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together

a national family magazine

make mental health a priority

together

Together is a national family magazine. It is a monthly, published by the Franciscans (OFM) in India. It was started in 1935 in Karachi, now in Pakistan. It got its present name in 1966.

The magazine *Together* is a conversation platform. Nothing changes until our families change. It is an effort at making worlds meet by bringing down fearful, pretentious and defensive walls. *Together* is a journey, an ever-expansive journey—from me to us, from us to all of us, and from all of us to all. Let us talk, let us cross borders. The more we converse and traverse, we discover even more paths to talk about and travel together.

Together is also an effort to uncover our shared humanity.

Your critical and relevant write-ups that promote goodness, inclusivity and shared humanity are welcome. Your articles must be mailed to **editor@togethermagazine.in** before the 15th of every month.

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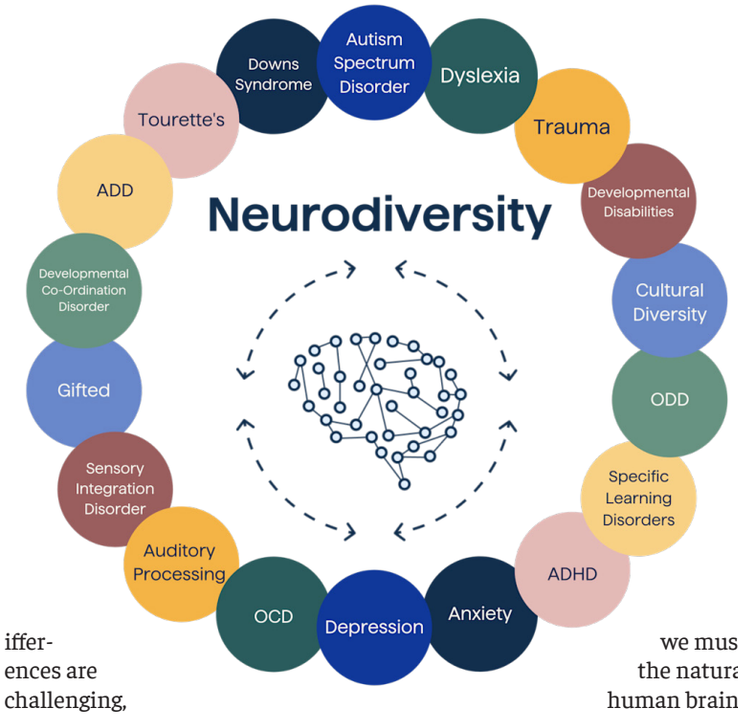
WE ARE NEURODIVERSE

We have to teach one another to read and understand each other's rulebook. That is the way to cure our ignorance and intolerance.

SAJI P MATHEW OFM



Differences are challenging, but without them life would be repetitive, boring, and small. Uniformity would drain life of its wonder and possibility. We speak and listen to others to experience the thrill of differences; we read and write to appreciate difference; and we travel to see and experience differences. It is differences that make the world go around—if not, perhaps we would have stood still like the stagnant waters of the Dead Sea. Human brains are no exception—we are neurodiverse. As we celebrate diversity in art, cuisine, and culture, we must embrace the natural diversity of human brains.

Neurodiversity holds the idea that people experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways; there is no one "right" way of thinking, learning, and behaving, and differences need not be viewed as deficits. Differences in how we think, learn, and experience the world are not flaws to be fixed, but variations to be understood and valued. Just as we don't expect all eyes to be brown or all personalities to be extroverted, we shouldn't expect all brains to process information in identical ways.

Every culture operates by an invisible rulebook—unspoken rules about how to make eye contact, when to speak, how to interpret a smile, or what silence means. Most people absorb these rules naturally, like learning to breathe. But neurodivergent individuals often receive a different rulebook, one that doesn't always align with the majority's expectations. Picture a child who takes every word literally in a world full of metaphors and sarcasm. Or someone who finds small talk exhausting but can discuss their passion for hours with incredible depth and insight. These aren't deficiencies—they're different ways of being human. Yet without understanding and acceptance, these differences can become sources of isolation and self-doubt.

Listening to Elisabeth Wiklander, who is on the autistic spectrum, saying that her mind constantly clashes with nonverbal and verbal subtleties in social situations made me think. She is provided with a different rulebook of social interactions. Her natural and biological calibration is different. For her, everything is too literal and very direct, and has no nuance; jokes and sarcasm go over her head. The world around her becomes unpredictable and scary. What saved her is the knowledge of neurodiversity, not only by her, but by her family and spouse, which opened new channels of conversations between them. She asserts that humanity and society will ever remain neurodiverse. We have to teach one another to read and understand each other's rulebook. That is the way to cure our ignorance and intolerance.

The challenge isn't that neurodivergent people can't contribute meaningfully to society. History has benefited from individuals who thought differently and changed the world through their unique perspectives. The challenge is that our cultural systems—schools, workplaces, social gatherings—are often designed with only one type of mind in mind.

For many neurodivergent individuals, navigating social situations feels like trying to decode a foreign language whilst everyone assumes that they are fluent. They may excel in certain areas—showing remarkable creativity, attention to detail, or problem-solving abilities—yet still be labelled as "difficult" or "antisocial" because they don't follow conventional social patterns. This misunderstanding carries a heavy emotional cost. When someone constantly feels misinterpreted or out of step with their community, they may begin to see themselves as fundamentally flawed rather than simply different. The fear of judgement can lead to masking—exhausting attempts to appear "normal"—or withdrawal from social connections altogether. Whilst neurodivergent individuals struggle to fit into a world that doesn't understand them, society loses out on their unique contributions. We miss the innovations that come from thinking outside conventional patterns, the solutions that emerge from approaching problems differently, and the perspectives that can enrich our collective understanding.

Change Demands Active Curiosity and Empathy

The path forward lies not in expecting neurodivergent individuals to change who they are, but in expanding our cultural understanding of what it means to be human. This requires more than tolerance—it demands active curiosity and empathy. In educational settings, this might mean recognising that a student who struggles with traditional classroom dynamics might thrive with different teaching approaches. In workplaces, it could involve creating environments where diverse thinking styles are not just accommodated but actively valued. In our daily interactions, it means questioning our assumptions about "normal" behaviour and remaining open to different ways of communicating and connecting.

Knowledge of neurodiversity opens new channels of conversation between us. When we understand that someone's directness isn't rudeness but authenticity, or that their need for routine isn't rigidity but a way of managing an overwhelming world, we can begin to bridge the gap between different neurological experiences. This conversation benefits everyone. Neurotypical individuals gain insight into different ways of experiencing the world, whilst neurodivergent people find validation and community. More importantly, we all contribute to creating a society that truly values human diversity in all its forms.

The goal isn't to eliminate differences—it's to create a world where those differences are understood, valued, and celebrated. In doing so, we honour the full spectrum of human experience and create a society that truly works for everyone. After all, if diversity makes the world go around, then neurodiversity makes it spin with greater wisdom, creativity, and possibility. The question isn't whether we can afford to embrace these differences—it's whether we can afford not to.

COVER STORY

Mental Health

It Is Time for Awareness and Accessibility

Well-being—social, emotional, and mental health—should be talked about, discussed and understood by all members of the family and should be given its place in conversations.

DR SUNITHA K DAMODAR

The World Health Organisation's observation of mental health in India reveals a concerning picture and must be taken seriously: high disease burden, critical resource shortage, and a large treatment gap. This situation creates a vicious cycle where limited resources hinder treatment access, ultimately worsening the mental health crisis. Key issues include a significant number of people needing care, insufficient infrastructure and workforce, and societal barriers like stigma and lack of awareness—all of which prevent individuals from receiving timely and appropriate treatment.

The National Mental Health Survey (NMHS) found that 10.6% of adults in India suffer from a common mental or neurological disorder (current prevalence). Lifetime prevalence is estimated to be higher, with up to 13.7% of the population affected. This translates to approximately 150 million people needing active mental health intervention—a figure often cited by both NIMHANS (Bangalore) and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), India. The massive treatment gap, which ranges from 70% to over 90% for different mental disorders, means the vast majority of people who need help do not receive it.

India faces a severe shortage of mental health professionals, with roughly 0.75 psychiatrists per 100,000 people—dramatically lower than the WHO recommendation of three psychiatrists per 100,000 people.

The WHO has projected an economic loss to India of US$1.03 trillion from 2012–2030 due to lost productivity and DALYs (Disability-Adjusted Life Years)—representing a serious economic and health impact. Additionally, India has a significantly high age-adjusted suicide rate, reflecting the severity of unaddressed mental distress.

A dominant traditional belief in many communities is that mental illness is caused by supernatural forces (such as evil spirits, black magic, or curses) or results from bad karma or punishment for past sins. This leads families to seek non-medical help first from faith healers (tantriks, priests, or spiritual leaders), significantly delaying or replacing actual medical diagnosis and treatment. While things are changing lately, the percentage of change remains minimal. Additionally, denial often occurs—families refuse to accept that medical attention is needed. The inability of families to seek timely professional help is a critical driver of the treatment gap, rooted in deeply

India faces a severe shortage of mental health professionals, with roughly 0.75 psychiatrists per 100,000 people—dramatically lower than the WHO recommendation of three psychiatrists per 100,000 people.

Empowerment involves equipping families with knowledge and awareness while strengthening them emotionally so they can gauge and understand what is happening with their loved ones.

entrenched social and cultural beliefs. The socio-cultural environment also creates pressure, as marriage and career opportunities are sometimes perceived to be influenced by mental health matters, leading families to hide or keep these issues secret. Furthermore, families, especially those with lower incomes, often cannot afford the costs of private mental health care, medication, or repeated travel to distant urban facilities.

As families, the idea of well-being needs to be part of the DNA of family life. Well-being—social, emotional and mental health—should be talked about, discussed and understood by all family members and given its proper place in conversations. Any discomfort or inconvenience should be followed with a standard check to rule out the need for professional help, rather than being brushed aside or ignored. Empowerment involves equipping families with knowledge and awareness while strengthening them emotionally so they can gauge and understand what is happening with their loved ones. This helps them become confident in handling situations and building strong social support systems.

Education About the Disorder
Help families understand symptoms, treatment options, prognosis, and how the disorder manifests. This demystifies the illness and reduces fear.

Open, Non-judgmental Communication
Family members can be helped to set realistic boundaries, especially in cases where the affected person requires caregiving. Sometimes family members are confused about how suddenly a person may need assistance, so they need to understand what support they can or cannot provide.

Encouraging Professional Help and Facilitating Access
Help family members find and attend appointments with mental health professionals (therapists, psychiatrists). This involves both logistical help (transportation, scheduling) and emotional encouragement.

Prioritising self-care and caring for the caregivers: Stress the importance of all family members—especially parents and siblings—maintaining their own well-being through self-care activities, seeking their own counseling, and using support groups. A stable family unit provides the best foundation for support.

Access to Financial Support
Explore NGOs or support groups that may provide guidance and financial assistance.

The most important aspect is identifying early signs of change, concern, or problems—deviations from a person's typical behaviour, emotional regulation, or daily functioning.

Emotional Regulation
Look for persistent, exaggerated, or rapid changes in mood (such as profound sadness, increased irritability, intense worry, or frequent emotional outbursts).

Cognitive Changes
Problems with concentration, memory, or logical thought; difficulty making decisions; increased worry or fear; rash, impulsive decisions.

