

WHO

## Rajeev Kumar, officer in Centre-State crossfire

A 1989 batch IPS officer, Kolkata Police Commissioner Rajeev Kumar hogged the limelight along with West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee for the better part of this week. After a CBI team arrived to search Mr. Kumar's south Kolkata residence, Ms. Banerjee launched a sit-in, 13 years after she launched a fast during the Singur crisis. In 2006, it was against the Left, in 2019 it was directed against the right, the BJP. But this time the Supreme Court walked the middle path, halting Mr. Kumar's imminent arrest, calming Ms. Banerjee and her counterparts in Delhi.

### Why is he the target?

Launching the dharna in the city centre, Ms. Banerjee said it was "her duty to protect her officers." But the Opposition trained guns on Mr. Kumar, with the BJP alleging that he had not furnished two crucial items – a red diary and a pen drive – seized during raids on the Saradha Group's office. The office, at Midland Park in Salt Lake, falls under the juris-

dition of the Bidhannagar Commissionerate, and Mr. Kumar was its first Commissioner. Ms. Banerjee blocked the CBI-Kumar interaction to "protect herself," said Union Minister Prakash Javadekar. The allegation was refuted by the main accused in the Saradha scam case, the group's chief Sudipta Sen, who has been in prison since 2013. The CBI, in a 17-page affidavit filed in the Supreme Court, alleged that Mr. Kumar "destroyed, destructed and tampered with the material primary evidence in form of CDRs [call data records] while handing over the same to the CBI on 28.6.2018."

### Is he close to the CM?

When Ms. Banerjee stormed to power in 2011, she kept her distance from Mr. Kumar, who was known to be close to Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, the outgoing Chief Minister. But Ms. Banerjee soon changed her opinion on Mr. Bhattacharjee's "blue eyed" officer. Last Sun-

day, as she began her protest, she described Mr. Kumar as among the "best in the world." He studied engineering at the University of Roorkee, now an IIT, preceding the decade when India opened itself to foreign investments in



ILLUSTRATION: J.A. PREMKUMAR

the early 1990s. Western Uttar Pradesh's Kumars, with many teachers in their family, shifted to Chandausi, where Mr. Kumar's father joined a local college as a professor of social science. On completion of college, Mr. Kumar appeared for the civil services examination and cleared it. Mr. Kumar's Roorkee-induced specialisation in technical intelligence, a rare feat among IPS officers, helped him grow in the ranks. He played a major role during the Left Front government in nabbing leaders connected to various people's movements, like Chhatradhar Mahato. During that time, Ms. Banerjee, then in the Opposition, repeatedly alleged that Mr. Kumar was engaged in surveillance against the Left's political opponents. But once in power, Ms. Banerjee considered Mr. Kumar an asset. A fitness enthusiast like the Chief Minister, Mr. Kumar was reinstated in the Special Task Force with the responsibility of technical intelligence. At the time when

the Saradha scam exploded and investors hit the streets in protest, it was Mr. Kumar who partly diffused the anger by arresting Sudipta Sen and his associates from Kashmir, tracking wireless devices. The Chief Minister was convinced of his ability to address complex situations and Mr. Kumar was soon elevated to the rank of CP of Bidhannagar Commissionerate, investigating the Saradha scam. The investigation – and his role in handling it – has landed him in trouble.

### What lies in store?

The CBI began questioning Mr. Kumar in Shillong on Saturday. Depending on the nature and volume of evidence, the CBI may seek to vacate the stay on his arrest, issue a warrant and take him into custody. The key question, however, is how Ms. Banerjee responds to the challenge. Will she succumb to pressure or be more combative? We will have to wait and watch.

