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CONFLUENCE

SOUTH ASIAN PERSPECTIVES

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Over 20 years of publication

Sept - Nov 2025

Anita Nahal wins NISSIM INTERNATIONAL PRIZE FOR LITERATURE, 2024



Acclaimed writer and one of our long-standing contributors Dr. Anita Nahal has won the prestigious NISSIM International Prize for Literature, 2024 for her outstanding novel *Drenched Thoughts*.

The NISSIM International Prize for Literature was instituted by Satbir Chadha, wife of the chairman of the NISSIM company, who is herself an award-winning author and poet. It is a part of the social outreach program of the company to award upcoming writers in the English language in the fields of prose and poetry, fiction and non-fiction. There is a cash award of Rs 10,000/- each for the best author in prose and poetry. This is the eighth year of its inception, and it has been well acknowledged and appreciated by the writing community.

We work within the Facebook group 'The Significant League,' whose founder and chief admin, Dr. Ampat Koshy, also gives out the 'Reuel' awards for best poet, translator, motivational writer, and other categories. (See page 11)

Trump's Second Administration: America's "Great Experiment" on Trial by Kavita Mohan*



"[T]he preservation of the sacred fire of liberty, and the destiny of the Republican model of Government, are justly considered as deeply, perhaps as finally staked, on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people."

- *George Washington, First Inaugural Address*

"A republic, if you can keep it."

- *Benjamin Franklin's response to a question about what form of government was created after the Constitutional Convention.*

One year ago, for the November-December 2024 issue of *Confluence*, we reported on the results of the U.S. presidential election. In that article, we noted that "[i]t is not an understatement to say that American democracy itself could be at stake." The events of the past eleven months have proven those words to be prescient and many of our forecasted shifts in U.S. policy related to immigration, education, international trade, climate change, and U.S.-India relations have materialized. This article provides a brief summary of just some of the major actions of the current administration this past year. (continued on page 3)



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Frozen in Time P17



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Editorially Speaking

Dear readers,

I am very pleased to write to you again through this feature-packed issue of Confluence, which I am sure you will all enjoy reading. Although this edition has reached you later than planned, I am confident that our readers will find it well worth the wait. My sincere thanks go to all our writers, who have enriched these pages with their varied and thoughtful contributions.

In my previous editorials, I have reflected on AI technology and the future of creative journals. In this issue, we have experimented with AI in a limited and thoughtful way, ensuring that our original creativity remains fully intact. For a long time, we have been searching for a cartoonist who could add an extra layer of visual enhancement to the stories and articles we publish. This new technology appears to have helped us bridge that gap. I look forward to hearing our readers' and writers' responses to this new creative technology in the history of our magazine.

Another important update I would like to share with our writers' community concerns a research project we hope to undertake, examining the articles, stories, and poems published in this magazine over the past 23 years. We are seeking volunteers who would be interested in contributing to this valuable and meaningful initiative. While the work is voluntary, the Editors will gladly provide a Certificate of Participation that may enrich your own creative and professional journey.

We would be grateful to receive your submissions for the next edition at your earliest convenience, so that we may bring it to you on time and with the care it deserves.

Happy Holidays to everyone, and I look forward to hearing from you as we welcome the New Year 2026!

Vijay Anand

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Volunteering Opportunity

We are looking for Editorial Assistants to assist us with the regular publication of this magazine. We would like to hear from people who have experience with publishing software and with a creative mind.

Please Email

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Immigration: The Trump administration has gone further than any other prior administration in recent history in its dehumanization of immigrants and its attacks on due process. Scenes of masked Immigration and Customs Enforcement (“ICE”) officials conducting aggressive raids, sweeping up immigrants and U.S. citizens alike, have become commonplace. In September, the U.S. Supreme Court, the majority of which is comprised of conservative judges (three of the six were appointed by Trump during his first administration), even cleared the way for ICE to stop any individual based solely on [how they look, what language they speak, or what work they do](#).

Additionally, although Trump claimed that he would be deporting “[the worst of the worst](#),” Government data demonstrates that the vast majority of those targeted by his policies have no criminal convictions. As of September 2025, [71 percent](#) of those detained had no criminal convictions. Indeed, during the recent raids in Chicago, as many as [97 percent](#) of those subjected to ICE raids had no criminal record at the time of their arrest. It is important to note that in U.S. law, simply overstaying a visa is a [civil violation](#), not a criminal offense, making the violence and force used in many of these enforcement activities particularly incomprehensible.

There are widespread reports that those who have been caught up in ICE raids have been subjected to [inhumane conditions](#) and possible human rights violations, including a lack of access to [food, water, or medical care](#). The administration also [stripped a Biden-era policy that protected certain areas from enforcement activities, such as churches, hospitals, and schools](#), which means that enforcement activities are now taking place at places of worship or as people seek out medical care, and in front of children.

Public Health: During his second administration, Trump has taken significant steps to [undermine American confidence](#) in its public health institutions through politicization, anti-science policies, funding cuts, and attacks on institutions. Among multiple other concerning actions, Trump appointed Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., as the Secretary of Health and Human Services. Kennedy, a former lawyer and [heroin addict](#) who does not have either a medical or public health background, is an anti-vaccine activist. Trump [withdrew](#) the United States from the World Health Organization, which significantly weakens international collaboration efforts during global health crises. The administration also pulled back on public health funding from local and state governments, and has undertaken [major job cuts and funding cuts](#) at federal health agencies. While the administration has officially stated that it wishes to “Make America Healthy Again,” many of its actions will lead to outcomes that are [just the opposite](#).

U.S.-India Relations: U.S.-India relations have become more strained during Trump’s second administration, as compared to his first. On the immigration front, Trump made it harder to obtain H-1B visas, ordering in September that every new application would [cost \\$100,000](#), a blow to skilled workers from India hoping to work in the United States. Additionally, in an unexpected move, in August 2025, Trump also implemented an additional 25 percent tariff on India, bringing its total duties to 50 percent. Trump stated this was due to India’s imports of [Russian oil](#). Some have speculated whether the tariffs were also imposed on India because Prime Minister Modi denied that Trump played a role in brokering India’s ceasefire with Pakistan after Operation Sindoor and [refused to back him for the Nobel Peace Prize](#). Either way, the current administration’s actions have certainly taken a toll on U.S.-India relations and chilled the previous “warm” friendship of the two leaders. A trade deal between the two countries is purportedly [nearing completion](#).

Attacks on Universities, Law Firms, Media, and Political Opponents: The current administration under Trump has attempted to silence [universities, law firms, media](#), and political opponents to an extent that has not been attempted by any other prior administration. This includes threatening or withholding billions of dollars of funding for elite universities such as [Harvard, Cornell, Northwestern, Brown, Princeton, the University of Pennsylvania, and Columbia](#) because of

perceived liberal biases. Trump also threatened top law firms in the country, including many that previously investigated Trump or represented prominent Democrats, by threatening to revoke security clearances, ordering reviews of government contracts, blocking them from federal buildings, among other actions. While some [universities](#) and [law firms](#) have capitulated to the administration, agreeing to questionable “settlement agreements,” others have stood fast and have prevailed in their legal challenges. This administration has also made a number of attacks [against the media](#), a continued hallmark from Trump’s first administration, including filing suits against major media outlets, stripping federal funding from National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting Station, and threatening television personalities and comedians who are critical of his policies. Trump has also threatened [political opponents](#). Most recently, on November 20, Trump warned that the actions of half a dozen Democratic lawmakers were “[punishable by Death](#)” because those lawmakers, all of whom previously served in the U.S. military called upon current members of the U.S. military to “refuse illegal orders.” Under U.S. law, members of the military may, and in some cases must, [refuse to act on an order that is unlawful](#).

International Trade: Trump has imposed sweeping tariffs impacting goods from nearly every country in the world, including its closest neighbors and allies. The overall average effective tariff rate is currently [higher than any time since 1935](#). Among multiple other actions, the administration has claimed [tariff authority](#) under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), as a result of which it has imposed tariffs against almost all countries. It has also imposed duties on multiple products under Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act. The Supreme Court recently heard [oral arguments](#) on whether the President has the authority under IEEPA to impose such sweeping tariffs, and a decision is expected by the end of this year or early next year.

Results of November 2025 Elections: As of November, Trump hit a new low in his approval ratings, with 59 percent of all voters [disapproving](#) of the job he is doing, based on a poll conducted by Fox News, a right-wing network typically aligned with the administration. This disapproval was reflected in the November 2025 elections, which resulted in [sweeping wins](#) for Democrats. One of the most notable results of the night was the victory by Zohran Mamdani for Mayor of New York City. Mamdani, a Democratic Socialist, and son of noted filmmaker Mira Nair, defeated former New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, who ran as an Independent, and Republican Curtis Sliwa. Mamdani ran on a platform of making New York City more affordable for the majority of its residents and [won](#) despite Trump’s threats to slash New York City’s federal funding if he won and [major Wall Street donors](#) backing Cuomo.

Mamdani met with Trump on November 21 during an unexpectedly cordial meeting. Mamdani seemingly won over the president, who said “[t]he better he does, the happier I am.”

Trump has already been talking about seeking an [unconstitutional third term](#) as President, but the next litmus test for his popularity will be the U.S. midterm elections in November 2026. If Democrats are able to regain the majority of the House and Senate, there may be a chance to restore some balance of power. A key concern, however, is whether the United States will be able to hold free and fair [elections](#) by then.

***Kavita Mohan is a U.S.-based attorney with over 20 years of experience. She has published multiple articles on issues relating to U.S. politics and trade policy and previously served as a Vice-Chair of the South Asia and Oceania Committee of the American Bar Association for over a decade. Kavita has been selected to the Washington, D.C., Super Lawyers list in 2023, 2024, and 2025, and was previously selected to the Super Lawyers’ Rising Stars list in 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2019. This article was prepared in her personal capacity and the opinions expressed herein are hers alone.**



Magazine Introduction

Vatayanam - वातायनम्

Vatayan Europe's quarterly flipbook magazine by Astha Deo

Vatayan Europe's quarterly flipbook magazine **Vatayanam** was launched in London on 13 April last year by Baroness Usha Parashar, CBE. The event brought together local literati and glitterati, including eminent educationists and writers from across the globe. Among the distinguished guests was Anuradha Pandey, Attaché (Hindi and Culture) at the High Commission of India, London.

Founded by acclaimed author Divya Mathur, Vatayan envisions the magazine as a creative anchor for writers across the Indian

commissioned to craft a Dastangoi for **Vatayanam**. Our Poetry Editor, Prof. Rekha Sethi of Delhi University, presents an insightful interview with Prof. Anamika, while eminent storyteller Suryabala captivates readers with her memorable piece *Vachal Sannaate*. Adding a thought-provoking dimension, Balendu Sharma Dadhich, Universal Access Ambassador for ICANN, explores the question: 'Is mechanical translation important even if it remains imperfect?'



diaspora. We take pride in our exceptional editorial board, comprising celebrated writers and scholars, supported by a skilled technical team. While Hindi remains the primary language of publication, the magazine also offers three distinctive sections: English, International Authors in Translation, and Regional Literature.

Over the past three editions, **Vatayanam** has proudly featured cover art by distinguished author-artists Liladhar Mandloi, British artist Jeroo Roy, and Asghar Wajahat—each infusing their unique creative vision into the magazine. Carrying this tradition forward, the current issue showcases a striking cover designed by the celebrated poet, art critic, and writer Prayag Shukla. This edition also brings an exciting array of contributions: veteran author Nasira Sharma has been specially

As Prof. Francesca Orsini suggested, the magazine aims to reflect the diverse experiences of non-resident Indians living in the UK—their struggles in an adopted country, the practicalities of daily life, and their interactions with other ethnic communities. We would be delighted to publish articles that explore these themes.

We invite readers, writers, and thinkers to engage with **Vatayanam** - share your stories, perspectives, and creative expressions. Together, let's celebrate the richness of language, culture, and experiences across borders.



