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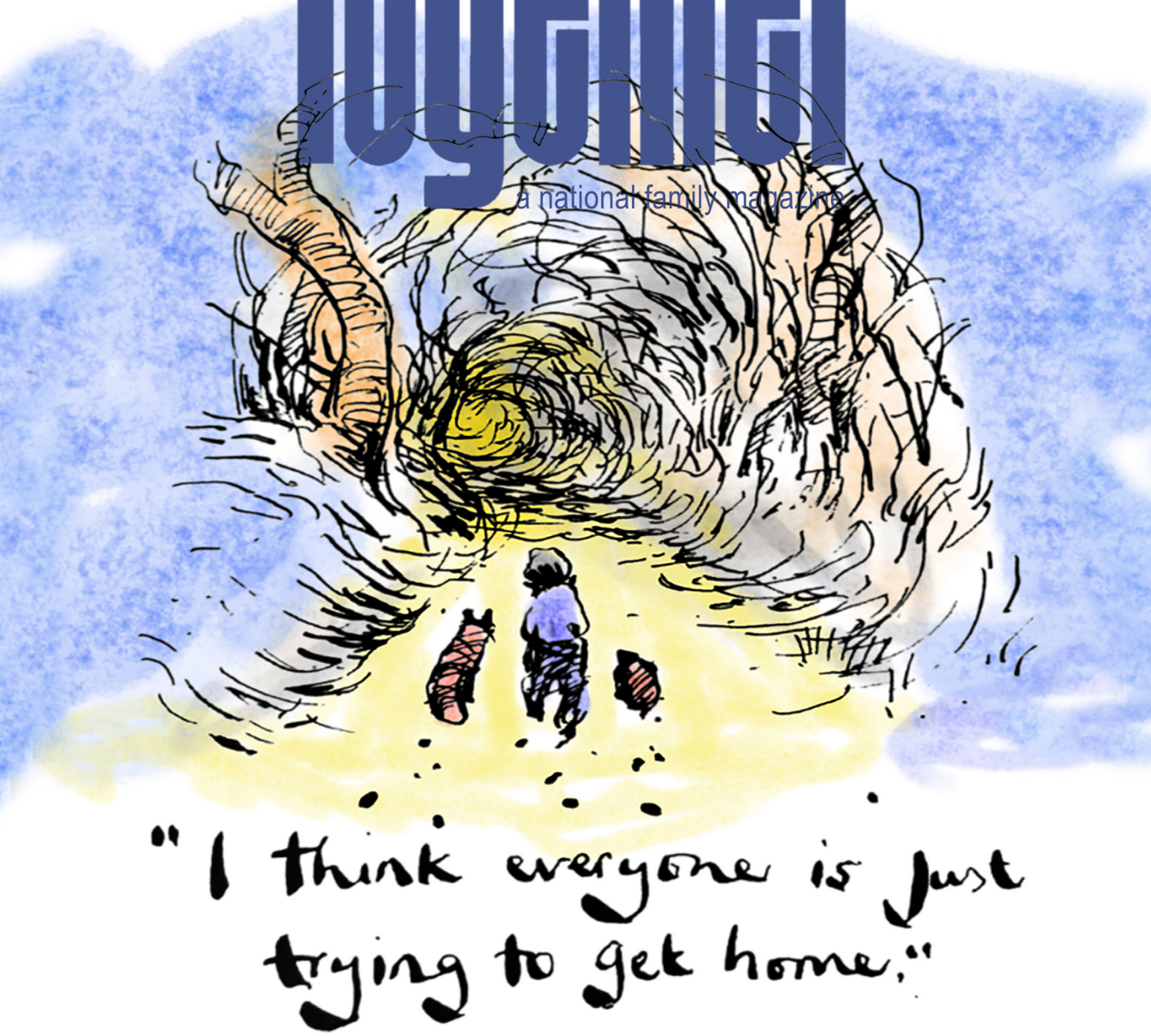
together