SUVOJIT BAGCHI

WHAT

## The lowdown on Mallya's extradition



**WHAT IS IT?** Earlier this week, Britain's Home Secretary Sajid Javid signed the order for Vijay Mallya's extradition to India to face charges of fraud and money laundering, following the judgment handed down by Westminster Magistrates Court Chief Magistrate Emma Arbuthnot in December. She concluded there was a *prima facie* case against Mr. Mallya, rejected the argument that the case was politically motivated, and labelled him a "gla-

morous, flashy, famous, bejewelled, body-guarded, ostensibly billionaire playboy." India wants to bring criminal action against Mr. Mallya, whose business interests have ranged from aviation to liquor, for defaulting on over \$1.4 billion in loans Kingfisher took out from Indian banks. Authorities argue misrepresentations were made to acquire those loans, while Mr. Mallya had no intention of repaying them and sought to squirrel away funds and use them in ways that were not permitted by the terms of the loans. However, the ample opportunities for appeal available to Mr. Mallya – who has indicated his intention to pursue them – means the entire process could take another two years, estimates Pavani Reddy, managing partner at Zaiwalla & Co. in London.

**WILL HE BE ALLOWED TO APPEAL?** The signing of the order means the appeal process can now be kick-started.

Mr. Mallya has two weeks from the signing of the order to seek permission to appeal to the High Court, at which stage that application will be considered by the judge on paper over a 21-day to 3-month period, explains Ms. Reddy. If he manages to get permission to appeal, the appeal process should begin within 76 days, though with options for seeking extensions available to both sides, the appeal could take 6-8 months to begin with. If – following the paper consideration – the judge denies permission to appeal, Mr. Mallya can push for an oral hearing, which could add a further three months to the process. If at this stage, permission is still refused that would end his appeal options.

**HOW LONG WILL THE PROCESS TAKE?** He can seek permission to appeal to the Supreme Court – at first instance from the High Court, and if unsuccessful he can seek permission from the Supreme

Court itself. If successful at this stage, he would have 28 days to file an appeal, with the ensuing appeal taking over 6-9 months more, estimates Ms. Reddy. He could apply as a last resort to the European Court of Human Rights though such appeals are only granted in very rare cases, she notes. In 2014, only 4 of 833 applications for appeal were granted. The 2003 Extradition Act says he must be extradited within 28 days of the court of appeal's decision (or when appeal proceedings are discontinued). If the deadline (including any extension) is passed without the extradition happening, he could apply to be discharged from extradition, unless the Home Office could provide a good reason for any delay.

**WHAT CAN INDIA DO?** While the applications for permission to appeal can't be speeded up, an expedited appeals process can be requested if leave is granted, which would

involve pushing for an early date in the court's diary.

Grounds, of course, vary significantly, and include suggestions that the person is being pursued for political motivations because of race or religion and so on.

Others include the passage of time, and rules against double jeopardy. While it is not common for extradition appeals to succeed, last year India successfully appealed a Westminster Magistrate Court's ruling that discharged the alleged bookie Sanjeev Chawla, who India had been seeking to extradite over the 2002 cricket match fixing scandal.

As per the guarantees offered to the Chief Magistrate, if Mr. Mallya is extradited, he will be held in Barrack 12 of the Arthur Road Jail in Mumbai – with certain assurances of space, daylight and medical facilities – both ahead of any trial and after any conviction.

VIDYA RAM

WHY

## are quakes happening at Palghar?

### What happened?

■ Since November, Maharashtra's Palghar district has experienced dozens of small earthquakes. As on February 6, a seismometer located around 70 km from Palghar and operated by Gujarat's Institute of Seismological Research (ISR), recorded 74 quakes, with 26 measuring between 1 and 1.9 on the moment magnitude scale (Mw), 39 measuring 2 and 2.9, and nine measuring over 3, according to ISR director Sumer Chopra. This pattern of several small earthquakes occurring in a brief time-window is called an earthquake swarm. "It is like a swarm of people. There is no leader, and all of them are similar [in magnitude]. So, there is nothing like a foreshock or mainshock," says Vineet Kumar Gahalaut, director of Delhi's National Centre for Seismology (NCS).

### Why is it a worry?

■ The epicentres of the current swarms haven't seen such activity in the past. Why it is occurring now is a mystery.