Behavioural Changes
Social withdrawal—spending more time alone, avoiding friends and family, canceling plans; changes in functioning—noticeable drop in performance at school or work, or difficulty completing familiar tasks; uncharacteristic, odd, or aggressive behaviour; sleep or appetite changes—sleeping too much or too little, significant weight loss or gain; decline in personal care—neglecting hygiene (bathing, changing clothes); and frequent, unexplained physical ailments (headaches, stomach issues).

A single symptom may be temporary or related to stress or transient anxiety. Parents and siblings should look for a cluster of symptoms that persist and significantly interfere with the person's daily life. What families need most are empathy, non-confrontational conversations, helping normalise whatever their loved one is experiencing, leading them to treatment, and ensuring they're there when needed. Patience and unconditional love are the most powerful tools a family possesses. Recovery is often a long process with ups and downs, but a supportive family significantly improves outcomes.

The single most important change needed is awareness and accessibility—established in the same way the government approaches primary healthcare services and literacy programmes.

While high rates of depression and anxiety among youth are prevalent, the reasons are often not solely academic pressure, social media, or lifestyle factors. It's all of these combined with a lack of well-established, trusting relationships with parents, absence of mentors, or inability to engage in consultation and discussions. Social media tends to encourage connecting only with groups or individuals who think similarly, so when we're unable to sort things out or feel confused, we tend to spiral within our own limited perspectives. Encouraging social life and inculcating habits of play and hobbies would definitely help. All stakeholders must contribute: parents, schools, workplaces, society, and government.

The single most important change needed is awareness and accessibility—established in the same way the government approaches primary healthcare services and literacy programmes.

Mental health care must become as accessible and normalised as physical healthcare, with systemic changes that address both cultural barriers and resource shortages. Only through collective effort and sustained commitment can we bridge the treatment gap and create a society where mental health is prioritised, understood, and properly addressed.

Dr Sunitha K Damodar is an Associate Professor of Psychology and the Head of Department at the Indian Institute of Psychology and Research (IIPR), Bengaluru.

Reparenting Is the Power to Choose Again

Beneath the weight of old wounds lies a latent power: the power to choose again. This is the promise of reparenting, a healing practice that rewrites the legacy of a painful past. Leading this charge is Dr Ashwini Govinda, a trauma-informed psychologist and TEDx speaker whose work empowers a profound declaration: this ends with me.* ARSHIA CHIDAMBARAM *sat down with Dr Govinda to understand how we can all begin this healing work and start our own reparenting revolution.*

ARSHIA CHIDAMBARAM: The concept of "reparenting" is central to your work. Can you tell us how to realise if you need to reparent yourself? What did that first step look like?
ASHWINI GOVINDA: The first step would simply be to acknowledge the younger parts of yourself that are still alive and active. This is something most people don't actively look at, so it is important to pay attention and to simply acknowledge that—and it might take some practice, sometimes therapy or some sort of inner work to be able to recognise that.

These younger parts do not need fixing; they just need to be heard and acknowledged. To answer your question, for me reparenting is about learning to pause in those moments of reactivity and then asking ourselves, "What does my younger self really need right now?" The answer could be safety, reassurance, love, and sometimes simply to be seen.

ARSHIA: For someone hearing about "reparenting" for the first time, what does it actually look like in daily practice? Is it an internal dialogue, a set of actions, or both?
ASHWINI: Sometimes a parent may not have always been there. Most often parents do try their best, but it may not be what the child needs. Reparenting is the process of becoming the parent to your own younger self, who needed a parent in a way that the child needed—if I were to put it in much simpler terms.

Sometimes it looks like an inner dialogue, maybe speaking gently to yourself the way you wish an adult had spoken to you when you were a child, perhaps a parent. Sometimes it's an action where you're setting boundaries. Boundaries are not meant to build walls between you and another individual, but rather a bridge between you and another person and a bridge between you and your younger self, where you know when to properly close the gate. It could be as simple as resting without feeling guilty, or choosing compassion over self-criticism.

***Dr Ashwini Govinda** is a trauma-informed psychologist and a professor at Christ University, specialising in healing through emotion-focused therapy and inner child work.

ARSHIA: The idea that "the past is always there, but how we respond to it changes" is powerful. What is one practical tool or question someone can use to change their response to a traumatic memory?

ASHWINI: We gather the resources we need as we move along in life. As adults, all we can do is gather these resources and move ahead with the past. I often think about what I would tell a child going through what I went through. What you would tell them shifts the lens from judgment to compassion. It doesn't erase the memory; it really transforms how you hold it.

Healing is a non-linear process—it's two steps forward and one step back.

ARSHIA: The concept of breaking a cycle—"this ends with me"—is powerful but can feel like a huge responsibility. What is a small, manageable way someone can start to break a negative cycle in their own life or family?

ASHWINI: I don't want to call it a negative cycle at all because it is just a cycle. The consequences can be negative or positive. You're already beginning to break the cycle by reflecting. The next time you feel yourself repeating an old pattern or thinking something similar to the past, it is important to speak about it. It is a scary and unintentional experience that is more common than people think.

Step one is to recognise—be aware of the cycle. In the case of physical discipline, for example, it's about urgency; they believe they need to fix a problem immediately, but it's not like that for children. There is no immediacy in fixing a problem for them.

In my own experience with the students I teach, I don't relate to being strict or yelling or calling them out by saying something mean. I've continued to be the way I am within my space of therapy, which is kindness and compassion. The students respond to this wonderfully. There is a lot of accountability. It may not happen the way you would want it to, but they still continue to take responsibility and accountability, which is the most important takeaway. It requires patience.

ARSHIA: For someone who feels they've been operating on "autopilot" or in "survival mode" for years, what does it mean to finally pause and choose a different path?

ASHWINI: Survival mode is very familiar to all of us because it's the nervous system's unconscious choice. This changes when we begin to start working on ourselves. That's the moment you realise that you don't have to live in alert mode. There is no need for hypervigilance or constantly being on guard.

One of the ways to begin could be pausing to allow you to feel your body again, even if it seems scary. A lot of times survival mode is just about fighting—fight or flight—so we need to take a moment to reflect and be able to remember that you're safe in this very moment to choose something new. The nervous system takes a while to rewire that whole pathway of safety. It is a slow process called neuroplasticity.

ARSHIA: What role do our relationships and partners play in this healing journey? How can they support us?

ASHWINI: Relationships are often like mirrors that show us our deepest wounds. They also trigger our deepest healings, but they can also provide almost the kind of acceptance we've never had. They do not fix us; instead, they give us space and acknowledge our healing. They help us feel seen in our most vulnerable moments. Even when we are not understood, we are heard. The presence of a partner can really be profoundly healing for each other.

ARSHIA: What gives you hope? What is the most important message you want people to take away from your "Reparenting Revolution"?

ASHWINI: It really gives me a lot of hope when I see people turn their pain into presence—to see someone who once probably felt broken begin to show up for themselves and their families differently. The message I really want everyone to take away is: your past is a part of you, but it doesn't really define your present, nor will it define your future. Your inner child deserves to be heard, and your story matters.

Lastly, I want to say healing is a non-linear process—it's two steps forward and one step back. So there are going to be moments where you still feel a certain way, but it is important to remember that you have still progressed.

COVER STORY

Prevent Suicide; Real Strength Is in Asking for Help

Let's create a space where healing is possible. Please know that there is help, and there is hope.

Dr Sr MARY LOUISA S

The most precious thing in this world, without an iota of doubt, is human life. Every single person matters. Every life is precious. No one—absolutely no one, rich or poor—can buy a life or get a lost life back. A life lost is lost forever. Yet often we forget this, particularly when in distress. Tragically, some people take their own lives, and others attempt it. This reality demands our immediate attention and action—not just as educators or healthcare providers, but as a community that values every precious life within our walls.

Real strength isn't about pretending you're okay. Real strength is asking for help, even when it's hard.

The statistics paint a sobering picture that we cannot ignore. In our colleges across India, we are witnessing a mental health crisis unfold before our eyes. A comprehensive study across 30 Indian universities revealed that 12.3% of college students experienced suicidal thoughts in the past year, and 5.2% had attempted suicide. The contributing factors—exposure to others' suicidal thoughts, poor family relationships, and substance use—are challenges many of our students face daily.

Nationally, youth aged 18–30 represent a demographic at critical risk, with nearly 50% of suicide deaths in this age group related to family disputes, romantic breakdowns, or marital stress. In 2021 alone, out of approximately 45,000 women who died by suicide in India, about 5,700 were students—young women with dreams, aspirations, and futures that were cut tragically short.

The global context is equally alarming: India accounted for 37% of all suicide deaths among women in 2016, with the majority of victims falling in the 15–39 age range. These aren't just numbers; they represent daughters, sisters, friends—young women who could have been sitting in our classrooms, walking our corridors, sharing meals in our hostels.

We live in a world where pressures converge from every direction—academic stress, societal expectations, family obligations, and internal battles many don't see. For women in particular, there's often an added weight: the pressure to "keep it all together," to be strong, to succeed, to smile even when everything is falling apart inside.

This pressure is compounded by cultural expectations that often discourage young women from expressing vulnerability or seeking help. The fear of being labeled as "weak" or "unstable" can create a dangerous silence around mental health struggles. In our educational institutions, where academic excellence is prized, students may feel that admitting to mental health challenges could jeopardise their future prospects. Here is what we must understand and share that struggling doesn't mean you're weak; it means you're human. And being human means recognising when we need support, connection, and professional help.

Creating a Culture of Support

Real strength isn't about pretending you're okay. Real strength is asking for help, even when it's hard. But before someone can ask for help, we—as a community—must learn to recognise when help is needed. Warning signs often appear gradually and may include:

Emotional and Behavioural Changes

Withdrawing from friends, family, or social activities, talking about feeling hopeless, trapped, or like a burden, expressing a desire to die or disappear—please take this seriously, even when said as a whisper, a joke, or in passing, sudden mood changes or unexpected calmness after a period of depression, or giving away personal possessions or saying goodbye in unusual ways.

Academic and Social Indicators

Significant decline in academic performance, loss of interest in activities once enjoyed, changes in sleep patterns—sleeping too much or too little, neglecting personal hygiene or appearance, increased use of alcohol or drugs.

Physical Manifestations

Frequent complaints of unexplained aches and pains, changes in appetite or eating habits, expressing feelings of worthlessness.

Remember, these signs often appear as a cluster rather than in isolation. A single bad day or moment of sadness doesn't necessarily indicate suicidal ideation, but persistent patterns demand our attention and care. You don't have to be a trained counselor to save a life. Sometimes the most profound interventions come from simple acts of human connection and compassion.

Remember: You matter. Your life has value. There is always hope, and there is always help available.

Start with Genuine Care

A simple "Are you okay? Really?" can open doors. The key is in the follow-up—don't accept a quick "I'm fine" if your instincts tell you otherwise. Create space for honest conversation.

Listen Without Judgment

Be present. You don't need all the answers; you just need to listen. Sometimes the most healing thing you can offer is your undivided attention and the assurance that their feelings are valid.

Help Them Connect to Professional Support

Encourage them to reach out to counselors, mental health professionals, or trusted adults. Offer to accompany them to their first appointment if that would help.

Stay Connected

A message, a walk, a shared meal—these small acts remind people they aren't alone. Consistency in showing up can be life-saving.

Know the Resources

Familiarise yourself with campus mental health services, national helplines, and local support groups. Knowledge of available resources can make you an effective bridge to help.