a national family magazine



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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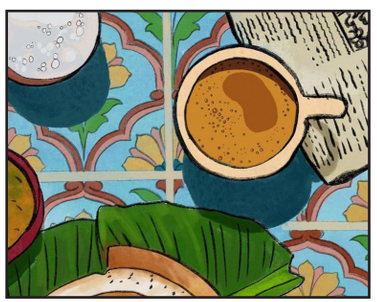
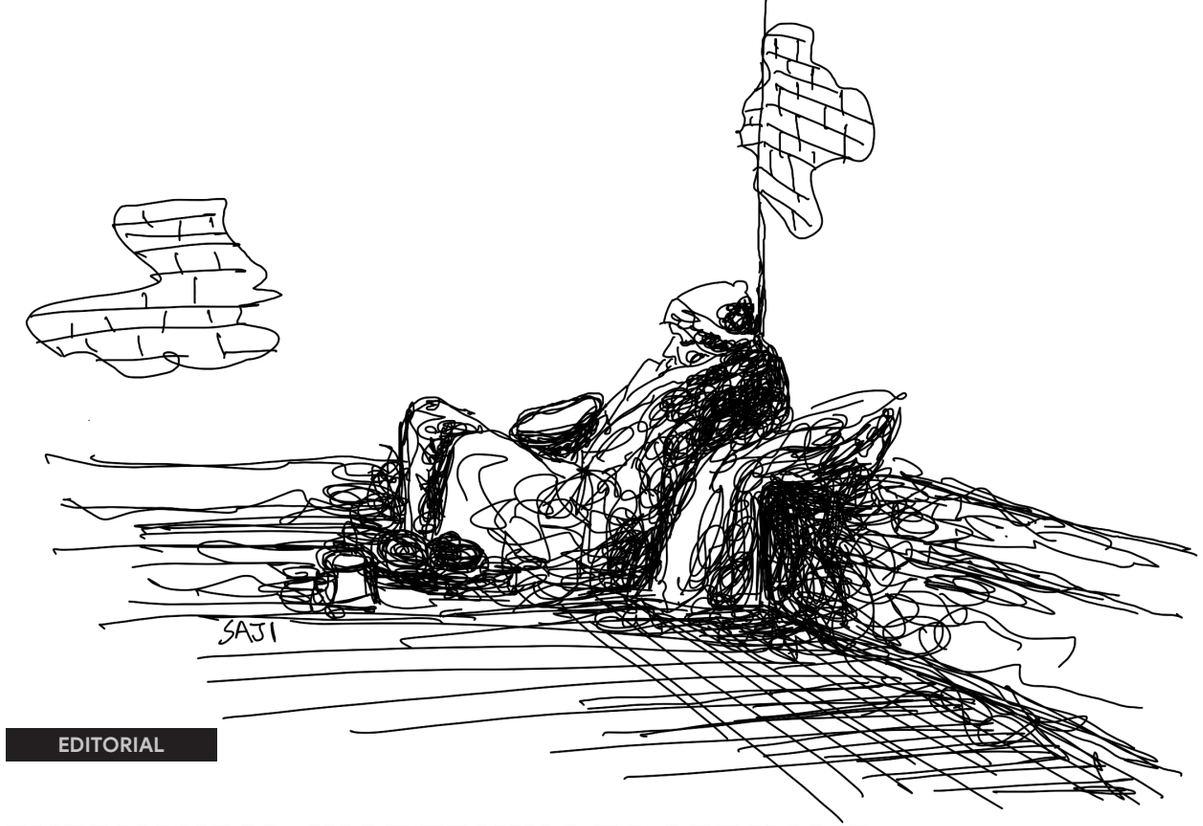




EDITORIAL

EVERYONE IS JUST TRYING TO GET HOME

SAJI P MATHEW OFM

Bengaluru has been my home for a while now. Few things unwind me in this place as much as meandering through Church Street and its neighbouring quarters. On arriving here one comes face to face with diverse people and lives: some selling and some buying, some performing and some watching, some courting and some breaking up, some driving by and some staying on, some eating and chatting and some drinking and getting high, some plugged into music and some reading a book—no two people do the same thing on Church Street. Recently, arriving at MG Road, strolling down Church Street, at Blossoms (one of the biggest book houses in the city), whilst flipping through the pages of the illustrated book, *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox, and the Horse*, by Charlie Mackesy, my lips read the words, "I think everyone is just trying to get home." Slowly my brain heard it and nodded. Interested in its illustrations, I sat down there with that book, reading some pages and flipping others. Not everyone is trying to get home; some perhaps are trying to find it afresh—where they belong, feel accepted, safe, and authentic.

The narrative framework of *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox, and the Horse* centres on a boy's literal journey home. Lost in the wilderness, the boy wanders through unfamiliar terrain, seeking the way back to his physical dwelling—what he knew as home. We all experience moments when we don't know which path to take, when the landscape of our lives becomes unfamiliar, and when we long for the comfort and security of a known place. The boy's companions—the mole, the fox, and the horse—do not provide directions; they offer something far more valuable: presence, alternatives, wisdom, and companionship. This reveals the first truth about our search for home: we rarely find it alone.

One of the most poignant moments in the book occurs when the mole asks the boy, "What do you want to become when you grow up?" The boy's response is profound in its simplicity: "Kind." This exchange represents a homecoming of a different sort. The boy discovers that his true aspiration is not to achieve or arrive at a home, but to be a home for others and for himself.

Throughout the book, the characters repeatedly demonstrate kindness to one another. The mole, initially driven by his hunger and apparent selfishness, learns to think of others. The fox, wounded and suspicious, gradually opens his heart to trust. The horse, wise and gentle, carries the others when they are weary. Each act of kindness creates a moment of home—a space where vulnerability is met with care, where weakness is met with strength, and where fear is met with freedom, where we don't have to pretend to be stronger or wiser than we are. I stopped flipping the book any further when I heard the boy ask, "What is the bravest thing you ever said?" The wise and strong horse answered, "Help."