However, swarms are common in peninsular India and mostly harmless because of their low magnitude. In fact, a city called Jawhar in Palghar district has experienced swarms several times earlier, Dr. Gahalaut said. Another vulnerable region is Amaravati in Maharashtra, which saw swarm activity last August. Subsequently, the NCS set up seismometers in the region. They found that most earthquakes there were very shallow: they originated from within a few kilometres below the surface. Further, the tremors stopped soon after the monsoon. The researchers concluded that the swarms were related to the monsoon, and were attributable to a phenomenon called "hydro-seismicity."

Whether the Palghar quakes are a swarm, however, will only be clear after they stop. Researchers will then categorise them based on the distribution of the magnitude. Even if the magnitude distribution so far suggests a swarm, said Dr. Gahalaut, this will change if a big earthquake follows. If and when that



happens, the temblors so far will be called foreshocks. Because there is no way to predict whether such a large quake will follow, Palghar residents must be careful.

### Why is this happening?

■ In "hydro-seismicity," which is hy-

pothesised as the reason for swarms in peninsular India, water from heavy rainfall enters small fractures in rocks. This raises the pressure within them. A study from the ISR in 2008, published in the *Journal of Geological Society of India*, estimates that with every 10 metre rise in groundwater, pore pressure increases by 1 bar. This pressure is released in earthquake swarms. However, such activity typically starts in June and dies down in December, said Dr. Chopra. In Palghar's case, it has continued into February. This raises questions about the mechanism behind it. In general, quakes are caused by geological faults, or cracks in the earth's crust across which rocks get displaced. There are plenty of faults along the Konkan coast of India (where Palghar lies), although how many of these are active isn't known. In 2007, a *Current Science* study by researchers from IIT-Bombay suggested that swarm activity along the west coast was due to a major fault parallel to it. Dr. Gahalaut said, however,

that more evidence is needed to determine the extent of this fault and how active it is.

### What next?

■ Palghar falls in Zone 3 of the seismic zoning map developed by the Bureau of Indian Standards. This means that buildings here must be able to withstand earthquakes of intensity 5.5-6.5 on the Medvedev-Sponheuer-Karnik (MSK) scale. Intensity is a qualitative measure of how people experience earthquakes, rather than the energy released, which is measured by the magnitude scale, said Deepankar Choudhury, a civil engineer at IIT-Bombay. In earthquakes measuring 5.5-6.5 on the MSK scale, people are frightened and run outdoors, and heavy furniture can move. Buildings that follow the BIS codes are likely to survive swarms and even larger quakes. So, it is crucial for the code to be implemented stringently.

PRIYANKA PULLA

WHEN

## 3 February 2019

**Off track:** Seven people died and several others were injured on February 3 after 11 coaches of the Delhi-bound Seemanchal Express derailed in Vaishali district of Bihar. Survivors recalled hearing a deafening bang and being flung off berths. Initially, officials suspected that the accident happened due to a "rail fracture" or a fault on the tracks. However, the reason has not yet been confirmed and a probe has been launched. On February 1, in the interim Budget for 2019-2020, the government announced a massive allocation for the Railway's capital expenditure, at ₹1.58 lakh crore. Presenting the Budget, Finance Minister Piyush Goyal, who also holds the Railways portfolio, said the Railways had "experienced the safest year in its history" in 2018. He said the launch of the first indigenously developed and manufactured semi high-speed Vande Bharat Express (Train 18) will give passengers a world class experience in speed, service and safety. Picture shows rescue workers looking for survivors. ■ REUTERS



WHERE

## In Northeast, air links shrinking

The day Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the foundation for the first civilian airport in Arunachal Pradesh, Jet Airways operated its last flight on the Guwahati-Aizawl route. By withdrawing from Mizoram, the private airliner joined an expanding list of flight operators that have suspended operation from new and existing routes in the geographically challenged northeastern region. This has undermined New Delhi's ambitious flagship regional connectivity scheme UDAN, an acronym for the Hindi phrase *Ude Desh ka Aam Naagrik* meaning 'let the common man fly.'