**Astha Deo is a Project Manager,
Writer and Presenter.**



Emily Henry's latest novel

Great Big Beautiful Life

Reviewed by Anjana Basu
Publisher: Penguin Viking

Sandglass and sea glinting in the sun, the glamour of the bygone movie business, the atmosphere of the California Gold Rush with attendant treachery and the flavour of lost loves. In Emily Henry's latest novel, *Great Big Beautiful Life*, the past breathes, lingers, and beckons, trailing scents of salt air, scandal and long-faded perfume.

Alice Scott arrives in Georgia to research the history of the mysterious Margaret Ives, a tabloid princess who belonged to the Golden Age of Hollywood and who had a legendary romance and marriage with a rock star which ended tragically with his death. Margaret wants her story written and she invites two journos to Little Crescent Island the sleepy coastal space in Georgia where she has hidden away so that she can decide which one she wants to commission. Alice a bubbly optimistic girl writes for a serious publication *The Scratch* while Hayden the other journalist has a Pulitzer under his belt and is stiff competition indeed. Now in her eighties, Margaret surrounds herself with sandglass artefacts of her own making, trying to trap time even as it slips through her fingers.

Margaret's dazzling white house—with its spiral path, wooden staircases and drifting scent of sea and memory—is the heart of the novel. It's a place where past and present blur and where stories long buried begin to find new life – but do they really?

Emily Henry fans will find this a departure from her usual books even though it remains atmospheric with a cosy small town backdrop, cups of steaming coffee and a cast of endearing characters. There is also Margaret's own dazzling white house with wooden stapes and sandglass decoration with a uncurve path winding around it with one entrance and one exit.

Against this unfolds the story of Margaret's great grandfather,

grandfather and other relatives The novel is propelled by Margaret and the St Ives history that she narrated to Alice. To keep the plot moving, Henry intertwines Margaret's memories which Alice is recording and family lineage with episodes between Alice and Hayden and



Alice and Margaret in the present time. Hayden is not shown in his interactions with Margaret - he remains teasingly the one whom Alice is competing with while at the same time losing her heart to. The threads of father-son and mother-daughter relationships weave through the novel, extending from Margaret's complex past to Alice and Hayden's present. Hayden must navigate the tightrope of legacy, haunted by his father's expectations, just as Alice seeks a truth that resists her attempts to grasp it.

There is a lot of family politics to deal with, including who is related to who and how and a mysterious Nicolle acting as the Rosebud factor in the story while the Ives family castle borrows its grandeur from Hearst's

fantastic San Simeon. The parallels continue with Margaret's love story with her husband Cosmo Sinclair which is as fast and all-consuming as that between Alice and Hayden, despite the fact that the romances are set decades apart and the Cosmo encounter begins with Margaret's grandfather's death and a tabloid storm. Perhaps the ending is what readers might expect from such a generational novel remaining true to the lives of millionaires and rock royalty with secrets to hide from tabloids.

What emerges is a tapestry of anecdotes, griefs, betrayals, and small victories. In *Great Big Beautiful Life*, Henry doesn't end with a plot twist but what one might call a poetic reckoning—with love, with loss and with the way our stories live on in others. Sometimes the pace is screechingly slow and readers might wish for more excitement – because the content has the potential to be exciting, but Henry is not interested in progressing into thriller terrain. She evokes the fragrance of past and present with a sparkling use of adjectives and language is poised to create tension whether romantic or poetic in terms of description.

Full of sandglass time and starlit memories, *Great Big Beautiful Life* is exactly that—a rich, melancholic tribute to the glamour of yesteryears and the quiet beauty of lives too big to be contained in headlines.



Anjana Basu works as an advertising consultant in Calcutta. She has had a book of short stories published by Orient Longman, India, the BBC has broadcast one of her short stories and her poems have featured in an anthology brought out by Penguin India.

Bollywood

Hindi Film Songs and Their Place in The Life of Indians

By Sunayana Panda

I live in Pondicherry in south India. This morning I went to fill petrol in my scooter at the petrol station near my house. The man who was dispensing the petrol had his phone in his shirt pocket and a song was playing on it so that he could listen to it while he worked. And what was the song? "Pyar kiya toh darna kya?" from Mughal-e-Azam, a film which was made some 65 years ago in Bombay (now known as Mumbai).

When India became independent the people living in the various states didn't know much about each other. They did not speak each other's language and travel was neither easy nor cheap. So, getting to know each other was difficult. There was neither television nor the internet but there was the print media of newspapers and magazines. As the masses were unlettered the newspapers and magazines could be accessed only by a few. But there was something else which was widely popular and that was the radio. The radio brought the news and music into everyone's lives. The radio also brought Hindi film songs. Everyone listened to them, the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated, the Hindu and the Muslim. These songs became a part of shared experience by all Indians.

From the 1950s to the 1990s Hindi film songs entertained the country through the radio and in the early years of Indian television it was the programmes based on Hindi film songs which were the most popular. People waited eagerly for the weekly telecast of these song clips from films.

India produces films on an industrial scale. The main centres of film making after independence were Bombay, Calcutta and Madras (now known as Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai) but because the Bombay films were made in Hindi, and because it was the commercial heart of India, it became the capital of Indian cinema. Hindi was spoken in most North Indian states and it could be understood in several other states so Hindi films became a

thread which connected a large section of the population of the country. The Tamil and Bengali film songs were also popular but their reach was restricted to their region.

Songs have been an integral part of Indian films since the days when sound was added to the silent films. The songs were parts of dialogue in the very early films. In that sense they took the story forward. But over the years they have moved to the background. We see the actors but the song is sung as a piece of background music, telling the audience about what is going on in the minds of the characters. Sometimes a song is added purely for entertainment and if the song is removed

Indians said how much they felt the loss. Lata Mangeshkar was only a part of this rich world film songs.

There was not only the music but also the lyrics. Those who wrote the words of the songs were not that well-known beyond the circle of true film songs fans even though it was their words which thousands of Indians knew by heart. The masses quoted them when they needed to express their feelings. As Javed Akhtar, the famous lyricist says, "The songs of the 1950s, 60s and 70s gave not only emotions but also wisdom to the people."

Today every singing competition on television has songs from old Hindi films, every wedding venue plays those songs, YouTube has hundreds of channels which show these songs, sometimes with the lyrics so that listeners can sing along. These songs are a collection which spans 60 years. The styles changed from decade to decade but they remain popular even today.



it would not change anything in the story. This is entirely an Indian format of making films.

Earlier Hindi film songs were not only heard by the audience but they were sung by everyone. Today it's a treasure trove that we have inherited. All Indians are familiar with films songs and many sing them in private gatherings or public performances. Even those who never had a formal training in music can sing film songs and all Indians have a sense of melody because they grow up listening to film songs.

The mass mourning that was witnessed when Lata Mangeshkar died showed how emotionally attached Indians, as well as Pakistanis, were to her songs. And it was a pan Indian phenomenon. Not only people who speak Hindi as their mother tongue but also Bengalis and Odias, Gujaratis and Marathis expressed their grief. Even South

I end with another anecdote. A couple of months ago, as I was leaving London to return to India, my husband called a taxi on a taxi service app to take us to Paddington Station from where we were going to catch the Elizabeth line. When the vehicle arrived we got in. A couple of minutes later the driver made polite conversation. He told us that he was Iranian. My husband told him that we actually wanted to go to the airport but no taxi driver wanted to go to Heathrow at 7.30 in the morning. That is why we were taking the train from Paddington Station.

"Where are you travelling to?" the man asked.

"My wife is going to India," replied my husband.

"Are you Indian?" he asked me.

"Yes," I answered.

"India is a wonderful country!" he exclaimed. And then, to my surprise, he started singing the well-loved song from Sholay, "Yeh dosti ..."

I was really taken aback because he not only sang the whole refrain but also the whole first stanza. Here I was sitting in a taxi in London and an Iranian driver was singing a song from Sholay, a film which is celebrating its 50th year since its release. I saw how Hindi film songs have not only connected all the states of India but they have also connected India to many other

countries where Hindi films are very popular.

Those who composed these songs and those who wrote the lyrics had no idea how far and wide their work would go, even crossing the barriers of Time and Space.



Sunayana Panda is a writer and actor who divides her time between London and Pondicherry. She is the author of three non-fiction books and several short stories.

Three Poems

by Gopal Lahiri

Anaphora of My River

My river nourish the roots of a young plant
testing strengths in the moonless night.

My river passes by the door and sleeps beneath
the sycamore near the foothills.

My river stretches her feet into the fading
patch of sunlight.

My river carries the pilgrims to the small
temple in the middle.

My river watches a fisherman stands in a boat
and cast a net in jade waters.

My river decides to blanket the paddy field
against the dense grey sky.

My river overflows its dykes in persistent rains
drowning villages and towns.

@gopallahiri

Waking Hours

Seeds planted earlier germinate now,
in the early hours of morning
a lonely hummingbird sits
on the patio wall
looking up to answer the low clouds,
up there she is my clock
that set my heart into proper motion.

Light spillages, sound mutes, whisper erases,
a change is in the offing,
memories swirl, unspoken words
encounter on the basement, mattresses,
refrigerator draws, shower heads,

You are here yet
far beyond
real and more real,
I can feel but never touch.

I sink in my dream in a black porcelain cup,
they say, it's my waking hours.

@gopallahiri

Shades of silence

Now my anger scatters in every line of the
couplet, in the forest of the alphabets and notes.

I draw the arched line of my grief and wound
in the shape of verse to reach my readers.

And hold on to the shadow of mango leaves,
whisper into the ears of the crumbling wall.

How long must I wait before the closed door
and recite your name all the time like a hymn?

I fetch myself metaphors and simile to sketch
the terrace flooding in egg-yellow balminess.

In the evenings I wait for the moon to rise in crescendo
and sit beside the window with a stash of memories.

A solitary shadow is screaming in shades of silence
and hide my poems in the secret desk and drawers.

@gopallahiri



Gopal Lahiri is a bilingual poet, critic, editor, writer and translator with 32 books published, including eight solo/jointly edited books. His poetry and prose are published across more than one hundred fifty journals and anthologies globally. His poems are translated in 18 languages and published in 16 countries. He has been nominated for Pushcart Prize for poetry in 2021. He has been conferred First Jayanta Mahapatra National Award on literature in 2024 for his significant contribution in Indian English Writing. His collection of poems 'Alleys are Filled with Future Alphabets.' has received Pan Asian Ukiyoto awards. His Selected Poems was published from CLASSIX, New Delhi recently.

Faith & Rituals

Clay, Rain, and Reverence: Mumbai's Ode to Ganpati

By Tanusha Nagrath

The first drop of rain on the streets of Mumbai never falls quietly. It carries with it a pulse- the pulse of festivity drum beats, of faiths about to awaken, of hearts, hands and homes in preparation for their most awaited guest. Somewhere, a child in the neighbourhood starts humming "Ganpati Bappa Morya" long before the idol arrives... Somewhere else, an old man quietly wipes the framed photo of last year's Ganpati. In Mumbai, Ganesh Chaturthi is not a festival. It is the city's heartbeat! As the monsoon winds loosen their hold, markets begin to bloom in their own rhythm. Stalls selling Ganesha clay idols stand shoulder to shoulder with a burst of colourful flower garlands,

when it departs. A Family Called Mohite, A Tradition Called Devotion Among the millions of homes preparing for Ganpati this year, one in particular has its own gentle rhythm, the Mohite household. Their story begins, like every good Marathi story, with rain. "आस लागे तुझे देवा, सरता श्रावण सरी..." "When the first monsoon showers fall, we start longing for Bappa's arrival," says Roshan Mohite, smiling as he recalls the frenzy that follows. "Discussions begin...what form should the idol take this year, what decoration would best suit him." "This year, our Ganpati came as Lord Krishna," he continues with pride in his tone and a glint in his eyes. "A flute in one hand, a chakra in another, a lotus in the third,

reciting softly the line that carries the festival's bittersweet farewell: "निरोप घेतो देवा, आता आज्ञा असावी, चुकले अमुचे काही, त्याची क्षमा असावी." "O Lord, we bid you goodbye; please grant us permission to take leave. If we've made any mistakes, forgive us."