If you're reading this and recognise yourself in these descriptions, please know that there is help, and there is hope. Thoughts of ending your life are a sign of intense emotional pain, not a character flaw or moral failing. They indicate that you need support, not judgment. Mental health challenges are medical conditions that require and deserve treatment, just like any physical illness. Seeking help isn't giving up—it's choosing to fight for yourself, and that choice is incredibly brave. Remember: reaching out doesn't mean you're failing. It means you're choosing to fight for your life, your dreams, and your future contributions to this world.

If we want to prevent suicide, we must end the stigma around mental health. This transformation starts with us—in our classrooms, in our hostels, in our casual conversations, and in our responses to those who trust us with their struggles. As young women with the privilege of education, we have the power and responsibility to create a culture where it's safe to say, "I'm not okay," and where no one feels they must face their darkest moments alone.

We can build this culture by speaking openly about mental health as we would any other health topic, celebrating those who seek help rather than stigmatising their struggles, educating ourselves about mental health resources and warning signs, creating peer support networks within our academic community, advocating for better mental health resources and policies.

As the principal of a women's college I shout out to all women of every campus, true strength lies not in silent suffering, but in the courage to reach out, to speak up, and to hold each other up. Every single person in our community matters. Every life has value, potential, and purpose. When we lose someone to suicide, we lose not just a life, but all the contributions they might have made, all the people they might have helped, all the joy they might have shared. Let's create a space where healing is possible. Let's prevent suicide by choosing life—not just for ourselves, but for each other. Let's embrace the sisterhood of love, compassion, courage, and unwavering support. Because in the end, the most profound act of strength is not just asking for help when we need it, but being the kind of person others feel safe asking for help from. Remember: You matter. Your life has value. There is always hope, and there is always help available.

Dr Sr Mary Louisa S is a professor of Sociology, and the Principal of Jyoti Nivas College Autonomous, a premier women's college in Bengaluru.

The Mental Health Challenge in Jammu and Kashmir

In the Valley, some families travel for hours just to see a doctor, only to find long queues and rushed consultations. For many, the journey feels too heavy, and so they stay home, bearing their pain in silence.

YAQEEN SIKANDER

Picture a house with colourful paint on the walls and nothing on the base. Mental health, which is the foundation of physical and emotional health, is often ignored in India's healthcare system, which means that doctors only focus on symptoms that are easy to see. The mental health of people in India is important for both individuals and the public. The National Mental Health Survey (2015–16) says that almost 150 million Indians need active mental health care, but only 10–12% of them get enough help.

Even though more and more people are talking about mental health online and in cities, millions of people still can't get help or treatment. In a country like ours, where there are a lot of young people, this difference is about more than just health; it stops us from moving forward as a whole. Pope Francis says, "Health is not just the absence of illness; it is the harmony of body, mind, and spirit." If mental health isn't a top priority in public health policy, the very fabric of our society is in danger.

People are starting to talk to each other, which is a good thing. It was a big deal when the Mental Healthcare Act of 2017 passed, and we hear about people who are getting better in the news today. Many people still don't talk about depression or anxiety when they eat with family and friends. This silence may be even more oppressive in a culture where families are very close.

A lot of Indian families still don't talk about mental illness, as if it were a sign of moral decay or religious infidelity. "Have more faith, it will go away," parents might say to their depressed daughter. People in the neighbourhood might say, "He's just too sensitive," and a worried kid might hear them. These responses may make people feel guilty and quiet, even though they mean well.

It is true that mental illness is a medical condition and not a flaw in one's character. We wouldn't ignore a broken arm or diabetes, and we can't ignore sadness or OCD either. I often ask families, "If someone broke their leg, would you tell them to pray more and not get treatment?" Not at all. Prayer can lift the spirit, but it is not a replacement for medical care. However, prayer and professional help can work together.

When loved ones understand that mental illness is a real, treatable, and common condition, they can stop blaming and start caring. A lot of the time, the first step towards getting better is going from being ashamed to getting help.

Ten years ago, the Médecins Sans Frontières carried out one of the most comprehensive surveys of its kind and found that nearly one out of every two adults in Kashmir showed signs of significant psychological distress.

Mental Health in Jammu and Kashmir

The picture becomes especially stark when we look at Kashmir. In 2015, Médecins Sans Frontières carried out one of the most comprehensive surveys of its kind and found that nearly one out of every two adults showed signs of significant psychological distress. That translates to about 1.8 million people in the Valley living with depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress.

And yet, the people who need help have very few doors to knock on. In a region of more than 12 million, there are only a small number of psychiatrists and mental health professionals. Most families are left to cope on their own, leaning on relatives, community elders, or faith leaders. For many, the struggle remains unspoken—carried quietly, often in silence.

The resilience of Kashmiris is extraordinary, but resilience alone cannot fill the void left by the absence of structured care. What is urgently needed is a system of mental healthcare that is not only professional and organised, but also accessible and rooted in the culture of the people it seeks to serve.

I sometimes explain it with this image: if an earthquake were to leave half the population with broken bones, no one would hesitate to call it a humanitarian crisis. Mental health deserves that same urgency and response.

The gap in mental health care in Jammu and Kashmir is vast—but it's not unique. Across India, the patient load is overwhelming compared to the tiny number of trained professionals. Imagine thousands of people waiting at the door, but only a handful of

Healing happens not just in a therapist's office, but in schools, mosques, churches, homes, and community centres.

psychiatrists and psychologists inside. In the Valley, some families travel for hours just to see a doctor, only to find long queues and rushed consultations. For many, the journey feels too heavy, and so they stay home, bearing their pain in silence.

On top of this shortage lies stigma. In many communities, mental illness is still spoken about as a private shame. People would rather suffer quietly than be labelled. This silence doesn't just delay healing—it deepens wounds.

As a practitioner, I realised long ago that the Western model of one-to-one therapy, while valuable, cannot be the only answer here. For a place like Kashmir—and really, for much of India—we need a community approach. Healing happens not just in the therapist's office, but in schools, mosques, churches, homes, and community centres. That's why I focus on training teachers, youth leaders, and imams in the basics of "mental health first aid." Just as everyone should know CPR for the heart, we should all know the first steps to take when someone is drowning in despair.

Technology has also become a bridge: tele-therapy sessions, awareness webinars, and online support groups bring care into people's homes. But at the heart of it, I believe the strongest medicine lies in community—neighbours looking out for each other, families learning to listen, and leaders speaking openly about mental health. In Kashmir, where bonds of community have always been our strength, I see this as the most hopeful way forward.

In a place like Kashmir, where professional help is scarce, families often become the frontline of care. They are, in many ways, the best medicine. When parents or siblings notice changes—withdrawal from friends, persistent sadness, sleepless nights, or sudden bursts of anger—these should not be dismissed as mere mood swings. They are signs, the body and mind's way of asking for help.

Too often, families hide these changes out of shame, worrying what relatives or neighbours will say. But silence only deepens the wound. Love, patience, and presence, on the other hand, can open the door to healing. I remember a mother who once said, "I don't know what my daughter is going through, but I will sit beside her in silence until she wants to talk." That, to me, is love in its purest form.

Families don't need to have perfect answers. What matters most is creating a safe space—saying, "I am here, and you are not alone." Encouraging professional help is important, but equally vital is remembering that recovery is rarely a straight road. There may be setbacks, but when families walk alongside with patience, the journey feels lighter.

In Kashmiri homes, where family bonds are strong and faith is deeply woven into life, this kind of presence becomes more than comfort—it becomes an act of mercy, a small light in someone's darkest hour.

Young people nowadays are connected to thousands of individuals online, but they often feel very alone in real life. The race to "keep up," academic competitiveness, and the never-ending scroll of Instagram can all make anxiety worse.

An adolescent said to me, "I feel like I'm on a treadmill that never stops." That picture remains with me because it shows how tired young people are these days. Here are some things you can do to help: put your phone away for a few hours every day to have digital Sabbaths, protect sleep as if it were precious, writing in a journal, praying, or meditating are all good ways to ground the heart, instead of having a hundred shallow friends, invest in one or two deep ones.

The single most important change India needs is to integrate mental health into primary healthcare. If every local clinic screened for depression and anxiety, millions could be helped early. Schools and colleges must also teach emotional well-being alongside academics. Early intervention is the key to better prognoses.

But beyond systems, the deeper change is cultural: learning to speak openly about mental health at the dinner table, encouraging teenagers to seek help without fear, and training our faith leaders to support the broken-hearted. As long as we carry each other with compassion, there is hope that our communities will not just survive, but flourish.

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Finding Your Flow: Peaceful Parenting in a Hectic World

SHARON ANTONY

Becoming a parent is one of life's most profound transformations. The journey from pregnancy to the first months of life with a new born is filled with love, exhaustion, questions, and deep learning. Whether you're parenting solo, with a partner, or in a supportive community, the early days can feel overwhelming.

The truth every parent quickly learns is that while books offer mountains of advice, no single guide exists for *your* specific child. Every little human is beautifully unique! Thankfully, decades of evidence-based research provide valuable insights into building a supportive, nurturing relationship. Let's face it: there is no perfect parent. We all make mistakes, we all learn, and that's more than okay. Driven by a deep desire to give our children the best, none of us intentionally causes harm. This article is a gentle exploration of how we can forgive ourselves for the inevitable missteps and, in doing so, help our children confidently and safely explore their world.

The Myth of the 'Perfect Parent' to the Power of 'Good Enough' Parenting

The pressure to be a "perfect parent" is intense, fuelled by social media highlights and well-meaning (but often overwhelming) advice. The truth, however, is simpler and kinder: perfection is an impossible standard.

In the mid-20th century, British paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott coined the term "good enough mother" (a concept now applied to all parents). His research suggested that a parent doesn't need to be flawless. In fact, making minor mistakes and adapting allows a child to experience mild frustration, which is necessary for them to learn resilience and how to cope with life's imperfections.

You promise to take your child to the park after school, but you're stuck late at work. A "perfect" parent might feel like a failure. A "good enough" parent apologises sincerely, explains the situation (in an age-appropriate way), and makes a new, firm plan. The child learns that sometimes plans change, and that their parents are honest and dependable, even when they make a mistake.

Shifting from Rules to Relationships

While there isn't a single prescriptive book, decades of evidence-based research provide powerful guidelines focused on the parent-child relationship.

The Importance of Attachment: Research, particularly on Attachment Theory, shows that a secure and loving bond with a primary caregiver is crucial for a child's emotional regulation, social skills, and cognitive development. This secure attachment is built not by being perfect, but by being consistently responsive.

When your toddler falls and cries, a responsive parent doesn't just say, "You're fine!" Instead, they immediately hug the child, acknowledge their pain ("That fall looked scary!"), and then help them dust themselves off. This pattern teaches the child that their feelings are valid and that they have a safe harbour to return to.

The consistency of your responses, described above, directly shapes your child's attachment style, which acts as their first blueprint for all future relationships and their view of themselves. Children who experience consistent comfort and responsiveness typically develop a Secure Attachment. This style allows them to feel safe enough to explore the world, knowing they can always return to their parents for comfort (the "safe haven"). Conversely, inconsistent or dismissive responses can lead to Insecure Attachment styles (Anxious-Ambivalent or Avoidant). These children may either cling excessively or withdraw completely because they are unsure if their caregiver will reliably meet their needs. Therefore, a secure attachment doesn't just benefit the toddler years; it forms the bedrock for their self-esteem, independence, and capacity for intimacy throughout life.

Discipline Through Connection, Not Control: Studies in child psychology advocate for positive discipline and authoritative parenting (high warmth, high expectations) over harsh, punitive methods. Positive discipline aims to teach rather than punish.