### Why was the flight terminated?

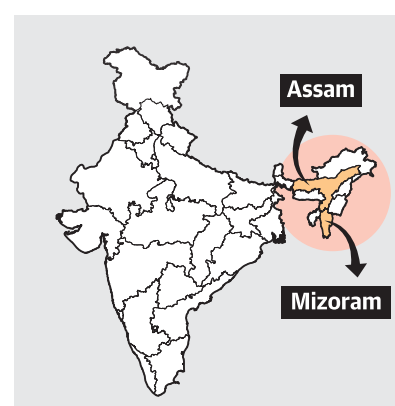
Mizoram's Lengpui Airport, 32 km from the capital Aizawl, took a little more than two years to be completed in February 1998. It soon became the busiest airport in the region after the ones in Assam's Guwahati, Manipur's Imphal and Tripura's Agartala. But the airlines began withdrawing operations for reasons such as safety, maintenance and

viability. If an accident made Northeast Shuttles stop its Cessna flights in 2011, losses made Kingfisher Red withdraw a year later. Air India ended its Guwahati-Aizawl flights as did SpiceJet in less than a year after its inaugural flight in October 2016. Jet Airways, once the only private airline flying to and from northeastern India, withdrew from Aizawl on February 10. The airline attributed it to non-viability of the route because of fuel price rise, a depreciating rupee and a difficult pricing environment.

### Is only Mizoram affected?

No. Jet Airways withdrew from Imphal and Assam's Silchar and Jorhat, along with Aizawl. Much before the first round of UDAN was launched in April 2017, private airlines had withdrawn from Nagaland's Dimapur.

The Hyderabad-based Air Deccan, which won exclusive rights in the UDAN bidding to connect Meghalaya capital Shillong to Aizawl, Agartala, Silchar, Dimapur and Imphal, operated only 10



flights to Agartala and Dimapur in May 2018. The Delhi-based Zoom Air operated between Assam's Tezpur and Kolkata for only three months, till July 2018, before withdrawing owing to "technical issues." And from September 1, 2018, SpiceJet suspended its operation from Agartala, six years after Jet Airways and a few other small airlines had withdrawn.

### Has the demand gone down?

According to Zoliana Chhakhchhuak, Aizawl-based head of a regional tour operators' association, viability is often cited by airlines, despite a passenger occupancy rate of 60-70% in most flights, and more people in the region flying than ever before.

While some of the smaller airports have flights connecting Kolkata and Delhi, the withdrawal of service to and from Guwahati – the hub of communication – is expected to affect tourism, a sector that has capitalised on peace in the region. Airlines and the Airports Authority of India (AAI) agree that the passenger volume has doubled in the last five-six years from Guwahati and other popular airports in the region. But improved road and rail connectivity, they said, have become a bane for smaller airports.

For instance, a two-hour drive brings a passenger from Shillong and an overnight train trip brings one from Dimapur to Guwahati.

### Where is connectivity headed?

The Ministry of Civil Aviation announced the opening of 92 air routes in the region in the second round of UDAN in November 2017. Bidders snapped up six airports – Rupsi, Jorhat, Lilabari and Tezpur in Assam, and Tezu and Pasighat in Arunachal Pradesh – and 12 routes, of which only two are operational. In May 2018, Air India started a flight between Guwahati and Pasighat in Arunachal Pradesh with VIPs, including Chief Minister Pema Khandu, on board. The militarily strategic airport, which allows Sukhoi 30 to land and take off, has had very few civilian flights. AAI officials say UDAN, in its current form, is difficult for smaller airlines to sustain. Aviation experts say the scheme has not been able to add wings because it is aimed more at reaping political benefits than increasing connectivity. Furthermore, it does not have enough incentives for airlines to ignore the issue of viability.

RAHUL KARMAKAR



# A compass for navigating contemporary art

Among the gimmicky installations and concept artworks at the India Art Fair, some pictures take you towards your north pole



## PASSING BITE

**RUCHIR JOSHI**  
is a writer, filmmaker and columnist

Every year, Delhi's art season throws up all sorts of odd things. Nowadays there are art events in the NCR all across the year but the so-called season is in the cooler months, from mid-October to mid-March. However, a bit like the magnetic North Pole that's currently playing catch-me-if-you-can, the exact epicentre of the season can be hard to pinpoint. An early winter show can define a particular season, or a big retrospective of a big-name artist at a museum might yank the point into March, but one steady fulcrum is the India Art Fair (IAF) that usually takes place in end January/early February, with all the shows and events that are clustered around that sales jamboree.

