

Price ₹ 250

U-TALK

Multidisciplinary Magazine | Quarterly | Est. 2023 | Vol. 4, No. 3 | July - Sept, 2026



Dr. R. Abeetha

Women's Activist Outlook
in Shashi Deshpande's...

Payal Choudhary

Dhoop, Dua aur Yaadein
(Incense, Prayers, and...)

Esra Yagmur

Medina: Finding Stillness
in the City of the Prophet



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PUBLISHER'S INFORMATION

Published by: Umran Green School & Umran
Academic Research Association

Subject: Multidisciplinary

Publication Date: August 2026

Place: Jaynagar, Bihar, India

Website: www.uara.in

Email: uara@umran.org.in

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Prof. Mousumi G. Banerjee

Editor-in-Chief, U-Talk Magazine

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We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all individuals who contributed to the creation of this Issue of the U-Talk Magazine.

First and foremost, we appreciate all the contributors to the Magazine, writers and artists, whose creativity and skill have been instrumental in making this publication a reality. The “Articles” by Dr. R. Abeetha, Basanta Bhowmick, and Tanvi Agarwal; the section on “Visions, Voices, and Verses” by Payal Chaudhary and Adrija Chakraborty; “Poetry” contributed by Sophia Margar Salibio and Bushara Naurin; the section on “Art & Craft” contributed by Arzu Başkoç Kızıl, Fatima M. Saify, and Tahoor Ajaz; “Photography” by Sophia Margaret Salibio, Jarpula Abhijith, and Sourasnata Debnath; “Health & Healing” by Dr. Mohammed Haseeb Khan; the section on “Travelogue” by Esra Yagmur; and an “Interview” by Abdul Nafey Syed – all endeavors deserve to be lauded for making the Magazine complete and fulfilling.

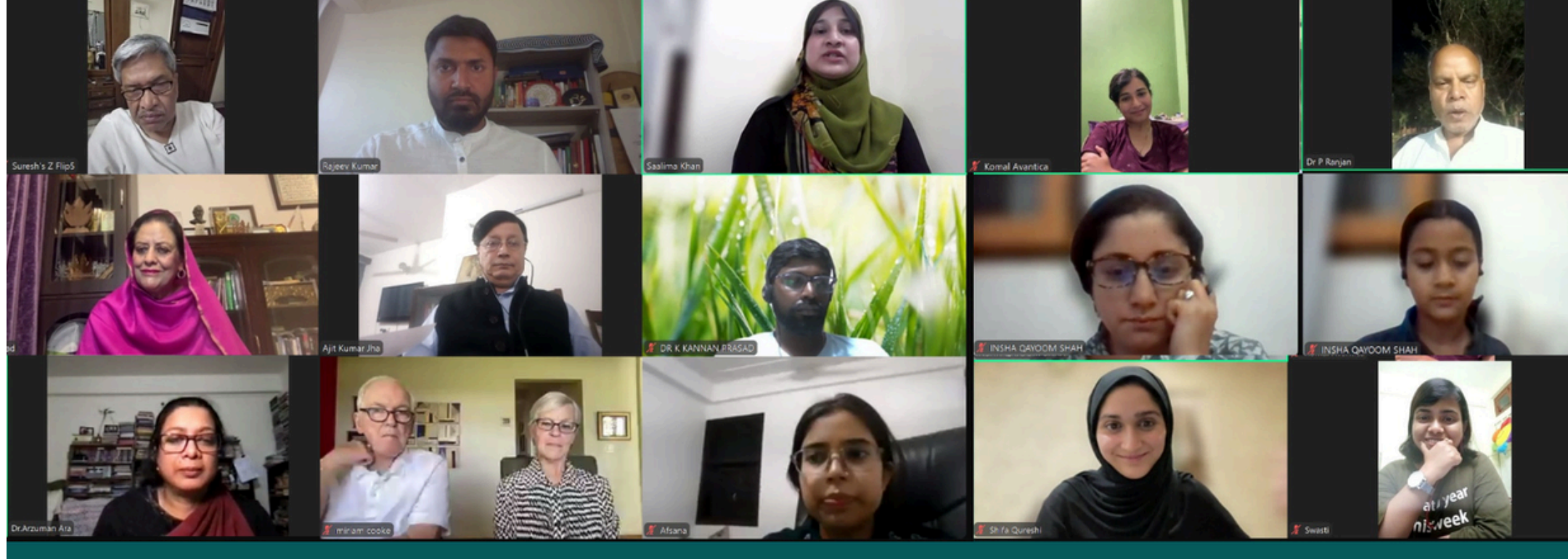
Special thanks go to our Managing Editor, Rajeev Kumar, for overseeing the Magazine’s design. His expertise and artistic vision have made the publication visually engaging. Thanks to the Magazine’s Copy Editor, Dr Insha Qayoom Shah, for copyediting and doing all the meticulous work required to bring out the work, thereby ensuring its quality and accuracy. We also thank the Section Editors, Dr Kannan Prasad, Saalima Khan, and Dr R. Abeetha, for mobilising the articles and preparing them for publication. We thank our IT team, comprising Graphic Designer, Harsh Dubey, Website Coordinator, Atender Ray, Media Coordinator, Aman Verma, Content Layout, Sonal Butley, and Outreach, Harsh Srivastava – all of whom have remained fundamentally involved in putting their hard work together to give birth to this much-awaited version of the Magazine.

Our sincere appreciation goes to the esteemed Advisors of the Magazine, Professor Bruce B. Lawrence, Professor Miriam Cooke, Prof Manindar Nath Thakur, Professor Purnendu Ranjan, Professor Rakesh Thakur, Professor Raziuddin Aquil, and Dr. Ajit Kumar Jha, for their invaluable guidance and insights in shaping the Magazine’s content and direction.

We express our gratitude to our sponsors and supporters, the Umrans Green School, the Umrans Academic Research Association, and Webultrasolution, whose generous contributions have also made this publication possible.

Best Wishes

Prof. Mousumi G. Banerjee



U-Talk

About U-Talk

U-Talk Magazine is a multidisciplinary, quarterly publication by the Umrans Green Perspective Foundation, produced through its initiatives Umrans Green School (UGS) and the Umrans Academic Research Association (UARA).

U-Talk amplifies the voices of everyday people, sparking honest, messy, and meaningful conversations across generations, backgrounds, and beliefs. We don't curate for comfort—we curate for truth. Because every story has more than one side—and yours deserves to be heard. So go ahead. Talk to us.

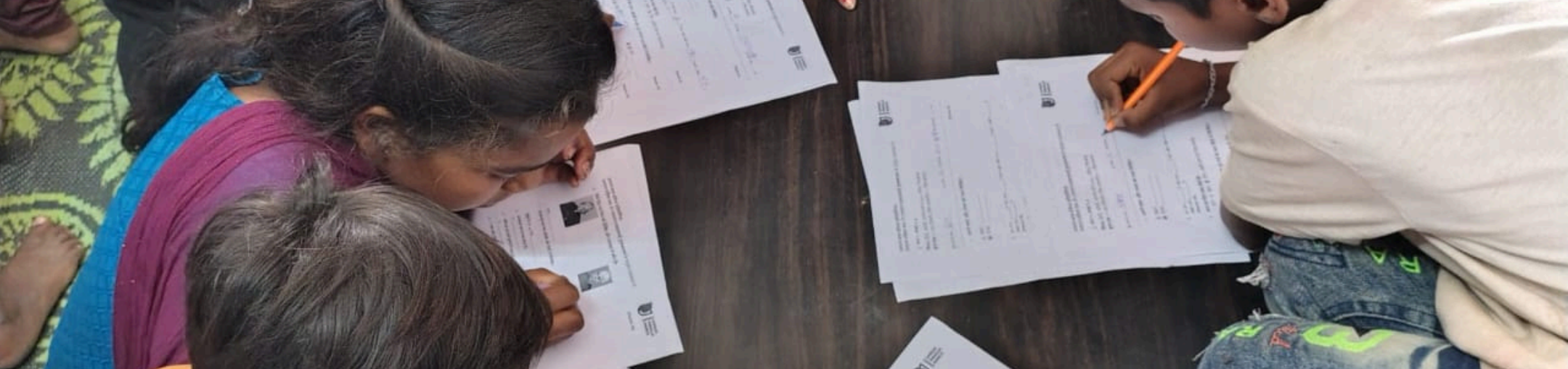
Our Vision

To foster creativity, empower voices, and promote cultural understanding through storytelling, artistic expression, and critical dialogue.

Join us

- To amplify diverse voices—students, artists, storytellers, and community members.
- To celebrate cultural diversity and promote dialogue across generations and regions.
- To inspire readers through stories of resilience, innovation, and the richness of human experiences.





CONTENTS

II TEAM

III FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

IV ABOUT U-TALK MAGAZINE

V TABLE OF CONTENTS

VI UMRAN'S HIGHLIGHTS

- Updates on Umrán's events and activities

01 ARTICLES

- Women's Activist Outlook in Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* by Dr. R. Abeetha
- The Crucible of Crisis: The Bengal Famine of 1943 and the Enduring Transformation of Bengali Cuisine by Basanta Bhowmick
- Commodified Feminism in the Age of Capitalism by Tanvi Agarwal

09 VOICES, VERSES & VISIONS

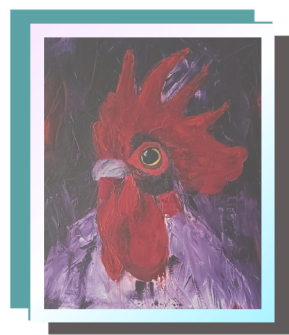
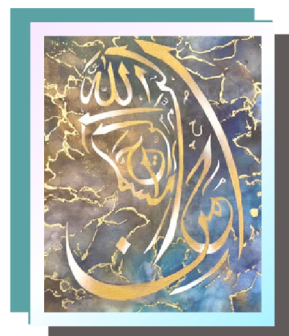
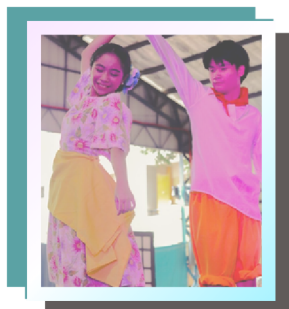
- Dhoop, Dua aur Yaadein (Incense, Prayers, and Memories) by Payal Chaudhary
- Intense Loops by Adrija Chakraborty

16 POETRY

- Arithmetic of Nearness by Sophia Margaret Salibio
- The Ambitious Coward by Bushara Naurin

18 TRAVELOGUE

- Medina: Finding Stillness in the City of the Prophet by Esra Yagmur



21 INTERVIEW

- Maheen Shabir Interview by Abdul Nafey Syed

23 ART & CULTURE

- Roosters by Arzu Başkoç Kızıl
- Lustre of Radiants by Fatema M Saify
- Calligraphy by Tahoor Ajaz

26 HEALTH & HEALING

- Why the Traditional Diet Is Still the Best Medicine for Indians by Dr. Mohammed Haseeb Khan

28 PHOTOGRAPHY

- Recital by Sophia Margaret Salibio
- Quiet Devotion by Jarpula Abhijith
- Sanctuary by Sourasnata Debnath

32 WORDS OF ADVISORY BOARD

33 CONTRIBUTORS

34 SPONSORS

35 SUPPORT

Writing Research Papers & Publishing in Journals Workshop-1



We are proud to share that our first Workshop in the series of ‘Research Methodology’ workshops was successfully conducted on 6 and 7 June, 2026. The workshop contained the fundamentals of writing a research paper by Dr. Insha Qayoom Shah on Day 1, and the guidelines on how to publish a research paper by Ms. Saalima Khan on Day 2.