The Mohite story is not just about ritual; it is about a way of being. A memory made in rain and clay, preserved by hands that still believe. Faith That Smells of Modaks and Marigolds A few local trains away, in another suburb, Chaitanya Kulkarni and his family prepare for the same guest, but in their own way. "गणपती आला आनंद घेऊनन,



Amid chants and skies divine,
his grace and glory shine



In his lifted palm of peace, the universe finds
its gentle release



Throned in splendour, draped in grace-
The Eternal Lagbaugcha Raja

washed green banana leaves, and sparkling decorative lights. You will find the air thick with the smell of wet earth, turmeric, and sweet jaggery; the unmistakable scent of beginnings. Every lane, from Girgaon to Andheri, carries a secret countdown. Families discuss their themes; decorators and drummers rehearse across suburbs. Artisans, with hands that have shaped faith for generations, sit cross-legged beside half-finished idols, their palms stained with the very clay that will soon breathe a force- divine. For many, this is the moment when Mumbai begins to transform. The buildings look the same, the trains run late as usual, yet something invisible moves through it all- a warmth, a waiting, a familiar joy that visits each year and leaves the city lighter

and blessings in the fourth. We created a small forest around him; trees, rivers, birds, and sky, all made from paper and natural material. Our family believes in keeping Bappa close to nature." In the Mohite home, devotion looks like teamwork. Mothers, uncles, cousins, and grandparents work side by side, hands busy, hearts full. Their shadu (clay) idol stands as a symbol of what the family cherishes most- reverence that does not harm the very earth they worship. "Every evening, we sing aartis, play traditional games, and share stories," Roshan says. "When the seventh day arrives, and it is time for immersion, it feels as though someone our own, someone very dear is leaving the household." He pauses before

फुले सजली प र्त ्येक अंगणी..." "Lord Ganesha has arrived, bringing joy with him; every courtyard is decorated with flowers"

"Every year, the excitement is the same," Chaitanya says, arranging durva (holy grass) beside the idol. "Ganpati's arrival is like a loved one returning home after a long absence." In the Kulkarni house, faith smells of steaming modaks, fresh marigolds, and sandalwood. Laughter fills every corner. The sound of aartis competes with the sizzling of ghee and the chatter of visiting relatives. "Bappa is not just Vighnaharta- the remover of obstacles," he says. "He brings calm, focus, and strength to our home. Each year, we feel the difference his presence makes. It is not a ritual anymore- it is love, it is trust." Their Ganpati stays for

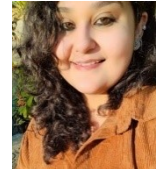
ten days. By the time the immersion comes, the house feels emptier, but also lighter, as if some unseen burden has been lifted. The City That Believes Together What makes Mumbai's Ganpati special is not its scale but its inclusiveness. A mechanic in Dharavi, a banker in Bandra, and a film star in Juhu—all bow before the same clay idol. The same chant rolls off a million tongues: "Ganpati Bappa Morya!" Community pandals rise overnight, each one a work of unique imagination. Some depict mythological stories; others address social issues, water conservation, women's safety, education. The largest of them all, Lalbaugcha Raja, draws queues that last for hours, sometimes days. Yet, no one complains. Devotion in Mumbai doesn't measure time. Children dance in processions. Elders distribute prasad. Strangers share umbrellas and packets of chivda (a healthy millet snack). For ten days, the city that often feels hurried suddenly finds time, time to sing, to pray, to smile at strangers and engage. The Sea That Listens And then, as all beautiful things must, it ends. The drums grow louder, the streets turn crimson with gulal, and idols begin their slow journey to the sea. Standing by the waves at Girgaum Chowpatty, you can feel a sublime sense of what words often fail to describe. There is farewell to the joy in the air, and a lump in every throat. Families call out to Bappa to return soon. Children wave, some crying, some laughing. The sea receives the idols one

by one, embracing and carrying them away gently, only to return the next year. It is not just immersion- it is surrender. A reminder that faith like life, is cyclical: you let go, only to receive again... A Memory That Travels Beyond Shores For South Asians living abroad, Ganpati remains a bridge- a reminder of home, of noise, of belonging. It connects second-generation children in London, Toronto, or Singapore to a feeling that is hard to explain; a belief that the divine can live inside your living room, eat your sweets, and share your laughter. Somebody's off-key singing becomes everyone's favourite part! In Mumbai, Bappa is not distant or abstract. He comes home, sits among us, listens to our small prayers. And when he leaves, he carries away our heaviness. Perhaps that is why, year after year, through rain and rush and relentless traffic, people still gather on those crowded streets with the same unwavering cry- "Ganpati Bappa Morya! Pudhchya Varshi Lavkar Ya!" Because faith, like the monsoon, always returns...

Acknowledgments: *This article would not have been possible without the heartfelt stories and memories shared by the Mohite family- Roshan, Samir, Sonal, Kaushal, and Jagruti, along with their parents Supriya and Sudhakar Mohite, uncles Rajendra and Subhash, aunts Maya and Sakshi, and grandmother Snehalata Mohite. Their warmth, creativity, and devotion brought alive the true spirit of Mumbai's Ganpati celebrations. Sincere gratitude is also*

extended to Chaitanya Kulkarni and his family for sharing their reflections, rituals, and moments of faith that beautifully capture how Ganpati Bappa continues to unite hearts across generations. Thank you for opening your homes and hearts, and for reminding us that behind every faith, idol, and prayer lies a story, a tradition a heritage of a simple family, of their cultural ties and their bonds of love.

Tanusha Nagrath is a Jaipur-based media freelancer, storyteller, performer, and voice artist. A Registered Talker with Prasar Bharati, she has appeared on Doordarshan Rajasthan and leading FM channels.



Her voice work includes Voice ATM projects, reflecting her versatility. An experienced live anchor, hosted major events like Pink Festival Jaipur and the Know India International Cultural Conclave.

A published poet featured in national and international anthologies, she also brings depth to theatre through productions like Chandni Raat Ka Ek Dukhant, continuing to expand her creative horizon.

NISSIM INTERNATIONAL PRIZE FOR LITERATURE, 2024 for Anita Nahal's novel, *Drenched Thoughts*

by Satbir Chadha

The NISSIM INTERNATIONAL PRIZE FOR LITERATURE was instituted by Satbir Chadha, wife of the chairman of the NISSIM company, who is herself an award-winning author and poet. It is a part of the social outreach program of the company to award upcoming writers in the English language in the fields of prose and poetry, fiction and non-fiction. There is a cash award of Rs 10,000/- each for the best author in prose and poetry. This is the eighth year of its inception, and it has been well acknowledged and appreciated by the writing community.

We work within the Facebook group 'The Significant League,' whose founder and chief admin, Dr. Ampat Koshy, also gives out the 'Reuel' awards for best poet, translator, motivational writer, and other categories.

Both the REUEL and NISSIM prizes are given along with gifts and certificates to awardees at a glittering event held every year in Delhi in the presence of prominent writers, academics, and celebrities.

It was our delight and honor to present the NISSIM award this year to Dr. Anita Nahal for her outstanding novel *Drenched Thoughts*. Circumstances forced a simple private ceremony at the India International Center, New Delhi on November 5, 2025, with only a few friends, though one of the admins, Sunita Singh, and a few members of the Significant League, Vandana Kumar, Dr. Roopali Sircar Gaur, and Dr. Vinita Narula—all writers and/or retired and current professors and teachers of English—were present and gracefully shared the joy of handing over the prize to Dr. Nahal. The ceremony was also attended by other writers and editors, such as Lakshmi Kaanan, Deepa Agarwal, Rachna Joshi, Swati Pal, Radha Chakraborty, Satish Chopra, and Perwaiz Shaharyar, and by Dr. Nahal's friends, former students and family members.

Sunita Singh spoke of the salient qualities of the book and why it was our choice out of several entries, and Roopali spoke about Anita Nahal's writing journey and especially about the unique genre (combination of poetry and prose) in which this book is written. Everyone congratulated and felicitated the awardee, to a round of applause.

Flash fiction

ESKINOMO

by Cyril Dabydeen

Always, in retrospect, the journey north has the quality of a dream.

--Margaret Atwood

In the Arctic, what's imagined from long ago. Really the Iceman cometh, do you know? Crossings on my mind as snow glitters, this alembic. Nothing being out of sight, you see. *Who's she really?* Scary Old Drupattie, wearing her Madrassie headkerchief--as she waves to me.

A voice, whisper. A household slave on that first or last slave-ship.

Can you really tell?

Going to find the Northwest Passage...she keeps leading me on--with our being on a nameless ship. Her distinctly white hair, cobwebby patterns on her face: Drupattie, so used to working with her hands: kneading, grinding, and spinning; an incorrigible weaver she is.

She has cast her imaginary northern spell on me, imaginary but real, as I'm yet in my Snowman's guise. See, she'd been through many passages and crossings long before. *Oh, before the Iceman cometh!*

Here indeed in the Northern sea as waves rise higher, and the ship keeps canting, more than a mirage: now to really find a new passageway, believe me. "Hey, Drupattie, do you know?"

She nods to me, yes.

Those below deck also call out to her, like to a Hindu deity from long ago, Vedas-long ago. Fore and aft, the waves rise higher. Now who's perched on the mast making a sign of the cross? The crow's nest, yes. What Christian sailor of yore proclaiming himself, and not slave-liberator like William Wilberforce in the English Parliament?

Go on, keep signalling to me!

"Slavery must be abolished for good," I hear, words said and unsaid, rhetoric being all.

Crossing borders, gateways, on small rafts, and making headway. But going...where? Who does in my own ordeal? Ice crackles. Cold-cold, in the veritable North. *Eskinomo in me, ah.*

Drupattie in an indentured vessel coming from Calcutta, it seemed, but now in the far North on the totemic

Franklin Expedition.

No-no, I hear again.

--Yes-yes.

*

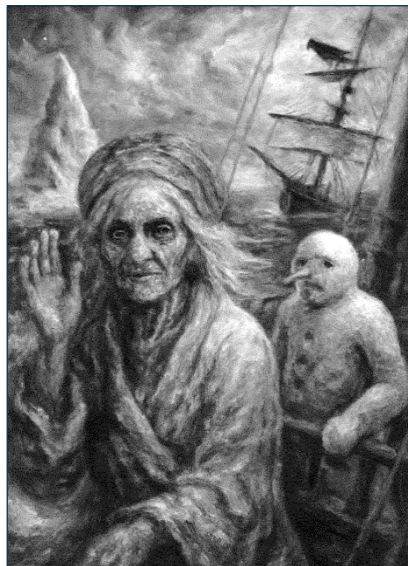
It was her idea that we go out, like

falsifying time itself. *Yeah, out with it!*

Drupattie's gums start flapping. Believe me, she's not making sense anymore. Let the deities have their own way, like a destined path to follow. *Why... not?*

Drupattie might have impressed herself on me, as I construe the old hag with bones piled up in a far place, like ancient India itself. Palimpsest, you bet, with markings everywhere.

She crinkles her eyes, looking back, but also looking forward to the North, to what's less exotic. *Really*



Eskinomo...me?

Who am I really? Asking, nothing denying.

She calls out for us to walk in heavy snow, in shivering cold.

I conjure up an island-archipelago, like an escape plan. I rub my eyes with our indeed being on the authentic Franklin Expedition.

Who's John Franklin, if a Seaman of Yore? I am frozen in my tracks.

Streaks of red are before me. And more I must know from past days and nights. Bloodlines, with memory intact...indeed mesmerizing.

I am yet in my guise as an invisible Snowman, really being at it.

Now what does the Snowman in me want to talk to her about?

Waves beating, like from undersea, then rising up again as we move along. Let Wilberforce, Buxton, Canning, liberators all in the English Parliament keep being at it. Real voices

demanding that slavery be abolished for good! Drupattie hems and haws.

Indentured labour must also be abolished, do I know?

Ah, let Gandhi keep being at it: first in South Africa. Tribal voices also keep asking, like from everywhere--everything more authentic in the penury of days ahead.