Your five-year-old scribbles on the wall. Instead of yelling or isolating them, a supportive parent takes a breath and uses the moment to teach. You might say: "Walls are not for drawing. It makes me feel frustrated when I have to clean up later. Let's work together to clean this, and then we will find paper so you can draw all you want." This addresses the mistake, validates your feeling, and teaches them the correct behaviour and responsibility.

When a child falls, a natural instinct is to 'scold' or even hit the surface that caused the tumble. While well-meaning, this teaches the child that it's acceptable to react to hurt or pain by hitting the source of their frustration. To avoid modelling this aggressive coping mechanism, it's best to skip 'beating' the inanimate object and instead focus your energy entirely on soothing your child and acknowledging their feelings

Forgiving Ourselves and Exploring the World Safely

Recognising that we all make mistakes is not a sign of failure—it's a sign of humanity and growth. Most parents, as you noted, want the best and never intentionally cause harm.

When you lose your temper, forget an important appointment, or handle a situation poorly, the key is the repair process.

Acknowledge: Internally, admit that you made a mistake.

Apologise: Find a quiet moment to tell your child, "I'm sorry I yelled earlier. I was feeling very stressed, and it wasn't fair for me to take it out on you. I promise to try harder next time."

Reconnect: Follow the apology with a hug, a shared activity, or simply spending quality time together.

Being a supportive parent isn't about perfectly following a script; it's about the relationship you build.

This "rupture and repair" cycle is incredibly valuable. It teaches children that relationships can weather conflict and mistakes, and that apologising and reconnecting is the way forward.

Maya, stressed about a deadline, snaps at her seven-year-old son, Liam, for taking too long to put on his shoes, making them late for school. The initial rupture is the sharp, critical tone that makes Liam feel bad.

Later that evening, after the family has settled down, Maya initiates the repair. She sits with Liam, genuinely apologises for her mistake (yelling, which stemmed from her stress), and validates his hurt feelings. She doesn't blame the shoes or the clock; she takes full responsibility for her reaction. They share a hug to reconnect, restoring their emotional closeness. Together, they then quickly agree on a plan for the next morning (like setting a gentle timer) to prevent a recurrence. This simple act of apology and reconciliation teaches Liam that their relationship is strong enough to handle conflict, and that mistakes can always be fixed.

Helping Children Explore Safely

The goal is not to eliminate risk, but to help children develop the skills to navigate the world independently. This is called scaffolding.

Scaffolding: Provide support only to the extent necessary. Think of it like a builder's scaffold—you take parts away as the structure (the child's confidence and skill) becomes stronger.

- *Toddler Example*: Let them try to put on their own shoes, even if it takes five minutes and they are on the wrong feet.
- *Teen Example*: Let them manage a budget for a school trip, only stepping in to offer a suggestion when they are clearly stuck.

By forgiving your own inevitable mistakes and focusing on being consistently responsive and respectful, you create a home environment where your child feels safe, understood, and ready to take on the world—one confident step at a time.

The primary styles of parenting are generally categorised across two dimensions: warmth/responsiveness and demands/control. These result in four main types: authoritarian (high demand, low warmth, favoring strict rules and obedience), permissive (low demand, high warmth, offering few rules and little structure), uninvolved (low demand, low warmth, being largely disengaged), and authoritative (high demand, high warmth, setting clear expectations while being supportive and responsive). Research consistently points to the authoritative approach as the most beneficial; by combining high expectations with high emotional support, this style fosters children who are typically more self-reliant, academically successful, and have better social skills, as it teaches them responsibility within a nurturing, safe environment.

Ultimately, being a supportive parent isn't about perfectly following a script; it's about the relationship you build. By letting go of the myth of perfection and embracing the wisdom of being 'good enough,' we free ourselves to be present, authentic, and loving. Remember that your desire to do well already makes you a wonderful parent. When you prioritise connection, model self-forgiveness, and teach repair, you equip your child with the two most essential tools for life: a secure foundation and the resilience to explore the world with confidence and joy.

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Image: Zubeen Garg's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/ZUBEENsOFFICIAL)

Zubeen Garg
A Life That Sang Beyond Boundaries

SUMIT DASGUPTA

Zubeen Garg, the versatile singer-composer from Assam, passed away suddenly on September 19, 2025, while attending a cultural festival in Singapore. He was 52. Local reports state that Garg had been on a yacht when he dived into the sea without a life jacket. Pulled out unconscious, he was rushed to Singapore General Hospital, where doctors confirmed drowning as the cause of death. The organisers of the North East India Festival, where he was scheduled to perform, later announced his passing.

In the aftermath, Assam police constituted a 10-member Special Investigation Team (SIT) to examine the circumstances. His manager and close associates who accompanied him have been questioned, while Himanta Biswa Sarma indicated that a federal CBI inquiry would follow if the probe raised doubts. As of late September, post-mortem reports in both Singapore and Assam were still awaited, though the official death certificate listed drowning as the cause.

The news of Garg's death echoed across Assam and the country in a way that went beyond the usual celebrity grief. The state government declared four days of official mourning, during which schools, shops, and offices remained closed. On social media, users claimed his funeral drew the fourth-largest gathering of mourners worldwide. In Guwahati and beyond, thousands stood in silent tribute as his funeral pyre was lit with full state honours. On September 23, roads overflowed with people waiting for a final glimpse of their "favourite rockstar." At the cremation ground, amid a 21-gun salute and flames, the crowd spontaneously sang *Mayabini*, one of his most cherished songs. Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma joined the congregation, standing with citizens and officials as the chorus swelled in unison. Political leaders across India shared condolences, their messages reflecting the rare cohesion that Garg's life and music had inspired.

A Cultural Unifier in Troubled Times

To understand Jibon Borthakur's (Zubeen Garg's birth name) impact, we must place it within Assam's difficult history of changing borders, communal unrest, and insurgencies.

Zubeen Garg was not merely an entertainer but a voice of inclusivity. Given the state's scarred history, his refusal to be confined by religion, caste, language, or political alliance became a call for unity that is rare in contemporary Assam. He embraced the moniker Kanchenjunga (after the Himalayan mountain) as a metaphor for his identity: high, unbound, and free. His art carried the same spirit. Singing in over 40 languages and dialects, he fused Assamese folk with rock, Bollywood, and global rhythms. His breakout hit *Ya Ali* made him a national star, yet he repeatedly chose to root himself in Assam, calling it the "land of mountains and rivers." Each spring, he was the heart of the Bihu festival, performing to packed grounds where his casual sunglasses and ripped jeans belied lyrics that spoke to everyday dreams and struggles. Garg denounced extremism despite threats, challenged bans on Hindi and Bengali songs at Bihu, and publicly sided with protesters against the Citizenship Amendment Act. He was also a pivotal source of assistance and support during COVID-19; he did not care about language or religion. His assertion that culture should remain "open and diverse" resonated strongly in a region often fragmented by identity politics. In a candid remark, he once said, "I don't have any caste, I don't have any religion, I don't have any God. I am free." For many, these words encapsulated his place as a bridge across Assam's fault lines, embodying the unity so often denied by its turbulent history.

Tributes and Remembrance

In the days after his death, tributes to Garg came from every quarter. People from villages and cities, of different communities, joined in mourning. Students held memorial concerts, and social media was awash with messages and photos. At Gauhati University, officials announced several permanent honours to preserve his memory. The campus performing arts centre will be renamed the Zubeen Garg Centre for Performing Arts and Culture, and a statue of the singer will be erected there. Generations grew up on Garg's music, from college students who remember his early rock albums to older Assamese for whom his songs became the background to family weddings and festivals. Family members and friends saw a deluge of tributes: walls of text sharing stories, renditions of his music, and reflections on his philosophies. People acknowledged his struggles with drugs and alcohol. It was quite a public affair. He had his ups and downs and was at one point mocked for being a relic of a state that had more pressing issues to worry about. But he rose through it and, in a public fashion, showed the world that the scars of the past should not determine the present.

One cannot tally his popularity merely by album sales or concert tickets. Rather, Garg became a sort of cultural Kanchenjunga. Fans say he had an uncanny knack for capturing Assamese moods, from the yearning of *Mayabini* to the resilience of *Jontro*. At his funeral, the same song he had written about longing became an anthem of communal grief.

Inquiry and the Search for Answers

Alongside the tributes, public debate in Assam has centred on the mystery of Garg's final hours. The state SIT has searched the homes of a festival organiser and Garg's manager, Siddhartha Sharma, and detained one musician from the yacht. Bandmates and managers have denied foul play. In an open letter, Sharma clarified that most of Garg's 38,000 songs were owned by labels, and that the small firm they co-founded in 2021 was meant to secure a fairer share of his later works. He pledged cooperation with investigators and rejected rumours of financial impropriety.

Authorities maintain the probe is ongoing. Assam's chief minister has cautioned that if the SIT's findings prove unsatisfactory, the case will be handed to the CBI. A second autopsy in India is pending, and forensic teams are reviewing evidence from Singapore. For now, officials say no wrongdoing has been established; whether Garg's dive was a tragic accident or something more remains unresolved.

Lasting Legacy

Zubeen Garg's death leaves a cultural and social void that Assam will not forget. He had become woven into the state's collective identity. Despite his fame, Garg called himself "Assam's son." The silence that fell over the state in mourning reflected both grief for his music and longing for the unity he embodied. He stumbled, made mistakes, and fell down like anyone who listened to his music, and like his songs, he grew through his mistakes. His simple mantra, "I am free," resonated because it suggested that identity could transcend division.

The challenge now lies in whether a new generation can carry forward his spirit. In a fractured landscape, Garg's voice reminded people that art can unite in ways politics cannot. His personal life was political, and it is important that we remember that.

In the end, Assam's mourning for Zubeen Garg is not just shock and hurt but also a moment of introspection. Jibon transitioned to Zubeen, like the warrior piercing the heavens with his sword as his name suggests; internalising the values that he lived by is the responsibility of the people of Assam. His songs will continue to be sung at weddings, rallies, college house parties, and quiet moments alike. We must remind ourselves not to be passive listeners but to feel free with the music, just like Zubeen *da* was.

Francis of Assisi: Who Made the Impossible, Possible!

GERRY LOBO OFM

Today, with the new phase of history, human beings have fallen prey to a sense of emptiness, a lack of meaning and norms. There seems to be a permanent crisis and uncertainty looming large. The emergence of the individual in search of autonomy is pervasive. Religions having been on the back door, people have defined their space and have rejected anything which would impose itself on their conscience. There is no more reliance on homogeneous unity of the world and culture, religion and economy, politics and everyday life. Living in a pluralistic society, little societies which are self-authenticating without any necessary connection with any religion or ethics are emerging. We are witnessing a contradiction in every sphere and aspect of life in the society today. Technical and scientific pluralism due to the appropriation of knowledge, and now particularly with the ever speeding Artificial Intelligence, there is no more need of the human person to continue this created earth. Each person has one's own rules of the game and will not make it available for others to use for fear of losing predominance and profit. Pluriform world and thinking patterns do not go together anymore. The world has truly come of age!