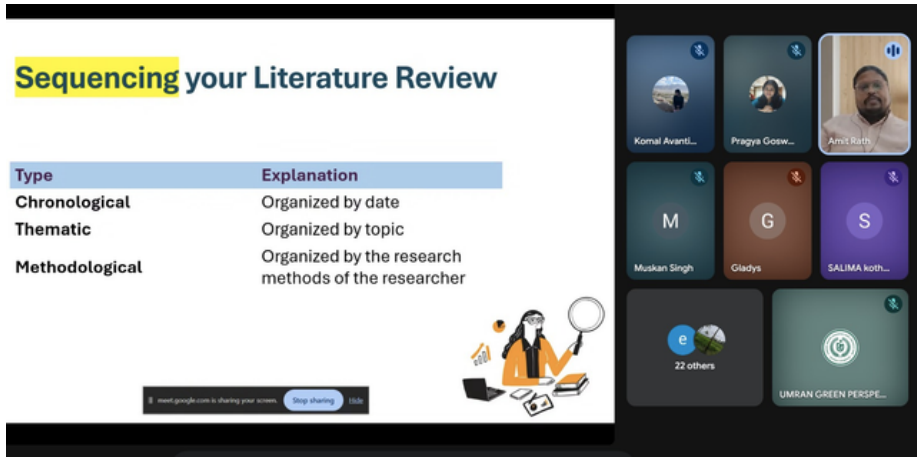
Successful PhD Dissertation Defended by UMRAN Director Rajeev Kumar



It is heartfelt to convey that our Director, Mr. Rajeev Kumar, has successfully defended his Doctoral Dissertation, ‘The Longing-Belonging Paradigm: Negotiating ‘Kahat Kabir’ in South Asia with a Focus on Bihar,’ on 31 July, 2026. His presentation and research was considered timely and relevant.

Literature Review: How to Do It? Workshop-2

Umran Academic Research Association and U-Talk Journal organised the Second Workshop on Literature Review, with the eminent resource person Dr. Amit Kumar Rath (Assistant Professor, University Institute of Liberal Arts and Humanities, Chandigarh University). The workshop had a bountiful discussion and 93% positive feedback.



Educational Interaction with Children of Imamia Education & Kashmir Trust

We, at Umran Academic Research Association, were grateful to have been invited to conduct a career counselling session with the children of Imamia Education and Welfare Trust at Srinagar on 31 May, 2026. Our Co-Director, Dr. Insha Qayoom Shah, spoke about academics and higher education opportunities. The eminent occasion was also graced by the Deputy Superintendent of Police, Mr. Ashiq Hussain Dar.



Women's Activist Outlook

In Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine*



Dr. R. Abeetha

Assistant Professor of English, Vels Institute of Science, Technology and Advanced Studies, Pallavaram, Chennai.

ABSTRACT

The twentieth century witnessed a significant rise in women's writing, where female authors began to articulate the complexities of women's lives within patriarchal societies.

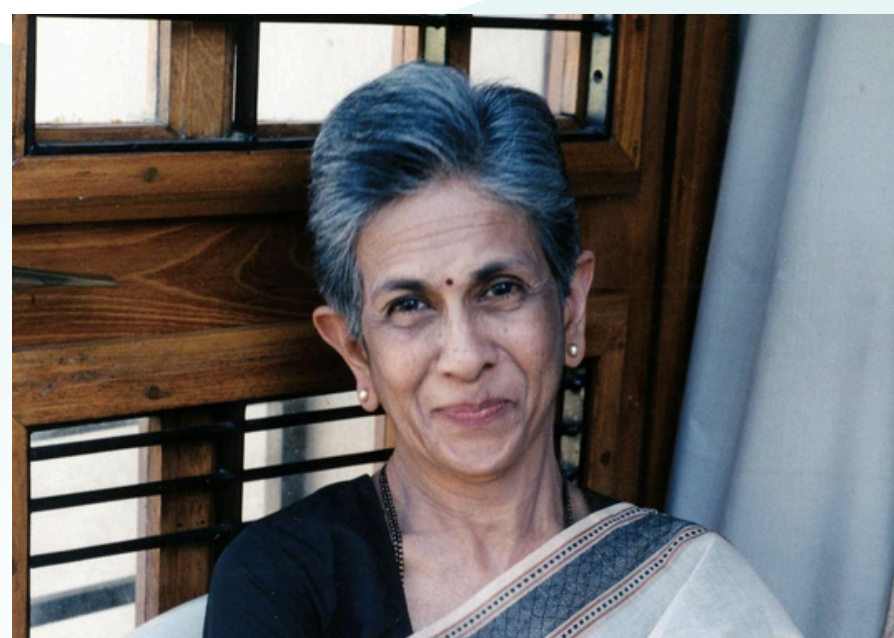
Among such writers, Shashi Deshpande occupies a prominent place for her sensitive portrayal of women's inner struggles and quest for identity. Her novel *The Binding Vine* (1993) stands as a powerful exploration of women's suffering, resilience, and silent resistance. Through this novel, Deshpande presents a feminist perspective that emphasizes women's right to self-expression, bodily autonomy, and emotional independence.

Keywords: Sufferings, Oppression, Dejection and Depression

At the heart of the novel lies the question of whether women should break their silence and, if so, how they can do so within a restrictive social framework. Indian society, deeply rooted in patriarchal traditions, has historically confined women to prescribed roles of daughter, wife, and mother. Influenced by cultural texts such as *Manusmriti*, women are often denied individuality and autonomy. They are expected to emulate idealized figures like Sita, Ahalya, and Savitri, whose identities are defined by devotion and sacrifice. Deshpande challenges these rigid norms, arguing that such outdated conventions must evolve to accommodate changing social realities. The narrative of *The Binding Vine* is multi-layered, weaving together the lives of three generations of women to demonstrate that female suffering transcends time.

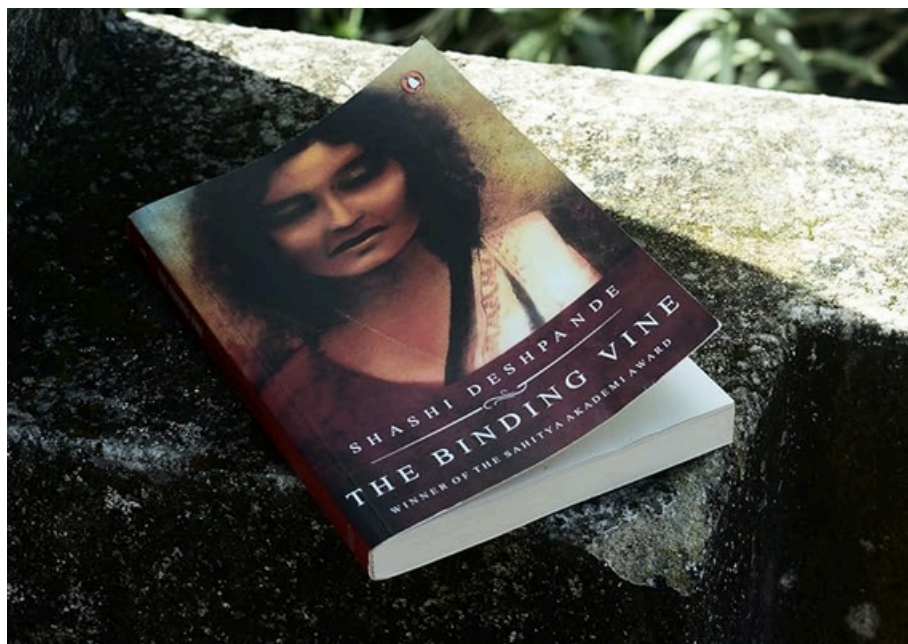
The central character, Urmi, serves as the connecting thread among these narratives. Her personal tragedy—the loss of her infant daughter Anu—plunges her into deep grief, yet it also heightens her sensitivity toward the pain of other women. Unlike traditional female protagonists, Urmi asserts her independence by continuing her career and refusing to subordinate her identity to her husband. Her character represents emotional strength and intellectual awareness, making her a symbol of modern womanhood.

One of the most striking aspects of the novel is its bold treatment of sexual violence, both within and outside marriage. Through the character of Mira, Deshpande exposes the trauma of marital rape, a subject rarely addressed in Indian literature. Mira's suppressed anguish finds expression in her poetry, which reveals her deep aversion to forced intimacy. Her experience underscores the reality that marriage does not necessarily protect women from violation; instead, it can legitimize it. This idea resonates with the feminist views of Simone de Beauvoir, who argued that marriage often reduces women to objects rather than individuals.



Shashi Deshpande, Author

(Source: Deshpande, S. (2018, November 16). Novelist Shashi Deshpande on the difficulties of being a woman who writes (or, a 'woman writer'). Scroll.in.)