Drupattie looks at me with distemper, you see.

We keep plying the waters, looking for the Northwest Passage, like an escape route...to find the Indies. Yes, the Franklin Expedition--being on the *HMS Erebus* or *HMS Terror*.

Drupattie scrubs harder at the floor. And the Iceman I will keep being, more than make-believe. The snow drives hard. A blizzard with the Arctic, like nowhere else. Sailors with binocular-eyes look out from the ship's masthead, the real crow's nest--looking far out. Where are men like Drake, Gilbert, Raleigh? Elizabethans all, do you know?

I see a mammoth iceberg far ahead. "It's what you must only know," Drupattie says to me. The ship floundering, in more icy waters.

I also imagine being stuck in tropical waters, going through the dreaded Middle Passage. *Do I really know?* I quickly reach out to Drupattie, touching her cold hands.

The ship's foghorn noise comes to us again, now here in Baffin Bay, the year being 1845. *Eskinomo I am, believe me!* My birthright, it seems. I keep being on the masthead, like my foreordained place, but back in India also.

Beary-eyed Drupattie keeps thinking of an auspicious moment looking up at the stars, believe me.

What more she wants me to know about, the augury of a new day, and maybe seeing the planets ablaze. Her face frozen, like pumice, as I yet hear her calling out to me...about the Iceman cometh.

Yes, our coming and going on the Northwest Passage. History's pathway only--looking far back. The wind blows hard again, with my sense of being far away...well beyond what seems like the trumped-up Northwest Passage, yeah. *How the Iceman cometh!*



Author's note: An early draft appeared in *South Asian Ensemble (Canada)*, Vol. 8, # 1-4 (Fall 2016).

Cyril Dabydeen writes with all his “fateful diversities”—as some critics have said. A “noted Canadian poet” (House of Commons, Ottawa), his recent books of fiction included *Forgotten Exiles* and *My Undiscovered Country* (Mosaic Press). Previous titles include: *God’s Spider*, *My Multi-Ethnic Friends*, *Jogging in Havana*,

Black Jesus and Other Stories, *My Brahmin Days*, *North of the Equator*, and *Imaginary Origins: Selected Poems* (Peepal Tree Press, UK). His novels include *Drums of My Flesh* (Mawenzie House), an IMPAC/Dublin Prize nominee, and a Guyana Prize winner for best fiction. Cyril’s work has appeared in the Oxford, Penguin,

and Heinemann anthologies, and in *Poetry* (Chicago), *The Critical Quarterly* (UK), *Prairie Schooner* (US), *The Fiddlehead*, *Prism International*, and *Canadian Literature*, etc. He is Ottawa Poet Laureate Emeritus.

Azam Gill’s thriller *Jadiny* Reviewed By Santosh Bakaya

This fourth thriller novel, by Azam Gill, published by Sabre & Quill, with 174 bibliographical references, is a spine-chilling thriller that grips the reader from the first page. Writer, editor, public speaker, teacher, Azam Gill has written three stand-alone thrillers, five non-fiction scholarly books, and many articles on eclectic subjects. Len Deighton called his novel, *Blood Money*, a ‘first-class thriller.’

Dedicated to ‘those who go beyond the call of duty,’ this book initially appeared intimidating to me. But gradually, the intimidation tapered away as I read page after page, visualizing every scene written with such precision and visual clarity.

I experienced a whole gamut of emotions — awe, surprise, admiration, and wonder. How can anyone even begin to think of writing such an unusual book, involving extensive research and erudition? This brilliant counterfactual / alternative book, full of edge-of-the-seat, nail-biting suspense, is highly recommended for lovers of thrillers.

In Gill, I found David Baldacci, James Patterson, Dan Brown, and Lee Child all rolled into one dazzling writer. I have no intention of writing a spoiler of the entire plot, but highlighting a few key points will make your fingers itch to flip open the pages.

Gill excels in lyrical prose:

In the Prologue, he says—

“The wide screen TV outlined the Manhattan morning traffic jam against the backdrop of the forty-one-year-old Twin Towers on one of those heart-stopping, beautiful September mornings when you just had to forgive fall for burying summer.”

First Chapter, Operations Owl hoot & Scimitar, Leads & Clues—
March 2001, Rome

“A short, sharp explosion ripped the night. There was the sound of two single shots, followed by a burst.

Then silence.

Sweat broke out on the Terp’s upper lip, but he remained in control. Bill handed him a chewing gum. The Terp almost giggled, but popped it in his mouth, mind racing. There was no guarantee that the Very High Value Target under the shoot-on-sight order was still inside since their departure from base two hours ago. There were two more shots.”

The book has two parts:

Operation Trident: September 10, 2001, which begins with a prologue, followed by 17 chapters.

The second part, “Let’s roll,” has six chapters.

Deft characterization is Gill’s forte.

In the first chapter, the reader comes

His job gave him enough time to pursue his inexpensive hobby of reading Arabic poetry. On a high school trip to Morocco, he had fallen in love with mosaics and the Arabic language in its calligraphic inscriptions. But his real interest was in the layers of meaning with which it was imbued.

He had found his niche in life and pursued it with diligence. Unknown to Luigi, he was becoming a natural, self-taught semiotician. Luigi was destined to remain one of society’s unsung, nondescript heroes, a distinction earned through a sense of duty and the pursuit of an unusual hobby.”

Frederick Forsyth says in his novel, *FOX*, 2018

“If the nine inner US intelligence agencies and the seven outer agencies had been doing their jobs in 2001, 9/11 would never have occurred.”

“There were signs, hints, reports, tip-offs, indications, and oddities that were noted, reported, filed, and ignored.”

The novel has been written on the premise:

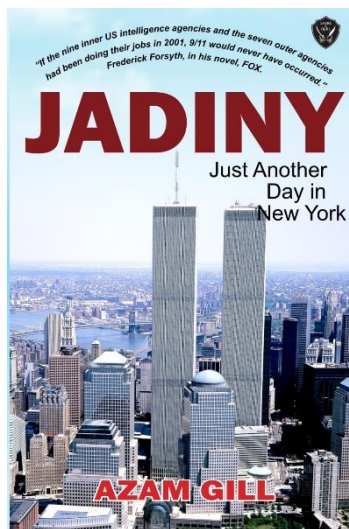
“Had the intelligence Agencies done their jobs, 9/11 would have been just another Day in New York.”

Azam Gill. *Blue Ear Forum* 2002

“Operations Owlhoot, Scimitar, and Trident demonstrate how it would have unfolded, with dedicated junior officers risking their lives and careers to follow and coordinate every clue”.

When a scholar and a military veteran writes an impeccably researched political thriller and exposes the clandestine operations of some terrorist networks, *JADINY* happens.

Armed with an acute lens, an incisive writing style, and painstaking and scrupulous research, the brilliant Gill makes the book a gripping page-turner, characterized by a crisp, riveting style, dexterously weaving a tale of intrigue, suspense, and thrills.



across Luigi Miccoli, who works in SISDE (The Italian Servizio per le Informazioni e la Sicurezza Democratica — the Italian counter-intelligence service).

“Luigi Miccoli had been contentedly working as a filing clerk in the SISDE for over fifteen years. He was small, and his well-rounded midriff attested to his wife Alessandra’s gourmet cooking.

Luigi was a man whose ambition matched his size, and he was happy with his lot in life.

Red herrings are liberally sprinkled all over the book; a fast pace and an attention to detail add more luster to the already sparkling book.

"Chris Holingworth yawned and put the book on the bedside table. His son, a great Tom Clancy fan, had pressed it on him. Although it was a richly informative page turner, he himself preferred the gossamer weave of relations offered by Len Deighton. But when your son is fifteen, at a public school, and you only see him for weekends, you need to listen to him. So, he took the book. For someone who had reservations about Clancy because apparently The Hunt for Red October had been published by an influential group of the US Navy led by Admiral Rickover, he couldn't put this Clancy book down. The man was actually a great storyteller. He yawned."

Some of the Highlights of JADINY, mentioned on the back cover, are: "A Transatlantic, anti-terrorist organization, hidden from heads of state. The dismantling of terrorist money-transfer networks. The Bilderberg Group, The Trilateral Commission, The Russell Trust, The Bohemian Grove and the Council of Foreign Relations. Top-secret US Presidential Executive Orders.

A lurking aircraft carrier. An unpretentious translator transformed

into a cold-blooded striker. The terrorist redoubt in secret diamond mines at the uncharted Roof of the World.

Twenty thousand signed, authenticated, and numbered blank passports. A historic maze of booby-trapped tunnels hides the terrorist treasury. The hereditary guardian of a world-threatening secret in the mountains of Pakistan."

"His mind raced. What could it be?

Clouds? Rain clouds, but rain would extinguish the fire.

Celestial clouds, from which something or someone would appear. A messenger. Clarity from obscurity. An avenging host. Distorted information overriding the consciousness, from within which, by total surprise, a spectacular truth would burst on the consciousness of mankind.

War clouds? What did war clouds hide? What was above the clouds?

Sky, space — birds — planes flew above the clouds.

Planes!

Star-crossed lovers and operatives, Saint John 'Sinjin' Kilvington, ex-SAS and French Foreign Legion, and school-teacher-spy Nathalie Le Viallon, are requisitioned from paradise.

Ordinary citizens blaze their names for eternity.

Brilliantly wrought, finely tuned, Azam Gill has skillfully incorporated unexpected developments, and the way he plays with words is indeed laudatory.

I could almost visualize the image of the "Airport officials embalmed in greedy-eyed incompetence" in this amazingly written counterfactual historical thriller. The captivating narrative features unexpected eye-popping twists, and a fear of imminent dangers. Even the characters who make cameo appearances are described in detail and are engaging and believable, like Shukar Din, an honest clerk in the passport office who refuses bribes from passport applicants, stands up to his boss' corruption and is run over by a speeding car. Shabbir, the suicide bomber, known to his neighbours as Kuntiraman, who kills himself.

Let me say something more before I cap my pen. I loved the Post Scriptum:

New Year's Day, 2002, Southern California.

"The earth showed up stark and unsheltered. Green trees had shriveled and been claimed by the autumn wind. Under an eye-popping, clear winter sky, the blue silhouette of far-off hills brooded over rolling hills."

Two families sat around a blazing log fire, with smiles and tears, waiting for a baby to be born. A new beginning.

A Flying Bird by Toolika Rani

Open wings flapping fervently against the wind -
There is such a charisma in the vastness of the sky!
The youth was not meant to fizzle.
To explore, to live, to fly,
How come that be taken as conventions defied?
Fatigue, yes, it dawns when the excitement slides
After all, the wings are made of feathers light
Extremely fragile.
And then there is this horrible need to survive,
To sit and rest for a while,
But is it fair if all the trees deny
The bird a shelter
And hold a grudge- how could she fly!
Was she made to sit on the branches...ever...forever...and ever...
Or could she just incessantly fly?
You, the trees, can hold your head arrogantly high
And turn her out for what she was designed to try.
Exhausted her wings are broken not
And out in the wild again she'll dart
To fly to the destiny meant for her,
And what a glorious fate confers
Death upon a flying bird!

Squadron Leader (Dr) Toolika Rani is an ex-Indian Air Force Officer, Mountaineer (Everest Climber), Motivational Speaker (twice TEDx), Bilingual poet, Author, and Assistant Professor of History. She is the author of eight books i.e Beyond That Wall: Redemption on Everest, Sherpas of Solukhumbu, three English poetry books, two Hindi poetry books and an Anthology on Himalaya, The Mountain was Abuzz.

Rising from the dust: Dalit stories from Bengal

Selected and translated by Aruna Chakravarti

Reviewed by Sonia Bhatnagar

To read Aruna Chakravarti's *Rising from the Dust*, a translation of Dalit short stories from Bengal by both Dalit and non-Dalit writers, is to have your eyes forever opened to the hierarchy of caste in our country, a reality we are still struggling to dismantle. It is also to sit up, take note, and discover the towering, often-overlooked voices in Bangla Dalit literature.