Extraordinary conquests and huge strides may have been the success story of the humankind. However, widespread impoverishment of the human person cannot be laid under the rug. The logic of social

Francis' famous *Canticle of the Creatures* reminds humanity that we are all dependent on the elements of creation and that even if we do not exist they would but without them we would disappear.

exclusion has failed to respect the human person in our world today. Many are involved in the capitalisation and the manipulation of natural resources, resulting in the degradation of the quality of life. Obviously there is a crisis in the human capacity to order values and relationships in view of a worthy and fullness of life has surfaced. Living with others has become only for personal convenience where the other is only a point of reference or as an element of disturbance. Only common interests are paid attention to, not reciprocal understanding and mutual respect. The other is only a similarity rather than a brother or a sister to be loved and promoted. The other is perceived as a competitor. As A Glucksmann affirmed: "To exist democratically is to doubt one another."

The overall situation in which we live today has come to influence religion and spiritual practice. Satisfying the individual needs has become the priority in order to provide self-gratification by pleasure and material happiness. Calculated outcomes and measurable results become the supreme value of this kind of mentality. To work out an identity of the self has become cumbersome. The human person is in effect living in a permanent crisis. Being caught in the rhythm of the machine, the individual has come to realise that using goods and even people will never satisfy the human dream of fulfillment. There is a realisation gradually dawning upon people that consumerism, production, monetary wealth and power politics will lead to degradation and distress. Hence some are beginning to experience a return to an affective life in communion and spiritual experience, to ethical values and to a moral consciousness.

Perhaps a historical personality such as Francis of Assisi, a medieval spiritual leader, could offer an alternative vision of life to the human person drowned in the philosophy of plenty and in the practice of superficiality. Even though he was not an outstanding thinker of the medieval world, his thinking, which may be considered foolish by the wise rationalists, can certainly provide a radical meaning to existence today. He would not be pessimistic about the modern scientific and technocratic developments of today. He would rather honour them as creatures provided by the Creator for a harmonious and meaningful human existence, without making them the absolute power over humanity.

Being totally aware of the Transcendence, he realised his poverty of being human and sought liberation from all that estranged him from others, the world and God. Having found a supreme model of human existence in Jesus of Nazareth, he considered living for others, and a willingness to give all for the sake of the One whose goodness and love were the only essentials desirable in life and nothing else. His priorities were not those of his wealthy merchant class but the concerns of the socially and economically excluded that were deprived of their human rights. This implied denying the egotistical self which tended to consider itself as an end in itself and acknowledging ones dependence on God and others. Francis' life was a constant withdrawal from the worship of false gods and an embrace of truth.

Francis' famous *Canticle of the Creatures*, composed in 1225, eight hundred years ago, just prior to his death, reminds humanity surrounded by developments in every sector making living easier on the planet that we are all dependent on the elements of creation and that even if we do not exist they would but without them we would disappear. Francis understood that it is

the entire creation that rises to give praise to the Creator which human people take for granted to acknowledge the goodness emanating in and through all creatures.

The *Canticle* addressed to the Most High is an expression of the deep human poverty in Francis which allows to be enriched by all that is created. For him the world was a cloister, the place to find God, the One who is present in the daily-ness of our life. He personally experienced a communion of all with one another which could be actualised by a sensitive mindfulness towards the needs of one another.

In this way he allowed all creatures into his consciousness and spirit to find their home. With this poetic outburst at the close of his earthly existence, he envisioned with hope total reconciliation and peace that would be realised at the end of the human pilgrimage in Jesus Christ, He being All in all.

Francis was not a social reformer, one who stood against injustice or raised his voice in the socio-political world. Instead, as a man of the market place, moving around among people of the towns in his most simple presence, listening to the dejected, he created discomfort and disturbance in the hearts of those who were attracted by him. His distinctive life style of non-appropriation of anything was a message which knocked hard on the consciences of people who owned the world as its masters. In this way, Francis was known for his disarmed power against the avaricious and dominant persons both in the Church as well as in the society. His identity and that of his companions as "Lesser Brothers" was the hall mark of the Gospel of Jesus. This only revealed the plain truth: "What a man is before God, that he is, and nothing more."

Our world is growing in abundance of wealth where everything is sold and bought. One presumes that a thing is there and will be there without knowing its origin and cause. The space for a supreme value is not perceived. Francis, who disposed everything and was content with the little and who had no desire for anything more, could never go through the world without gratuitous consciousness. Thanksgiving was fundamental to him.

Significantly, Francis was not Plato or Heidegger. However he was a thinking being whose philosophy is devoid of abstract theories and intellectual systems. Based on the principles of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, he discovered the mystery of the human person and inevitably dealt with the human reality with an experience of life in community with creation, the human person being its centre, but not the ruler of all. Francis, therefore, could help people to live humanly and peaceably with all creation and discover the intra-historic meaning of life. His philosophy could be characterised as 'aesthetic-symbolic.'

As a true habitant of this world, he knew to discover a home in it. He did this by establishing a reverent distance between the material reality and his soul, considering everything as a gift to be honoured gratuitously, as against the plundering mind of today which takes people and things for granted, and takes the world as a mere utility product. Francis teaches humanity today how to live in the world as a good citizen, paying 'what is due to Caesar and what is due to God' by being sensitive to the needs of one's brother and sister at the same time.

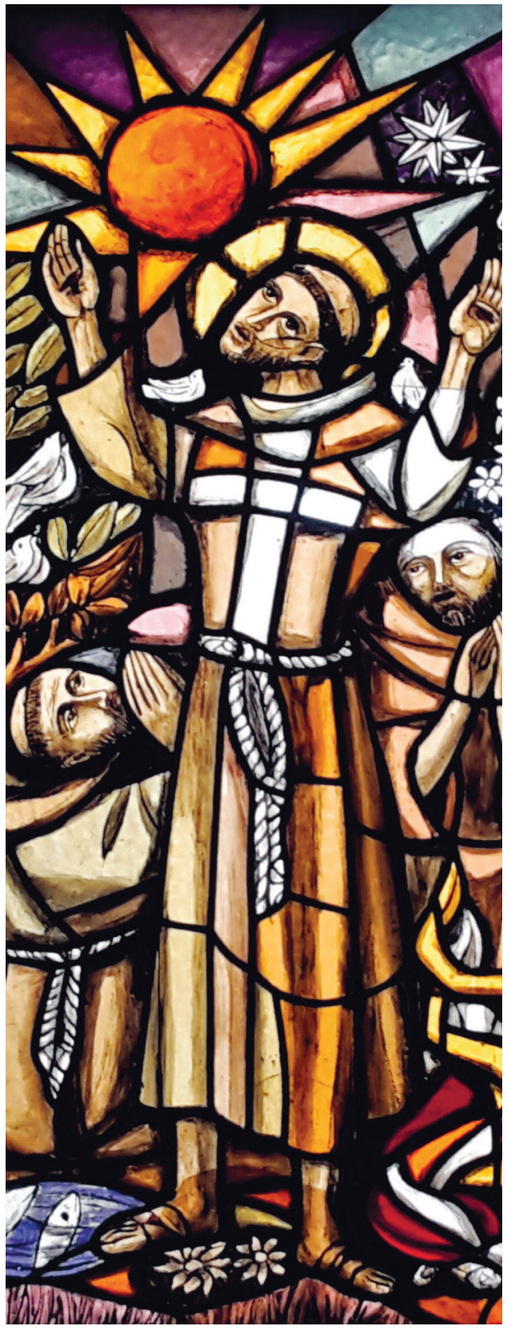
Rationality of our times does not easily accept the reality of pain and suffering. Going by the puritanical truth and flawlessness, people avoid anything that is negative and stands on the way of self-gratification and physical-emotional pleasure. Desiring to reach the perfection, without stain or wrinkle, human person gets disheartened and runs into despair. Francis, without any training in psychology understands and accepts human predicament as it comes, and makes good of it as an opportunity for positive growth though the path is thorny and stormy. His capacity to integrate the negativities enables him to develop a personality who could easily understand and share the plight of the sufferer.

Francis, indeed, made possible with an inventive alternative, what could be impossible for the modern mind.

The Canticle of the Creatures

A Song for Then and Now

NIJIL CHIRAMAL OFM



Eight centuries ago, in the hills outside Assisi, a frail and nearly blind Francis of Assisi began to sing. The song he composed—known today as the *Canticle of the Creatures*—has been called the first poem of Italian literature, a hymn of astonishing simplicity and joy. But its story is anything but simple. It arose from pain, it grew out of conflict, and it continues to carry a vision of peace and care for creation that the world still desperately needs.

To appreciate its enduring power, we need to linger on three movements of the story: how the Canticle first emerged, why Francis called the elements of creation his brothers and sisters, and how he later used it to bring reconciliation to a divided city.

Praise Born from Darkness

The *Canticle* was not written in a season of strength but in one of weakness. In 1224, Francis was only in his early forties, but his body was already worn down by years of poverty, fasting, and tireless travel. He suffered from malaria, stomach ailments, and especially from a severe eye disease that left him almost blind. Even the faintest glimmer of light caused unbearable pain.

To shield him, his companions built a small hut of reeds and mud near San Damiano, the chapel where years earlier he had first heard Christ speak to him from the cross. Inside the hut, the windows were shuttered to keep out every ray of sunlight. Instead of rest, Francis found new torment. Tradition tells us that mice infested the hut, disturbing his meals and his prayer, crawling even across his body as he lay in pain.

It was in this misery that Francis broke down and cried out in anguish. His companions feared his spirit might finally be broken. But it was in this moment, in the thickest darkness, that he experienced a vision. According to Thomas of Celano, Francis suddenly felt the nearness of God. His heart was flooded with peace, and he realised that his suffering was not in vain but carried within God's eternal love.

And from that assurance came the first lines of the *Canticle*:

"Most High, all-powerful, good Lord,
Yours are the praises, the glory, the honor, and all blessing..."

The first great paradox of the Canticle is that praise rising from darkness. Francis did not sing because his pain vanished. He sang because he discovered God present in his pain.

We, too, know seasons of darkness. For some it is illness, for others grief or despair, for others the hidden wounds of anxiety and loneliness. The Canticle teaches that even in such times, praise is possible—not as a denial of pain but as a testimony that God is still with us.

In calling the elements of creation—Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Wind, Sister Water, Brother Fire, Sister Mother Earth, Francis was not indulging in poetic fancy. He was expressing a profound theological truth: all of creation shares one origin in the Creator, and therefore all of creation is bound together as family.

This theme echoes throughout Scripture. The psalms are full of laments that turn into praise (cf. Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—which ends in trust). Paul and Silas sang hymns in prison at midnight (Acts 16:25). In Francis, this biblical pattern becomes flesh once more: a human voice finding song in the night.

Pope Francis reminds us in *Laudato si'* that the *Canticle* "is a beautiful and prophetic song" that allows us to discover joy even amid trials. In a culture that often equates happiness with health, wealth, and comfort, Francis shows another way: the joy of belonging to God, even in weakness.

Creation as Brothers and Sisters

The second striking feature of the *Canticle* is its language. Unlike the formal Latin hymns of the Church, Francis composed his song in the simple dialect spoken in Assisi. This is why it is often considered the first masterpiece of Italian literature. Francis wanted the song to be sung and understood not only by scholars and clergy but by ordinary people.

And what a song it was. One by one, Francis named the elements of creation—Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Wind, Sister Water, Brother Fire, Sister Mother Earth. To each, he ascribed qualities of God: the sun's radiance, the moon's gentleness, water's purity, fire's strength.

In calling them brothers and sisters, Francis was not indulging in poetic fancy. He was expressing a profound theological truth: all of creation shares one origin in the Creator, and therefore all of creation is bound together as family. Just as Genesis proclaims that all was created by God and "saw that it was good," Francis reminds us that goodness endures in creation, and we belong to it.