Shashi Deshpande's **The Binding Vine** (Source: <https://www.amazon.in/Binding-Vine-Shashi-Deshpande/dp/0140233369>)

Parallel to Mira's story is the tragic narrative of Kalpana, a young girl who becomes a victim of brutal rape. Her mother, Shakutai, represents the societal mindset that prioritizes honor over justice. Instead of seeking punishment for the perpetrator, she chooses silence to avoid social stigma. This reaction reflects a harsh truth: in a patriarchal society, the victim is often blamed while the perpetrator escapes accountability. Deshpande critiques this deeply ingrained attitude, highlighting the urgent need for social change. The novel also delves into the psychological dimensions of grief, memory, and trauma. Urmi's refusal to let go of her daughter's memory illustrates her belief that forgetting would amount to betrayal. Her pain becomes a part of her identity, shaping her understanding of life and relationships. This exploration of memory and loss adds depth to the narrative, making it not only a social critique but also a profound psychological study.

Deshpande employs various narrative techniques to enhance the thematic richness of the novel. The use of multiple perspectives allows for a comprehensive portrayal of women's experiences, while Mira's poetry serves as a powerful medium for expressing suppressed emotions. Symbolism is also evident in the characters' names and relationships, adding layers of meaning to the text.

Ultimately, *The Binding Vine* is not merely a story of individual suffering but a collective representation of women's struggles in a patriarchal society.

It advocates for women's empowerment by encouraging them to voice their experiences and challenge oppressive norms. While Deshpande herself has often resisted the label of a feminist writer, her work undeniably contributes to feminist discourse by addressing issues such as bodily autonomy, gender inequality, and the silencing of women.

In conclusion, *The Binding Vine* stands as a significant work in Indian English literature, offering a nuanced portrayal of women's lives and their quest for identity and justice. Through characters like Urmi, Mira, and Kalpana, Shashi Deshpande not only exposes the harsh realities of a patriarchal society but also inspires hope for change. The novel ultimately calls for women to reclaim their voices and assert their individuality, making it a powerful testament to the enduring struggle for gender equality.

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THE CRUCIBLE OF CRISIS:

THE BENGAL FAMINE OF 1943 AND THE ENDURING TRANSFORMATION OF BENGALI CUISINE



Basanta Bhowmick
Student, Visva-Bharati University

INTRODUCTION

One of the most disastrous events in the history of modern India, the Bengal famine of 1943, is referred to as one of the most catastrophic events in the history of Bengal within the tumultuous backdrop of the Second World War. Based on the available data, it is said that the total estimate is between 0.3 to 0.8 million people who died due to three main reasons that is starvation, malnutrition, and associated diseases. It is one of the most horrific events that redesigned the whole structure of Bengal. Here, Bengal doesn't mean the modern-day one; rather, it is the Bengal province of Colonial India.

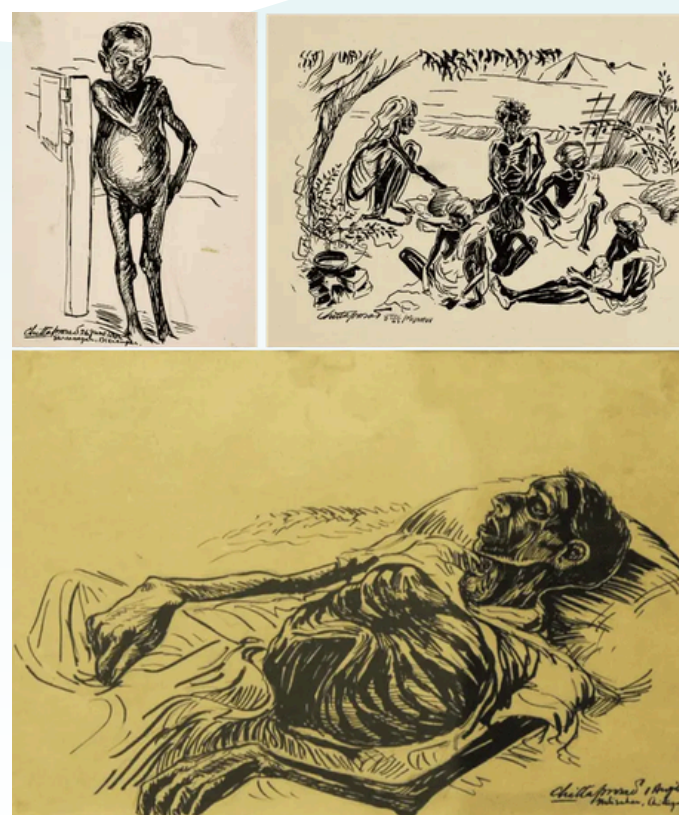
PRE-FAMINE VULNERABILITIES

As we all know that from ancient to modern India, Bengal has always become the hub of consolidation of power among the maximum rulers and always flourished in maritime Indian Ocean trade due to various cultivation factors. Bengal, which we know as 'the land of rice growers and rice eaters,' has to face tremendous changes due to a shift in population growth in colonial India. The implementation of Permanent Settlement has also dangerous impact on the people that only focused on the maximization of revenue. As a result, it led to stagnation in agricultural production. Based on the observation of one of the most eminent economic historian, Cormac C Grada, he argues that "margin over subsistence on the eve of famine was slender." This created a situation where the population had to stay on minimal consumption that led to starvation, malnutrition, and the coming of new diseases that affected the people at the worst case as possible. One of the Bengali doctor, Chunilal Bose,

argued that from the period of 1930, the Bengali diet or cuisine was among the least nutritious, which highlights the condition of food scarcity among Bengali people.

WARTIME EXACERBATION

During this period of crisis, the Second World War was at its peak, which had an immediate impact on the people. At this moment, the British were busy recruiting an army for the war, where they overlooked the needs of the civilians; they were more focused on the war rather than the humans of Bengal. At this moment, the Japanese occupied Burma in 1942, which proved to be disastrous as it permanently cut off the rice imports estimated at around 2.3 million. The war led to the stoppage of continuous food distribution through railways, but this sector also showed stagnancy that put a huge burden on the Bengalis. It is said that there was a risk of Javanese invasion on Bengal, and in reaction to this, the tracks of the eastern Bengal delta were dismantled, and any kind of food supplies and transports were banned, thousands of the boats were confiscated in the Bengal delta, economic activities become stagnant, farmers were unable to cultivate due to heavy burden of taxes. The Britishers prioritized the need to feed their army to keep it active in the war.



Sketches from Hungry Bengal by Chittoprasad Bhattacharya (Source: <https://www.abirpothi.com/recording-the-horrors-of-the-bengal-famine-the-social-realist-art-of-chittoprasad-somnath-hore-and-zainul-abedin/>)

COLONIAL POLICY FALIURE

The most important contributor to the rise of famine was the English and their failed policies; they neglected the rise of famine in Bengal and took a denialist approach towards this situation. The Britishers got continuous warnings and the signs of famine, but they overlooked them, and the worst scenario of famine began by mid-1942. In the case of providing relief, they showed ignorance towards it and completely became affirmative towards their idea of 'no famine occurring in Bengal.'

It is proven that the government never formally declared a state of famine. They were very busy with warfare, and by November 1943, a full-fledged famine took on an enormous scale. This situation shows the colonial consciousness among the Indians, and in this famine, too, their focus was only on the maximization of the highest revenue as much as possible. From the statistical economic data, it is found that a total of 170,000 tons of Australian wheat was kept for the Greeks and the Yugoslavs. Based on the calculation of an Economist, Amartya Sen, he argued that the scarcity of food was not the only factor; it was a situation where the purchasing power of humans collapsed due to harsh colonial policies.

SURVIVAL AND INNOVATION

The 1943 famine marked a radical shift in culinary activities and food culture among the Bengalis. The shift is now based on the survival and minimal use of resources, wherever possible, for future use. The population pushed its limits and went beyond the existing food practices just to survive and adapt based on the condition. This famine situation forced the people to adapt to their needs based on the availability of resources. That is why this whole period could be regarded as 'beyond unaffordable for most.' As a result, this led to the adaptability of various food items and even changed the existing food cuisine of the Bengali household.

The list of food items that were dominant during the whole famine was as follows: The first famine food was Kochu Shaak and Googli. Kochu Shaak is basically the leaves of the taro plant, which were dominant on the banks of ponds, and they were typically stemmed during the famine. Googli are small-sized snails that are

obtained from puddles and cooked in the form of broth or a normal curry.



A sketch on the Bengal Famine by Hore
(Source: <https://www.abirpothi.com/recording-the-horrors-of-the-bengal-famine-the-social-realist-art-of-chittoprasad-somnath-hore-and-zainul-abedin/>)

It is important to note that its prevalence was there before famine, but it wasn't popular; it became popular during the famine, and it is still practised even today in the modern-day Bengali household. Grass and tree leaves, such as jute leaves, which are scientifically called 'amorphous clumps' become popular. The leaves were stir-fried with salt and little turmeric, and a drop of oil. This dish is presently popular in some rural parts of Bangladesh, West Bengal, and the Northeast regions. Discarded parts of vegetables. The skin of various vegetables such as potato, bottle guard, and many more were used for consumption, even it is popular among everyone that the rice husk were eaten with a pinch of salt. Wild and Foraged food was used, such as the wild -

potato, which was boiled, and even the starch of that potato was consumed. Rice starch has become one of the most consumed foods above everything else. A saying has become commonly popular that women used to roam from one house to another in search of rice starch.

COMMUNITY AND INDIVIDUAL SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

This famine made the people realise the strategy of survival during a harsh period of crisis, which not only changed the food culture but also the living conditions of the people. Many people of Bengal who had enough money migrated towards the urban areas in search of settlement, food, and better opportunities. This created a situation of migration syndrome among the few Bengali households. One of the most popular sayings became popular in search of rice starch was 'the cry of phan dao'. Three main important factors prevalent during the famine were theft, destitution, and begging for food. These traumatic events are still popular in many Bengali folklores and even haunt many people till today, so it is like a situation of a 'Bengali Holocaust'. The significant change this famine brought was that in many rural areas, the dietary practices of famine are still popular today, such as Kochu Shaak, the Googli Curry, or Chokla Bhaja.



