madeline Slade was the real name of
(a) Annie Besant (b) Mother Teresa (c) Mirabehn
- In Greek mythology, Iris is the God or Goddess of
(a) Victory (b) Rainbow (c) Sleep
- In the Mahabharata, who was the last commander of the Kaurava forces?
(a) Drona (b) Bhishma (c) Ashwathama

Answers to last week's questions
 1.c, 2.a, 3.b, 4.c, 5.b, 6.a, 7.b, 8.a, 9.c, 10.a

Winner
 T Akshantya - Telangana
 Murthy N - Karnataka
 Prarthana Anuragi - Odisha
 M Balakrishna, Praneta - Tamil Nadu

Answers to this week's questions will appear next week. Only entries with all correct answers sent before Wednesday noon will be considered for prizes.

Email your answers along with your name, phone number and complete address to: sundayquiz@newindianexpress.com. For example, if the answer for Question No. 1 is A, it should be written as 1.A. Please mention QT and the issue date in MM/DD/YY format (for example, QT, April 25, 2021) in the subject line of the email. Only entries with these details will be considered for prizes.

FIVE ALL-CORRECT ENTRIES WILL WIN THE BOOK, THE GOENKA LETTERS: AGONY AND ECSTASY IN THE INDIAN EXPRESS

SUDOKU 1 TODAY'S SOLUTION

Evil Sudoku

1	7	6	2	4	5	3	8	9
5	9	8	3	1	7	2	6	4
2	4	3	8	6	9	7	5	1
3	1	9	6	5	8	4	2	7
6	2	4	1	7	3	8	9	5
7	8	5	4	9	2	1	3	6
4	3	1	5	2	6	9	7	8
8	6	7	9	3	1	5	4	2
9	5	2	7	8	4	6	1	3


Hard Sudoku

7	8	9	6	5	1	2	3	4
6	5	2	3	8	4	9	7	1
4	3	1	2	7	9	8	5	6
9	6	7	1	3	5	4	2	8
2	4	3	8	6	7	1	9	5
5	1	8	4	9	2	7	6	3
3	2	5	9	4	8	6	1	7
1	7	4	5	2	6	3	8	9
8	9	6	7	1	3	5	4	2

TIMEASY CWS BAD
 PIXIES OWE SEXY
 ANIMA PAL KALE
 ITIMEWITICAVES
 FORDMEETCUTES
 OROCATSITTER
 REWORDSTTSAR
 MOSHE WAGYU
 CALI STATION
 ROMANTASYRUT
 MEMESTOCKALDO
 TATERTOTSSUMO
 OHIO ANA TODAYSA
 DARN CDS EDITOR
 OLE TEL NASHUA

Year: Parabhav
 Aani: TheiPirai /Nij Jyeshtha: Krishna Paksha
 Panchami till 13.31hrs.
 Nakshatra (Star): Shatataraka till 15.13hrs.
 Moon in Kumbh
 Rahukaalam: 04.30 pm to 06.00 pm
 Yamagantam: 12 noon to 01.30 pm
 Gulikakalam: 03.00 pm to 04.30 pm

BIRTHSTONE | CANCER (JUNE 22 - JULY 23)

 Ruby, the Cancer birthstone, is a gem which brings major changes in the life of a wearer. Possessing the energies of the ruling planet Mercury, it has a great impact on relationships and financial matters in the life of a person. Ruby is also considered to be the gateway in the life of a wearer. Cancerians always want independence while doing anything. They are self-sufficient and do not want to depend on others, but they are also emotional and need motivational support for encouragement. Ruby is considered to be a very good source of energy that provides the emotion of love and helps the wearer feel compassionate for all life. It fills the heart with sparkles. Ruby includes the power of courage and self-esteem. It also helps the wearer in attaining spiritual and mental satisfaction which makes the person happy.

YOUR FORTUNE THIS WEEK Amarakosha

What the planets say about your prospects for wealth, romance and professional success this week



ARIES (Mar 21–Apr 19)

Work: Your hard work or an important project will bring clear results. You may gain more power at work, and higher ups will support your ideas.
Money: Travel, meeting new people, and social activities generate income. You get the deal or funding you wish for.
Couples: You two may not agree on everything, but will talk openly and respectfully to find ground balance.
Singles: You enjoy catching up with new faces while keep your options open. Beware of those who only want money.

TAURUS (Apr 20–May 20)

Work: Obstacles and delays fade and things move forward smoothly. A job or business offer may appear and look very attractive. Check pay and benefits carefully.
Money: You spend more on social activities which in turn generate useful opportunities.
Couples: Work and errands may leave less time for each other. The distance may help appreciate the bond more.
Singles: A friend may show their feelings, leading to deep conversations but you choose to keep it private for now.

GEMINI (May 21–June 20)

Work: You may be busier than usual with a large project that tests your energy and patience. A peer coworker may create issues or compete with you.
Money: Your income will reflect your effort. You may spend more on things you enjoy and save less than usual.
Couples: Work and errands may leave little 'us time'. The distance may help you appreciate each other more.
Singles: Work and money matters will take most of your attention, leaving little time or energy for romance.

CANCER (June 21–July 22)

Work: Unexpected travel, meetings, or training may come up. Your thoughts and instincts will be strong, helping you solve problems and move past delays.
Money: A side hustle may appear and pay well. It may also give you a chance to use your creativity.
Couples: If there are any issues that both of you have been avoiding, it's time for an honest talk to resolve it.
Singles: A work conversation may grow more personal.

LEO (July 23–Aug 22)

Work: You may get a difficult project done very successfully. Don't expect relaxing time as the boss may assign you another big task with trust and responsibility.
Money: You may notice a good income source in health, entertainment, or creative work before others do.
Couples: A major change may affect your relationship. Due to a new routine, you may need time to adjust.
Singles: Love may come, but you may not feel the need for a relationship just because you don't want to be alone.

VIRGO (Aug 23–Sept 22)

Work: Workload may increase. There are new things to learn and higher expectations from the boss. Don't rush as it may lead to mistakes and extra work later.
Money: A quiet side job may bring good income. You may want to spend on a new device or work equipment.
Couples: Time together may dim and romance may feel weaker. Different priorities may cause tension.
Singles: You may connect with someone younger, but differences in age and lifestyle may keep it casual.

LIBRA (Sept 23–Oct 22)

Work: You may be pushed into a big change that takes you out of your comfort zone. It may feel confusing at first, but you will slowly adjust and find your way.
Money: You may discover a side hustle or technology that helps you earn more.
Couples: You both try to avoid arguments, but some feelings remain unspoken. Honest talk may be needed.
Singles: Someone attractive and successful may enter your life and try to impress you, but they are not honest.

SCORPIO (Oct 23–Nov 21)

Work: You could handle a project well and create great outcome. A new and exciting chance may also come your way.
Money: You may find a good chance to earn money from your skills, knowledge, or products.
Couples: A family elder may interfere and show that they don't see you two as a good match.
Singles: A taken friend may show special interest in you. It feels tempting but could lead to problems, so be careful.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov 22–Dec 21)

Work: An unexpected assignment, urgent issue, or a last-minute project with another team may come. Sudden travel or meetings may bring you new ideas or chances.
Money: Earning may require more effort but it will be worth it. Plan your budget as sudden expenses may arise.
Couples: Misunderstandings may continue lingering unless the two of you speak it out openly.
Singles: You interact with people from different lived experiences. They help you learn more about yourself.

CAPRICORN (Dec 22–Jan 19)

Work: You may have heavy workload and very little help. You may also have to take on other's duties without extra pay or recognition.
Money: Saving money is harder. Avoid investing with friends as it may damage both, the bond and investment.
Couples: Errands may eat up your time. You both may talk more about bills and tasks than your feelings.
Singles: You may be too tired or busy for new people.

AQUARIUS (Jan 20–Feb 18)

Work: You may move into a new role or start something that excites you. You will get challenging tasks done with great results. Old ideas may finally move ahead.
Money: An older male friend or relative may help you find a new income channel.
Couples: Your partner may try to show care and affection but you may not appreciate it, which makes things tense.
Singles: New people may contact you. Friends may try to play cupid. But no one meets your expectations.

PISCES (Feb 19–Mar 20)

Work: You may be chosen for a big project that needs accuracy and determination. Even though it is challenging, it is manageable and you could handle it well.
Money: Your past efforts may finally be fruitful. An older female friend share useful tips that helps your finances.
Couples: You both are soulmates. Accept each other's strengths and weaknesses for happiness and comfort.
Singles: A man in uniform may enter your life and show romantic interest in you and try to become closer.

The Celestial Gaze

ARIES

Sun transits your 4th house (Cancer), activating home, mother, and emotional foundations. Exalted Jupiter here blesses property matters and inner peace, while Mercury retrograde prompts family reviews—but avoid major moves. Mars in 3rd house (Gemini) energizes short trips and courage but Saturn influences test patience. Early-week Mars-Uranus volatility may bring sudden domestic shifts; Pluto aids transformation. Focus on nesting and healing.
Vastu Suggestions: Enhance East for career with red or yellow accents; keep Southeast active but not cluttered.

CANCER

Sun in *lagna* spotlights identity, vitality, and new beginnings. Exalted Jupiter in 1st house is highly auspicious for expansion, wisdom, and protection. Mercury retrograde in *lagna* calls for personal review and cautious expression. Mars in 12th house suggests rest or hidden efforts. Neptune retro start adds intuitive depth. Family and home flourishes; nurture yourself. Major trines support healing.
Vastu Suggestions: Prioritize North and Northeast for prayer room or water features; enhance Southeast with kitchen; place flowing water in North for abundance.