Each story evokes, with rich atmosphere and lyrical language, the deep yearning for equality that pulses at the heart of every Dalit woman's life. Marginalised and ostracised by society, she nonetheless emerges as the unquestionable protagonist of her own narrative, no matter how insurmountable her struggles may be. The translations are vivid, the flavour of Bangla beautifully preserved, and the sensory details so immersive that the reader is swept along in the tide of her pain, as if living it alongside her. As she suffers, so do we; as she endures historic trauma, we bear witness; and as she fights to rise above her circumstances, we root for her, hoping against hope that there is light at the end of the dark tunnel that is her daily existence.

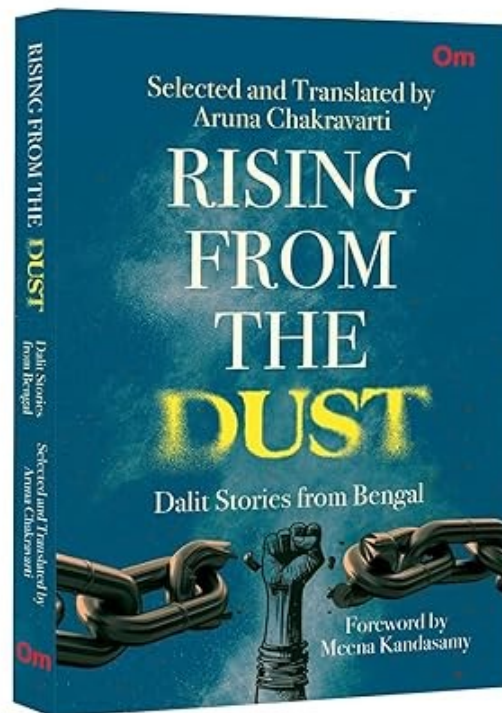
The stories call out to you — even by their titles. If, like me, you don't read

a collection of short stories in a linear way, this book invites a delightful dilemma. I was torn between "The True Life Story of Uli-Buli's Mother," "Snake Maiden," "The Witch," and "Abhagi's Heaven." But it almost doesn't matter where you begin, because it is the women in these stories who speak to you. Sarama in

to remain unmoved in the face of their fierce defiance.

What's especially notable is how the anthology thoughtfully includes both contemporary Dalit writers and canonical authors who, though not Dalit themselves, have written about the Dalit experience with striking empathy and insight.

That these stories remained untranslated and inaccessible to English readers for so long — and thus invisible to a global audience — is difficult to fathom. Now that they are here, one can only hope more writers continue to explore the psyche and undying spirit of the Dalit woman, across languages, and bring her vividly to life, as Aruna Chakravarti has so powerfully done.



Manoranjan Byapari's *The Fortress*, Shankhini in *Snake Maiden*, and Shordhuni — or Shora, or "witch" as everyone calls her — left me breathless. Despite absentee husbands, unforgiving families, ruthless landlords, and damning villages, these women channel their fear and trauma into resistance. They allow hope to illuminate their paths, and they dream of a better world, unflinchingly. It's impossible



Sonia Bhatnagar is a long-time advertising creative director

who made her literary debut with 'In Your Blood I Run' published by Harper Collins India in 2023. Her debut is a crime story set in 1936 British India and explore themes ranging from personal freedom, equality, women's writing to sexual con+ict and femininity. She lives in Gurgaon with her family and a dog of singular charm, and is currently working on her second novel.

Sharon Rundle speaks to Mr Selvarajah Muraledaran, OAM (Founder of Aiyamiddun charity)

Selvarajah Muraledaran arrived in Australia from Jaffna, Sri Lanka in 1994 and lives in Melbourne, Australia, with his family. He received the prestigious Order of Australia Medal in 2023, for his charitable services. Recently, he was awarded the Paul Harris Fellowship by Rotary Foundation of Rotary International, Australia.

I spoke with him about his charity Aiyamiddun (ஐயமிட்டுண்- Tamil phrase by Tamil poetess Auvaiyaar – (only after giving alms to those needy, you eat) which provides food and education for secondary school pupils. These schools are for Tamil children in isolated and remote regions of Sri Lanka and the charity provides daily



food and smart class rooms. In addition, they provide teaching and learning support to those pupils in collaboration with the communities in each village. The aim is to provide vital education and an ethos of giving and sharing as they support each other to reach their goals in education.

I asked Selvarajah Muraledaran how Aiyamiddun came about.

For over ten years, I have been helping underprivileged schools with educational support because there are not enough teachers to serve in remote

areas, and no new teachers are being produced in those areas, especially for Science and Mathematics.

After the end of civil war in Sri Lanka in 2009, one day, when I spoke to Dr. Ethirweerasingam, an educational consultant with the Education Department of Northern Province, he mentioned that they needed to find a new way of reaching the students, and educate them, in view of the shortage for qualified teachers in many areas.



Bearing in mind what he said, Aiyamiddun introduced smart classrooms. We loaded educational materials on USBs pen drives in video format and distributed them to schools to enable students to study from a modern television or computer or on a smart board where available. It was a success in many respects.

Under our program, we select students from Year 11 known as General Certificate of Education, Ordinary Level, which is a pre-requisite for students to go to advanced level and study further, including vocational subjects, as it is an important stage of their education. We particularly target vulnerable kids from the under privileged society and educate them.

What were the Challenges you faced?

Our main challenge was how could we bring poorer children to school and encourage them to stay at school? Due to poverty, they drop out of school and go to work resulting in child labour. By giving food and education to those

children, Aiyamiddun brought together the school community of parents, children, and school teachers. Our first-year pilot study was quite successful because we selected underprivileged children from the schools in the north, east and upcountry where maximum help was needed. Now we provide midday meal for over 35,000 underprivileged children a month to ensure the retention of the students in full time education.

Self-learning is the key for a successful future. Realising this, we have installed over ninety smart boards during the last two years. A teacher can use the smart board with pre-installed educational materials in video format, in compliance with the Sri Lankan education system, so children can have



offline lessons rather than online due to poor internet coverage in remote areas.

During school days, the children engage in educational and extracurricular activities until four o'clock in the afternoon. Not only we educate these children but also prevent them from getting into anti-social activities, such as the drug abuse.

How do you assess the success of your model?

The pass rate has increased so many students are going on to technical studies or advanced studies after year 11. Reduction in school dropout rate is also another indicator.

How do you supply food?

We have a sustainable model with a home garden and school garden to produce vegetables. We invite every parent or child to bring one or two vegetables, which is enough for the day. We created a box system called Atcheyapathiram. Whenever there is a birthday or a celebration in a family, the parent or child, or even people from the community, bring some vegetables to school. The local church or temple too sends vegetables to the school. By these means, we set a target of providing a meal to the value of about 10 rupees per child, which is the minimum amount we spend on high quality, freshly cooked food on each day, and the process is transparent.



I have created a WhatsApp group with over 800 people such as educationalists, teachers, principals, parents, and administrators. At the end of each day, everyone in the group, from anywhere in the world can see what did we cook, how many children had food etc. Transparency is maintained using the system of logbook and we don't have any cash dealing between the schools and us.

All our activities are conducted with the approval of Educational authorities of north, east and upcountry only. Aiyamidun model has been recommended as one of the best models in schools by Department of Education, Sri Lanka.

In April, I was invited to the Ontario parliament, Canada where I explained our model to the ministers. The ministers met me and wanted to find out how they could implement this model within their own Indigenous community. They want to try this model for their areas too.

Not only in Sri Lanka, but in Australia too, a lot of children from Indigenous communities don't go to school regularly. Education is a fundamental right of every child. Hunger is a root cause for children not coming to

In 1994, I migrated to Australia with my wife. We wanted our children to study Tamil language, which is one of the oldest languages. Twenty-five years ago, I started voluntarily helping to create and run language schools in Melbourne. I was also involved with the

multicultural ministry. I became part of the management group which created the Tamil schools. Now we have eleven weekend schools where children study their own language. I was the founder president of the Consortium of Victoria, which includes twenty two organizations from Sri Lanka, India, Singapore, Malaysia, and other countries. We coordinate and bring them together to create awareness of Tamil language schools.

In Sri Lanka, a lot of children lost their parents and became orphans during the

school. Food provides a bridge to education. We can raise awareness through media and pass this model on to the right people.

Tell me something about your upbringing and any incidents that impacted on you to become involved in charity work?

He said, "that is a good question because who and what I am today was given to me by the country where I grew up, Sri Lanka. The educational standard was remarkably high in Sri Lanka. I enjoyed free education up to the university level. I worked as student Demonstrator/Tutor in the chemistry department at the University of Jaffna. Then from there, I joined the government analytical department as a forensic scientist. Later, I served as the head of Narcotic Division there. Later, I was awarded a fellowship with the United Nations (UNDCP) Drug Control Program, where I had an exposure with other Southeast Asian countries and witnessed how children can be ruined by these drugs.

thirty years of war. We helped those children with their fundamental needs. At that time I was the president of the (Orphanage) Cholai Children's Association. With the help from the community we sent food, books, shoes and other essentials. Now, I focus on the children who are missing their education in underprivileged areas of Sri Lanka.

My motivation was due to receiving a free education, free health, and a good life. I migrated to Australia as a skilled migrant. I was lucky to have the United Nations fellowship, and I had a chance to get a scholarship to do my PhD in biochemistry at Monash University. Also, I am blessed with a compassionate wife and three boys. All three were studying on scholarships. I didn't spend much money on my

(continued on P16)

SUNFLOWERS ON DISPLAY

(In Memory of Vincent Vangogh and Ukraine)

By Laksmisree Banerjee

O where have the Sunflowers gone?
there yellow shine now in bleeding array
as muted, broken, afflicted as Vincent himself

Now sucked into the miasma of black wrath
spineless, broken stems and lives jailed
from open fields of joy to the cloistered asylum

Decorated pieces motionless in the still vase
the display of uprooted artistry in shackles
far from the sparkle of sunlight and starry night

Bright yellows congealed in dying emulsion
putrid mash of humanity gone astray
buried in the ashes of penury and gunshots

Beauty strangulated from here and now
to the hidden brutality across the millennia
like Vincent's elusive splurges scoffed at

O where have the Sunflowers gone?
do they cry in the entrails of reality or history?
from Kyiv, Kharkiv to the cells of Vangogh?

From Ukraine to the Dutch lands of artistry
the Creator's fabric spread out in magnificence
across time and space shrunk in futility?

The Orange Revolution is not dead yet
nor the blue sequinned Starry Night of the
Maestro
the sleeping seedlings are rising with the sun

O the Sunflowers are dancing free in jubilation
they are no longer cannon fodder not refugees
nor abandoned in the raging chains of sanity

Sunflowers are now divine madness of nature
free to nod their heads with life, history and gaiety
their revolt unfurls the tangerine flag of the
Master---

@ Laksmisree Banerjee
from my Book DUST DECKED RAINBOW QUILTS

Laksmisree Banerjee is a Multi Award-Winning Poet, a Former Vice Chancellor and University Professor of English. Among several Awards she is the recipient of the prestigious UGC Postdoctoral Research Award for Literature. Widely published and anthologised she has Twelve Books of Poetry and several Academic cum Research Publications. She also happens to be an International Sr. Fulbright and Commonwealth Scholar, having taught in premier Universities of the world.



(continued from P15) children's education, so we wanted to allocate this money to underprivileged children in Sri Lanka. So, my simple answer to your question is that today, I am what I am because of Sri Lankan free education. I want to reciprocate to my country and to children in need of opportunities.

We have registered our charity in Australia and in Sri Lanka as a non-profit organisation.

Australia has brought the best out of me, and recognised me with the Order of Australia, so I now want to return something to the Australian indigenous community. I want to apply the bottom to top approach with the elders and community leaders of the indigenous

people. We can trial in one place to see if our system works in Australia. Then the schools can take over, and then it will expand itself."

Please do share this interview to help spread awareness of Ayyamiddum.

(This interview was recorded at The Song Hotel, Sydney for which I give my thanks and acknowledgment to the wonderful staff for their kind assistance.)