For this year's IAF, the Arterati landed in force from out of town, while their local allies came out of the city's for-

trass-palaces. You could see them at various locations: looking sniffy in Khan Market, long-ball air-kissing in the lounge of the Taj Mansingh, piling out of SUVs and stumbling about trying to find the cleverly disguised entrance to the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, and so on. You can easily identify these bipeds by the bright orange sunglasses (even at night) and the generally outlandishly expensive and unsuitable designer pelt in which they are covered. At the Fair itself, you see a few of them in the exclusive VIP lounge, not too many foreigners, and not too many proper Arterati, but a lot of the Indian nouveaugarchs who are clearly discovering new and unique ways of spending their ill-gotten crores. As soon as your group approaches the lounge (your own card having been acquired by dint of a friend being a part of the official proceedings), the young women at the desk put you through the questionnaire: 'What car do you drive, sir? Umm, usually Uber, sometimes three-wheeler.' 'Oh. And which model of our brand would you be looking to purchase, ma'am?' 'None, at least not in this life. No, wait, maybe I can afford one at Hamley's toy shop, I'll go look.' 'Okay ma'am, okay sir, thank



you, can I take that card? It's one-time use only. Thank you, this way please.'

## Through the grids

Entering the lounge you feel as though you've stumbled into some ill-conceived art installation. At the centre of the space is the fattest, most obscene staukampfwagen the sponsoring brand produces. Inside it is the suited salesman trying to show off all the bells and whistles to two gangsta-consumed chaps from Chandigarh. Around the

'car' mill the potential buyers and waiters with international cuisine canapes that tend towards the vegetarian. You look at the SUV and you can just see it, as still as it is now, embedded in the slow-moving car park that is the Mehrauli-Gurgaon Road at 6 p.m. on a Wednesday in April – you can just see this shiny thing in that oceanic traffic-jam, preening like some godman, with dirty Ubers and spluttering autos surrounding it like worshipful bhaktas.

After this vision, even the worst art

on display outside should like a relief. But as you wander through the grids A, B and C and then the projects section of the expo, you do feel as though you are examining cross-sections of the internal organs of a large, dismembered creature called Indianartnow, with all its anxieties and stress having caused various kinds of 'art' to come into being like ulcers and cysts, leading to multiple organ failure in the beast. However, as you move from stall to gallery stall, you also come across a few gems hiding in all the posey, moribund dress – a small oil by Raza here, a lovely early canvas by Madhavi Parekh there or a series of photos by Simryn Gill.

## Some rewards in the maze

Away from the Art Fair crowds, the big KNMA retrospective of Arpita Singh's work spanning half a century is quietly rewarding. For a while you can be lost in the maze of rooms hung with good, old-fashioned water-colours and oils, the form of the two dimensional 'flat work' centuries-old, but the images painted upon them like fresh maps and scans of the last few decades. As you slowly make your way through the rooms you can see the explorations becoming

deeper, some lines becoming more playful, other things – a figure, a colour combination or the use of stencils – beginning to work rhythmically, coming up again and again like the samm of a raga.

At Vadehra Art Gallery you come across a practitioner from an earlier era – the great Benode Behari Mukherjee. Again, just the flat work hung on the wall: a picture painted or drawn on paper, a surrounding mount, a frame and that's it. And yet, the dance of the brush, or the staccato stippling of pen and ink creates whole worlds, opens up wells of deep emotion. A series of landscapes, a suite of watercolours depicting the same flowers, figures against a mountainside brought alive by the most parsimonious deployment of brushstrokes. Nobody sensible can argue that only this drawing-painting of Benodebabu's and Arpita's is genuine art and that all the installery and concept-churning of the contemporary art world should be dismissed as gimmicks. But when searching for something that hits you, that moves you and makes you think, it's good to think of these pictures as being somewhere near your genuine north pole.