LIBRA

Sun in 10th house activates career, status, and public image. Mercury retro advises reviewing professional communications. Jupiter in 9th house (Cancer) favours luck, learning, and mentors. Mars in 9th house energizes travel or philosophy amid Uranus volatility. Saturn in 6th house supports health routines. Avoid legal haste. Spiritual insights remain strong.
Vastu Suggestions: Strengthen West/Northwest for partnerships with balanced decor and pairs of birds or crystals.

CAPRICORN

Sun in 7th house spotlights partnerships and marriage. Mercury retro reviews commitments. Jupiter in 6th house aids service, health, and obstacles. Mars in 6th house boosts work or competition. Saturn in 3rd house (ruler) demands disciplined efforts. Aspects support balancing duties or relations. Legal matters need caution.
Vastu Suggestions: Southwest is important for stability; place iron or black items sparingly in Southwest.

TAURUS

Sun illuminates 3rd house of siblings, skills, and communication. Mercury retro in 3rd house advises revisiting contracts. Exalted Jupiter in 2nd house supports finances through family or speech. Mars in 2nd house boosts earnings but watch impulses amid Uranus aspects. Saturn in 12th house suggests behind-the-scenes discipline. This is a positive time for practical skill-building. Emotional introspection yields stability. Double-check travel-related documents.
Vastu Suggestions: Strengthen Southwest for wealth with earth tones; put plants in North for Mercury balance.

LEO

Sun in 12th house emphasizes introspection, expenses, and spirituality. Mercury retro reviews losses or hidden issues. Jupiter in 11th house (Cancer) brings gains via networks or elders. Mars in 11th house energizes social goals amid innovative aspects. Saturn in 9th house tests higher beliefs. This is a positive time for subconscious work, charity, and preparation. Avoid overspending. Insights now aid future creativity.
Vastu Suggestions: Decorate East altar with yellow flowers or Sun yantra; avoid clutter in Northeast; place Sun-related items or lamps in East.

SCORPIO

Sun in 9th house highlights luck, dharma, and higher knowledge. Mercury retro reviews beliefs or education. Exalted Jupiter in 8th house transforms via research, inheritance, or occult interests. Mars in 8th house intensifies depth work with supportive outer aspects (trine Pluto). Sudden insights are possible. Karmic resolutions favour shared resources.
Vastu Suggestions: North is important for introspection with blue or black tones; avoid clutter in Southeast; Place seashells or a calm water feature in North.

AQUARIUS

Sun in 6th house emphasizes work, health, and service. Mercury retro reviews routines. Jupiter exalted in 5th house brings creativity, romance, and joy through children. Mars in 5th house fuels passion and intellect with innovative trines. This is a strong time for speculative gains. Address chronic issues.
Vastu Suggestions: Enhance West for tech or creative zones with airy layouts.

GEMINI

Sun in 2nd house highlights values, finances, and speech. Mercury retro in 2nd house deepens self-worth reflections, so review money matters carefully. Jupiter exalted in 1st house enhances confidence and personal growth. Mars in *lagna* with Uranus brings dynamic energy and innovations. But the same combination also brings potential restlessness. Aspects favour creative income ideas. Use this week for budgeting and alignment.
Vastu Suggestions: Activate West for study or work with blues and greens and wind chimes; keep Northwest airy.

VIRGO

Sun transits 11th house of gains, aspirations, and friends. Mercury retro (your ruler) in 11th house prompts goal or friendship reassessment. Exalted Jupiter in 10th boosts career reputation and authority. Mars in 10th house drives professional action with Pluto trine for empowerment. This is a favorable time for recognition if plans are refined. Balance service with ambition. Social ties yield benefits.
Vastu Suggestions: South for organized storage; keep green plants in Northeast for Jupiter/Mercury; keep workspaces clean in North for mental clarity.

SAGITTARIUS

Sun in 8th house deepens transformations, intimacy, and the occult. Mercury retro prompts joint finance reviews. Jupiter exalted in 7th house blesses partnerships or marriage. Mars in 7th house energizes relations but tempers conflicts amid Uranus. Positive healing aspects. Saturn in 4th house tests home. Depth yields empowerment.
Vastu Suggestions: East is favourable for a study or library with yellows (Jupiter); place sacred texts in Northeast; keep books or yellow accents in East/Northeast.

PISCES

Sun in 5th house activates creativity, romance, intellect. Mercury retro reviews love or education. Exalted Jupiter in 4th house strengthens home, mother, and roots. Mars in 4th house energizes property. Neptune retro in *lagna* heightens intuition and dreams. This is an excellent time for arts, joy, family blessings.
Vastu Suggestions: Northeast is suitable for meditation; place a fountain in North for intuitive flow.

The first-ever AI-generated weekly prediction

LAL KITAB DAILY PREDICTIONS Innovative disruptions (Mars-Uranus) meet introspective, home-centered energies (Cancer, Mercury retro, Neptune). Lal Kitab encourages transforming challenges via consistent, charitable actions and positive karma. Stay patient, hydrated, and mindful.

<p>SUNDAY, 5 JULY</p> <p>Lal Kitab Focus: Lingering Mars-Uranus energies in Gemini bring sudden changes, communication surprises, or travel or tech disruptions. Sun in Cancer emphasizes family and home matters. Avoid impulsiveness to prevent conflicts. Remedy: Donate fodder or vegetables to cow or the needy to pacify Mars volatility and promote stability. Avoid wearing red.</p>	<p>MONDAY, 6 JULY</p> <p>Lal Kitab Focus: Dynamic Mars aspects support action and short initiatives, but Mercury retrograde in Cancer may cause emotional miscommunication. Prioritize home and emotional grounding. Remedy: Keep a silver item nearby for Moon and Mercury balance and protection. Offer water to the rising Sun in the morning.</p>	<p>TUESDAY, 7 JULY</p> <p>Lal Kitab Focus: Neptune stations retrograde in Aries—dissolving illusions, possible creative or spiritual confusion or health sensitivities. Mars energy pushes forward. Review plans carefully. Remedy: Feed a cow milk or rice. Donate white items to soothe Moon and Neptune influences. On Tuesday, offer to cloth or <i>sindoor</i> to Lord Hanuman for Mars strength.</p>	<p>WEDNESDAY, 8 JULY</p> <p>Lal Kitab Focus: Mercury retro highlights introspection on family/communication. Venus gains practical ground—relationships and routines benefit from careful gestures; avoid overthinking delays. Remedy: Feed green gram (moong) to birds or donate green items to support Mercury clarity. Use green accents at home.</p>	<p>THURSDAY, 9 JULY</p> <p>Lal Kitab Focus: Venus enters Virgo—shift to service-oriented love, work, and health. Jupiter's supportive vibe aids creative self-expression growth amid retro influences. This is a good time for organizing but double-check details. Remedy: Donate yellow items or help elders. Care for a Tulsi plant to strengthen Jupiter.</p>	<p>FRIDAY, 10 JULY</p> <p>Lal Kitab Focus: Venus near South Node influences means karmic lessons in relationships, values, or finances. Energy stabilizes. Focus on completion and emotional harmony. Remedy: Offer white flowers or sweets at a temple or to elders. Maintain home cleanliness for Venus positivity. Avoid financial disputes.</p>	<p>SATURDAY, 11 JULY</p> <p>Lal Kitab Focus: Weekend reflection with Uranus or outer planet aspects lead to innovative ideas, but Saturn-like discipline helps long-term gains. Integrate the week's lessons. Remedy: Feed black sesame or seeds to crows or dogs for Saturn and Rahu balance. Keep iron to ground energies.</p>
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Holiday Mathis
 holidaymathis@gmail.com



An Invitation to YOU
 Misunderstandings can be traced back to an overlooked truth: the other person is not you. We can never fully know the heart of another, but the first step in doing so is to drop assumptions.

AUGURIES
Meenakshi Chawla
 gmail: astrologyyandus@gmail.com
 Twitter: @Shiva_Vadani



ARIES

March 21-April 19: No one succeeds entirely alone. True independence is feeling like you can rely on others, but you don't have to. You've an excellent sense for knowing when it's best to work together or stand on your own. This week involves a little of both. You'll ask for and accept help one moment, and provide it the next.

LEO

July 24-Aug 23: Emotional maturity is one of those things that's easier to recognize than define. This week shows you where it exists and where growth is still needed. Relationships go more smoothly when at least one person is asking instead of assuming, listening instead of preparing a rebuttal or apologizing without adding a defense.

SAGITTARIUS

Nov 23-Dec 22: Making people happy feels like your main purpose this week. But when someone is hungry, exhausted, grieving, frightened, sick, lonely, overwhelmed or lacking security, they may not be ready for joy yet. Before you can make them smile, you might need to solve a few basic problems that will improve their overall conditions.

TAURUS

Apr 21-May 21: How wonderful it is to be understood without explanation. It makes you feel that you're in the presence of your people. This week, you'll often enjoy that dynamic, but don't let it stop you from checking in later to make sure everyone understood things the same way. We are, after all, in the days of Mercury retrograde.

VIRGO

Aug 24-Sept 23: You're driven to create experiences for people. You don't have to start from scratch. It's possible to improve what's already there, though not always immediately. In the meantime, you can still lead people through the scene differently, hitting points of focus that keep things moving.