Dr Sharon Rundle is a registered member of the Institute of Professional Editors. She has presented conference papers, and lectured courses for the Bachelor of

Education degree, as well as writing workshops at universities, colleges, and institutions in Australia, UK, and India. She served on the Board of Directors and Management Committee of the NSW Writers' Centre. She has co-edited five anthologies of stories from Australia and the Indian subcontinent, published in Australia and India. Her work appears in books, anthologies, journals, magazines, and have been broadcast on radio. She is a regular contributor to Confluence South Asian Perspectives.
<https://sharonrundle.com.au>



Poetry on the Patio: An Evening of Literature and Art, Brings Together Poets, Artists, and Audience

By Marianne Szlyk

On the evening of Saturday, August 16, lovers of art and literature gathered to enjoy an evening of poetry, prose, and paintings at the gracious home of Dr. Meenakshi Mohan, poet, painter, translator, educator, and

international trade attorney, paid tribute to her father's memory. She wove together the strands of his life: his accomplishments as a scientist and businessman, his devotion to his family, his sociability, and his love of poetry and

reading his own poetry at this gathering, the reading began with English-language poems. Dr. Marianne Szlyk, a professor at Montgomery College, read "Respite in the City of Fog," an ekphrastic poem inspired by the Taiwanese artist Hung Ju



The picture shows the distinguished luminaries from across the USA who came to celebrate the cultural evening "Poetry on the Patio," hosted by Dr. Meenakshi Mohan, at her Potomac residence as a tribute to her husband, Dr. Kshitij Mohan, and to celebrate Setu Bilingual's journey.

hostess extraordinaire. This gathering on a patio adorned by a fountain, flowers, and religious statues and surrounded by graceful trees served a twofold purpose: to celebrate *Setu Bilingual Journal* and to honor the memory of her husband, Dr. Kshitij Mohan. In the words of their daughter Kavita, he was "a man whose life was a master class in pursuing knowledge, embracing the arts, and living with love." Fittingly, the evening brought together local poets and international writers and translators as well as visual artists, lovers of words and images, and speakers of both English and Hindi.

The evening began in the late afternoon shade of elegant American beech trees. Here Ms. Kavita Mohan, an

the written word. The intimate details that Ms. Mohan provided, including her father's "most exquisite penmanship" and his collection of fountain pens and rare books in multiple languages, served to make these strands even more vivid. Her references to her nephew Anant and her own young daughter Veda, both of whom "are like him in ways that continue to surprise and delight us," honored her father's memory and kept it alive. Indeed, earlier, while speaking to the audience, Veda adorably mentioned her love for her grandfather whom she knew only through her family's stories and pictures.

After Ms. Mohan concluded her tribute by imagining her father

Kan's abstract paintings. Dr. Szlyk chose this poem to celebrate the vibrant paintings by Dr. Mohan that greet her visitors throughout the first floor and basement of her home. Sri Indran Amirthanayagam, a multilingual poet and editor of *The Beltway Poetry Quarterly*, alternately charmed and moved the audience with his verbal magic. His poem "Living Will" invoked his love for "every creature, every song, every turn in the road." In the sensuous poem "Kiss," published on the Poetry Foundation's website, he then reminded the listener of not only his own mortality but also the world's, that is, the coming apocalypse.

The latter poem is part of his 1993 book *The Elephants of Reckoning*,

but its reminder of the world's mortality and cruelty is especially pertinent now. Dr. Anita Nahal, a local history professor and award-winning author, read the heart-rending prose poem "Wolf."

Here the title character bravely faces his humiliation and death at the hands of drunken hoodlums in a rural bar. Alan Britt, a professor at Towson University and poetry editor for the *Loch Raven Review*, presented a witty and commanding stage presence. His Whitmanesque "The Gospel" is a tribute to local landscapes with finches nesting

translator from Dallas, concluded this section with her intriguing translation of the late Mallika Sengupta's historical novel about Tagore and his sister-in-law Kadambari. Sadly, as Chaitali Sengupta notes in her review of Ms. Banerjee's translation, a review published in *Setu*, Kadambari would eventually commit suicide after she was not able to bear children and her husband abandoned her for an actress who had disclosed that she was pregnant with his child.

Ms. Banerjee's rendering of Mallika Sengupta's historical fiction

lines of poetry to fashion a dominant impression of the desert's arid severity. Ms. Chandrasekar, whose scientific background and training in traditional Indian art inform her work, presented gemlike color and geometry that filled the entire canvas. Dr. Mohan's majestic landscape of an ocean bordered by mountains harmonized with the twilight above it.

At the end of the exhibition, each artwork was raffled off to guests, with young Veda Mohan-Lal drawing and announcing the winning tickets. Among



The confluence of nature and creativity defined the evening. Against a backdrop of singing cicadas, dancing trees, and the soothing symphony of rippling fountains, the gathering celebrated the profound magic created by poetry and art.

in "cardboard suitcases destined for Goodwill or the landfill" and Japanese maples enlivened by the wind. Both landscapes are very much mediated by humans. Yet Britt's landscapes have not been despoiled by them. Indeed, Dr. Mohan's garden could have fit into the poem's landscape nicely with its marriage of trees, artwork, and religious statues.

W. Luther Jett, a central figure in Montgomery County's literary scene, followed with works that are simultaneously love poems and political poems. Sunayna Pal, an up and coming local poet, read from her chapbook *Refugees in Their Own Country*, a collection that depicts the tragedy of India's partition. Dr. Tanushree Ghosh, an activist, tech executive, and author from near Phoenix, Arizona compelled the audience with her writing about violence against women in India. Lopamudra Banerjee, an author and

created a smooth transition to the literature read in Hindi. Sri Anurag Sharma, founder and editor-in-chief of *Setu Bilingual Journal*, began with a musical recitation. Although I do not know Hindi, I enjoyed his sparkling, melodious voice. Certainly, his smoothly flowing recitation kept everyone's attention. Ms. Vinita Tiwari, an educator from Virginia, was equally engaging, drawing in the audience with her storytelling, smiles, and expressive gestures. Ms. Shashi Padha took another approach, mixing in some English to her work to orient those of us who do not speak Hindi but wanted to honor her story with our attention.

The presentation also embraced an exhibition of paintings by Ms. Nimi Trehan, Ms. Shanthi Chandrasekar, and Dr. Mohan. Each work displayed a distinctly different style. Ms. Trehan's painting of a desert landscape included stone-like human heads and

the winners was Stephanie Simon, the grandmother of Dominic Simon, the Montgomery College student who was videotaping the evening's events. Ms. Simon won Ms. Trehan's painting, a prize that epitomized the evening's eclectic spirit through its blend of words, images, and poetic imagination.

At the end of the program, the Mohan Family gave plaque awards in the Loving Memory of Dr. Kshitij Mohan to the driving forces behind the three organizations for making a difference in the global literary and art arenas.

The honored organizations were as follows:

- *The Setu Bilingual Journal*: an online literary journal that publishes content in both English and other languages, promoting cross-cultural understanding and providing a platform for diverse voices.

The Confluence UK: a London-based literary organization that facilitates a cultural and scholarly exchange between the UK and other countries with a focus on South Asian Literature.

The Writers Capital Foundation: An international non-profit organization that supports writers and promotes literature through various initiatives, including publications and events.

Dr. Meenakshi Mohan said, "Literature and art mean a great deal to me, and in my humble way I would like to keep this tradition alive."

All the photos are credited to the following:

Samantha Wedgewood
Kavita Mohan
Lopamudra Banerjee and
Sandeep Chauhan

Marianne Szlyk's books include *Why We Never Visited the Elms* (Poetry Pacific, 2022), *On the Other Side of the Window* (Pski's Porch, 2019), and *I Dream of Empathy* (Flutter Press, 2015). Her poems have appeared in *MacQueen's*



Quarterly, Setu, Beltway Poetry Quarterly, Verse-Virtual, Red Eft Review, One Art, Scurfpea Press' anthologies Green Elephant and Dream, and Pure Slush's anthology Loss, among others. Her stories have appeared in Impsired, Piker's Press, Mad Swirl, and Storyteller Poetry Review. For the past twenty years, she has been a full-time professor of English and Reading at Montgomery College in Maryland. Prior to that, she earned a Ph.D. in British Literature from Purdue University.

Introducing Kaaveri Kathaigal Short stories by Lakshmi Kannan (Kaaveri)



Kaaveri Kathaigal, a collection of select short fiction in Tamil by Lakshmi Kannan is upcoming from Her Stories, Chennai. Kannan is a bilingual poet, novelist, short story writer, critic and translator who writes in Tamil in the pen-name of 'Kaaveri'. The stories were published in prestigious Tamil magazines which showcase the new wave of writings. Founded by Vallidasan and Nivedita Louis, Her Stories is a trail blazing publishing venture for Tamil writings by women.

Kaaveri Kathaigal includes short and long stories along with novellas with the themes ranging from the loneliness of senior citizens living abroad or within their own country, human right issues of dignity denied to women till date, both at home and in their work place despite their education and professional status, existential and ecological concerns and Near-Death-Experiences. Kannan adapts different fictional techniques such as stream of consciousness, bildungsroman, Notes from a Literary Dairy, first person narrative and fantasy for her themes. She has translated many of the stories into English for a series of publications by Orient Blackswan, New Delhi and the titles are *Going Home* (novel), and collections of short fiction titled *India Gate*, *Nandanvan* and *Other Stories* and *Genesis*.

Kannan's recent publications in English include *Nadistuti*, *Poems* (2024, Authors Press) and *Guilt Trip and Other Stories* (2023, Niyogi Books) which was chosen as 'The Best Book of the Year' by Literature, Critique and Empire Today, London (UK), formerly known as The Commonwealth Journal.

Short Story

Trust Your Blood

By Subhash Chandra

Competitive guilt kept Badri Prasad in clover in old age, despite his retirement as a mere clerk from a government office with a meagre pension. His two NRI sons transferred a couple of lakhs into his bank account every two to three months. Whenever he told his sons he had a pile, "Papa, live life king-size," said one. "FDs are a buffer in an emergency, Papa," said the other.

One day, Rohan, the elder son, said on the phone, "Papa, at your age, it must be difficult to climb up and down sixty-two stairs."

"It has kept my heart strong and ticking."

However, he bought his father a spacious high-income group (HIG) flat on the ground floor of the same Housing Complex and equipped it with all the modern gadgets, such as Air Conditioners, Oil Heaters, Air Purifiers, a fully automatic Bosch washing machine, and a USB television.

Atharv commissioned a well-known Pathology Lab in Delhi to conduct a full body check-up of their father every six months, and contracted a reputed General Practitioner (an M.D. in internal medicine) who would review the reports, treat him for routine ailments, and, when necessary, refer him to a specialist and coordinate with him. However, despite being in his mid-seventies, BP was reasonably healthy. He regularly practised Yoga and meditation in the morning and went for long walks in the evening. No high blood pressure, diabetes, knee pain, etc. In fact, he was the healthiest among the Seniors' Group in the Complex, which met fortnightly.

Every member's birthday was celebrated in the Group with gusto. On this day, they turned into undisciplined brats. Having gorged on the choicest sweets (though some of them were diabetic) and fries, they belted out, "Happy Birthday" and clapped vigorously. In the evening of their lives, when death snapped at their heels, they wanted to squeeze every drop of pleasure out of life. BP was the odd man out. His self-discipline was exceptional; he would not touch any of the stuff.

Life, however, has quirky ways.

One evening, on his way back home from his walk, the sky suddenly got overcast.

The streetlights were yet to be switched on; in the semi-darkness, his foot got caught in a ditch, and he toppled over. Excruciating pain and swelling in the hip. A check-up by the Orthopaedist. An MRI. A major fracture in the pelvic bone.

"Total hip arthroplasty is the only option," the Orthopaedist said to Hari Om, one of his friends in the Seniors' Group, who had taken him to hospital while BP was writhing in pain.

#



"Bhaiyya, can you make it for Papa's surgery? I think one of us should be there," Atharv said.