# Bill shock for power producers

India's power woes have shifted from generation to distribution



## ON THE OTHER HAND

**RAGHAVAN SRINIVASAN**  
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What happens if you don't pay your electricity bill? The power company cuts you off (unless you happen to be a politician, slumlord or goon), right? Now what happens if you happen to be the power company, and haven't been paying your bills to your supplier – the power generating company?

Ideally, the same rules should apply. After all, what is sauce for the goose must be sauce for the gander. Only, the same rules don't apply. All kinds of reasons are trotted out: power distribution companies (discoms) are essential utilities, electricity is a basic requirement, the discoms are all (or, almost all) owned by the government so the money isn't going anywhere, and so on and so forth.

## The power problem

Usually, the generators tend to cave in and simply let the dues mount till they reach a point where they can't pay their suppliers or their employees and then the cycle of threat and bargaining starts. Last week's stand-off between India's largest power producer, NTPC, and the discoms of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Karnataka is a classic example.

Stuck with unpaid dues of over ₹5,838 crore, of which more than ₹4,100 crore were due for more than two months, NTPC threatened to "regulate" supply – effectively, reduce by over 3,400 MW the quantum of power it supplies to these three discoms – from midnight of February 5. Within a day, threat was kept in abeyance, with the three discoms promising to pay "as soon as possible", although no clear date was given. Needless to say, with all three States ruled by non-BJP parties or coalitions, there was considera-



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ble political pressure to not make it seem like a BJP vendetta.

That may have solved the political problem, but it doesn't solve the power producer's problem. As of November 2018, the latest month for which data are available, the money owed by discoms to power producers was over ₹41,000 crore. That number will climb closer to the ₹55,000 crore mark, if you add the dues which are still within the 60-day credit offered by generators. Pending payments are growing at 29% per year.

This is clearly unsustainable. If power producers don't get paid, their only option is to go belly up or shut shop, since power distribution is, for all practical purposes, a monopoly. If you have only one customer and that customer isn't paying you, there's little you can do. This is one of the reasons why over 30,000 MW of capacity is currently under the "stressed asset" category and looking for resolution. With or without resolution, lenders are already facing a monumental haircut. If one adds productive, operational assets to this – because the buyer is not paying up – then we are looking at a systemic collapse.

Currently, the accumulated losses of discoms are in excess of ₹17,000 crore. But this is after two years of the government's Ujwal DISCOM Assurance Yojana (UDAY), instituted after the cumulative losses of discoms crossed ₹51,000 crore in 2015-16. Under the scheme, State governments took over the liability for half the accumulated losses, allowing the discoms to start with a near fresh slate. In return, discoms were expected to cut losses resulting from theft, non-metering and leakages to 15% of the total by March

31, 2019, while gradually increasing tariffs to cover the rest. With just a little more than a month left for that deadline, the loss figure is still over 20% – which means a fifth of the power produced doesn't earn a paisa – while tariff hikes and axing of subsidies hasn't happened.

India's power problem, long thought to lie on the generation side, has shifted to the distribution side. We are now comfortable on the generation side. But with State governments stubbornly refusing to change, using discoms as handy vehicles to push all kinds of populist agendas without actually having to spend their budget monies on it, the discoms have virtually reached the point of no return.

## A workable solution

The Centre has taken several shots at solving this. Initially, privatisation was thought of as the panacea, but the experience with privatised discoms has been only marginally better (Mumbai-kars are up in arms over sharp bill increases after Gautam Adani bought out Anil Ambani's distribution utility there). Then the Modi government came up with UDAY. But clearly, UDAY too has just kicked the can down the road, since discoms haven't cleaned up their act.

In 2018, a high-level committee headed by the Cabinet Secretary suggested that public financial institutions like the Power Finance Corporation discount discom receivables and pay power producers. However, these institutions were wary of default by discoms and wanted the government to create a three-way arrangement with the Reserve Bank of India, such that flows to State government treasuries would be diverted to pay the institutions in case of default. This proved unworkable.

Now, yet another committee has been formed, which is of the view that discoms should go into a prepaid mode with power producers. This too looks unlikely. What also looks unlikely is a workable solution – unless the political class stops playing politics with power.