CAPRICORN

Dec-23 Jan 20: The physical world has strict boundaries. The emotional world doesn't. Objects can't exist in the same space at the same time, but hearts will break the rule. Part of them lives in you, and part of you lives in them. The heart can make room for another person in a way that matter never can.

GEMINI

May 22-June 21: One reason things go so well this week: You don't require everyone to agree with you. You can survive being misunderstood. Not happily, perhaps, but you tolerate the discomfort, because it's the adult thing to do. And your maturity reminds you that being understood is wonderful, but it is not a prerequisite for being yourself.

LIBRA

Sept 24-Oct 23: When life gets complicated, you figure out who you can rely on. Good friends check in. Maybe they even have a sort of sixth sense about it, calling you at exactly the right moment. Or maybe they are just observant and can tell when you need more than you are able to ask for at the moment.

AQUARIUS

Jan 21-Feb 19: You're irresistible. The support around you this week isn't only a reflection of other people's generosity. It's also a reflection of the energy you bring to every scenario. People are naturally drawn to someone who greets opportunities with enthusiasm and gratitude, and that's so you.

CANCER

June 22-July 23: This week, a restriction on lifts, much to your liberation. The most meaningful ways this manifests will be small and personal. You'll exercise your right to change your mind, set a boundary, follow your curiosity or begin again. Freedom often arrives as permission you finally give yourself. Your life will feel even more like your own.

SCORPIO

Oct 24-Nov 22: Much will hinge on knowing someone well. Figure out what they're really after - not what they say they want. Not what they ought to want. Not what would look good. What they genuinely want. Because once you know this, you know much more. Motivation is the master key.

PISCES

Feb 20-Mar 20: Behaviors and habits are not just actions we take; they are ways to meet a need. Lives organize around fulfilling needs - needs that can often be met in a variety of ways. To change behavior, identify the need first, then experiment with other ways to meet it.

The Last Keepers of the Monpa Table

This boutique eatery is turning forgotten Himalayan recipes into an unforgettable destination dining experience

By SAMIYA CHOPRA

As you enter Arunachal Pradesh's Chug Valley, the roads narrow and the mist begins to gather over the folds of the serene valley. Amidst this beautiful landscape, Damu's Heritage Dine, an intimate 11-seat boutique eatery, is reimagining and reviving the region's native Monpa culinary traditions. Run by eight Monpa women and supported by WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature), Damu's is part archive, part community project, and part cultural revival—an endeavour to preserve recipes that have survived only in the tribe's oral tradition.

Here centuries are fragrant. The restaurant occupies a 250-year-old village house whose stone walls are weathered by aeons of mountain winters. But its welcome has unusual warmth. Through the windows, the guest can see clouds drift across the slow-moving curtain of the valley's breath. Food arrives carrying a subtle scent of wood smoke. And the meal? The seven-course feast is no ordinary

intimate dining experience. The menu features rooted, heirloom recipes, once unfailingly present on every family table across the region. "To start with, we first recalled dishes we had eaten in childhood and then made a list of the dishes we would like to serve here. It took months of preparation and deliberation to get the menu right," recalls Leike Chomu, the manager at Damu's.

Traditional Monpa food stands out as distinct in the culinary landscape of the Northeast. Rich, assertive flavours of *chhurpi* (yak cheese) define many dishes. Staples include millet pancakes, buckwheat noodles, momo and *chamin*—a fiery local chutney. Finger millet, corn and buckwheat are central to local food culture. "Rice is not a staple here, but a luxury to be enjoyed once a year on Losar (Tibetan New Year). Meat, especially pork, is looked down upon since Buddhism is the faith that permeates the valley," explains Nishant Sinha, WWF coordinator for Damu's Heritage Dine.

The food, rooted in the tradition, is served with contemporary hints. Its reinterpretation



(Above) A Monpa woman at Damu's Heritage Dine; (below, left to right) Buckwheat pancakes paired with orange marmalade; guests relishing food at Damu's



is subtle but striking. Warm buckwheat pancakes arrive with spoonfuls of bright orange marmalade made from fruit harvested in nearby orchards. *Shiitake* mushrooms, grown on oak logs, are transformed into smoky skewers to be paired with *halloumi* cheese. "Apart from market-bought salt and oil, each ingredient comes from the valley itself and is locally harvested from nearby fields," smiles Chomu.

While designing the menu, many almost-vanished Monpa recipes were rediscovered. One such preparation is *phurshing gombu*—a hand-shaped corn-flour bowl filled with a liquid extracted from the Chinese lacquer tree. Roasted over charcoal, it was traditionally used to relieve body aches and ease childbirth pains. The dish nearly disappeared because harvesting the plant's extract

often triggered severe allergic reactions. In the Chug Valley only one skilled harvester is left; *phurshing gombu* survives at Damu's as an appetiser.

Then there is *shya marku*, a comforting preparation of chicken enriched with generous amounts of ginger and ghee. Damu's version was recreated from food the women remembered eating when they were children. "For us, it's not just food that matters. It is more about giving younger Monpas a reason to value their culinary heritage and strengthen the community by increasing local produce demand and livelihood opportunities," says Chomu.

Destination dining is reshaping travel. Diners now travel great distances for rooted food experiences. Guests at Damu's do not just relish a carefully curated meal; they travel through generations of preserved flavours, forgotten recipes and mountain traditions.

QUICK TAKE



CHUNKY COOKIE

Iconic British cookie brand, Ben's cookies has finally arrived in India, with its official launch at Delhi's Meherchand Market. Founded in 1983 at Oxford's historic Covered Market, Ben's Cookies has built a global reputation for its freshly baked, chunky and gooey texture. The store, designed as an intimate boutique bakery, will offer a curated selection of 13 signature cookie variants, including Milk Chocolate Chunk Cookie, White Chocolate Chunk Cookie, Peanut Butter & Milk Chocolate Cookie, Triple Chocolate Chunk Cookie among others.



AN INDIE-MEX DELIGHT

Delhi's Pendulo, known for its bold interpretation of Indie-Mex cuisine and immersive tasting-menu experiences, is introducing its new a la carte menu. The new menu translates Pendulo's most defining ideas into a collection of dishes. Among the highlights are the Habanero Butter Chicken, a bold reinterpretation of one of India's most beloved dishes; the Chipotle Lobster, which brings together coastal flavours and Mexican smokiness; the Mulato Chili Raan; and the now cult-favourite Lamb Birria Taco, which has quickly become one of the restaurant's most talked-about dishes.

Where: Ambawatta One Complex, Mehrauli, Delhi

Why Small Castles are a Big Deal Here

In a German town, over 40 miniature fortresses turn history into a walkable fairytale

By SOUMYA GAYATRI

Germany is known for its towering castles and expansive palaces. Yet in the small town of Gerbstedt, tucked into the rolling hills of the Saxony-Anhalt state, the story unfolds quite differently. Here, more than 40 majestic castles dot the landscape—scattered across streets, gardens and open spaces in a town rarely mentioned in guidebooks. The twist? Every single one is a miniature citadel.

This extraordinary collection was built by Günther Beinert, a local artist and professional bricklayer. He began building them in 1949, using concrete, construction rubble and broken tiles to replicate the look and feel of real masonry. What started as an enjoyable experiment became a lifelong pursuit over time.

The first castle, inside his parents' home, was an imaginary version. Drawing inspiration from collectable cigarette-packet picture cards, Beinert began to recreate castle replicas with brilliant accuracy. Over decades, his creations multiplied, turning Gerbstedt into an unlikely open-air collection.

What stands out the most, is Beinert's extraordinary attention to detail. Every tiny castle has been meticulously constructed, keeping the exact plan and layout in mind. Concrete watchtowers and tiny drawbridges guard entrances. Small courtyards are



protected by stone walls while delicate stained-glass windows, some no larger than fingernails, are a visual treat.

"It is incredible that these elaborate miniature castles are made by hand," says Yamuna Matheswaran, an artist, who met Beinert on a trip to Gerbstedt. "It's such painstaking work and clearly a labour of love."

Among the most impressive

(Above) Miniature castle; (below) Wettin Palace; miniature train



creations is a replica of the Mansfeld Castle, an 11th-century complex located in nearby Mansfeld-Südharz district. Occupying 120 square metres, it is Beinert's largest work, and boasts walkable passageways, real windowpanes, and even electric lighting.

His other iconic works include

replicas of Wettin Palace—a heavily fortified complex in Central Germany, the Lichtenstein Castle—a picturesque Gothic Revival edifice in Southern Germany, and the Collegiate Church of Quedlinburg—a 10th-century Romanesque church listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List for its stunning architecture. Interestingly, Beinert never accepted payment for any of his works. "I do it for the public and mostly for the children," he once said. "I just want to make them happy."

The best way to see Beinert's creations is to hike along the Burgenwanderweg or the Castle Hiking Trail. Thoughtfully curated by the city council, the trail links all the miniature castles and takes visitors on a leisurely stroll through the town. Walking along the path feels one is a giant striding through centuries of architectural history, moving from one tiny kingdom to the next.



Kila Dalijoda's facade; (below) the living room

A Royal Recall

By MALLIK THATIPALLI

The way to Kila Dalijoda is not a usual ride to an Odisha home-stay. It travels through a long elephant corridor; no paved roads and Google Maps to guide you. To land at Mangarajpur village, where stands the laterite building, is to go back in time.