Famine by Atul Bose, 1943

(Source: <https://www.facebook.com/PrinsepsOnline>)

CONCLUSION

This period of famine is one of the most traumatic events in the history of Bengal, which carried the most devastating testament of complex socio-economic vulnerabilities due to the primary failure of colonial policies. This man-made crisis laid its roots in the British denial policies and often regarded as the 'catastrophic failure' that took away the food from the common masses, it shows us how the colonial classes failure of policies had laid a huge impact on the suppressed classes of the Bengal.

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Commodified Feminism

In the Age of Capitalism



Tanvi Agarwal

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Hansraj College*

In 2017, Dior launched a t-shirt carrying the phrase “We should all be Feminists,” drawing from the title of an essay written by a Nigerian author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

The t-shirt immediately became a global hit, grossing thousands of dollars from a single launch. However, luxury brands are renowned for relying on underpaid labour for several years, especially women. This paradoxical example portrays how capitalist brands often manipulate the entire idea of feminism for direct profit. How did feminism transform from a movement dedicated to dismantling oppressive systems into one of capitalism’s biggest branding strategies? In order to answer this question, one must trace back to the conflicted and tangled relation between feminism and capitalism, which eventually altered one of the most radical movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries into a marketable product.

The earlier waves of feminism emerged as a critique of political and social systems. While the first wave of feminism focused primarily on achieving political and legal rights such as property ownership and voting rights, the second wave challenged and demanded interrogation of entire social systems. Thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millett challenged the institutions of marriage, family, and labour, presenting them as key structures which sustained patriarchy. Second wave feminist thinkers did not encourage women to thrive within existing social systems, but rather demanded complete reformulation. Feminism was regarded as a collective struggle, aimed to deconstruct hierarchies instead of merely helping women navigate their way through them.



(Photo by Dominique Charriau/WireImage) (Source: Allure)

However, eventually the correlation between feminism and capitalism changed drastically with the rise of neoliberalism during the late twentieth century. The increase of private property, deregulation, limitation of government intervention created an entirely new economic structure. Eventually, feminist ideas and demands for independence were entangled with the new capitalist apparatus. Political philosopher Nancy Fraser argues that second-wave feminism’s emancipatory ideals were co-opted by neoliberal capitalism, particularly because of its emphasis on individual empowerment while neglecting structural economic critique. Fraser’s argument identifies the shift in feminist ideals, as neoliberal capitalism selectively appropriated feminist critiques for its own benefit. For example, the feminist critique of the traditional male breadwinner and female housewife model was adapted by neoliberal capitalism, encouraging women to enter paid labour which eventually justified flexible, low-wage labour markets. Individual advancement was celebrated and women were encouraged to fight for equality within unequal systems themselves, thus contradicting the initial demands of structural reformation.

The consequences of this shift to neoliberal feminism are evidently visible in the twenty-first century. Even when huge masses of women entered the workforce during the twentieth century, the domestic model which was heavily criticised during the earlier waves of feminism remains fundamentally unchanged.

According to the International Labour Organisation, an estimate of 708 million women worldwide remains outside the labour force because of unpaid care responsibilities, compared to just 40 million men. This stark discrepancy highlights the disproportionate role that women take in child-rearing and other domestic responsibilities. Instead of dismantling oppressive systems, neoliberal feminism simply included women into paid labour market while patriarchal institutions remained intact.

As a result, domestic burden remains fundamentally undistributed, paving the way to what is referred to as 'double burden' or 'second shift'. Furthermore, the growth of social media led to the aestheticization of feminism, converting contemporary feminism into a cultural identity rather than an active political movement. Posting slogans, hashtags, news of female exploitation, critiquing political and social spheres replaced significant active action against exploitative and oppressive systems. Platforms prioritise visual appeal and emotional resonance, shifting the focus from collective liberation to individual, monetisable content like the "girlboss" or "soft girl" eras. Social media thus further accelerated this commodification of feminism. Influencers and brands reshaped profound ideologies into marketable trends and commercial assets. Feminism thus became increasingly detached from its original roots of collective emancipation and shifted towards individual empowerment within the same repressive systems, transforming into a performative act instead of notable action.

One of the most disturbing aspects of this shift is not the commodification of feminism itself, but the gradual erasure of women whose struggles initially shaped the entire movement of feminism. Feminist critic Bell Hooks argued that the first and second waves of mainstream feminism centred primarily around white, middle-class women, often completely sidelining the women of colour and lower classes. bell hooks argued that one cannot separate issues of class and racism from the mainstream feminist movement. As a result, concepts such as "womanism", constructed by Alice Walker, emerged as an attempt to transform feminism into a more inclusive and holistic movement.

However, in the twenty-first century, one can observe how arguments of female inclusion often neglect women of lower classes, focusing mainly on middle-class corporate women. The evolution of feminist discourse through neoliberalism once again ostracised underprivileged and marginalised women from mainstream feminist critique. For example, according to the reports on the garment industry in countries such as Bangladesh, women workers occupy a large number in the workforce, manufacturing products for various international brands, often surviving under harsh working conditions, with poor wages. The Dior t-shirt serves as a crucial example of this aspect as middle and upper-class women enjoy products manufactured by marginalised women in poor and exploitative work conditions.

The commodification of feminism became exceedingly evident when corporations remodelled feminist discourse into a strategic branding tool. "Femvertising", a term coined in 2014, refers to a marketing strategy that features the imagery of women's empowerment. The twenty-first century witnessed numerous advertising campaigns featuring the themes of women's empowerment. Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign is often regarded as the pioneer of femvertising. Launched in 2004, it challenged the narrow definitions of female attractiveness by using everyday women, gaining immense popularity on a global scale, increasing the sale of Dove products enormously.



The Illusion of Choice Feminism. (n.d.). The Student Life.
<https://tsl.news/opinion-the-illusion-of-choice-feminism/>

However, such branding strategies often spark debates about the ethical implications of representation and the dangers of corporations using feminist slogans as a marketing gimmick without any real implementation of gender-equal practices. High-end corporations are frequently accused of relying upon underpaid and exploited labour forces. Furthermore, apart from profiting through the means of empty slogans, brands often profit by capitalising on prejudices and insecurities of women. One of the most notable examples is the advertisement of the cream “Fair and Lovely” in India. The cosmetic brand portrayed darker skin tones as a flaw that needed to be fixed, encouraging customers to buy its products in order to fix it. While these two campaigns differ significantly from each other, both examples highlight a disturbing, yet crucial fact that women’s bodies and identities are constantly moulded into sources of profit. The remarkable success of femvertising reveals how capitalism often modifies important political movements into commodities due to their high emotional impact. Capitalism thus reconstructed feminism, from a landmark political movement to a commodity which can be marketed, sold, and purchased.

What began as an act of collective liberation eventually paved way towards individual advancement within the very systems it sought to challenge. Feminism’s conversion from a political movement to a commodity portrays capitalism’s haunting ability to reformulate central resistance into a product for sale. The central question is not whether feminism continues to exist in contemporary times; it sure does. The central question remains whether feminism achieved its goals or drifted away from its roots somewhere along the way and transformed into a mere act of representation stripped of any meaningful action. The paradox of the Dior t-shirt captures this argument perfectly. A product based on the concept of empowerment earns profit while being produced by the hands of exploited workers. Therefore, the challenge facing feminism in the contemporary world is not its visibility, but rather the need to reclaim its original commitment to collective liberation and structural transformation. Without this, feminism simply remains another marketable brand in the hands of capitalism.



Sara Cwynar, *Tracy (Cezanne)*, 2017. (Source: <https://www.sleek-mag.com/article/sara-cwynar/>)



Untitled (*I shop therefore I am*) | Pinault Collection. (2023, June 10). <https://lesoeuvres.pinaultcollection.com/en/artwork/untitled-i-shop-therefore-i-am>

Dhoop, Dua aur Yaadein

Incense, Prayers and Memories



Payal Choudhary
Student, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University,
Delhi

The smell hit me the moment I opened the tin box – the smell of Sandalwood.

Not just any sandalwood- it was like petrichor or like a rich and ancient story. I lifted the bundle of incense sticks, wrapped in crinkly plastic, it was open from one end. The scent grew stronger and fuller like comforting glow of a hearth. It was not only sweet and warm but it felt like a sacred whisper bringing calmness to my soul.

Just a day before Diwali, I stood in the puja room in our house. A tiny sanctuary built in our living room. The walls of the room were closed together, but it had everything- covered in marigold flowers, a brass diya with dried oil stains which my mother would clean later. It had a small brass bell (ghanta) hanging overhead and the window letting soft sun rays that made red dupatta covering the mandir glow like flame.

It was quiet. Except the whispers of grandmother's prayers and continuous stirring of gram flour in the kitchen. My mother was making besan laddoos- the smell of roasted gram flour was floating in the air but got overpowered by sandalwood. The sticks were dry and smooth yet velvety texture. I slid one out and lit the tip of it, the fire hissed softly like it knew a secret.

The tip first turned yellow and orange, and then red and then finally it died, left behind a slender trail of grey smoke. And with it, smell changed. It did not take any longer for the sharp dry Chandan to become rich and deep, just like a warm, Kashmere blanket being wrapped around you to provide a sense of comfort and tranquility.

My hands became stock-stilled when I placed the incense sticks in its holder. The smoke started to get curled up and dancing steadily and gracefully as if time has become sluggish. I was able to hear my slowed breath and ticking of the clock. The room, the light, the smoke, the quite – it felt like it all wrapped inside that single smell.

That aroma had brought something precious with it.

A memory.



Sandalwood for Hindu God Worship (Image Courtesy and Source: eshubhpooja on Instagram)

I was seventeen again.

It was Diwali morning and me and my sister were sitting on the floor alongside with our father. He was wearing a simple light pink kurta but his presence filled the whole room. He was smelling like Chandan- not just the incense sticks but the actual paste he used to dab on his forehead. It dried and cracked gently. Left a pale mark on his forehead just like chalk dust.

He was chanting slowly, every word could be heard firmly and full of weight. I did not understand most of it but I listened to his words carefully. And the incense sticks - they were burning. Chandan. Always Chandan.