This vision is startlingly relevant in our own era. We live in a time of ecological crisis: forests cut down, oceans polluted, species disappearing, the climate destabilised. Much of this destruction springs from an attitude that sees the earth as a resource to be exploited rather than as a home to be cherished.

Francis offers us another path. If the earth is our mother, if water is our sister, then exploitation becomes unthinkable. Family is not consumed; family is cared for.

This insight underlies Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato si'*, which begins with the words of the *Canticle* itself: "Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us..." The encyclical insists that ecological care is not a secondary issue but central to faith, because creation itself is kin.

For us today, the challenge is clear: we cannot love God while ignoring or abusing God's creation. To honor creation as brothers and sisters is to embrace an ethic of care, restraint, and solidarity with the earth.

The Call to Reconciliation

The *Canticle*, however, did not remain unchanged. In 1225, Assisi was plunged into turmoil. The newly elected mayor, Oportulo Bernardo, clashed bitterly with Bishop Guido. The dispute grew so heated that the bishop excommunicated the mayor, and the mayor retaliated by forbidding anyone to sell or deliver food to the bishop. The city was paralysed by this feud.

Francis, heartbroken by the division, decided to act. He added a new verse to his hymn:

"Praised be You, my Lord, through those who give pardon for Your love,
And bear infirmity and tribulation.
Blessed are those who endure in peace,
For by You, Most High, they shall be crowned."

Two of Francis's brothers sang this verse in the bishop's presence. Hearing it, the mayor was moved to tears, and he went to the bishop to ask forgiveness. The bishop forgave, and the two embraced. The *Canticle* had become not just a song of praise but an instrument of peace.

Here lies the third great lesson: reconciliation is at the heart of creation's song. We cannot truly sing praise to God while harbouring enmity against our brothers and sisters. As Jesus taught, "If you are offering your gift at the altar and remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift... first be reconciled" (Matthew 5:23–24).

Our world, like Assisi in 1225, is torn by conflict—between nations, religions, races, and even within families and communities. The *Canticle* challenges us to live as peacemakers, to risk forgiveness, and to see even enemies as kin under one Creator.

This does not mean ignoring injustice or tolerating abuse. It means refusing to let hatred have the last word. Francis's simple hymn broke a deadlock between mayor and bishop; in our day, gestures of reconciliation—large or small—can break the cycles of violence, prejudice, and division that plague our societies.

The *Canticle of the Creatures* is not a relic of medieval piety. It is a living song, and it continues to speak with urgency. In times of suffering, it teaches us to lift our eyes in trust and discover joy even in the night. In times of environmental destruction, it reminds us that creation is family, calling us to care for our common home. In times of division, it calls us to reconciliation, so that peace may flourish.

The *Canticle* begins with praise to "the Most High, all-powerful, good Lord" and ends with a word of humility. *Humilitas*—humility—comes from *humus*, the soil. To be humble is to recognise our place: creatures among creatures, children of one Creator, called to live in peace with God, with creation, and with one another.

Eight hundred years after Francis first sang in his darkened hut, the *Canticle* remains a beacon. It calls us to sing—not only with our voices but with our lives. It asks us to be people of hope in suffering, caretakers of creation, and builders of peace.

If we learn this song, then together with Brother Sun and Sister Moon, with Sister Water and Brother Fire, with every neighbour and stranger, we too can proclaim: Praise be to you, my Lord.

Whose Culture Is It Anyway? A Case of Kashmiri Culture's Appropriation

RAKHSHAAN SHAMOODAH

While meandering through a local market in Dehradun, I stumbled across a shop with a vibrant exterior, gaudy clothes hung on the mannequin. And in one corner below the roof, a Kashmiri 'aari' embroidered *pheran* caught my eye. Through the dingy interior, a frail woman emerged. I asked her what that piece of clothing was called, pointing to the neon pink *pheran*. Using one hand to hide half of her face with the worn out veil, she lovingly touched the *pheran* with the other. 'It's a 'pahadi firan', madam', she replied innocently. I smiled in surprise. I had never seen or heard about a 'pahadi firan', ever. I quickly googled it and what followed was a series of disappointing information. The truth is that the *pheran*, a traditional loose, long cloth worn by Kashmiris, contains multitudes of history and glory throughout its length and breadth. The 'poou-tsh', a cut out of the *pheran*, usually made out of cotton, is worn underneath to provide further insulation against the cold. Therefore, not only does *pheran* protect us, it gives us an identity. Women used to adorn their *pherans* with threads of silver (*ropp*), sewn into beautiful, intricate 'tilla' designs. While the practice of using actual silver is discontinued, tilla still remains deeply personal to Kashmiri women, and ever so glorious. A Tilla embroidered *pheran* is so honourable that it is considered a grand gift. To our misfortune, a lot of shame and paranoia is also woven along the woollen threads of pheran. Kashmiris, who choose to embrace wearing a *pheran* are mocked for wearing it. The fetishisation of Kashmiri culture, sadly, goes hand in hand with the stigmatisation of it. A few years ago, a high ranking, non-Kashmiri official called his Kashmiri colleague out for looking like a shepherd. Interestingly, it was because he wore a *pheran* during chillai kallan, the harshest period of winter. Its prejudice -fueled incidents like these, that make Kashmiris conscious about their culture. They stop expressing themselves culturally, for fear of being ridiculed.

While other cultures choose to borrow it, some people, don *pheran* as an aesthetic, gaudy garment in the form of a kurti which they call a *firan kurti*, most commonly adorned with aari work(aari kaem), not knowing what the work is called or what it is associated with. I once saw a girl wearing an Aari work kurti, and chose to ask about it, without impressing upon her that I know anything about it. she was dismissive when she said,' I don't know,who cares, i saw it on a stall and got it'. The same ignorance is usually shown for Aari work accessories. Kashmiri Aari work involves unique techniques for the creation of vibrant, intricate stitches. Each stitch boasts ages of history and hard work. I'm not suggesting people to not buy the kurtis or the accessories. However, the unacknowledged adoption of cultural artifacts without reading up on the history associated with it, is simply disdainful. The word *Kashmiri* carries in itself a huge political and cultural weight, which often goes unnoticed whilst people are only attracted to the bright and beautiful.

With increased globalisation and exhaustive social media usage, appropriating a culture has become effortlessly achievable. As is known, these misrepresentations are not just cultural, but have political nuances which expose the way the dominant/colonising party perceives the marginalised group and their struggle. For a lot of subjugated communities, the conflict, the trauma associated with, and the struggle for autonomy becomes an indispensable part of their identity. Which is eventually absorbed into the culture. Therefore, sociologists have also included conflict minimisation by the dominant party as a significant part of cultural appropriation. I was first introduced to this extended definition in 2021, when tourist arrival resumed after covid-19. enjoying themselves, urging others to come here and 'enjoy' Kashmir too, they reported that everything was normal , when in actuality, nothing was. This repetitious use of the word 'normal', while nothing was normal, only unsettlingly quiet, revealed the daunting level of trivialisation of the conflict by those people who only come here for selfish gains. This was met with 'now deleted' backlash, in which people shared how they lost loved ones and livelihoods in the period, while tourists creating romantic reels beside the dal lake labelled the situation 'normal', and 'safe'. The acknowledgement of a conflict is imperative, as is to show sensitivity toward those people, who unwillingly are trapped into it.

Stereotyping a language as well as displaying exaggerated accents also are a part of cultural appropriation. An influencer had made content on how girls shift their accent to a heavily stereotyped, laughable Urdu accent when they want to act like Kashmiris after watching an Imtiaz Ali film. It has recently been done again with the *Songs of Paradise*, where the main protagonist, firstly does not speak in Kashmiri (Considering the film is set in the 50s, and speaking in Urdu is a relatively new trend), secondly, she is made to speak in the same stereotyped Urdu. Stereotyping, in the long run, engages a people to break stereotypes, rather than understand the how and why of it. Simplifying an institution as integral to a community as language, and giving it an exaggerated twist from one's own mind for one's own sake, is appropriating a culture.

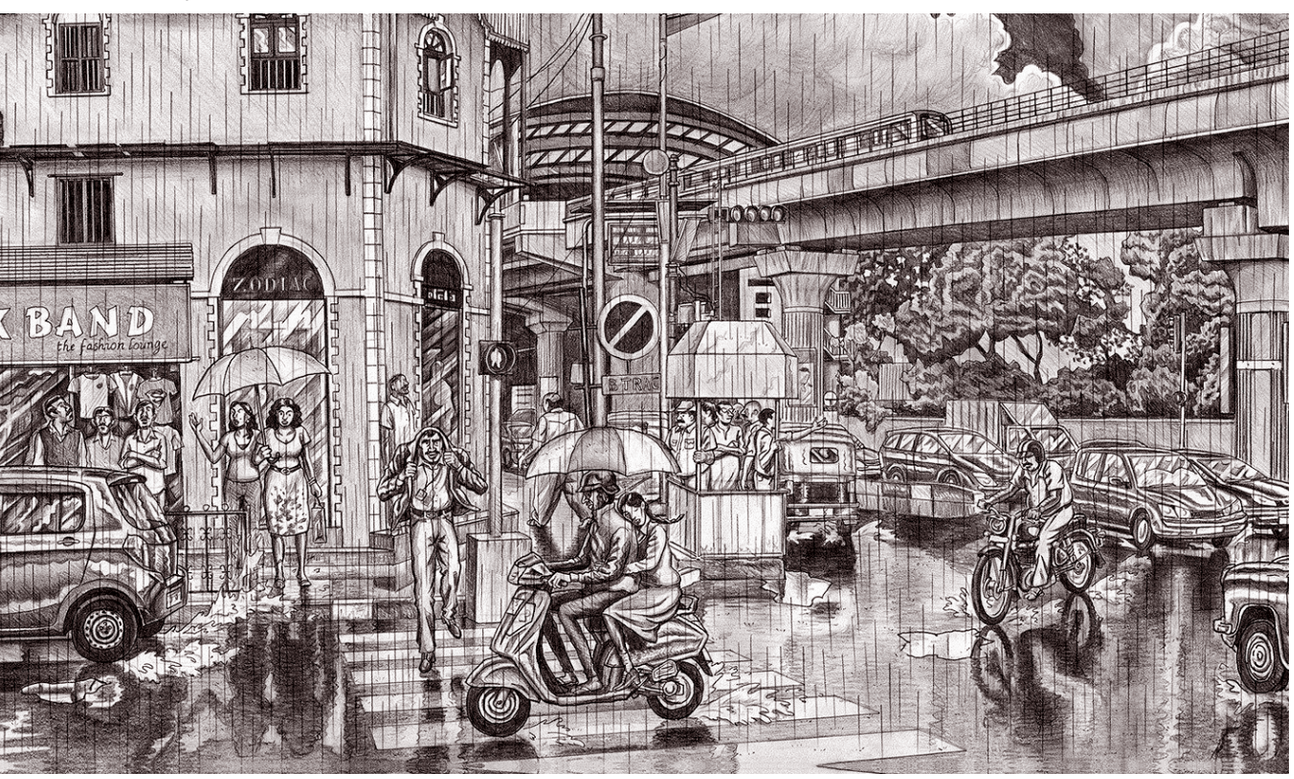
Unfortunately , this appropriation is done by people of separate ethnicities, who reside in the so-called Azad Kashmir, the Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir. It accommodates different ethnic groups, who identify as Punjabi, Rajpoot, Gujjar etc, who adopt Kashmiri culture, unaware of its vast, tormented history. While this does involve some degree of assimilation, the motive behind unjustly treating a culture with an established history like an aesthetic is inconsiderate. Not only them, but people from mainstream Pakistan, dress up as Kashmiri, without having a regard about the history of Kashmir. In its entirety. Not just a part.