At first glance, the building is deceptively medieval; locals call it a fort. But the building is a hunting lodge that borrows the architecture grammar of a European castle. Built by Raja Jyoti Prasad Singh Deo between 1931 and 1933, it preens with turrets, stained glass windows, and thick walls that hold the memories of the colonial age and now, regional adaptation. Martin & Burn, the British engineering firm that built the famous Howrah Bridge, were the chosen architects of Kila Dalijoda; their Anglo-Indian sensibilities were behind the Gothic styling and structural choices. "It was built for hunting expeditions, and never meant to be a palace," says the host Debjit Singh Deo who belongs to the Panchko-te Raj dynasty.

Windows line all its sides, and are designed for cross-ventilation in a climate that demands it. The walls of local laterite are thick and heat-resistant; some sections even incorporate volcanic stone, chosen as much for durability as for insulation. Inside, light filters through colored stained glass panels. Kila Dalijoda's past tells a story of pride. By the late 1980s, it had fallen into neglect. Without maintenance, nature began to reclaim it. Its restoration was neither quick nor romantic. Starting around 2004, Debjit and his wife Namrata Kumari, faced numerous challenges. For nearly a decade, the building was effectively unliveable.

"We had no considerable funding to rebuild this place. We used whatever money we could spare. Restoration was slow, but we wanted to bring it back to life without losing its essence," reveals Debjit. The decision to restore rather than reinvent is what defines Kila Dalijoda today.

Outside, the landscape has been transformed by time. Tigers are long gone, but the area remains alive with birds, small creatures of the wild, and the occasional elephant moving through the sanctuary.



The Power of Sustained Focus

When attention stops wandering, work flows effortlessly, performance improves and the mind discovers clarity, balance, and lasting peace

By ANIL BHATNAGAR

These are the eleven doors I want you to paint by evening. If I find one drop of paint on the floor when you are done, you leave without a rupee."

Dhyaanpravaaha, the poor boy who desperately needed money, felt his stomach tighten as he heard the house owner's orders.

Eleven doors. That's impossible. He was about to refuse—then his ailing mother's and hungry sister's faces rose before him. He remembered the words of his dying father, a Buddhist priest: "Work is not as difficult as our thoughts make it. Preserve inner calm. Focus only on the small task before you. Then the next. Soon, you will be through."

He picked up the brush, dipped it carefully, taking just enough paint, ensuring each stroke was meticulous—without overlap, haste, or waste. He spread no newspapers below, letting the risk sharpen his focus.

By mid-morning, something shifted. The doors, the deadline, even his fear fell away. There was only the brush, the paint, and the stroke before him. Dhyaan had stumbled into what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called "flow"—complete absorption where the self disappears, hours pass unnoticed and performance peaks effortlessly. Flow, at its deepest, is a spiritual practice: the doer, the doing and the deed become seamlessly one. It is true yoga—the reunion of a wave with its parent ocean.

By evening, he had finished all eleven doors—with two hours and a paint-box to spare. When the house owner asked how, Dhyaan replied, "My father taught me that immersion-like focus is the source of excellence, efficiency and a deep inner calm."

The *Dhammapada* warns that a wandering mind brings suffering; Swami Vivekananda, in his commentary on *Raja Yoga*, writes that the difference between the ordinary and the great lies in the degree of concentration. What is holy in a pilgrimage is not the place; it is in the intensity of attention with which we use our five senses to attend to what life brings to us in this moment. And such immersive attention strengthens with practice and is therapeutic.

Neuroscience aligns with this insight. A landmark study by neuroscientist Amishi Jha at the University of Miami



found that just twelve minutes of daily focused-attention practice measurably strengthens the prefrontal cortex's capacity to regulate distractions and emotional impulses, especially under high stress. Behind everything we value—scientific breakthrough, artistic masterpiece, meaningful relationship and technological innovation—lies sustained human attention.

But modern life works against this capacity. Smartphones are engineered to fragment attention—every notification and algorithmically timed alert pulls us from what matters. Gloria Mark at the University of California, Irvine, found it takes twenty-three minutes to regain deep focus after one interruption. The cost is not merely lost productivity. A scattered mind makes poorer

decisions, sustains shallower relationships, and lives less fully. We are often absent in body and attention alike—lost in thought even as our sensory messages go unattended—and this absence cannot be recovered. Though sustained focus appears challenging to build, the tendency to drift is itself a habit—and like all habits, it can be trained. The self-training begins. Before

starting any task, set clear goals: how long you will work and what you will complete. Keep your smartphone out of reach—better still, out of the room—and keep what you need within arm's reach. Monitor your progress as you work. Each time your mind wanders, mark a small vertical line on paper. Let the fifth cut across the first four. At the end, count your bundles. What is measured begins to change.

Daily meditation builds the foundational capacity for sustained attention. Even spending ten minutes observing your breath each morning prepares the mind for focused work. Whenever you have a spare moment, instead of reaching for your smartphone, observe your breath, thoughts, or bodily sensations non-judgmentally or attend to the stillness behind the noise.

Each evening, spend ten minutes writing down your concerns and worries; return to them on weekends to respond prudently. A 2017 Penn State study found this practice significantly reduces intrusive thoughts. Given their own time and space, worries no longer intrude. They trust they will be heard—and wait quietly while you focus on what must be done.

Dhyaan didn't fear the fear; he channelled it into precision. Focus comes from proactively pre-empting distractions. It grows further when we cultivate a sacred discipline of falling in love with what we attend to and gently returning to the task whenever the mind wanders.

Like Dhyaan facing his eleven doors—the six doors of life we must paint well—health, finances, work, relationships, leisure and community—and the five doors of the senses through which we do so—reclaiming attention is not just about working better. It is about meeting life with steadiness—acting without waste, thinking without drift, living without scattering ourselves across a thousand distractions. In a world pulling us in every direction, developing a magnifying-glass-like focus that brings all the scattered rays of the sun to one point may be the difference between a life half-lived and a fulfilled one, shaped with care, stroke by deliberate stroke.

Anil Bhatnagar is a corporate trainer, spiritual coach, a keen student of neuroscience, and the author of several books, including *Success 24 X 7*. He can be reached at thrive.ab@gmail.com

SACRED SPACE | Ramanathaswamy Temple, Tamil Nadu



Situated on the island of Rameswaram in Tamil Nadu, Ramanathaswamy Temple is one of Hinduism's most revered pilgrimage centres. Dedicated to Lord Ramanathaswamy, a form of Shiva, it is one of the twelve Jyotirlingas and one of the four sacred pan-India Char Dham pilgrimage sites.

According to the Ramayana, Lord Rama worshipped Shiva here before crossing the sea to Lanka to rescue Sita. Tradition holds that when Hanuman was delayed in bringing a *linga* from Kailasa, Sita fashioned one from sand for Rama's worship. After defeating Ravana, Rama returned to offer prayers of atonement, making the temple a lasting symbol of harmony between Shaivism and Vaishnavism.

Much of the present structure was built and expanded between the 12th and 17th centuries under the patronage of the Pandya rulers and the Sethupathi kings. The temple is renowned for its magnificent pillared corridors—the longest in India and among the longest in the world. Pilgrims also bathe in its twenty-two sacred wells, each believed to possess water with distinct flavours and properties despite their proximity.

EPICS FOR CHILDREN | GAURAV YADAV

The Gods Love Goodness

Between the 8th and 7th centuries BCE, the kingdom of Phrygia flourished in modern-day Turkey. It is famous for legendary figures such as King Midas—of the 'golden touch'—and for its capital, Gordion, known for the Gordian Knot. It is said that on a hill in Phrygia stand two trees—a thousand-year-old oak tree and a linden tree of the same age. Locals place wreaths on the two trees on joyous occasions. Only wild animals and birds live in the area today, but in the olden days, humans lived there.

Once, Zeus, the supreme ruler of the cosmos, came there in human form along with his son, Hermes. They were seeking shelter for the night. They knocked on all the doors, but nobody agreed to let them stay the night. At the end of the village stood a small, old hut. In it lived the honest Philemon and his wife, Baucis. Though they were old, poor, and childless, they made no complaints and bore their hard lot with love for each other. When Zeus and Hermes knocked on the door of this small hut and asked for shelter, they were greeted heartily. Philemon placed seats for them, and Baucis went into the kitchen and started a fire. Philemon brought cabbage from his well-watered garden, deftly chopped it, and put it into a pot to cook. He brought out smoked pork, cut a huge piece from the shoulder, and put it into boiling water. The husband and wife also entertained their guests with pleasant conversation.

The meal was now ready, and it was served on a three-legged table that wobbled a little. They were too poor to have wine, so they served milk in a pitcher with wooden mugs. As all were



enjoying the food, Philemon observed that the pitcher contained wine instead of milk, and it did not empty despite the cups being continually filled from it. He realised that their guest must be Zeus. In a panic, he rushed to tell Baucis in the kitchen. They felt they ought to offer something better to their guests. They had only one goose. They both ran to catch it, but it ran away and hid behind the guests.

Zeus laughed and told the old couple that they had come to earth to test the generosity of humans. Their neighbours were wicked and would be punished, but they were given the boon of serving as priests of the temple and of always being together. They served for a long time. One day, as they were looking at each other, they floated away to a distant height and turned into an oak and a linden.

YouTube: @Mahabalak.English

A LOOK WITHIN



Reading the Self with Svadhyaya

Every day, we devote time to understanding other people, following the news or absorbing endless information. Rarely do we pause to understand the one person we live with every moment—ourselves. One of Indian spirituality's simplest yet most profound practices for this inward journey is *Svadhyaya*, the study of the self. Described as one of the five *Niyamas*, or personal observances, in the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, *Svadhyaya* combines the study of sacred texts with honest observation of one's own thoughts, emotions and behaviour.