# Whispers of the city

Around the world with a bagful of books



## WORD COUNTS

**MINI KAPOOR**  
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Ruskin Bond never tires of describing Landour, a little settlement high in the hills above Mussoorie in Uttarakhand's Garhwal where he's made his home for many decades; and his readers never fail to find something new in his descriptions as they fill in more details of the place in their imaginations. He does this by way of new stories, memoir and essays, through introductions to his books, and most curiously through the manner in which he constantly reassembles his writings in successive anthologies.

To read and love Bond is to look forward to finding a short story or narrative you've read before nestled among a different set of writings. I can read 'Time Stops at Shamli' or 'Voting at Barlowganj', to take just two of the pieces collected in his latest collection, *Landour Bazaar*, endlessly – but I never fail to experience a thrill of discovery when I find them in a new volume, with different Bond neighbours, as it were, in the table of contents. Serendipitously, the text feels just that tiny bit different each time, simply by being in new surroundings. In fact, it's long been a dream project to find all the anthologies of Bond's writings and map how different stories show up in different collections amidst old and new writing. The labour of tracking down each and every volume apart, I suspect the task is not doable for another reason – as happens spookily in his stories, the chase for his collected collections may bring the archivist to one trap door after another that take her to books no one else even knew existed.

Perhaps, Bond may also spice up the mapping project by updating some



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essays. In the introduction to *Landour Bazaar*, for example, he describes how "the Garhwal Himalaya and the people who live on these mountain slopes in the mist-filled valleys have long since learned humility, patience, and a quiet resignation", with a familiar rhythm to their cheer-filled days but very tough lives – but he notes, with a tone of regret, the changes that have come to the legendary bazaar in the twenty or so years since he wrote the title essay. Yet, even as Mussoorie and Landour change, for countless readers who may make their way around these hill stations, what they see will be some unique combination of the actual landscape and the picture Bond has painted over time not just in his non-fiction, but especially in his fiction.

## Transforming memory

No Ruskin Bond story is there in *Literary Landscapes: Charting the Worlds of Classic Literature*, a vividly illustrated volume edited by John Sutherland. He summarises it as "a collection of the world's most memorable fictionalised geographies". Sometimes the fictional touches don't just change our perception of a place, they actually alter the map. Patrick Modiano, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2014, had situated his 1997 novel *The Search Warrant* (Dora Bruder in the French original), set against the Holocaust and the German occupation of France during World War II, in the non-touristy quarters of Paris's 18th ar-

rondissement. It came full circle in 2015, when, as Catherine Taylor updates us, "the City of Paris named a promenade in the 18th arrondissement after Dora Bruder, the missing Jewish girl of Modiano's novel."

And as the Windrush issue comes back centre stage in Britain, it is instructive to map the London of characters in Trinidadian writer Samuel Selvon's 1956 novel, *The Lonely Londoners*. Kate McNaughton shows how the opening line of Selvon's classic uses not just imagery but also nuances of diction to contrast the London everyone is presumed to be familiar with the diverse 'Londons' various immigrants, specifically of the Windrush wave, occupy: "One grim winter evening, when it had a kind of unrealness about London, with a fog sleeping restlessly over the city and the lights showing in the blur as it is not London at all but some strange place on another planet, Moses Aloetta hop on a number 46 bus at the corner of Chepstow Road and Westbourne Grove to go to Waterloo to meet a fellow who was coming from Trinidad on the boat-train." Selvon and Barbadian George Lamming (*In the Castle of My Skin*, 1953) found the key for generations of West Indian, and other, writers to come, that to depict a place, language was key.

Cairenes, on their part, caution first-time visitors to their city to read Naguib Mahfouz before they set foot in the Egyptian capital or they'll never know it. Andrew Taylor recommends *Midaq Alley* (1947) to get a measure of the city's profile: "Mahfouz makes the alley much more than a setting for his characters. From the first page it is presented as a character in its own right, depicted through not just its physical appearance but the textures of its crumbling walls, the smells of spices and folk cures, the deep colors of a city sunset, and the intimate evening whispers as the daytime noises die down."