That year, he held my hand and guided me to offer flowers to the Gods. The marigold and rose flowers scratched my hands but it felt like a gentle kiss from sun. I remember how diya flickered on my face when I was offering flowers, the way smoke filled the gap between us, like a thread stitching us together.

I don't remember the gifts I got that year but yes, I remember the smell, taste of sweets and most importantly - Prashad for which I wait whole year.

Whenever I recall that day, memories surround me and hugs me.

I feel Safe. Loved. Home.



Now, I was sitting here years later and that same smoke was back. The same smell. It made me smile - small and quiet. A smile which comes with a little ache.

I whispered without even thinking, "You are back."

If smell could reply back, then I think that it would have said, "I never left. You did."

I laughed softly.

Then I asked, "Where were you all this while?"

And it answered, "In the corners. In the folds of your memory. In the clothes you did not unpack. I was waiting. I was in the silence between you and your family. I was there with you all this time. But you did not notice."

The incense sticks then burned slowly and I watched the ash form a flawless curve just like an artist's masterpiece.

If smell could tell a story, it might sound like this:

"I was born in the quiet heart of sandalwood. I was carved from centuries old trees. I waited in silence. I was pressed in between the thin velvety sticks and was bundled with others like me. Then, on one Diwali, a gentle hand slid me through the darkness and lit my tip. I woke up in the flames, slowly was turning into smoke and rising through the prayers and songs. I saw your eyes- curious, stressing about her future and wide. I started dancing in the air, wrapped your surroundings to give you comfort. I carried memories - of father chanting, mothers singing bhajans, home filled with love, light and blessings. I was not just a fragrance - I was time itself which would take you to the lanes of your memories, burning slowly. And when I turned to ash, I did not end. I lingered in your home—in your almirah, books, in hearts. Every time you light me, I come back- not as smoke but as memory."

Later that evening, my mother asked me to put diyas outside and to save one for the mandir. Her hands were sticky with sugar and ghee. She smelled like Diwali- sweet, sweat and something warm.

As she walked past me, she paused and sniffed. "You have found that old packet of Chandan incense! I was looking for it since morning."

She smiled and her face softened as if she remembered the same thing I had.

In the evening, me and my sister cleaned the house. The floor was cold against our bare feet.

We started decorating living room with Peacock Rangoli with Kalash on his back; placed Diwali Bandhanwar with golden beads and yellow sunflower on the gate sides. The air was filled with Bhajan songs on television, bangles clinking, oil crackling in the kitchen, and Kishore Kumar's songs echoing from a smartphone.

We covered mandir with garlands of marigold flowers and mango leaves as they were considered to be auspicious as their vibrant colours and strong fragrance were believed to represent prosperity, purity and positive energy, helping attract good fortune and ward off negative energy. A small brass bell hung overhead and string of fairy lights blinking lazily in the corner. There was a steel plates decorated with flowers, filled with rice grains and patashe (air-incorporated sugar drops), ghee lamps, kaju katli sweets, and sugar candies shaped like tiny diyas.

My mother decorated pooja room. She first placed Lord Ganesha and Goddess Lakshmi's clay idols at the center of the room, then placed some rose petals in their feet and one lotus flower at the feet of Goddess Lakshmi. She placed one kalash (pitcher or pot) filled with sacred water, wrapped one raw coconut in red cloth and placed it on the kalash.

When all the preparations were done, mother called us to do puja. My father lay sheets on the floor and then we all sat together. The house was lit in yellow and orange. Fairy lights were blinking like sleepy stars.



Mother and Child praying at Diwali Puja (Image Source: <https://tinyurl.com/yc7rfbdn>)

I lit one stick, it smelled the same.

We started doing aarti. Voices and clapping were in rhythm. We offered rice grains and patashe to the Gods. We prayed for their blessings. The smoke wrapped around us again- soft, silent and sacred- as if gods has granted our wish.

Sounds of crackers could be easily heard but later that night, its noise died down. And there was a smell like leftover sweets and as if someone has burnt paper. I walked back to the mandir and sat down.

The last stick had burnt out. Only small trail of smoke remained and that too was slowly fading.

I sat there. I observed it leaving.

But something stayed.

It was the calmness, warmth it had brought. The memory. The feeling that I had come home, not just to a house but to a part of myself.

A few weeks later, my college started. A new life. A new rhythm. I bought bottles of Chandan perfume. One kept in the almirah and the other one in the bag.



Sometimes, on quiet nights, when the noise of the world feels too sharp, I spray some of the perfume.

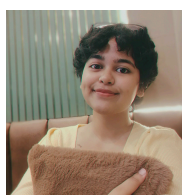
And the smell rises again.

Like a rich, creamy comfort of old wood.

Like a bridge of inner peace and divine connection.

Like an aromatic balm for stressed soul, saying: "You are home."

Infinite Loops



Adrija Chakraborty

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English Honours

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Grains of sand fell on her head as she further squeezed herself into the tight corner of the underground military base.

Almost dizzily she could hear the ear-splitting screams of children while the parents tried to shush them in vain. Her heart thumped faster, taking in the scent of copper and rot around her. She swallowed in pain around her dry as sandpaper throat when she started again at the feel of something skittering past her. Faintly she could hear the noise of artillery raining upon them aboveground.

With a bang the door to the base opened. The Council members, all dressed in white, unmarred by the terror around them silently glided in. She knew what they were here for. A stifling silence reigned interrupted only by the quiet muffled cries of children and the ongoing war outside.

"0-12," came a melodious voice. "Please follow the wartime regulations, 0-12. Otherwise..." The voice almost liltingly mocked.

A young voice countered suppressing his rage, "Grandmother has a name! And we already told you her healing beads are falling apart! She cannot even walk and you expect her to heal?"

Just when he shouted out the protest, it felt as if the temperature plunged further. She shivered. The 'Head of the Council' uttered but a single line and the door closed shut again, with both the grandmother and the youth gone. "It is war child, and the devils don't show mercy" rang hollow in her ears. She knew what they came for, yet tears formed mercilessly at the plight of yet another sacrifice.

A siren blared, breaking her out of her gloomy thoughts. "It's an internal breach, the beasts are here!" A dad cried, hugging his daughter to his chest as he staggeringly stood up. She froze up, her heart missing a beat. Again, a cacophony of noises surrounded her along with a stampede of nearly hundreds of people as they ran around checking for openings out of here. She hated herself then, a deep searing hatred for her uselessness, for having no beads, a mutant. If only...then she would have at least tried like the others, however futile to get out. She saw a man dig out his metal beads from his body to encase his family in a dome with few holes, just enough to say goodbye. She saw him fall as his lifeline was cut like a puppet with cut strings. She saw several people stampede over a grandfather's cooling body.

She also saw a woman abandoning her toddlers as she herself made a forcefield around her body. Worst of all, she saw several people grappling for beads of other people, sparing not even the elderly or the children.

The door banged open and she closed her eyes. A stench of Sulphur filled her nose and a squelch of something landed on her face. She refused to observe as she tightly clamped her ears, her hands turning white with strain. As soon as it started, it died down.



When she saw her surroundings change, she abruptly realized that she was running. She didn't know how but she pulled him up the staircase, running as fast as she could away from the glistening blood under the fluorescent lights and the still gaping maw. She saw flooded floors and more half-eaten bodies along the way, blood long washed away. He was a dead weight on her back, his short compact body slippery with sweat and day-old grime kept falling off. Her own legs couldn't bear her own weight, let alone the fire user's. Every sound made her hyperaware, every footfall felt like the last.

She at last reached the door to outside; it was long broken, the lock still stuck at INCORRECT PASSWORD. That was when the fire guy decided to move on her back, almost like a wriggling eel. He awoke with a tumble from her back, thumping his head on the ground. Bloodshot eyes opened, fumbling he sat up, taking in the unfamiliar environment. Without a word he glanced past her, and noticing the automated door his gaze stilled.

By the time she recovered enough to glance back up, he had stuck in his fingers to pry the door apart, melting it simultaneously. Moonlight streamed in, getting wider as the crack widened.

Slowly she walked up to him, still maintaining a distance, and she opened her mouth to thank him. The door decided to groan open, bent at the middle; she fearfully closed her mouth and threw a glance behind. There was nothing. Turning she saw the fire guy walk away with a pace fast enough to even make her own stilt legs jealous. She ran after him, catching up in a few long strides. He still refused to utter a single word. Deciding to ignore him, she muttered a near silent 'thanks,' and decided to keep alert. Even knowing the lore, the night sky looked weird to her. It was a new moon on a fortnight. Its pale light made the ankle-deep water sparkle silver and white, the deserted street engulfed in a white veil made for a serene view. It was broken only by their presence, wading through the waters for the artillery had long since stopped raining.

This military base was built near the border; the border always filled with people, was now deserted. The Council Members every year would try to reduce the flow of people, unfortunately the borders held mines and various high earning less than virtuous jobs which appealed to the people at large. The military was ineffective against such masses. Thus, there were many homes, all shabby and dark to attract the least attention. Yet those houses never felt eerie, only dirty perhaps.



A gurgling sound broke her mind out of her wandering thoughts. It was a child, trying to protect a baby, desperately shushing. The child had determination written on her face, holding the baby, she was ready to run across the street, coincidentally choosing the direction they came from. Perhaps noticing, the fire user stopped rushing and instead called them over. The child's eyes flashed blue for a millisecond, her hand tremblingly forming a water whirlpool in front of her, in response the fire user's eyes instinctively flashed the colour of his fire. The girl instantly seemed to calm down in front of that display of power, slowly wading closer.

Once the child was close enough, the moonlight glancing of her face illuminated the relief of having found her own kind amidst the horror of the breaking barrier. Perhaps this night saw her entire family being ripped apart in front of her. Still shushing the doll like baby, she stared wide eyed, as the fire user bent down forming a tiny bud of fire, warming up the surroundings. Perhaps the child and the baby were freezing, as after some time the baby stopped crying out and the child stopped the minute shivering that was almost imperceptible except to his keen eyes. To her surprise as to the child's the baby waved its hand towards him, and he spoke for the first time since he was taken out of the shelter, in a soft tone bending to the child's level.

"My name is A-Zhu, number 0-10. What is your name?"

With a gasp both people able to comprehend the power of that assigned number turned to stare unblinkingly at him.