In daily life, the practice may begin with a simple question: "Why did I react the way I did?" Instead of blaming circumstances or other people, *Svadhyaya* encourages us to look within. A disagreement may reveal an attachment. A disappointment often uncovers an expectation. A success may highlight a strength to be nurtured with humility.

Applying Svadhyaya today:

- Read a passage from a sacred text and reflect on how it applies to your own life
- Spend a few quiet minutes each day observing your thoughts and emotions with honesty
- Examine your actions and motives without self-condemnation or self-justification
- Learn from both success and failure by asking what they reveal about your inner nature

AMMASPEAK Mata Amritanandamayi



True Devotion Takes Courage

Children, if one were to ask what is most beautiful in human life, it is devotion, pure love for God. In the vast darkness of sorrow and suffering, devotion is the light that holds our hand and leads us forward. It is like the sacred river Ganga, which washes away all mental impurities. When one attains pure devotion and pure love, life itself becomes blessed.

Many of us remember God only when faced with problems. Our devotion is limited; we pray and make offerings so that He will fulfill our desires. At other times, we forget God completely. We cannot call this devotion. True devotion is not a part-time affair. A devotee remembers God in all circumstances.

When a coin is louder than a bell

Some people were waiting outside a shop with the shopkeeper busy wrapping their purchases. Suddenly, he stopped, closed his eyes, and stood there with joined palms. After a while, when he opened his eyes, one of his customers angrily asked, "What injustice is this? Is it right of you to stand there with eyes closed when so many of us are waiting?"

The shopkeeper calmly replied, "Didn't you hear the *dipradhana* bells from the nearby temple? As soon as I heard the ringing, I closed my eyes for a while to pray."

The people gathered in front of the shop said, "We didn't hear any bell ringing from the temple." Hearing this, the shopkeeper did not say anything and resumed his work.

After a while, he took out a coin and threw it onto the street outside. No one noticed him throwing the coin, but they all heard the clink of the coin as it fell to the ground and turned to look. A few of them even scrambled to pick it up.

The shopkeeper said, "See, even when the temple bells clanged loudly, none of you heard it, but the moment you heard the soft clink of the coin falling to the ground, your attention went towards it."

Those who came to buy things from the shop were focused on worldly objects. Therefore, they easily heard the sound of the coin. However, for the shopkeeper, God was the focal point in his life even while immersed in work.

An experience beyond emotion

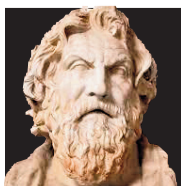
When the person dearest to us has been hospitalized, our mind will revolve around them no matter where we are. These thoughts will continue flowing as an undercurrent amidst all our actions.

Likewise, God should become the center-point of our life. If so, no matter what we are doing and even if we are mired in worldly activities, our attention will be on God.

Devotion is not mere emotion; it is wisdom. It is inner fulfillment and the discovery of one's true self. Such devotion becomes possible only for the most courageous. Love awakens from within, and that faith is not blind. That faith is the most luminous. It leads to love and finally to surrender.

The writer is a world-renowned spiritual leader and humanitarian

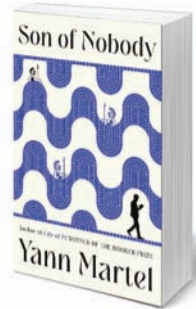
MASTER MIND



"If there were no absurdity, there would be no wisdom." ~ ANTISTHENES

The Greek Geekiness and a Bunch of Nobodies

Yann Martel blends an imagined epic, scholarly footnotes, and prose into one ambitious narrative on war, myth, and marital squabbles



Son of Nobody
By: Yann Martel
Publisher: Penguin
Pages: 343
Price: ₹587

By MANI RAO

The narrator in *Son of Nobody*, Yann Martel's fifth novel, is Harlow Donne, a classicist and PhD candidate who goes to Oxford University to work on an obscure project to decode the (correctly named) Oxyrhynchus Papyri. Instead, Harlow stumbles upon an unknown Trojan war story featuring an ordinary soldier called Psoas. It is a name he has previously encountered on some fragments of pottery (*ostraka*) in a museum; intrigued, he is sucked into the story. Harlow has left his wife Gail and daughter Helen behind in Canada, and this mirrors soldiers who abandon their families when they join a war.

Harlow's translation of the poem about Psoas—which he calls *The Psoad* (a riff on *The Iliad* by Homer)—becomes the mainframe of the book, while copious footnotes deliver a parallel narrative with hilarious, geeky information about details in the poem, as well as the narrator's own reflections and emotional struggles. The two stories echo each other—the ancient Trojan war and the modern domestic squabble, the soldier and the researcher both missing their families.

Psoas is “a goat-teat puller, a cheesemaker, a fixer of fences”,

an ordinary man from Midea, fighting on the side of the Greeks. There is a clear pecking order—people like Psoas do not talk back to heroes, for “*heroes cut down/ordinary men like blades of grass are scythed, and never did a blade of grass try to strike back*”. When another nobody called Thersites is thrashed for insubordination, Psoas is overcome with brotherly love and goes to commiserate with him. Thersites complains about their lot, and their “miserable, anonymous deaths”.

“Who will sing of me, who will sing of you?”

“Why are we so little deserving of song?”

“Yet I'm a stupid goat, son of nobody?”

What motivates these nobodies to fight in other people's wars? Psoas joined the war for the spoils, but ends up with none. Alternating between fright and bravado, these sons of nobodies get their share of slashing and mauling the enemy. But, unschooled in war etiquette, they may even go too far—an angry Psoas mauls Prince Mestor of Troy so badly that it brings down god Hades himself. When Hades asks Psoas to bring him the “flesh of death”, Psoas takes him the body of a child—the pathos is so intense that Hades begins to weep.

Like *The Iliad*, the narrative of



Yann Martel

The Psoad is episodic. One anecdote has Psoas chatting around a table with a Trojan carpenter, Elianthus, before killing him; eventually, the table has “four empty sides”. A 25-page episode spins a new theory about how Helen of Troy was actually lawfully wedded to Prince Hector, and never abducted, contradicting the *Iliad* version.

Phrases in the main poem about the war trigger recollections and musings from Harlow's personal life. The pyre to cremate Patroclus, Achilles' friend, recalls an anecdote about how an American was cremated in Goa

by a collective of Westerners.

The footnotes are geeky, and the trivia are presented with utmost seriousness. From the impossibility of bronze armour and likelihood of wood and linen to maps of the Aegean sea, and the dactylic hexameter, we learn much about the nuts and bolts of the ancient wars and classical epics. A phrase such as “land dry as camel shit” leads to a fascinating footnote about how camels are not native to Greece, but could have been encountered in North Africa. The yarn of Psoas and Harlow (and Martel) features giraffes, “with whom the Greeks

had imaginary and perhaps real relations”; and a Trojan elephant instead of the Trojan horse.

And this is where a sub-plot unravels, about the blurring between history and fable, between fact and fiction, between canonical religious text and literary works. As the epic takes on religious seriousness, the Bible becomes an epic. Martel asks: “to what extent are these ancient songs history, and to what degree, fiction?... This seminal event of antiquity, along with other foundational stories of the great past—Gilgamesh, the Bible, the Gospels and the like—

all belong to the verdant realm of fiction (hence their power), with only a few, thread-like tendrils reaching out to verifiable facts.”

In the Greek epic, war is foregrounded while broken souls are mourned in the background; while “with the story of the Jesus of Nazareth, we have love constantly discussed and concretely enacted in the foreground before a background of hatred and violence. It's the exact inverse of *The Iliad*.” The parallels are spelt out: “Troy: Jerusalem. Psoas: Jesus. Contrary complements. Stories that are at the start and heart of Western culture, our founding myths, the first, the oldest, offering redemption through poetry, the second, the latter, salvation by faith. For both, we have mere wisps of evidence, then stories, then the Greeks and the Christians”.

All said and done, the book may appeal more to poets, classicists, or simply those who have already read Homer and are familiar with the conventions of Greek epics. The bifurcation of the main narrative and footnotes is not a new format; an example from Indian writing is Meena Kandasamy's *Exquisite Cadavers*, which has a similar parallel narrative. But the classical content that Martel probes in so much detail automatically demands more attention. For the reader willing to work for it, Yann Martel's *Son of Nobody* is delectable.

Phrases in the main poem about the war trigger recollections and musings from Harlow's personal life. The footnotes are geeky, and the trivia are presented with utmost seriousness.