It is hurtful for Kashmiris to witness their culture being simplified and stigmatised as is for other communities whose culture is appropriated. There has been increased awareness surrounding the subject in recent years. Compared to the older generations, the younger generation, for whom politics is incredibly nuanced, and crucial, take it seriously. They observe it, educate themselves and attempt to spread awareness about it. However, nothing can be done against it. No voice must ever be raised.

The City She Chose Twice

AMRUTHA MENON

Illustration by Simon Lamouret



At thirty-one, Aami stood by her window in Bangalore, watching the neon lights blur into the drizzle. It had been three years since her life took a turn she hadn't imagined. Three years since she let go of the man she once believed was her forever.

Bangalore had always been more than a city to her. As a little girl, she had dreamed of walking its streets, studying here, and working here. That dream had given her courage through years of betrayals and heartbreaks. Even then, amidst loneliness, she found one person who felt like home. With him, the world felt less cruel. He was her relief, her laughter, her partner in ambition. Together, they had crossed into this city, building a life out of love and hunger for more.

But dreams, Aami realised, do not always unfold into reality. Marriage came at twenty-five, and along with it, the erosion of what once held them together. He loved her, but not enough to share life as she hoped. He grew restless in her presence, reserving his joy for others' company. Aami, once fire-hearted, found herself shrinking, losing color each day. She smiled outside but withered inside, even as depression slowly caged her spirit.

The therapy sessions were sterile, her nights suffocated with tears. And one evening, when it felt unbearable, she made the quiet, terrifying decision to end it all. Yet, at the edge of that darkness, her father's voice came through from miles away. A call, almost ordinary, yet powerful enough to break her. She broke down, sobbing as years of pain poured out, telling her father everything she had hidden behind silence. In that moment, her vulnerability shattered every barrier, and for the first time, she let herself be seen. Within hours, her family rushed to her side, gathering her into their arms, holding her as she crumbled. They didn't judge, didn't demand explanations—only let her weep and unravel, gently helping her lay down the heavy sorrow she had carried alone, giving her the grace and permission, at last, to let go.

The divorce stripped her. Not only of him but of the version of herself she had built around him. Eight years of togetherness suddenly became echoes. Nights stretched endlessly. Mornings felt like betrayal because they arrived at all. Bangalore, once her dream, now felt like a graveyard of memories. Every café, every street was haunted with shadows of them.

But Aami did what only the resilient learn to do—she chose herself. Slowly, painfully, carefully. She returned to life but added new colors to her days. She began traveling, sometimes alone, sometimes with new faces who didn't know her past. She danced again. She created content that expressed her untold words. She laughed—hesitantly at first, then with growing ease. It wasn't that grief vanished. It never did. She learned that moving on wasn't about forgetting but about carrying the memory differently.

One evening, in her favourite coffee shop, she cradled a steaming cup, watching the city hum around her. The aroma mingled with the sounds of laughter and traffic drifting through the dusk. For the first time in years, Aami didn't flinch at its familiarity. Yes, it was full of memories of him, but it was also full of her—the girl who chased a city, who made it hers once, and was now making it hers again.

Grief, Aami realised, was not only about endings but also about transformation. She would never erase him, or those eight years, but she was no longer shackled to them. She accepted that she could live with her grief, let it sit beside her, without drowning in it.

And in that acceptance, she found something rarer than happiness—peace. The city she once feared had become hers again. Bangalore. The dream of her childhood. The choice of her womanhood. Twice chosen. Twice survived. Now, twice loved.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PEAK PERFORMANCE

Resilience or the capacity to overcome hardship and come back stronger, is what sets champions apart.

GLADIS SATHEESH

The difference between winning and losing is frequently quite thin in all sports. Even though two athletes have comparable skills, preparation and physical conditioning, one wins, and the other is still in the running. What causes this discrepancy? According to sports psychology research, mental toughness, attitude and emotional control are just important as physical readiness. Champions are characterised by their capacity to handle the psychological pressures of competition in addition to their physical brilliance.

Mental toughness, the capacity to maintain composure, focus and resilience under duress are one of the qualities most frequently mentioned in elite athletes. The goal of mental toughness is to effectively manage anxiety and dread rather than to ignore them. Instead of seeing pressure as a threat, champions see it as an opportunity.

Serene Williams, who showed incredible poise and tenacity throughout her career, is a notable example. Despite numerous setbacks and potentially fatal health problems, Williams confidently returned to court and won 23 Grand Slam singles titles. Her ability to view failures as short-term obstacles is a perfect example of champion's mentality.

Visualisation is a strategy used by elite athletes to mentally practice good performances. Studies reveal that visualising improves performance outcomes by activating the same brain regions as physical practice.

The Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt often talked about his use of visualisation prior to competitions. He pictured himself sprinting out of the starting blocks and outpacing his rivals to the finish line. These strategies, together with encouraging self-talk that reminded him he was "The fastest man alive," helped him win eight Olympic Gold medals and dominate the sprinting world.

The capacity to achieve the flow state, a mental state in which athletes feel totally absorbed, intensely concentrated and nearly effortless in their tasks, is another characteristic that distinguishes winners from competitors.

Michael Jordan, a basketball legend frequently talked about being "in the zone" where his moves were instinctive and distractions vanished. Despite battling illness, Jordan scored 38 points in what became known as "The Flu Game" during his 1997 NBA Finals performance. He exhibited the mental focus that distinguishes champions by being able to ignore his physical suffering and outside demands.

In athletics, setbacks are unavoidable. Resilience or the capacity to overcome hardship and come back stronger, is what sets champions apart. They view failure as insightful criticism for growth rather than as a judgement on their skills.

Due to mental health issues, Simon Biles regarded as the best gymnast of her generation withdrew from multiple Olympic competitions in Tokyo in 2020. Biles reframed this as a lesson in putting mental health first rather than seeing it as a defeat. She eventually competed again and performed exceptionally well, demonstrating that resilience is as much about taking care of oneself as it is about recovering physically.

Sports require a lot of emotional and physical energy. Champions are exceptionally skilled at controlling their emotions, maintaining composure under duress using aggression constructively, avoiding and not letting dissatisfaction get in the way of their performance.

According to the psychology of peak performance, champions stand out for their mental toughness as much as their physical prowess. Their success is built on a foundation of focus, resilience, emotional control, mental imagery and intrinsic motivation.

One of cricket's contemporary greats, Virat Kohli has been candid about his struggles with anxiety and depression at a difficult time in his career. He sought expert assistance, engaged in mindfulness exercises and worked on mental conditioning rather than repressing his feelings. His comeback highlights how emotional control promotes lifespan and optimal performance in sports.

A higher feeling of purpose that goes beyond medals or trophies frequently motivates champions. They compete for more than just their own success; they compete for pride in representing their nation, motivating others or realising a long-time dream.

Muhammad Ali for example was driven by more than just titles during his boxing career. In addition to being a sports great, he became a cultural icon for his support of civil rights and unwavering commitment to his convictions. He overcame both personal and professional setbacks, including a three-year boxing suspension at the height of his career, thanks to his internal drive.

According to the psychology of peak performance, champions stand out for their mental toughness as much as their physical prowess. Their success is built on a foundation of mental toughness, focus, resilience, emotional control, mental imagery and intrinsic motivation. Champions turn obstacles into chances and failures into victories, while competitors may stumble under duress, obsess over errors or lose motivation.

The way athletes think, feel and react to the stress of competition ultimately determines the difference. The mind is what takes an athlete from contender to champion, even as physical training develops the body. The principles of sports psychology, which is still developing serve as a reminder that excellence involves both our actions and our thoughts.

IN STAMPS

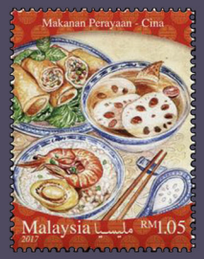
16 October

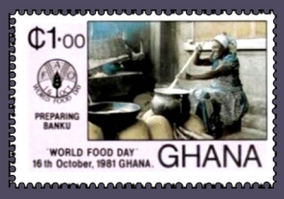
World Food Day

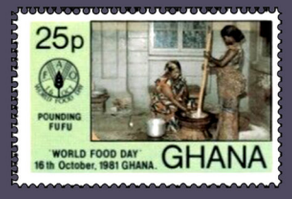
TOM JOHN OFM

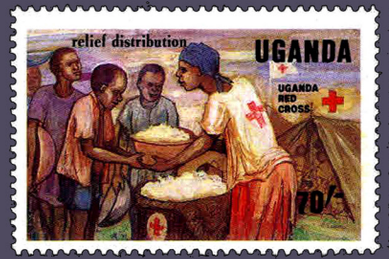
Food security is one of the most fundamental human right, yet it remains the most violated. World Food Day arrives with the weight of profound contradiction. In a world that produces enough food to feed ten billion people, nearly 800 million go to bed hungry. This annual observance, established by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation in 1979, forces us to confront an uncomfortable truth: hunger is not a problem of scarcity but of equity, not of production but of distribution, not of nature but of human choice.

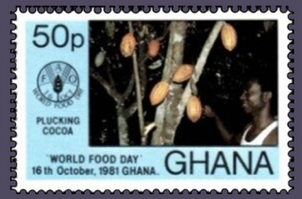
The significance of World Food Day extends far beyond charitable awareness campaigns or fleeting social media hashtags. It serves as an annual reckoning with our collective moral failure—a day when the comfortable majority must confront the reality that while we debate restaurant reservations, others search garbage bins for sustenance. This is not merely a humanitarian crisis; it is a profound indictment of our global economic and political systems.











SANTOSH PORTRAYS LAYERS OF GENDER POLITICS

NIKHIL BANERJEE

In an era where cinema increasingly serves as society's mirror, Sandhya Suri's *Santosh* emerges as a devastating critique of systemic corruption that permeates every layer of Indian law enforcement. This 2024 Hindi neo-noir thriller, featuring powerhouse performances from Shahana Goswami and Sunita Rajwar, stands as an alarming entry in the contemporary police genre of films.

The film follows Santosh Saini, a newly widowed woman who inherits her husband's position as a police constable through "compassionate recruitment" in rural Northern India. When a Dalit teenager is brutally murdered and dumped in a well, Santosh finds herself thrust into an investigation led by the enigmatic Inspector Sharma. What unfolds is not only a crime story but a chilling examination of how caste, gender, and power intersect within India's corrupt institutional framework.

Suri's directorial vision refrains from sensationalism for a more insidious brand of horror—the banality of everyday evil that operates under the guise of law and order. The film's strength lies in its unflinching portrayal of how systemic prejudice operates not through overt cruelty but through subtle machinations that render justice an impossibility for the marginalised.

Santosh finds similarities with Malayalam cinema's recent exploration of police corruption, particularly Shahi Kabir's *Nayattu* (2021) and *Ronth* (2025). All three films share a fundamental thesis: the police force, ostensibly society's protector, becomes its most dangerous predator when institutional rot sets in.

Where *Nayattu* depicted three officers transformed from hunters to hunted in a single night of political machination, *Ronth* examined the psychological toll of patrol duty on officers navigating moral compromise. Both films, like Santosh, reveal how individual conscience becomes irrelevant when systemic corruption demands compliance.