"Umm ... I'm not too sure," Rohan said worriedly. Our Marketing Division, helmed by me, has not been performing well, and it is likely to undergo restructuring. Heads may roll, and I'm no exception... I need to be around. You being a doctor will carry more heft at the hospital."

Atharv rubbed his chin. "The problem is that three complicated open-heart surgeries are scheduled during this week, and it'd be unethical to leave the patients in the lurch."

He was a celebrated Cardiologist in California who periodically appeared on State Television to discuss heart issues. About ten seniors were present on the day of surgery. Hari Om signed the sheaf of papers absolving the hospital in case of BP's death. After being discharged from the hospital, trained Nursing Attendants engaged by Atharv took over for four months.

The major surgery had almost crippled Badri Prasad. The two male Nursing Attendants on a twelve-hour duty day and night were coldly competent, overbearing, and wore a funeral expression on their faces. They scolded BP over trifles.

"Must you sit up on your own? Why am I here?"

The night Attendant upbraided him when he, tired of lying on one side, tried to change position. A couple of times, he complained to Atharv.

"Papa, they are strict for your own good. You'll see it works out to your advantage, eventually."

The Attendants were gone. He was now able to hobble around the house, but still needed help with small things. He phoned up Sunita, who had taken care of Mohini for three years before she passed away. She had treated Mohini with gentle affection.

#

Her husband was reluctant. "Why doesn't he get a male Attendant? She was attractive with large, almond-shaped eyes!"

"He's as old as my father and will pay double the amount they did earlier."

"You know nothing about men. They're all dirty pigs, irrespective of age."

Eventually, however, the temptation of the large amount got the better of him.

#

She kept the house impeccably clean, changed the bedsheets every day, and kept everything in place. She'd put a chair on the balcony in the morning and handed Badri Prasad a steaming cup of tea, together with the newspaper.

Her cooking was good – almost like Mohini's. "God has given us back our daughter who did not survive childbirth," Mohini often said.

#

Bhanu Prasad was thrilled when Sunita told him the old man wanted them to move into the servants' quarters; no room rent and no nagging landlord.

Now, each member of Sunita's family served BP. Bhanu took him to the hospital for check-ups, and their fifteen-year-old daughter ran errands to the nearby market after she got back from school.

One day, BP called his lawyer friend and got his Will prepared. The friend raised his eyebrows. "BP, is it fair to your sons? After all, it is their money."

"They have enough and more. And they've told me to do with the money what I want."

He allocated money for the Guards, the Sweeper, a reasonable sum to an Orphanage, and the flat, along with a huge amount in the bank, to Sunita and her family.

He heaved a sigh of relief.

#

Three months after Will, BP fell critically ill. His kidneys had conked out.

"Inform my sons when I die, though I know neither will come," he said to Hari Om.

But both the sons came, and Rohan with his wife. Atharv was suspicious and talked to the GP before their father's cremation.

"His kidneys were as healthy as a twenty-year-old's. KFT reports were always normal."

The post-mortem report revealed perforated kidneys. Sunita, constantly egged on by her husband, had been mixing powdered glass in BP's meals.



Dr. Subhash Chandra is a former Associate Professor of English at the University of

Delhi. He has published three collections of short stories, viz., *Not Just Another Story*, *Beyond the Canopy of Icicles*, and *A Game of Dice*, and more than eighty short stories in Indian and foreign journals, and Guest Edited College Fiction Section of MUSE India.

Frozen in Time (Seeking answers from Seurat) by Meenakshi Mohan



My painting, oil on canvas, and my poem *Frozen in Time* are inspired by Georges Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. The print I used was a close-up shot, blurry, undefined, and vague. I used my imagination to fill the gaps in my painting. I realized that the blend of colors in his dots was meaningful when seen from a distance. I was fascinated by the optical illusions his painting created.

How can the drops of water know
Themselves to be a river

Zen Saying

why did people on your canvas
creating a human mosaic
on a Sunday's golden glory
at the beach of the Seine River
seem distant, detached
each one like an island
a silent tableau

what secrets did these tiny dots represent
on earth's vast canvas
each soul a solitary islet – silent, isolated
no clasping hands, no shared embrace
yet, woven together, they created the whole.

what did the silent journey of the Seine whisper
beneath the ever-rolling sun
did it speak of the transience of life
fleeting days and folding and unfolding of destinies
yet, your Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande
Jatte
has crossed centuries
and your people stayed frozen in time
and found their endless realm.

Dr. Meenakshi Mohan (USA) is an internationally published writer, scholar, art critic, children's writer, painter, and poet. She is on the editorial Committee for *Inquiry in Education*, a peer-reviewed journal published by National Louis University, Chicago, Illinois. She is an Advisory Editor for *Confluence*, UK. Meenakshi received the *Setu* and *Panorama International Awards for Excellence in Literature*. Her book, *Symphonies of Life*, won the Sudesh Kamra Memorial Award for the best debut poetry book at the Bhasha and Beyond Literary Festival, Pune. Meenakshi is the Chairperson for the Global Nexus Program of The Writers' Capital Foundation. Meenakshi lives in the USA.

Lessons in the Language of Leaves

by Ritu Kamra Kumar

It begins with the quiet conversation of leaves. I hear them before I see them—soft whispers as the morning breeze tiptoes through my garden. My hands cradle the watering can, the way one might hold a fragile child. Each pour feels like an offering, each droplet a syllable in the long poem my garden and I have been writing together for years.

The marigolds are the most talkative today—tiny suns in saffron skirts, bowing and swaying as though rehearsing for a festival. I lean in, brushing their petals with my fingers, and they seem to giggle at my clumsy affection. The roses, meanwhile, play the aloof aristocrats. Their thorns stand guard, yet their fragrance betrays them—softening my morning chores into a scented serenade.

I remember, with a smile, how last summer my niece Isha asked, “Do they know you’re talking to them?” I told her, “Not only do they know, they talk back—just not in words you understand yet.” That evening, she watered the hibiscus with such exaggerated gentleness that I could almost hear the plants sigh. Children understand far more about communion than adults often believe.

Birds join the chorus, turning the air into an orchestral arrangement. A sunbird hovers near the bougainvillea, her emerald feathers catching sunlight in quicksilver flashes. Somewhere near the mango tree, a myna offers a mimic’s melody, as if trying to imitate the rustle of leaves.

The hoeing and weeding feel less like labour and more like listening. Each root I free from choking weeds is a conversation restored, each furrow I make a sentence waiting for rain. As I bend to prune the jasmine, a line by Wordsworth drifts to mind:

“Come forth into the light of things,
Let nature be your teacher.”

And she is. She teaches patience when I must wait weeks for buds to bloom, humility when a storm undoes months of care, and joy—pure, unmeasured joy—when a row of seedlings rises like green prayers answered.

There was a day last monsoon when my son Avinav, coming home from Delhi drenched and laughing, spotted



the gulmohar shedding her crimson petals in the rain. Without a second thought, he scooped up a handful and flung them into the air. For a moment, it was as though the sky itself had burst into celebration. That’s when I realised—gardens do not just grow plants; they grow people.

By midday, the trees stand tall as sentinels, their upper branches caressing the clouds. Some days, when the light is right, it looks as if they are touching the horizon—uniting earth and heaven in a single, unbroken arc. In those moments, I feel the truth of Emily Dickinson’s words:

“The Earth is the only paradise we shall know—
The only paradise we need to know.”

Colours become my cathedral. The purples and pinks of the zinnias, the gold of the chrysanthemums, the white lilies like folded hands in prayer—each hue a hymn, each fragrance an amen. My garden becomes the altar, the wind its choir, sunlight the blessing poured over everything.

In the evenings, my husband sometimes joins me here, tea in hand, as we watch the silhouettes of sparrows dart across a copper sky. “You’re lost in your world again,” he teases. I smile, because he doesn’t realise—it’s not escape; it’s arrival.

I often think life should be lived like a garden—serving without expectation, growing quietly, and giving beauty without asking for applause. Flowers do not bloom because someone will praise them; they bloom because that is what they were made to do.

And perhaps that is the most profound lesson my garden whispers: to live selflessly, rooted in kindness, swaying to the music of the seasons, touching the horizon of the soul. For intending to this patch of earth, I have found myself tended to in return.

As the day ends, I gather a last glimpse of the hibiscus, the marigolds, the mango tree—and I feel my heart hum its own little song. Nature, in her infinite patience, has been shaping me leaf by leaf, petal by petal, into someone who knows that the garden of life is kept alive not by fences or walls, but by love.



Dr. Ritu Kamra Kumar, Retd. Officiating Principal and Associate Professor of English at MLN College, Yamuna Nagar, is an acclaimed academican, poet, and

writer. With over 400 contributions to leading national newspapers and magazines, she has published 70+ research papers in reputed national and international journals and edited books. A noted resource person and

speaker, she has led workshops and panel discussions nationwide, including at the Delhi Book Fair 2024. Honoured by the District Administration and featured as an Empowered Woman by The

Hindustan Times, she is a recipient of the Indian Woman Achiever Award and has authored eight acclaimed books.

Meenakshi Bharat's Hindi Cinema and Pakistan Screening the Idea and the Reality - Reviewed by Taufeeq Sheikh

Meenakshi Bharat's *Hindi Cinema and Pakistan* is a rare book that could reshape the way you see—and write—about the India–Pakistan story. As a filmmaker and storyteller, reading it made me more alert and sensitive to the emotional freight a scene carries; it has helped sharpen my instincts, if and when I choose stories set on this fault line.

Meenakshi Bharat maps the theme across clear, tightly argued chapters—Partition, war, proxy terror, sport, cross-border love, and humour—each treating cinema as both mirror and maker of public sentiments. Her method is simple and strong: close textual readings of films grounded in cultural theory, but always attentive to affect and reception. The result is neither grand theory nor mere catalogue; it's an ethical, human-centred account of how films shape human imagination and nationwide emotions.

Meenakshi Bharat's partition chapter moves from the early silences to the full-throated reckonings of *Garm Hava* and *Tamas*, tracing how Hindi cinema slowly learned to name violence and grief. The chapters on war and terrorism refuse easy labels: Bharat reads these films as layered responses to fear, state power, and audience appetite rather than as a single dimensional propaganda. The sports and romance chapters remind us that rivalry and longing can be staged on many registers—cricket as theatre of nationhood, love as small-scale resistance.

One of the freshest sections is Chapter 7, on humour. Bharat shows how comedy has become a deliberate device for disarming hostility and imagining repair.

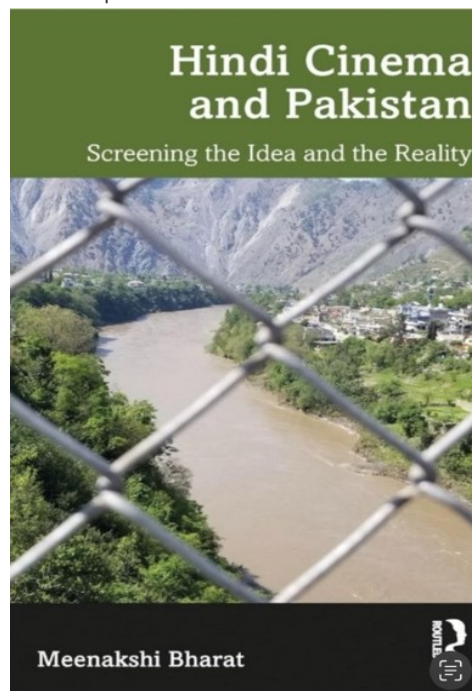
She discusses the war-comedy *War Chhod Na Yaar* (2013) — directed by Faraz Haider — as a key example of satire that exposes the absurdity of perpetual conflict and political profiteering from war. Her reading places the film within a growing corpus of comic interventions that use laughter to open space for empathy and critique.

cinemas—captures the book's emotional truth: division has not severed a shared cultural bloodstream.