READ

THE BESTSELLERS

FICTION



Yesteryear
By: Caro Claire Burke
Publisher: HarperCollins
Price: ₹799



Before I Knew I Loved You
By: Toshikazu Kawaguchi
Publisher: Picador India
Price: ₹550



The Ocean Would Paint Me Blue
By: Zoulfa Katouh
Publisher: Bloomsbury
Price: ₹499

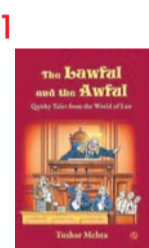


Taiwan Travelogue
By: Shuang-zi Yang
Publisher: Picador India
Price: ₹499



Fieldwork as a Sex Object
By: Meena Kandasamy
Publisher: HarperCollins
Price: ₹599

NON-FICTION



The Lawful and the Awful
By: Tushar Mehta
Publisher: Rupa
Price: ₹995



Strangers
By: Belle Burden
Publisher: Ebury Press
Price: ₹99



Let Go
By: Daisuke Yosumi
Publisher: Allen & Unwin
Price: ₹599



Just Being
By: Romila Thapar
Publisher: Seagull Books
Price: ₹1,499



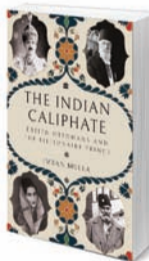
The Constitution Is My Home
By: Indira Jaising, Ritu Menon
Publisher: HarperCollins
Price: ₹699

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Sources: Amazon, Bookstores, Publishers

The Ottoman Twilight in the Indian Sky

The narrative revisits the shared ideals and forgotten ties between Ottoman exiles and the Nizam of Hyderabad



The Indian Caliphate
By: Imran Mulla
Publisher: HarperCollins
Pages: 304
Price: ₹799

By KABIR DEB

While the Ottoman Empire is often remembered through the lens of its decline, far less attention is paid to the ideas and aspirations that survived within its ruins. In *The Indian Caliphate: Exiled Ottomans and the Billionaire Prince*, Imran Mulla offers a deeply human account of this forgotten history. Through the story of Abdulmejid II and his relationship with Mir Osman Ali Khan, the Nizam of Hyderabad, he reveals an Ottoman world shaped by intellectual exchange, cosmopolitan ideals, and political imagination. By recovering these overlooked connections, Mulla brings to light a history of coexistence that feels especially relevant today.

In the book's introduction, Imran Mulla reveals that the marriage between Abdulmejid II's daughter, Durrusehvar Sultan, and the Nizam of Hyderabad's son, Azam Jah, was envisioned as a final flowering of Indo-Islamic culture. It was also an attempt

to project the Ottoman Empire, and by extension, Islam, as progressive, cosmopolitan, and engaged with modernity. As Mulla writes, “I describe the scheme as Indian because it involved Indian Muslims outside of Hyderabad, and the Nizam's capital was widely recognised as home to the last flowering of Indo-Islamic culture.” The book's strength lies in its willingness to embrace subjectivity. Mulla often speculates about the intentions of his subjects, offering possibilities.

From the Ottoman exile in India, the narrative gradually widens to encompass the growth of modern art in Istanbul and the political choices whose consequences continue to reverberate across the Middle East even today. More than a century later, the idea of the Caliphate remains contested, seen by some as a symbol of extremism, by others as a reminder of a tradition that sought to reconcile faith with modern thought. Mulla's book inhabits this tension with nuance. He notes that Indian

Muslims' concern and fascination for the Ottoman Empire “helped encourage the Young Turks to embrace global Islamic politics.” This insight is particularly significant today, when divisions within the Muslim world continue to deepen. The relationship between Ottoman and Indian Muslims was not merely political. Rather, it broadened horizons, shaped ideas, art, and literature that extended beyond national boundaries.

One of the book's most intriguing insights is its portrayal of Abdulmejid II at a moment of crisis. While many Muslim intellectuals and rulers feared the destruction of the Caliphate, Abdulmejid was more concerned with preserving Turkey itself. For him, the

survival of the nation took precedence over the institution of the Caliphate, which held greater symbolic importance for Muslims beyond its borders. Mulla suggests that this tension contributed to the weakening of both the empire and the Caliphate. Against this backdrop emerged Turkish nationalism under Mustafa Kemal and his allies. As Mulla notes, “The victory of Turkish nationalism over the European powers led to widespread and raucous celebrations.” In many ways, the political order of the present modern Middle East continues to rest upon the choices made in that decisive moment.

Sections that revisit Hyderabad under the Nizams challenge many contempo-

(From left) Durrusehvar Sultan, Abdulmejid II, and Azam Jah



The relationship between the Ottomans and Nizams was also an attempt to project the Empire, and by extension, Islam, as progressive and cosmopolitan

The Sound of Earth

By SATHYA SARAN

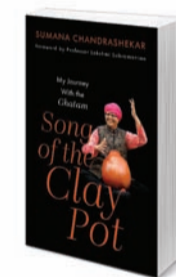
Sumana Chandrashekar's *Song of the Clay Pot: My Journey with the Ghatam* is a book one wants to treasure, so one can soak in the richness of the musical heritage it offers.

Chandrashekar's journey with the musical instrument ghatam is told with passion and eloquence. From the very first moment she feels drawn to the sound of the clay pot to the moment she masters it, she holds the reader in thrall. “I must have been asleep for about three hours. Suddenly, I sensed my fingers were moving on my belly. As they moved, I heard the sound of a pot. The smell of earth had engulfed me. I woke up with a start. No rain. No petrichor. And the night was warm and still,” she writes. And thus begins Chandrashekar's involvement with the clay pot.

What makes this book a comprehensive whole is that the author weaves the history of the instrument into her own story. The ghatam started as a vital percussion instrument, but gradually slid down the hierarchy, falling far below the mridangam and being relegated to the back of the stage.

Yet, she presents enough evidence to show how her own teacher, as well as the ghatam maestro Vikku Vinayakram, helped bring the clay pot into focus, its eloquence sounding out loud even on the international stage. Like the humble bamboo flute that Krishna played, the simple clay pot, despite its humble beginnings, can stand up to the most accomplished musician and provide all the variety of sounds that a rendering of the most complex ragas might demand.

The chapters on how ghatams



Song of the Clay Pot
By: Sumana Chandrashekar
Publisher: Speaking Tiger
Pages: 238
Price: ₹599

are created, the soils used to ensure perfect resonance, the creation of various pitches, and Chandrashekar's own experience of witnessing the process make for fascinating reading. Even as the instrument is mainly played by men, Chandrashekar sees it as a soul sister, a friend, and a companion through life.

Her search leads the author to realise that the sacred clay that creates sounds worthy of the stage is fast diminishing. Entire tracts of this special soil have been cemented over for the creation of new buildings, and the hands that once crafted a musical instrument are now working at odd jobs in towns and cities.

In a chapter on musical censorship, she writes about how the incredible power of music to heal body and mind led to musical instruments becoming a means of oppression. Till quite recently, in Carnatic music recitals, the ghatam was never offered a microphone when such aids were still rare and reserved for the singer and, among percussion instruments, the mridangam.

A wealth of musical and social information lies between these pages. The author uses a simple, candid style to share her thoughts and discoveries, leaving the reader much richer in knowledge about an oft-overlooked instrument.



Kitchen Confidential

The heart of the home deserves thoughtful design that looks good and works even better

By KRITI SARASWAT-SATPATHY

The contemporary kitchen has evolved far beyond its utilitarian roots. Today, it is a statement of design, craftsmanship and lifestyle—a space where bespoke finishes, sculptural materials, and seamless functionality converge. “A kitchen’s layered look comes from thoughtfully-composed material choices, textures at different depths, finishes that complement, and the right storage and cabinetry. The key is to build these layers in a cohesive way,” says Anju Mukhi Mistri, principal designer at Open Atelier Mumbai.

Making the right material selection based on the kitchen’s usage and overall aesthetic is key to creating a space that’s both functional and visually pleasing. Sneha Ostawal, principal architect at Source Architecture, suggests, “For cabinetry, I prefer marine-grade plywood for longevity and durability. In areas exposed to constant moisture, particularly under sinks, I recommend stainless steel cabinets as they help address concerns around hygiene, odour and water damage. For countertops, porcelain slabs and high-quality quartz work beautifully in most kitchens due to their durability and ease of maintenance. For backsplashes, I often suggest using the same quartz or countertop material to minimise grout lines.”

Flooring plays a prominent role in how your kitchen is experienced. In open-plan layouts, interior designer Aanchal Bhuwalka of AB Design recommends continuing the same flooring as the rest of the house or living room because it creates a seamless look. “If the kitchen is a separate space, a different flooring material can help



Prashant Bhat/Open Atelier Mumbai; (below) Source Architecture



Ankush Maria/Open Atelier Mumbai

define the area. Porcelain tiles, terrazzo, and natural stone are some of my preferred choices,” she adds. If you opt for wooden flooring, keeping it in contrast with the cabinetry can create an illusion of more space while adding another layer of visual interest.

Smart planning based on one’s pantry requirements and crockery can help create storage solutions that are intuitive yet discreet. “The goal is for the kitchen to absorb everything it needs to hold, with none of it visible yet all of it accessible,” opines Mistri. She further elaborates, “Integrated pantry systems, deep drawers, and floor-to-ceiling cabinetry maximise efficiency without compromising elegance.” According to Bhuwalka, lighter shades can make a smaller kitchen feel more spacious, while darker tones add richness and character to larger spaces. “I also like to ensure that the colours complement the rest of the home,” she adds.

A combination of ambient, task and accent lighting works best in the kitchen. Explains Ostawal, “Task lighting over the preparation areas is essential for everyday cooking, while overall ambient lighting ensures the kitchen feels bright throughout the day. Under-cabinet lighting is particularly effective as it illuminates work surfaces without creating shadows. Cabinet lighting can then be added to introduce warmth, depth, and a layered visual experience. When done right, lighting not only improves functionality but also transforms the kitchen into a space that feels inviting.”

Ultimately, timeless materials, intelligent planning, and impeccable craftsmanship come together to elevate the everyday.