Almost awkwardly A-Zhu said, "It's not that big of a deal. Its mostly because of my grandmother..."

At that he stopped talking once more, his hoarse voice filling with a tide of emotions. Sensing it, the non-user was about to steer the conversation, but she was taken over by the child jumping in saying, "My name is Asha and my brother's name is Messiah."

She then turned about to face the non-user urging her silently to go next. Before she could start introducing herself, a half-crazed giggle suddenly broke through the night. Sensing something in the periphery, they all turned their heads towards a narrow dark alley to their alley. Messiah had stopped waving his hand.

"A gathering of humans? How quaint!" came a skin crawling voice from the dark alley, the figure hardly visible even with the bright moonlight.

The hot-headed A-Zhu decided it was a good time to open his mouth again, only to ask a stupid question, "Who are you?"

"Well, aren't you cute? I am just a messenger of the true deity," came the retort as fast as lightning.

Saying so it stepped into the well-lit street, almost gliding. A-Zhu pushed Asha and her behind him. Still giggling, the figure was revealed. It was a grotesque figure emanating the smell of death. More than half of its body was missing, the other half rotting.

"You know I could feel you killing my second in command!" it peppily declared as if commenting on the weather. A-Zhu backed further away as it came closer, with a skip and a half it came up to A-Zhu, grasping him in his mangled bloodied arms, or what remained of it.

"Thus, I just had to find you." It breathed in A-Zhu's ear. Its eyeballs roved over at Asha and her, "They are just the leftovers, right 'Hero'? Useless burdens, let me take them off you!" Asha tightened her hold over Messiah. She hugged both to her side.

The devil opened its maw, splitting the poor human's face in half, the body long since a husk; A-Zhu jumped further away letting lose a series of fire daggers. With a blip of a transportation spell stepped next to Asha and her. With a shriek, Asha let out a whirlpool blast right at it. Again, with a giggle it went to transport when a flying piece of metal struck its rolling eyeball.

With a curse, she ran with Asha in hand. Her hand still shook at the close encounter. Pulling out more metal pieces left from the attack at the base she flung it blindly at her back. A-Zhu quickly used the opportunity to run towards it, much to all their amazement. With a swing of fist, he formed a flaming sword lighting all the metal pieces thrown by her. Sizzling it burned the devil, as it struggled further with its frail possessed body.

Hissing it hatefully cursed in its demonic language. Simultaneously, it formed a hand gesture pulling A-Zhu towards him. Wide eyed A-Zhu started choking on the mangled hand as Asha and Messiah both shrieked at the top of their lungs. She started panicking.

Quickly looking around, she picked up the metal bin and threw it at the devil. It stopped just before it hit the devil, but it looked over smiling eerily at her. Thankful that he was released again, A-Zhu let loose a wall of fire, evaporating the water around them. The devil yet again decided to teleport, this time just behind her, planning to rip out her throat. Yet it found, that it could not move, the new moon was covered with clouds. Without the energy source helping corrupt its body, it could not move. The strange sigil on its forehead glowed red, ready to fight through the wall of fire when it suddenly slipped.

There were glowing green vines crawling all over its legs. Sensing nothing from her, all of them turned their heads towards the squirming bundle called Messiah. The devil's vassal body sizzled as it let out a ear piercing shriek. With a thump the vines still attached, detached the flaying parts of the body. Almost going down on his knees, A-Zhu turned towards the now swirling ashes with a glowing sigil on top. The clouds had shifted once again, lighting up the surroundings. With a laugh, it rushed at them.

They were running again, she kept throwing metal pieces behind her, A-Zhu lighting them on fire. Nothing seemed to work. Even Messiah had grown tired and the vines receded. Now, he and Asha only gasped and hiccupped silently. They were truly facing the King unhampered by the bad luck he possessed for his sin now that he was without a vassal. Almost unknowingly they had arrived right next to the still pulsing barrier. The magic spells and the beads still glowing golden, even as pieces disintegrated. Beyond the barrier they could see the black sludge of death, that 'Pandemonium' possessed.

The only colour they could see beyond the barrier amongst the sludge was the blue hellfire and millions of human skeletons stacked on top of each other, reaching dizzying heights.

A hoarse laugh echoed from around them the barrier shaking like a thin piece of paper. "After I am done with you... Maybe I will venture further into your village and further still into your mighty cities! They didn't even come to help you poor souls..." sighing the voice paused, "Well, I promise to preserve your bodies for two days...no, three days after this."

The ashes gathered again after that declaration. With nowhere to run, she foresaw her death. A rush of adrenaline filled her. With a smile she leaped to her death, embracing the ashes. Strangely she knew what to do, calling forth the disintegrating barrier as every inch of her body burned.

Asha, A-Zhu joined the fray, slowly sending the pieces towards her using their beads. The King then stopped trying to move, a grin could be felt taking over its features as he whispered, "Hunter, do they know what you sacrifice for them?" Wide eyed she stared at it, as still laughing it was encased by the barrier banished to the maze caves of the Pandemonium. The barrier was healed at the cost of her life. She could feel her life draining, shock taking over, when she saw those two rushing to her.

Suddenly a window popped up, strangely floating in front of her. A-Zhu and Asha slowed as did the world around her. A stoic voice declared, "Failure to end the test infinite times results in more tests. Does user wish to continue the journey?" Smiling through the rising sorrow, she calmly said yes. The world was saved, yet she couldn't stay, only her memories wove another tale in the tapestry of her heart.



Sophia Margaret Salibio
Student, Lagro High School

Arithmetic of Nearness

For months,
the streets resolved to sirens,
while the wind wandered
through shuttered stores
and windows that forgot
a familiar knock.

Life returned
the way dawn does.
A chair scraped against concrete.
A market breathed open.

And a hesitant wave
crossed a weathered fence.
I remember how strange it was
to hear laughter
without a screen holding it together.

Some of us returned
with silver at our temples.
Some carried names
that would never answer again.

Still, every evening,
someone swept the dust
from the sidewalk.
Someone left vegetables
at a neighbour's gate.

Someone asked,
"Have you eaten?"
and lingered,
as though the answer
could mend something unseen.

Perhaps
this is how a broken world
begins again?

Only later
did we remember
it had all begun
with a pandemic
named by a number,
nineteen.

A number
that measured our distance,
yet taught us,
that when the glowing screens
could no longer carry us,
we found each other
in open doors,
shared tables,
and voices
that no longer
needed a screen
to reach home.



Bushara Naurin

Student, Ansar Training College for Women, Kerala

The Ambitious Coward

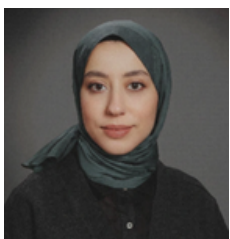
Heard the gunshot!
Had myself run along with the rest.
Running, running... kept my pace;
Felt everyone's hopeful gaze.
Striding forth,
With no progress.
Effort finds its cease;
My mind - heavy and breathless;
Falling short...
Deep down, echoed a whisper-
"QUIT"
- A comforting malice;
The ambitious coward obeyed it.
Fearing to face failure,
Feared not meeting those hopeful gaze,
Fearing to be a loser...
She Quit!
To embrace the very doom she'd shun.
Ironic. Isn't it?

In seeking refuge from a feared
defeat,
She built a prison of her own feat.

*Modern Humans are Nothing but Technologically
Advanced Barbarians.*



Medina: Finding Stillness in the City of the Prophet



Esra Yagmur

Digital News Producer, TRTWorld. She writes feature articles on culture, history, art and comparative civilizations.

The first days of Ramadan in 2025 marked my first journey to perform Umrah. Before dawn had faded the stars, the cool Istanbul night felt like a quiet farewell as we set out for the sacred lands. Alongside the familiar anxiety of forgetting something important came a restrained excitement, the kind that arrives when something long anticipated is finally close.

A small group of six friends boarded a plane filled with travellers from many countries, all bound for Medina al-Munawwara in Saudi Arabia.

As the aircraft gradually descended towards the airport, the landscapes of Arabia stretched out beneath us. Faded pastures, dusty plains, and sand dunes dotted with thorny shrubs formed the very image of the desert many of us had only imagined before.

When we arrived in Medina, the warm air that greeted us felt strikingly different from the climate we were used to. After leaving our luggage at the hotel, we began walking toward the Prophet's Mosque with the guide who would accompany us throughout our journey.

Soon, the green dome of Masjid al-Nabawi stood before us, as if quietly greeting its visitors. It is one of the three mosques regarded as the most sacred in Islam. As mentioned in the Quran, it is a mosque "founded upon piety," honoured by the presence of the Prophet Muhammad and by the countless memories associated with him. Standing there, it felt like a jewel among the lands he once walked.

The Prophet's Refuge: Al Balad Al Tayyiba

In his renowned account of pilgrimage journeys, the Ottoman traveller Evliya Çelebi describes the gruelling caravan routes that once stretched across deserts for weeks at a time.





Yet what impressed him most was not the hardship of the journey, but the moment when travellers finally glimpsed the dome of the Prophet's Mosque.

"When the dome of the Prophet's Mosque becomes visible, the believers in the caravan begin to weep. The camels, exhausted from the journey, suddenly revive and rumble like thunder; horses neigh, and mules and donkeys cry out as if in the musical mode of Segâh," he said.

Segâh, in Turkish classical music, is a mode associated with deep spiritual contemplation, carrying a sense of noble detachment from the world. It was with a feeling like this that we approached al-Madinah al-Munawwarah.

The streets of the city were filled with people from every corner of the world, dressed in a remarkable variety of colours and garments. Yet the atmosphere felt far from chaotic.

On the contrary, there appeared to be an unspoken understanding that everyone was gathered under the same spiritual invitation, moving within the protective presence of the Prophet Muhammad.

We stayed in Medina for three nights. On our first evening, we joined the long line of visitors waiting to enter the sacred chamber where the Prophet Muhammad is buried. In the faces of those standing in line, one could read the anticipation of an encounter with one of the most meaningful moments of their lives.

While waiting for our turn, we prayed in the mosque. The Prophet is reported to have said that a prayer performed in Masjid al-Nabawi is worth a thousand prayers elsewhere, except those performed in Masjid al-Haram in Mecca. Knowing this made the moment feel even more extraordinary.