The Malayalam films' exploration of police officers as both perpetrators and victims of institutional violence finds resonance in *Santosh*'s portrayal of its protagonist's moral awakening. Joju George's Maniyan in *Nayattu* lamented that "Even goons have the freedom to accept or reject orders, but we don't"—a sentiment that echoes through *Santosh* as the character discovers the price of moral agency within a corrupt system.

The film's courageous examination of caste-based violence and institutional corruption inevitably invites comparison with *Udta Punjab*'s censorship battles. Abhishek Chaubey's 2016 film faced 94 proposed cuts from the Central Board of Film Certification before the Bombay High Court intervened, reducing them to a single deletion. The controversy surrounding *Udta Punjab* highlighted how politically sensitive content—particularly narratives that expose regional corruption—becomes a target for institutional suppression.

Like *Udta Punjab*, which dared to name Punjab's drug mafia explicitly, *Santosh* refuses to soften its critique of caste-based violence and police complicity. Both films demonstrate cinema's capacity to function as social documentation, even when—or perhaps especially when—such documentation threatens established power structures.

The parallel extends beyond content to treatment of fictional narratives: both films employ gritty realism over commercial success, privileging uncomfortable truths over audience comfort. *Udta Punjab*'s victory against censorship paved the way for films like *Santosh* to tackle similarly controversial subjects without compromise.

Santosh succeeds where many social thrillers fail by refusing to provide easy answers or popular narrative conclusions. Like the best entries in this emerging genre of Indian police films, it acknowledges that individual heroism cannot dismantle institutional corruption—a lesson that resonates through *Nayattu*'s tragic conclusion and *Ronth*'s bleak finale.

The film's exploration of how ordinary people become involved in extraordinary crimes is particularly urgent in contemporary India. By focusing on a woman's entry into a masculine, corrupt system, Suri adds layers of gender politics that complement rather than overwhelm the central narrative of institutional decay.

Santosh stands as essential viewing—not for its entertainment value but for its unflinching documentation of how justice dies not through dramatic collapse but through the accumulation of countless small compromises. In an age where cinema increasingly serves as society's conscience, films like this remind us why some truths, however uncomfortable, demand to be told.

Ipsita Sarangi: A Luminous Voice in Contemporary Odia Poetry

Ipsita Sarangi stands as an inspiring figure in the landscape of contemporary Odia literature, particularly celebrated for her profound and evocative poetry. Born in Odisha, her work is a testament to the enduring power of language and a deeply felt connection to human experience and cultural heritage. Dr RAMAKRISHNA PERUGU interviews Odiya poetess Ispita Sarangi.

Dr RAMAKRISHNA PERUGU (DRP): Tell us about your birthplace, education, and family background.

IPSITA SARANGI (IS): First of all, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to you, Dr Ramakrishna Perugu, for interviewing litterateurs from all over India and for being a bridge between different languages.

Well, about myself, I was born in Nimapada, a small, culturally rich town near the city of the Black Pagoda, Konark, Odisha. Nimapada is just 40 kilometres away from Bhubaneswar, the state capital. I completed my post-graduation from Utkal University, Bhubaneswar, and my MPhil. from the historical Ravenshaw College, Cuttack. I am the third daughter of the eminent Odia poet, Dr Banshidhar Sarangi. He was a recipient of both the Odisha Sahitya Akademi Award and the Central Sahitya Akademi Award for his poetry collections, which showcase the rich cultural tradition of Odia poetry and his unique writing style. My mother, Kabita Sarangi, though a housewife, is a great inspiration to me to stay active in the field of literature.

DRP: How did you emerge as a poet? What were your inspirations?

IS: I started writing small poems at the age of 11, which were published in school magazines. Being a poet of great repute, my father had a tremendous impact on me through his poems. Since childhood, I used to read and recite his poems loudly, even if I couldn't completely fathom them, and I was enchanted by their subtle musicality, or 'dhwanis'.

My father subscribed to a number of magazines like *Chandamama* and *Shishu Lekha*, along with many detective novels, which lit a spark for reading in me. Reading magazines and books remains the best 'medium of entertainment' for me. My father has been a trendsetter in modern Odia poetry. Many poets and literature lovers used to congregate at our house to meet him and interview him. The personality of those litterateurs inspired me a lot.His research was focused on the Odia classic *Bhagabata* by Atibadi Jagannath Das. He involved us three sisters in his research work, and he would sometimes narrate the unique experiences of his research days. He always advised us to watch classic films like those of Guru Dutt, Satyajit Ray, and a few others. All these factors inspired me to spontaneously enter the field of arts, poetry, translation, and criticism.

I was the first person among my siblings to enter the field of writing and to get published in reputed magazines and journals. I recall being awarded the State Youth Award for Poetry by the Odisha Government in 2001. In a TV programme about me, when my father was asked about my writings and involvement in literature, he said, with a voice choked with emotion, "My life now got extended".

DRP: Which genre is your favourite in literature, and why?

IS: I've written poems, critical reviews, short stories, translated poems and novels, and written some features as well. Writing poems is what I love the most. Translating poems into other languages is challenging, and I love that challenge too.

DRP: Are you a bilingual poet, and in which language are you most comfortable?

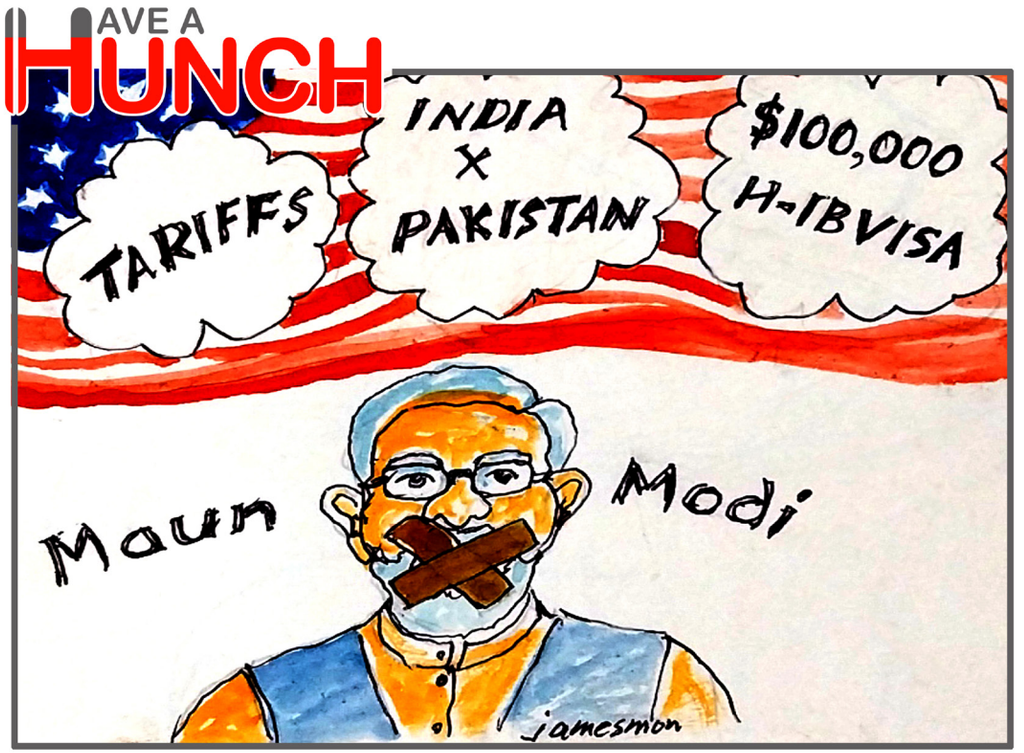
IS: I love my identity as an Odia Poet. However, I am equally comfortable in Hindi and English as well.

DRP: How many books have you published? What is the soul of your writings?

IS: A total of 18 books have been published to date. I have six original poetry collections, and one book published on contemporary Odia poets. I also have seven translated books; among them, my Odia translation of Dr Kedarnath Singh's *Bagha* was nominated for the Central Sahitya Akademi Translation Award in 2022. Additionally, I have edited four books. As for my own poetry, I think my poems express life in its expanded form. They are reflections of my reactions to certain social taboos. My poems contain sharp edges, like a knife, often serving as satires on the social situation, while simultaneously being full of empathy for the oppressed. In terms of style and word choice, I try to be laconic, making my words more suggestive and metaphorical. One will find an abundance of imageries in my poems, which I draw from the natural world, myths, and historical depictions that seamlessly become symbols. Ultimately, appropriate words, thoughts, and expressions are always elusive; one has to invoke them with austere meditation—Saadhana—to write a worthy poem.

DRP: Please tell us your own definition of poetry.

IS: Poetry, for me, is the only means of living. It is the way through which my thoughts find words, my reactions get reflections, and the



reflections of my reactions get a concrete shape. I believe poetry is a quest for the meaning of life. It can be a celebration of your own self, a meditation upon existence, an exultation of feelings, an invocation for peace, an original prayer without any formal offerings. It's a direct connection of the soul with the Super Soul. It has its own momentum, own rhythm and rhyme, and its own echoes too.

DRP: What are the current trends in Odia literature in your view?
IS: Nowadays, Odia literature has four generations of writers. The younger generation is a bit reactive and likes to write on themes of love, rejection, and revolution. The other three generations are focusing on themes of mysticism, atrocities on women, Dalit consciousness, and nostalgia for their rural life. All are very experimental in their writings, and Odia poetry is on par with the poetry of any other Indian language.

DRP: Tell us about your awards.
IS: Although I have received a number of awards from different governmental and non-governmental organisations, the phone calls, messages, and letters from readers are the most important awards in my life. Notable organisational awards are State Youth Award for Poetry, Odisha Bahi Mela Yuba Saraswat Samman, KLF Samman, Utkal Mani Yuba Kabi Samman, Tanmay Tarunya Samman, Chausathi Yogini Pratibha Puraskar, Basanta Muduli Smruti Samman, Sumitra Nandan Pantha Smriti Puraskaara, Uttar Pradesh, and so on and so forth.

DRP: Please quote some of your favourite lines from your poems.
IS:

From ***Devi***

I won't turn escapist
Imploring the earth to tear asunder,
Nor would I stand myself anymore
At the threshold of a hermit
Decking myself with
The ornaments of curse, and
Turning myself into stone.
The word 'waiting',
Even if it may be for
Purushottam,
Has to be obliterated
From all desires,
consciousness
And transient supplications.
Now that the feet are raised
For stepping out—
There will be no more vacillation.
They will be climbing steps
Till they reach the sanctorum;
Their imprint will remain embossed
In Heaven, Earth
And the Nether world.

From ***Pandora's Box***

I grew up;
Gradually, dreams became heavier
And were bound to remain
In a sealed box,
Like a half-knit sweater.
Like a teddy bear—eyes yet to be fixed.
After marriage
As I moved to a new shelter
I found true happiness—
A mirage.
Yet, living with dreams
Had its own beauty.

From ***Ode to Time***

Leave back a clue, O Time!
How to uncoil
The labyrinthine knots
Of bundles of interrogation.
O sentinel
At the end point!
Do keep your sphere
Open in two halves—
I'll either take shelter
Or crawl out
To vanish into
A nothingness.

From ***Yashodhara***

Torture on women
Has always been scripted
As tales shrouded in
Bright velvety clothes,
The hell she lives in
Is deceptively portrayed
As heaven, And her pangs
Candescent like burning coal
Glorified in myths
As her divine stoicism.
I'm Yashodhara, Siddhartha,
I'm Yashodhara.
Lamps in your palace
Glow up with my sorrows, and
You're illuminated
With the burning
Of my own self.

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