Blue Blooded

At OZEN RESERVE BOLIFUSHI, the Maldives isn’t merely a destination—it is a masterclass in effortless, all-inclusive luxury



By NIKHIL P MERCHANT

There is a moment, two-and-a-half hours out of Mumbai, when the Maldives reveals itself—a constellation of islands scattered like sequins across an impossible palette of navy, aquamarine, and electric turquoise. It is the kind of view that explains why travellers keep returning. Part of Atmosphere Core, OZEN RESERVE BOLIFUSHI has built a loyal Indian following through its intuitive understanding of the market. After landing in Malé, guests are escorted to their private lounge before boarding a luxury catamaran. The island is split between beachfront Earth Villas and overwater sanctuaries, each positioned for either sunrise or sunset. Beach villas come with private pools and shaded cabanas, while the overwater residences add an irresistible flourish: a private slide that drops straight into the lagoon.

The Reserve Plan elevates the all-inclusive concept into something genuinely indulgent. With one of the Maldives’ largest kids’ clubs offering everything from pizza-making to cookie baking, alongside nanny services, and wellness programmes, the place is well suited to families. Then there is The Royal RESERVE—three interconnected villas that function as a private island within the island. It comes with its own spa pavilion, personal trainer, private Teppanyaki restaurant, butler, and exclusive transfers.

Dining is one of the property’s strongest calling cards. Breakfast at Vista del Mar moves effortlessly from traditional Maldivian flavours to sushi counters and champagne. Saffron serves refined Indian cuisine, Sangu explores Levantine and Moroccan flavours, while Soyi delivers bold Pan-Asian fare. At ORIGINE, the adjoining CUVÉE Wine Library houses over 2,000 bottles across more than 350 labels, making it one of the Maldives’ most ambitious collections.

Evenings naturally drift towards OZAR, the poolside bar made for slow sunsets. Suspended above the lagoon, the overwater ELE INA Spa draws inspiration from the five elements, with treatments accompanied by uninterrupted reef views beneath glass-panned floors. Between dives, snorkelling, water sports, boutique shopping, and leisurely island cycling, boredom simply never enters the itinerary.



11

THE SUNDAY
MAGAZINE

FLAUNT

An Actor’s Legacy



Bonhams’s four-part auction of Diane Keaton’s estate on June 12 was a historic success. Achieving a 100 per cent sell-through rate, the global event grossed \$4.2 million and drew the auction house’s highest-ever number of registrations. Organised alongside the Fine Art Group, the sale offered a rare glimpse into the Godfather star’s life as an artist and curator.

The auction’s centerpiece was the late actor’s original Annie Hall script, which sparked a 22-minute bidding battle before selling for \$394,200—nearly 100 times its estimate. Her iconic fashion sense also drove massive numbers: a Ralph Lauren Purple Label jacket commanded \$40,960, and her trademark black bowler hat brought in \$20,480.

High-end art excelled as well, with David Wojnarowicz’s (Untitled) Buffalos print setting a record at \$127,500. Meanwhile, the most eccentric lots proved irresistible: Keaton’s personal, candid photo booth strips from the 1970s outperformed expectations entirely, with one set of three strips hammering down at \$23,040.



PICK OF THE WEEK

For the Love of Linen

With a new store in Mehrauli, Anavila weaves together nature and nostalgia in its collections

Delicate, earthy, nostalgic are a few words that capture the essence of the luxury fashion label Anavila. Tucked away in a quiet courtyard in Delhi’s Mehrauli, its newly-opened store is a sunlight-filled sanctuary that rests under the shadow of a ber tree. Drawing inspiration from linen—the fabric that lies at the heart of the label—the space is rooted, simple, and meaningful.

Long before quiet luxury became a thing, Anavila embraced it through textile depth in 2011. Born out of founder-designer Anavila Misra’s love for linens, the label was a result of an exploration of what could be the women’s counterpart to men’s linen shirts—breezy, comfortable, and suited for the Indian climate. “Saris are integral to the socio-cultural fabric



of India, and I decided to craft a linen sari that can be draped well and doesn’t crush.”

Being raw in a refined manner, Anavila’s butter-soft saris are fragrant with nostalgia. Misra shares, “Whenever I think of new collections, nostalgia keeps coming

back to me—summer vacations, nani ka ghar, and the saris grandmothers wore.” And this translates onto the garments. A green linen sari appears with Anavila’s signature dainty hand applique work—white cranes, banana trees, and flowers—inspired by Misra’s own love for trees and the daily observations of tribal women embroiderers from Jharkhand. While the saris from the Ete collection feature block printed motifs—faint, subtle, and elegant—the Sofia sari features Baroque-inspired prints. Anavila’s latest Spring-Summer ‘Oh Bonita’ embodies the bloom of spring with a burst of pink and tangerine. With the label, Misra wants to exhibit Indian luxury in its true sense.

—Samiya Chopra



'I'm Nothing Like Guddu Pandit'

Ali Fazal speaks with Puja Talwar about his latest series, *Raakh*, and the responsibility he felt while portraying an introverted Dalit cop

Ali Fazal is an actor of illusion, disappearing so completely into his characters that each role feels worlds apart from the last. He was the lovable, vulnerable Joy Lobo in *3 Idiots*, the ruthless Guddu Pandit in *Mirzapur*, and now, in *Raakh*, he ventures into yet another unfamiliar territory—as an introverted Dalit police officer navigating the rigid hierarchies of 1970s India. Constantly reinventing himself, Fazal has built a career that resists typecasting and embraces transformation. In this conversation, he reflects on inhabiting one of his most restrained performances yet, the life-changing experience of fatherhood, and finding a deeper sense of peace in his craft.

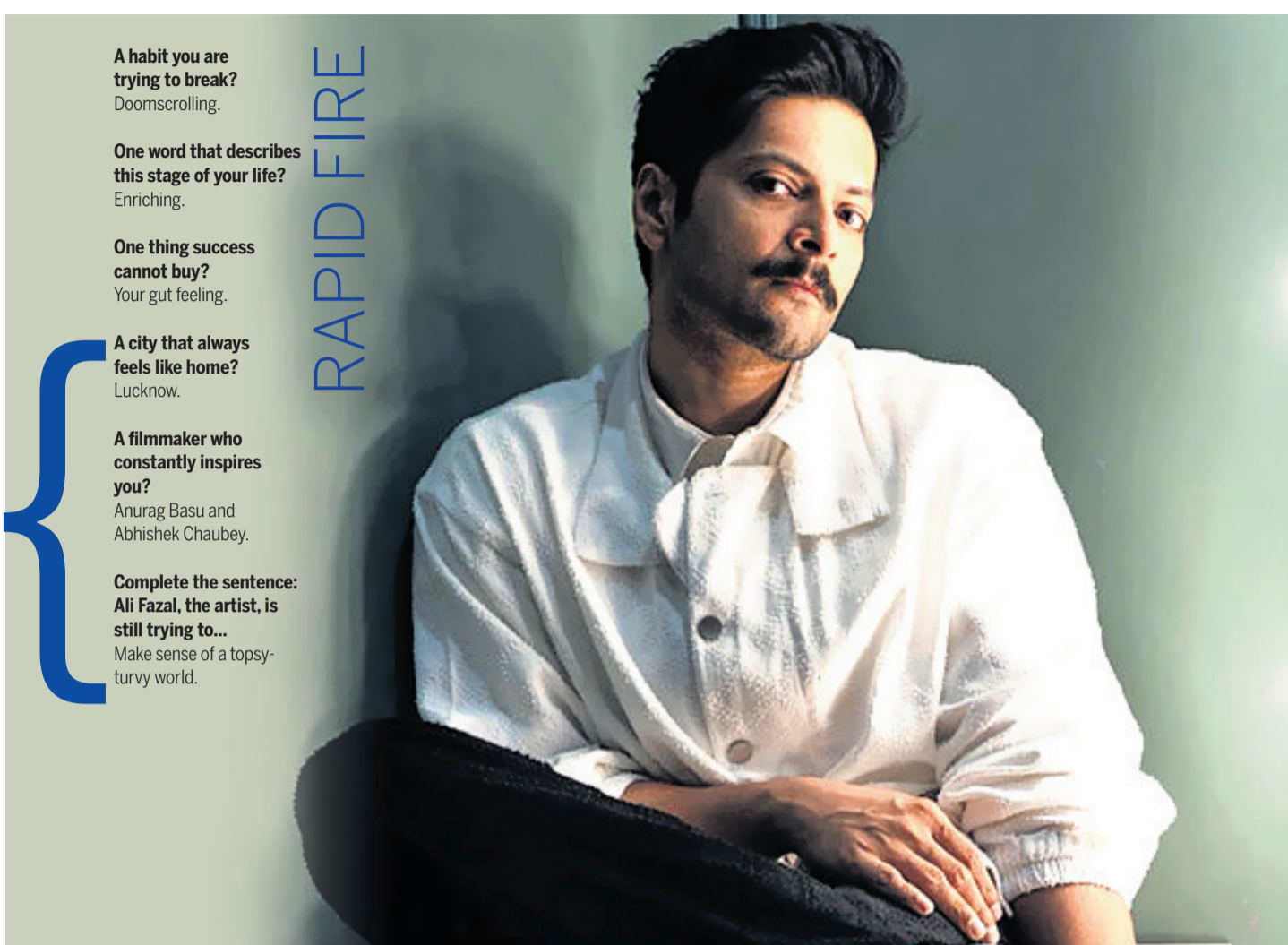
For someone who has played the anti-hero, a romantic lead, and now a cop, which version of Ali surprised you the most?

I think the antagonist, the *Mirzapur* stuff. I am nothing like that character.