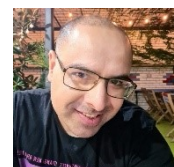
For practitioners and writers, the final payoff is practical: this book is not just a history of films but a handbook for ethical storytelling. It taught me to look for buried affects, to question where a joke lands, and to resist easy moral binaries. Bharat's scholarship should be the first stop for anyone planning films or stories in this genre—use it as a reference, a sounding board, and a compass for nuance.

In short: rigorous, humane, and quietly corrective—*Hindi Cinema and Pakistan* belongs on the shelf of anyone who wants to tell honest, responsible stories about the subcontinent's most durable relationship.

— Taufeeq Sheikh (Crossover Stories)



Taufeeq Sheikh, curator of Crossover Stories, is an award-winning writer and storyteller whose work



spans film, theatre, radio, and live performance. His writing includes NSW Police Dowry Awareness films, original short plays, and weekly short stories for Kehte Sunte Radio 89.3 2GLF FM. A mentor and creator of platforms like Safety Pin Open Mic, he champions emerging voices while blending literary craft with performance and cross-cultural narratives. His storytelling journey began with early recognition as one of Times of India Top 5 Public Speakers (Ahmedabad, 2007) and continues with accolades such as Best Storyteller from the Indian Literary Society of Australia (ILASA) in 2023.

What distinguishes this book is the balance of theory and feeling. Bharat draws on major thinkers but never lets them eclipse the films themselves. She rejects and I concur, labels like “Bollywood” for the sake of precision, and her textual approach (scene, dialogue, mise-en-scène) teases out the ideologies embedded in apparently simple pleasures. The recurring image, Meenakshi, returns to—the invisible umbilical cord tying Indian and Pakistani

Fiction

The Tastiest Sambar in the World

By Anita Balakrishnan

My grandmother Chudamani was considered to be an excellent cook, and her sambar was celebrated as the tastiest in the world. She was a stickler who would insist on things being done precisely her way: that the dal be cooked just so in a stoneware pot, or that only certain vegetables be used in the savoury stew. I was the rebellious one in the family, who tried to make sambar with the tastemaker from Maggi noodles, and tamarind chutney. Whenever I look at the large portrait of my grandmother, I can feel her disapproval coming towards me in waves. I can imagine her stentorian voice declaring that I could never make sambar the way she did, followed by her scornful laughter. I also remember the time I tried to skate down the road using my cousin's skateboard. I had fallen flat on my face and knocked out a tooth. My grandmother was not amused by these antics.

Today, I decide to make sambar in the traditional way, in the style of my grandmother. Of course, she had never divulged her recipe to anyone, taking her secrets with her when she died. But I was a software professional who could design and deliver complex products to exacting customers. How difficult could it be to make sambar? I remember when I was a little girl my grandmother declaring that the secret to good sambar lay in the way the spice mix was roasted and freshly ground. I am filled with doubt at this point. The spice mix, sambar powder, was a mix of dals and spices, wasn't it? I could almost hear my grandmother's laughter echo into the kitchen!

My grandmother was never bothered about my mother trying to make sambar. She was not a Sadasivam, not

a blood relative, she could never hope to replicate it. She was the wife of a son who was not the favourite, who had a mediocre state government job and had married a girl of his own choice.

My mother warned me about the sambar, saying any attempt to make it would only end in tears. I don't tell my mother that it's not simply about making good sambar. It's about putting my grandmother in her place. Although she was no longer with us, I had to prove to her that she was not

"They are spices, not white tourists in Goa, they will brown on high heat."

"But that's what Venkatesh Bhat says on YouTube!"

"Oh, so now some YouTube fellow has to teach me cooking? Siva Siva, what has this world come to?"

"Don't worry, I'm going to turn up the heat."

"I'll tell you what my dear, why don't you go back to your software or skateboarding. You have a better chance at skateboarding than as a chef!"



I turn up the heat but the spices have already started to burn. I turn the heat off, but inexorably the residual heat burns the spices even more. I decide that it's just a dark roast, if the flavour works for coffee powder, perhaps it will work for sambar powder too! I grind the spice mix into a coarse powder in the blender.

The pot was already hot so I added some oil and the sambar onions that I had bought pre-peeled from the supermarket. Of

exceptional.

Now on to the sambar spice mix. I put the pot on medium heat, and add the spices one by one: coriander seeds, channa dal, fenugreek, cumin seeds, red chillies. I try to ignore my grandmother's voice in my head that goes "The heat is too low; the spices will never roast properly."

"But the gas stove knob is on medium, if I turn up the heat, the spices may burn."

"Turn up the heat, will you?"

"If the pot gets too hot the spices will burn", I say, "they need to brown on low heat."

course, my grandmother would have peeled the onions herself and chopped them into pieces of a uniform size, that's why they had softened into that melt in the mouth consistency and added a special flavour to her sambar. But I thought to myself, "Is it really that important? I'm a busy software engineer and outsourcing is the name of the game these days."

In the meanwhile, the onions have started to take on a slightly charred appearance, I add the chopped drumsticks and pumpkin pieces and the dal that had looked slightly undercooked. I add the tamarind juice,

and the ground spice mix to the pot. The resulting concoction takes on a decidedly mahogany colour. For my grandmother, cooking was second nature, all the precision and technique that chefs spouted on TV and social media was ingrained in her. She cooked instinctively, knowing just by the aroma when the sambar was done. I let the mahogany sambar simmer while as I add my grandmother's secret ingredient to the sambar. I had found it written on a scrap of paper among her saris in her wooden cupboard. It was a tablespoonful of asafoetida and fenugreek powder. I then added the *thalippu* of mustard seeds and curry leaves crackled in oil and covered the pot. My sambar smelled quite

appetizing. I tell myself that I had cracked the secret code to my grandmother's sambar.

The big moment has arrived! I bring the pot of sambar to the table. I serve myself some hot rice and pour a ladleful of sambar over it. I felt vindicated, convinced I had made the tastiest sambar in the world. I savoured the aroma and tasted it. My sambar was bitter and acrid. But every sensation was drowned out by the loud cackling in my ears.

"I deliberately left that scrap of paper among my saris, my girl. I knew somebody would go snooping around. You had better stick to your software

and skateboarding, for my sambar is beyond you!"

Dr Anita Balakrishnan is the former Head of the Department of



English, Queen Mary's College, Chennai, India. Her research focuses on contemporary Indian writing in English, Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Cultural Studies and postcolonial literature. She is the author of *Transforming Spirit of Indian Women Writers* published in 2012. She has published papers in various national and international journals and has guided several PhD scholars.

Author of *Parrot Palace* Susanne Gervay OAM, in conversation with Sharon Rundle

Susanne, your book for middle grade readers *Parrot Palace* is published by Little Big Sky Books (2025). The book has the theme of friendship across diverse cultures in Australia. What motivated you to write *Parrot Palace*?

The richness of our multi-cultural society embraces diverse cultures. It is what drove me to write 'Parrot Palace' to give a sense of place to young people and their diverse families.

Why is the friendship between Hari, Lily-Rosa, and Mikey so important?

Junior fiction needs to embrace multi-cultural friendship. The three main characters are Indian, mixed ethnicity of Hungarian and Chinese, and an Anglo Aussie boy. Hari has to face many changes coming from another country. Lily-Rosa contends with the multiple sides of her Chinese, Hungarian, Australian heritage. Mikey embodies the Aussie 'good-day mate' attitude. While a 'simple' story, it subtly blends cultural difference with friendship.

Parrot Palace is a three-storey apartment building, why is this significant?

Parrot Palace has an apartment with a family on each floor. It is a microcosm

of the world they live in, and the perfect setting to understand the cultural exchanges and development of friendship.

What was behind the idea for the kids to join forces to confront their neighbour Mr Crabtree, an older Australian man, who is their nemesis and the catalyst for Hari, Lily-Rosa, and Mikey to join forces?

The neighbour was the natural villain, he shouted at them and stole their balls. The kids change as they become friends, Mr Crabtree needed to change too. By the end of the story, he acknowledges his racism and intolerance and is able to find friendship with the kids and their families.

Did you have a bit of fun with ideas for these interactions?

Lectures on inclusion and racism are usually a failure. Diving into story engenders real change. Kids are original thinkers as they explore their world and work within the limits imposed by their families. It was fun when Hari with nervous trepidation asked what the rules of joining the club were. Relief and laughter result because the rules are that they must have fun together. Mikey is the joke-

maker welcoming readers into the story. There was so much to play with.

What was on your mind when writing the turning point in this story?

The turning point is when Mr Crabtree reveals his true discrimination. He shouts at Hari that he should go back to India, where he belongs. The defence from his friends shows that mateship and belonging are paramount.

Without giving the ending away, how do you think this turning point affects your young readers?

'Parrot Palace' never instructs but places them in situations that confront and challenge. It opens questions that are not only for kids but their families. It gives them choices about how they want to live and who they want to be.

Did the current concerns and discussions about appropriation trouble you? If so, how did you approach it?

A writer gets into the mind of many characters. I have been to India several times, even so, I needed to validate my engagement with character and cultural understanding. My colleague, Indian-Australian teacher librarian Pooja Mathur read the manuscript,

and said, 'You have written about my family.' She assisted to ensure 'Parrot Palace' was authentic. Illustrator Sarah Tabassum who is a Bangladeshi-Australian understood the cultural mix of the children.

Pooja Mathur, Susanne Gervay, Sarah Tabassum

Parrot Palace is a success, with excellent reviews and comments, for example, *Parrot Palace is an open invitation from the heart to step into a multi-hued, multicultural, inclusive world where difference is celebrated, tradition is valued, and the language of love is spoken. It certainly does 'make the world a better place' A Must Read!* - Professor Meenakshi Bharat, Head of English, University of Delhi. How did this reaction from readers and reviewers affect you as the writer? What has been the reaction?

The reactions have been amazing with major articles in the Indian and Australian press.

'An amazing story that brings India and Australia closer together, celebrates human relationship which doesn't change from one side of the Indian Ocean to the other and fosters 'dosti' (friendship) between the two great nations.'
Indranil Halder Ambassador of FOMA Multicultural Australia

Parrot Palace reminds me dearly of things my friends and I did in my own childhood days. It illustrates the essence of humanity: love, care, and sharing what we have for the common good of the community we live in. I strongly recommend it to all our children growing up in Australia.

Dr Andrew Kwong, Winner of the Michael Crouch Award, National Biography Award

The Parrot Palace story is relatable and entertaining. My 8-year-old son found it adventurous and loved how the kids helped Mr Crabtree despite him being mean to them. That's a life lesson.

Neel Banerjee (নীল ব্যানার্জী) Intercultural Theatre Practitioner

Growing up, some of my best friends were books, and how I wish I'd had a friend and a book like this, reflecting the true, warm, beating heart of Australian multicultural diversity. Hari and his friends will stay with you long after you've left Parrot Palace.

Sunil Badami critic, broadcaster, ABC personality.

Will Hari fix the disaster he created for his Nani and mother? Will Mr Crabtree become a better neighbour? Readers can discover the answers to these questions in *Parrot Place* as they learn more about what friendship means. It's a must-read.

Author of seventeen books, Susanne Gervay received the Order of Australia for children's literature, Lifetime Literature Award for her body of works on social justice for children, by the International Literacy Association, Lady Cutler Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature, Society of Women Children's and Young Adult Biennial Book Award, Children's Book Council Australia Awards, Family Therapy Children's Book Award and others. She is nominated for the 2026 Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award. <https://sgervay.com>

Dr Sharon Rundle is a registered member of the Institute of Professional



Editors. She has presented conference papers, and lectured courses for the Bachelor of Education degree, as well as writing workshops at universities, colleges, and institutions in Australia, UK, and India. She served on the Board of Directors and Management Committee of the NSW Writers' Centre. She has co-edited five anthologies of stories from Australia and the Indian subcontinent, published in Australia and India. Her work appears in books, anthologies, journals, magazines, and have been broadcast on radio. She is a regular contributor to *Confluence South Asian Perspectives*.

<https://sharonrundle.com.au>



**HAPPY HOLIDAYS TO ALL OUR READERS,
AND WE LOOK FORWARD TO HEARING
FROM YOU AS WE WELCOME THE NEW
YEAR 2026!**