Finally, we entered.

Before us lay Rawdah al-Mutahhara, the "Garden of Paradise." The fourteenth-century traveller Ibn Battuta once wrote that this place "has been perfumed for centuries, so that its fragrance seems to rise constantly into the air".

Despite the crowd around us, it felt as if every intermediary between the self and the Divine had vanished. In that moment, each person seemed alone before God.



Life in Medina moved slowly, yet with its own gentle rhythm. We spent most of our days in the mosque, often sleeping very little. This was not merely a place of ritual, but a living reflection of the Quranic verse: "For every nation there is a direction to which they turn" (Surah Al-Baqarah, 2:148).

People from every culture prayed according to their own traditions. Some remained in long prostrations. Others recited the Quran in soft murmurs. Some sat in contemplation facing the resting place of the Prophet. Others lay quietly on the green carpets, resting within the calm of the mosque. Here, whatever one did seemed to become a form of worship.

On our final evening in Medina, my heart was divided. I carried both the excitement of soon encountering the Kaaba and a quiet sadness at leaving this city behind.

Visiting Medina is not a formal requirement of Umrah. Yet once you are there, you come to understand the meaning of the city that once offered refuge to the Prophet after his migration from Mecca. After that migration, he named it *Taybah*, the good and pure city.

For more than fourteen centuries, Muslims have journeyed here, once a collection of scattered villages called Yathrib, transformed by revelation into Madinat al-Nabi, the City of the Prophet.

Standing there, I realised I had become part of a procession that stretched back centuries. It felt as if the Prophet's presence still lingered across every corner of the city, not as memory alone but as something quietly lived.

Our guide's words returned to me:

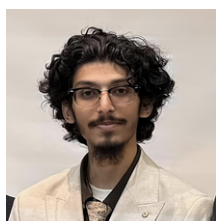
"We see the effects of the Prophet's blessing prayer for this place. The finest fruits and vegetables from around the world are still brought here."

Medina, once a collection of scattered villages called Yathrib, had become Madinat al-Nabi, the City of the Prophet. And as I prepared to leave, I understood that the city does not simply host visitors; it absorbs them into its continuity.

Leaving Medina did not feel like departure so much as carrying its stillness forward into what came next.



Maheen Shabir *Craft Artist and Entrepreneur*



Abdul Nafey Syed
*Head of Administration,
Umran Green School*

Abdul Nafey: What led you to study Home Science at Kashmir University, and how did it shape your communication skills?

Maheen Shabir: I initially chose Home Science, expecting a more manageable curriculum than technical subjects like mathematics. However, the program required extensive field surveys across rural communities to evaluate local infrastructure and social needs. Interacting directly with residents helped me develop both formal and informal communication abilities, which proved essential in building my independence and self-confidence.

AN: How did you navigate social scepticism surrounding your hearing impairment and personal hardship?

MS: When others questioned my educational prospects due to my hearing impairment, my mother encouraged me to let my accomplishments speak for themselves. Managing household responsibilities following her passing required significant resilience. Despite initial job rejections tied to my disability, persistent effort and support from close companions helped me demonstrate that personal capacity is not defined by physical limitations.



Maheen Shabir is from Gojwara, Srinagar, and has completed her Bachelor's Degree in Home Science from Women's College, M. A Road, Srinagar. She has developed various crafts and designs from paper and degraded waste materials. She is an autodidactic craft maker.



INTERVIEW

Maheen started her creative path by making a detailed handmade card for a friend. This initial act amazed her relatives and friends, turning a small present into a deep love for paper art. She began fashioning unique home decor pieces before displaying her talents publicly.

AN: How did your venture, Paper City by Maheen, transform from a creative pastime into an established business?

MV: During a local lockdown in 2019, I made a handcrafted card and a cardboard storage box as a birthday gift using basic paper materials. The encouraging feedback, along with a suggestion from an acquaintance at Pratap Park, prompted me to launch a dedicated social media presence. That initiative expanded into Paper City by Maheen, offering customised paper arrangements, explosion boxes, and calligraphy, which has since received multiple community recognitions.

AN: What motivated you to join the Chotay Taray Foundation, and how do you structure vocational training for specially-abled youth?

MS: Working with specially-abled youth was a personal goal of mine. At Chotay Taray Foundation, I serve as an instructor and vocational trainer. I break down crafting activities into clear, manageable steps—such as constructing stick pen holders—tailored to each student's learning pace. This approach helps students foster patience, practical skills, and confidence in their creative abilities.

AN: What message do you have for aspiring women entrepreneurs and individuals facing physical challenges?

MS: Focus on your personal goals and trust your own instincts rather than external opinions. Dedication to your passion is key to progress. Staying grounded in faith and maintaining confidence in your abilities provides the strength necessary to overcome obstacles.



PAINTINGS



This figure is, for Arzu, far more than a rooster; it is a symbol of the **courage to be seen and the vitality of life itself.**

The tension between the intensity of red and the weight of black reflects a dialogue Arzu seeks to create between **fragility and strength** in existence.

Within the layered brushstrokes, the figure emerges from **silence as a powerful presence**, meeting the viewer's gaze directly.



Arzu Başkoç Kızıl
Independent Artist, Türkiye

Arzu Başkoç Kızıl's Roosters

Emerging from the **darkness**, this figure is, for Arzu, far more than a rooster; it is a symbol of **resilience, awakening, and the will to exist.**

The intense colours and layered texture of the paint are part of an effort to convey not **what is seen, but what is felt.**

With its gaze directed toward the **viewer**, the figure makes a quiet yet powerful declaration of presence.



PAINTINGS



Fatema M Saify

Student, MSB Educational
Institute

Luster of Radiants

In accordance with the famous Norwegian proverb, **'In every woman, there is a queen,'** Fatima finds immense inspiration. This profound saying motivated her to create this evocative image of a **woman through the art of calligraphy.**

It serves as a powerful reminder that **women possess inherent strength, courage, and the innate qualities of a natural-born leader.**

Amidst the demands of daily life, **women may sometimes overlook their own greatness.** Through this artwork, she aims to **remind them of their amazing capabilities** and the regal essence that resides within.

“It is a tribute to the extraordinary power and potential that each and every woman holds.

PAINTINGS



Tahoor Ajaz

Arabic Calligraphy Artist,
Srinagar, Jammu & Kashmir

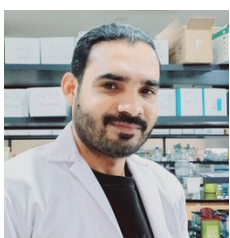
It was in **2019** that I started my journey to learn calligraphy in all its forms — from the disciplined elegance of traditional styles such as **Thuluth, Naskh, and Nastaleeq**, to the more contemplative **Khat-e-Wissam**, and to expressions that lie beyond tradition altogether. **Calligraphy** is not just a craft to me; it is a **spiritual practice** — giving form to **sacred words** and honouring a tradition passed down through ages of art and devotion.



From being a student at **Elif Learning Academy** to becoming a **trainer of Arabic calligraphy** at the very same academy, I **have passed on to others what was passed on to me**. It has been a good and rewarding experience and I continue to learn from it as I hope my students will learn from me.

“Through my work, I hope to bridge the old and the new - preserving the soul of classical calligraphy while allowing it room to breathe and evolve.

Why the Traditional Diet Is Still the Best Medicine for Indians



Dr. Mohammed Haseeb Khan

Researcher,
The Brain Tumor Laboratory, BILSAB,
Bezmialem Vakif University, Istanbul,
Turkey

My grandmother never used the word antioxidant. She certainly never talked about the gut microbiome. If you had asked her what keeps a family healthy, she would probably have said something much simpler: eat what is fresh, eat what is in season, eat a variety of things, and don't overcomplicate food.

Funny enough, modern nutrition research often arrives at a similar place, just with many more syllables. We have spent years being told that healthy eating requires expensive "superfoods," imported seeds and supplements. But much of what we need has been sitting in our own kitchens all along: dal, vegetables, seasonal fruit, whole grains, curd, nuts, spices and simple home-cooked meals.

The problem is not that traditional food has disappeared completely. It is that packaged snacks, sugary drinks, refined flour and fast food are increasingly replacing it.



The Wisdom of the Everyday Plate

Think about a traditional Indian meal. It may contain dal, a seasonal sabzi, rice or roti, some curd and perhaps a little salad or pickle. It is not perfect by definition; traditional diets can also be heavy in oil, salt or refined carbohydrates, but the basic structure can be remarkably balanced.

Dal and other pulses provide plant protein, fiber, iron and folate. Vegetables add fiber, vitamins, minerals and a wide range of plant compounds. Whole grains provide more fiber than highly refined alternatives. Curd (Yoghurt), milk, and other dairy foods provide protein, calcium, and B12, and fermented dairy may also support gut health, while eggs, fish, soy, nuts, and seeds offer good alternatives for those who prefer not to rely on dairy.

None of this requires a supermarket full of imported products. Take the humble dal. Masoor, moong, urad, toor, chana, rajma and chickpeas are ordinary foods in India, but nutritionally they are anything but ordinary. Regularly eating pulses can support heart health, blood-sugar control, and digestive health.

Then there are vegetables: lauki, pumpkin, bhindi, karela, spinach, methi, cauliflower, cabbage, carrot, radish, tomato and countless regional varieties. Eating different vegetables throughout the week gives the body a wider range of nutrients and plant compounds. And then comes fruit.

A mango in summer, guava in winter, papaya or banana any day of the week, amla, jamun, oranges, or whatever happens to be available at the local fruit stall, that is already a good beginning. We do not need to turn every fruit into a nutritional project. Eating fruit regularly is more important than finding the "perfect" fruit.

The same principle applies to grains. Atta, rice, millets, and oats can all have a place in a balanced diet. What matters is variety, sensible portions, and choosing whole or minimally processed options more often than refined ones.

Food Is Only Part of the Story

Our grandparents also had something that many of us have lost: movement built into everyday life.

They walked to the market, climbed stairs, worked in the fields, swept the courtyard, carried things, cooked, gardened, spending far less time in front of screens than we do today. They may never have called it "physical activity," but their bodies knew what it was.