***Raakh* is set in 1978, and you play a sub-inspector. What was it like to immerse yourself in a character in that period of time?**

It was challenging, but we had a lovely team. If I talk about my character, Jay Prakash, there were a few things for me to understand about him: is he a

Ali Fazal; (below) The show's poster



A habit you are trying to break?
Doomscrolling.

One word that describes this stage of your life?
Enriching.

One thing success cannot buy?
Your gut feeling.

A city that always feels like home?
Lucknow.

A filmmaker who constantly inspires you?
Anurag Basu and Abhishek Chaubey.

Complete the sentence: Ali Fazal, the artist, is still trying to...
Make sense of a topsy-turvy world.

smoker, why is he doing what he is doing, and all the other things that had to be correct as per the period. And of course, the uniform—we had ample trials on that, and had to be sure of how a police officer was in those days. This is also a story of a very common man who's just come up on merit. He studied for it, and he got into the system, and then he is fighting those layers of society, of the status that he belongs to. It was also important to keep in mind that there's another kind of chaos on the other side of the story, because my character is not somebody

who's verbose, and it's not all spelled out in each dialogue.

Also, the fact that he is a Dalit cop trying to prove his competence in a system which was never built for him. It was also a time when the caste conversations were not as loud as they are now.

I think it is still, in many ways, stifling for a lot of marginalised communities. I had to be respectful of the time and of that name. The whole show is a dramatised version of the Billa Ranga case. They had to do it because we had no information

about the criminals, so they had to create a story and turn the show into a study of criminal psychology. On the other side is my character, Jay Prakash. It's a study of the claustrophobia of this simple man in a uniform, who is always going to be stuck in a system. He is also larger than life, trying to shy away from his place in society. It's like trying not to be seen and be seen at the same time. So it's a battle. I was interested in seeing a cop who is also an introvert, and doesn't get violent or angry, but has been educated and wants to use it the right way.

You are a father now. Has that also changed you somewhere as a person?

Yes, I have a new outlook on time. I did respect time, but now I'm grateful for it because each hour, each minute I get, I want to spend with my daughter and family. It is so enriching. You are parenting, and you were parented once, because as actors, we're also kids; there's a part of us that doesn't grow up. It works in our favour because we have to be open to every experience, like a 6-year-old would be, probably.

After so many successful

films and shows, when did Ali Fazal go from promising to formidable in his own right?

I cannot answer that... You know, actually, there's a film that didn't do that well. It's called *Milan Talkies* by Tigmanshu Dhulia. I really learned a lot from him on that set, which I have taken with me for a long time. I got comfortable. Earlier, there used to be a lot of confusion and apprehensions. I think the time when I shot *Death on the Nile* with Kenneth Branagh, and then *Mirzapur* Part Two and other things, I noticed a change, because I started to enjoy the process. It became addictive, because it's like meditation. The film starts, and I'm answerable to nobody in the world. I'm switched off. That's the change—being answerable only to yourself.

You are an actor who's loved by audiences and critics. Have you reached a state where this validation doesn't interest you?

I'd be lying if I said it doesn't mean anything. It means something, because it's the last piece of the edit, right? When it's transferred to the audience, I think it's beautiful when that happens. And the ones that don't work—I am reminded of words of Raj Kapoor *Saab*. He said that the films that work, those are forever with the audiences; the ones that don't work, those characters stay with the actors forever.

You are now back with the *Mirzapur* movie, and your character Guddu has become one of the most iconic characters.

I think *Mirzapur* is an experiment for all of us. We're really excited that, for the first time, an Indian show is turning into a film. It's one of the best decisions made by the makers. I think it's going to be a standalone film. Regarding Guddu, I'm in our favour because we have to be open to every experience, like a 6-year-old would be, probably. I'm glad that the same people are now watching *Raakh*.

WATCH

The Ghosts We Inherit

By MEDHA DUTTA YADAV

Surina Narula has done it all. Over the past three decades, she has championed literature, education, women's rights, children's welfare and environmental causes, leaving an indelible mark across philanthropy and the arts. She founded the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature, was a founding sponsor of the Jaipur Literature Festival, and established the Global Sustainability Film Awards. Based in London and originally from New Delhi, she was awarded an MBE in 2008 for services to street children in India. Now, she has added filmmaker to that distinguished list.

Her directorial debut, *Haunted Heritage*, officially selected for the London Indian Film Festival 2026, is a psychological horror short that uses a haunted house as a metaphor to examine prejudice, racism and the fears societies pass down from one generation to the next. "The greatest surprise was discovering just how monumental the process of making a film really is," Narula says.

According to her, the ghost sequences were the steepest

In *Haunted Heritage*, first-time director Surina Narula transforms a supernatural thriller into a meditation on prejudice and forgiveness



(Left) Surina Narula; (above) a scene from the film



learning curve. "Creating convincing supernatural moments without exaggeration was something I had never done before," she says. The story itself emerged during the Covid pandemic, when prolonged isolation led her to reflect on how fear can revive old prejudices. "The film asks whether fear and uncertainty can awaken prejudices we believe we've left behind. The ghost is really a metaphor for those inherited fears and biases that continue to haunt us." Living in a 300-year-old Georgian house made horror feel like a natural choice.

At the heart of the film lies an unexpected message. "For me, the real exorcism is forgiveness," she says. "The ghost isn't banished by force; it is finally laid to rest through forgiveness and compassion." Narula believes audiences in Britain and India will interpret the film differently, yet arrive at the same truth. "British audiences may see race and immigration. Indian audiences may recognise caste, religion or class. The details differ, but prejudice exists in every society."

Her hope is that viewers leave asking themselves a difficult question: What ghosts am I carrying? "It is easy to recognise prejudice in someone else. It is much harder to recognise it in

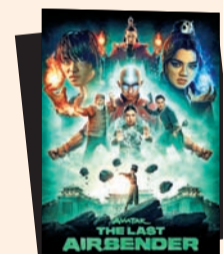
ourselves." Years spent working with street children, women and marginalised communities convinced her that "some of the greatest horrors are not supernatural—they are created by human beings." Among them, caste discrimination continues to haunt her most. "To be treated as though your very presence contaminates others is a terrible form of dehumanisation."

Her next dream project would examine caste through the same language of horror, inspired by stories of honour killings over inter-caste relationships. Instead of revenge, her imagined story would begin with a daughter's ghost returning to ask her mother: "What ghost do you carry that even your love for me was not enough?"

"The real monster is rarely the person," Narula says. "It is the inherited belief, the fear, the prejudice that has possessed them for generations." Alongside those ambitions, her next film as a producer is already underway. *Tasme*, a children's feature directed by Vinay Thakur, is currently being shot in Chandigarh. If *Haunted Heritage* is any indication, Narula's cinema will continue to use ghosts to illuminate the invisible prejudices that shape the human condition.

OTT REVIEW

On a Bender



AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER
Directors: Jabbar Raisani, Amit Gupta, Anu Menon, and Hiromi Kamata
Platform: Netflix
Genre: Fantasy
Language: English
Rating: ★★☆☆☆

In fantasy and thriller shows, some characters are so instantly compelling when they appear: Raymond Reddington in *The Blacklist*, Vartika Chaturvedi in *Delhi Crime*, et al. In the highly anticipated second season of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, that character is The Blind Bandit, or Toph Beifong. When she joins Aang's Team, Toph, played by Miya Cech, doesn't disappoint. She makes an already funny show even funnier, arriving with the same elusiveness as Jaqen H'ghar in *Game of Thrones* and Moghedien in *The Wheel of Time*.

For the uninitiated, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is a live-action adaptation of the 2005 animated series of the same name. Set in an Asian-inspired fantasy world where selected people can control the four elements—Earth, Water, Air, and Fire—the story follows Aang, played by Gordon Cormier, who goes by the sobriquet Avatar. He is the only person with the power to master all the elements. He, along with teammates Sokka (Ian Ousley), Katara (Kiawentiio), and two adorable CGI animals, Appa and Momo, must bring balance to the world and defeat the imperialistic Fire Nation before they conquer all other nations.

Unlike the first season's simple narrative, the second is much more mature, politically volatile, and morally grey. The arena for these themes to play out is Ba Sing Se, the Earth Kingdom's sprawling capital, where much of the season is set. The visual narrative and the storyline are so gripping that they resemble a political thriller. And even amid all the fantasy, it is the politics that mesmerises the watcher: the ignorance of the elite; a shadow ruler in the sly and manipulative Long Feng; and the conditions of the working class. Here, the characters are no longer confined to a single overarching narrative; instead, each one embarks on a personal journey—a shift the series portrays masterfully. To top it all, the season flaunts striking montages that provide a glimpse into their inner worlds.

The greatest strength of Season 2 remains its production. Every costume, set, location, visual effect, and action sequence has been mounted with remarkable care, giving the series a genuine sense of scale and ambition.

And yet, the series has its flaws, like any other. At times, the storyline loses momentum by dwelling too heavily on individual coming-of-age arcs. Like many live-action adaptations of animated shows—think *One Piece*—the performances struggle to retain interest—but just occasionally—with the the exaggerated style of animation. It does raise a laugh but we feel some of the jokes are unnecessarily inserted. Overall, *Avatar: The Last Airbender Season 2* is a confident and visually spectacular continuation of the emotional and political energy of the first. Even when pacing falters, or performances occasionally overlay familiar animated beats, the series succeeds because of its visually rich worlds, memorable new characters, and cinematic ambition.

—Mohd Shehwaaz Khan