That's one of the reasons we keep going back to great works – to catch snatches of, among other things, "intimate evening whispers".

# The vanishing of a writer

As the sins of the creator are foisted upon their work, writers craft a public persona superior to their own artistic creations



## SERENDIPITIES

**KEERTHIK SASIDHARAN**  
is a writer and lives in New York City

A few days ago, I translated a verse by a mighty Indian poet – a sprawling banyan tree of literary consciousness – from his mother tongue to English. It is a sensitive, minor poem that avoids easy sentimentalism or glib endings. Then, I made a critical mistake. I looked up the poet on YouTube. For all of the poet's literary sensitivities on page, on stage, in the presence of an audience, he metamorphosed into a moralist who took it upon himself to catalogue the failings of society, all the while self-aggrandising his own commitment to literature and higher ideals.

To an extent, among the great crimes of humanity, the harmless vanities of a bureaucrat-poet are minor, almost in-

consequential. Yet, it rankled within.

## A rogue's gallery?

For much of my adult reading life I have found myself admiring a book, only to later discover that in his personal lives the author was a moral skunk. There is, of course, a long history of this dichotomy – the yawning gap between luminous words and the wordsmith. Seneca was an obsequious slime ball in Nero's court who wrote stirring essays about honour and courage. The great Shakespeare, some evidence points, may have been in support of the Inclosure Acts which threw out tenant-farmers from British feudal estates. The greatness of T.S. Eliot is scarred by his anti-semitism. Ezra Pound and Curzio Malaparte became fellow travellers of Mussolini's fascism. Closer to our times, V.S. Naipaul declared that he became "a great prostitute man" as his wife lay dying. Lawrence Durrell's daughter topped off the description of her father as an "aggressive and demonic drunkard" with insinuations of incest. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, who spoke about human freedoms, enjoyed the friendship of Fi-



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del Castro, who ran an authoritarian gulag state. Pablo Neruda, ever ready to make art out of the artlessness, confessed to raping his Sri Lankan manual scavenger, all the while admiring the "brimming cup of her breasts" during the attack. Despite knowing all this, it has never stopped me from reading, enjoying, and profiting from their works.

In our times, however, unlike any generation before, we are gifted with a

sort of radical transparency about the private lives of our favourite authors. Be it either through social media, newspapers, or archival works – we know more of those who produce our culture than any time before. The result is that our knowledge of a work of art comes coloured with the results of extraneous information. What do they sound like, are they liberal or conservative, is she a vainglorious fool or is he merely a gar-

den variety misogynist and so on. An outcome of this is an increasingly schizoid response about what is to be done: Should we suffer through mediocrities because they favour our political dispensation. Or, should those who transgress our norms about gender or religion or nationhood be accommodated despite our distaste on account of their abilities to unsettle and yet instruct. These are the questions that increasingly dominate not just our aesthetics but even our consumption patterns.

The logic of consumption in an age where artists and writers transform themselves into products also forces them to conform, to behave and speak in a certain manner, to ascribe to forms of progressive claims lest the consumer, and therefore the publisher, deem them unmarketable. The upside of this relentless pressure of the markets is evident – more voices now add to the collective noise. But the downside is that these voices are largely similar because they emerge out of the same production chain – born from similar creative writing programmes subject to similar editorial tastes and ultimately package

their own authorial self as a conscientious, sensitive liberal, secular and so on. Both the writer and his work become receptacles for low-cost virtue signalling.

## Not for everyone

In today's environs, authors like Norman Mailer, prodigious in his talent but also one who stabbed his wife in a drunken fit, or Nirad Chaudhuri, who wrote euphonic prose that sought to please only Edward Gibbon and more expressly aimed to stir Indians out of their self-satisfied stupor – would be hard-pressed to find a place. This is not because we are more egalitarian today but because art and the artist have fused into a single marketable product. Anticipating this commingling, some like the great Thomas Pynchon or the pseudonymous 'Elena Ferrante' have simply chosen to vanish from the public eye. They are content to let only their words speak. The rest knowing very well that the sins of the creator will be foisted upon their creation muddle on, working to craft a public persona superior to their own artistic creations.