Modern life has made movement optional, and that is not always good for us. We do not necessarily need an expensive gym membership. A brisk walk, cycling, yoga, gardening, dancing, household work or simply taking the stairs can all help. Thirty minutes of movement on most days is a realistic place to start.

And then there is sleep.

We often treat sleep as something we sacrifice when life gets busy. But the body needs sleep to recover, regulate hormones, support immunity, and maintain metabolic health. For most adults, roughly seven to eight hours of regular sleep is a reasonable target.

In other words, health is not created by food alone. What we eat, how much we move and how well we sleep all belong to the same story.

Perhaps We Need to Make Food Simple Again

That does not mean everything traditional was automatically healthy, nor that imported food is automatically bad. It simply means that we do not need to look elsewhere for every answer. A healthy diet does not have to be fashionable. It can be a bowl of dal. It can be seasonal vegetables cooked at home. It can be fruit bought from the neighbourhood vendor. It can be curd with rice, roti with sabzi, or khichdi on a quiet evening. It can also include eggs, fish, chicken, nuts, seeds, soy or other sources of protein, depending on one's preferences and needs.

There is something else worth remembering about traditional Indian food: it was deeply connected to place and season. The sabzi bought from the local mandi, the fruit that appeared when it was in season, the grain grown in the region, the dal cooked differently from one household to another- food was local, varied and closely tied to everyday life.

The point is not to recreate our grandparents' diet exactly. It is to recover the principle behind it: eat a variety of real foods, mostly in their simple form, and let food be part of a balanced life rather than a constant search for the next miracle ingredient.



Going Back to the Basics

Perhaps that is what we have forgotten. My grandmother and many others of her era did not know what a microbiome was. She did not know how antioxidants worked. She did not read nutrition labels or count grams of protein.

But she knew when vegetables were fresh. She knew which fruits belonged to which season. She knew that dal belonged on the table, that food should be varied, and that the body needed rest.

Modern science has given us better language for understanding many of these habits. But it has not made the wisdom of the kitchen obsolete.

If anything, it reminds us of something rather simple: health does not always begin with something new. Sometimes, it begins with remembering what we already knew.

A walk instead of another hour of scrolling. A seasonal fruit instead of a packaged snack. Dal instead of another instant meal. A home-cooked plate instead of another delivery. Going to bed instead of watching one more episode.

None of this is revolutionary. And perhaps that is precisely why it matters. For many Indian families, good health is still within reach, not in an expensive bottle or a fashionable superfood, but in the sabzi mandi, the kitchen, the dining table, the morning walk and, finally, a good night's sleep.

RECITAL

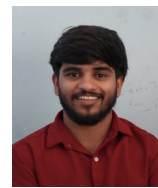


Sophia Margaret Salibio
Student, Lagro High School

These photographs capture a Sayaw sa Bangko recital performed by students, showcasing the beauty of Filipino folk dance. It highlights their balance, coordination, discipline, and teamwork as they perform on top of wooden benches.

More than a dance performance, the recital reflects the students' dedication, hard work, and pride in preserving and celebrating the rich cultural heritage of the Philippines through traditional dance.

Quiet Devotion



Jarpula Abhijith
3rd Year,
Pixels, NIT Agartala

The photographs move through intimate, unguarded moments of faith and routine. In one frame, a woman prepares ritual offerings with careful hands, surrounded by simple elements of worship. In another, a lone sadhu is seated against a weathered wall, accompanied only by a resting dog, embodying a life of renunciation and inner focus.

Abhijith shifts attention away from the spectacle often associated with Varanasi and instead captures its quieter truths. These images suggest that devotion is not always performative or grand, it exists in pauses, in repetition, and in deeply personal spaces. Together, they present spirituality as something lived, subtle, and profoundly human.

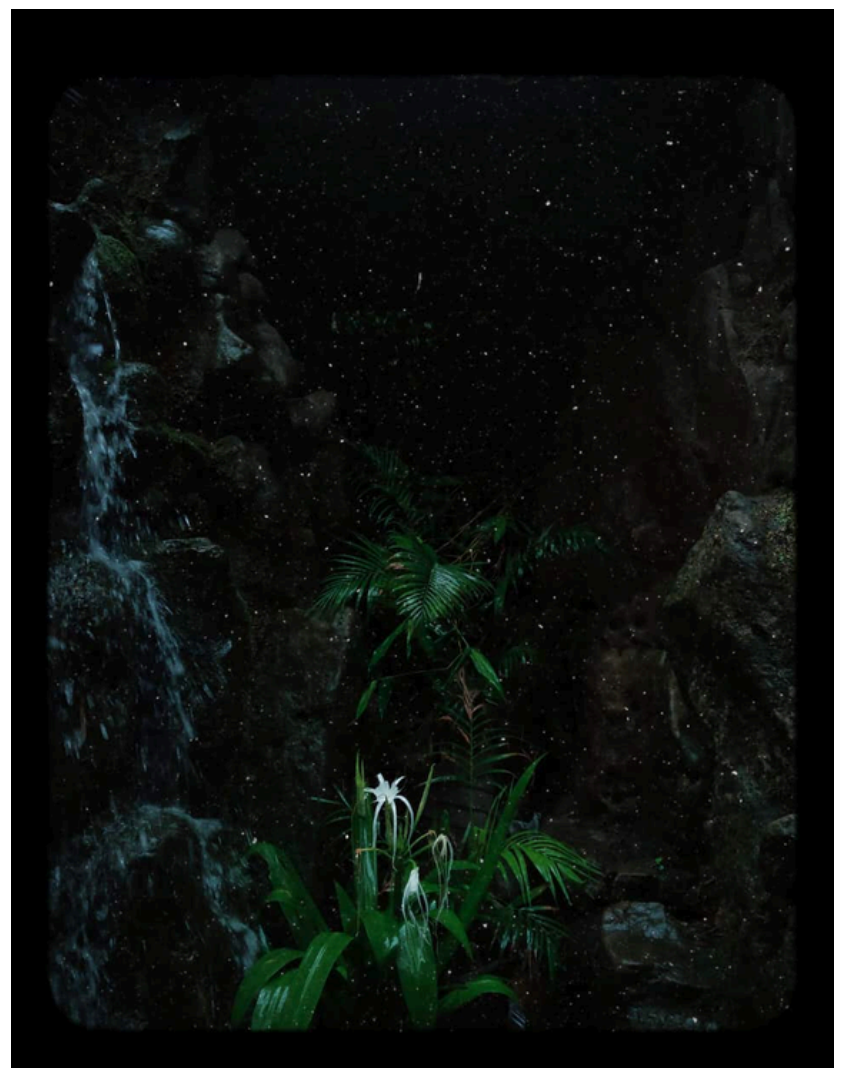


Sourasnata Debnath
Fourth Year
Pixels, NIT Agartala

Sanctuary

In Sanctuary, a solitary white flower emerges beneath a cascading waterfall, illuminated against the darkness of surrounding rock.

The image reflects nature's ability to create moments of refuge where fragility and resilience coexist. Hidden from immediate view, the flower becomes a symbol of life persisting in silence.





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"...there is a saying of Prophet Muhammad pbuh, 'Plant a Tree Even If It's the Day of Resurrection.' I think Umran is an example of this. We belong to different tribes, but Umran is trying to bring different tribes together even though the world is very pessimistic."

Prof. Heba Raouf Ezzat, Ibn Haldun University, Istanbul



"...there is a hierarchy within Umran. However, I see this hierarchy as being present in activities, ranging from small to large and from beginner to advanced. But there is no hierarchy in terms of value, because all individuals are important and included."

Prof. Bruce B Lawrence, Duke University, USA



"...Umran, as we have seen, signifies prosperity, peace, and compassion, and it promises that the Green Perspective has taken shape, which is extremely awe-inspiring. The zeal and potential with which the organization has initiated its operations, including the multiple academic projects and ventures it has envisaged, would benefit people across borders and nations."

Prof. Mousumi G Banerjee, EFL University, India



"...I want to say how impressed I have been by your project. It is truly extraordinary what you have been able to achieve in such a short time. You have a sparkling vision, and you have perfect sight."

Prof. Miriam Cooke, Duke University, USA



"...I have been following the Umran program for a while, and honestly, I have to say that it is a highly successful and beneficial project. Umran is a peaceful initiative against global conflicts, injustice, and many other issues"

Prof. Vahdettin Işık, Ibn Haldun University, Istanbul



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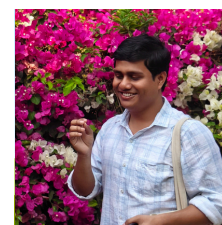
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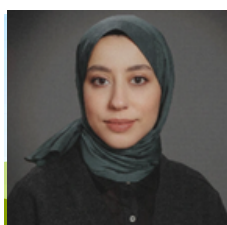
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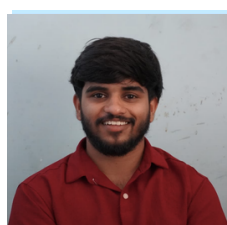
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“U-Talk gave me my first platform to publish my artistic work—it was like being heard for the first time.”

— Mokshita Mohan, Contributor from Pondicherry

“We feel proud to be one of the contributors of this reputed magazine. Thank you for giving me an opportunity to be the part of this issue.”

— Dr. R. Abeetha, Contributor from Tamil Nadu

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Thank you for being part of this journey.

The U-Talk Magazine Team

U-TALK

Multidisciplinary Magazine | Quarterly | Est. 2023 | Vol. 4, No. 3 | July - Sept, 2026



About U-Talk Magazine

U-Talk Magazine is a multidisciplinary, quarterly publication by the Umran Green Perspective Foundation, produced through its initiatives Umran Green School (UGS) and the Umran Academic Research Association (UARA).

U-Talk amplifies the voices of everyday people, sparking honest, messy, and meaningful conversations across generations, backgrounds, and beliefs. We don't curate for comfort—we curate for truth. Because every story has more than one side—and yours deserves to be heard. So go ahead. Talk to us.

Our Goals:

- Amplify diverse voices—students, artists, storytellers, and community members.
- Celebrate cultural diversity and promote dialogue across generations and regions.
- Highlight transformative initiatives of UGPF in education, social impact, and rural empowerment.
- Inspire readers through stories of resilience, innovation, and the richness of human experiences.