Coming out of the privileged space of the large bookshop after spending hours in it is like walking out of a cinema theatre in which masses embrace and enjoy fictional and magical narratives through "willing suspension of disbelief"—one forgets cold human realities for the safer illusory, spiritual, and heroic realities.

The Homeless Don't Go to Blossoms

As night sets in, the city returns home. The frenzy dies out. If one stays long enough and sees deep enough, one sees humans covered in soiled blankets and opened out cardboard boxes on street benches and pavement corners, retiring for the day—the homeless. Church Street is a busy commercial and cultural hub, part of the Bengaluru East Zone, which has the second-highest concentration of the total 17,000-plus homeless people of the city. According to the 2011 Census of India, the country has over 1.77 million homeless people. On the face of it, having a home to return to in the evening is a privilege.

Driven by poverty, low wages, unemployment, inaccessible medical care, driven out by political conflicts, wars, homelessness is real and exists everywhere. One singular reason why people in our cities and towns go homeless is not because there are not enough houses or there is too much population but because there is insufficient affordable housing. When houses, apartments and villas lie empty, people live on roadsides, pavements, in hume pipes, under flyovers and staircases, or in the open in places of worship, mandaps, railway platforms, because they cannot afford a house. They are the consequences and by-products of substance abuse, domestic violence, systemic discrimination, the absence of adequate social safety nets, and predatory capitalism.

Globally, millions sleep without shelter each night. In wealthy nations boasting unprecedented prosperity, tents of the homeless sprawl in the shadows of gleaming skyscrapers. They include not only the stereotypical mentally ill or addicts but also families with children, employed workers whose wages cannot cover rent, and elderly people whose savings have evaporated. The cycle begins: when you have no address, you lose access to employment, banking, healthcare, and often your identity documents; when you have no place to clean yourself, you lose dignity; when you have nowhere safe to sleep, you lose the capacity for rest and healing.

One needs more courage to meet the homeless on the streets. We are okay with meeting the homeless in a book, in the comfort of our homes, cafés, or bookshops. But when they stand for real on the streets we drive around them, we avoid them, we look the other way. When we acknowledge a crisis without feeling its weight or acting, we move from ignorance to indifference—ignorance perhaps could be tolerated.

Homelessness is not a character flaw or a lifestyle choice; it is a circumstance that can befall anyone in a society with inadequate safety nets. In truth we too are only a few misfortunes away from homelessness—a serious illness, a job loss, a family breakdown, a war, an ethnic genocide, or an eviction by a totalitarian regime. For a positive change the question must shift from "What is wrong with them?" to "What is wrong with a society that allows this?"

I Was Separated from My Homeland; What Remains Is Resilience and Hope

On the day I was leaving Tibet, it became the last time I saw my mother. My uncle says I held her hand tightly and refused to let go.

LHAMO KYAB

I was born in Tibet, the land of my roots and identity. When I was only five years old, my life took a turn I could not understand. I was separated from my parents and brought to India, searching for safety, education, and a future. I was too young to remember all the events — the journey, the landscapes, or even my final days in Tibet. But my uncle, who brought me to India, has shared those memories many times. Whenever he speaks, those forgotten moments come alive within me as if they are happening again.

He told me that I used to live with him in a monastery, and my mother would visit me whenever she could. On the day I was leaving Tibet, it became the last time I saw her. My uncle says I held my mother's hand tightly and refused to let go. No matter how hard he tried, I wouldn't release her hand. It was a moment of pure love between a mother and her child — a bond so strong that even I, at that young age, could not accept being separated.

Finally, my uncle took both of us to a small toyshop. When I got distracted by the toys, he singled my mother to leave. The moment I realised she was gone, I cried uncontrollably. When we returned home, I climbed a wooden electric pole, calling out for my mother from the top, believing that somehow, she might hear me. My uncle later told me that distracting me was the only way to help my mother go, even though it broke both of their hearts. Whenever he shares this story, tears still fill my eyes — because even if I cannot remember it clearly, I can feel the pain deeply.

After reaching India, I grew under the compassion of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama and the care of the Tibetan Children's Village (TCV). They gave me an education, guidance, and a home filled with love. Many children like me had left Tibet for a chance to meet His Holiness and to live freely as Tibetans. Though TCV provided everything for our growth, nothing can fully replace the warmth of a mother. I remember once being hospitalised in school and imagining my mother walking toward me. When I realised it was only my imagination, I cried silently.

A surprising chapter unfolded when I reached Class IX, I discovered that I have an identical twin brother in Tibet. Until that moment, I had no idea he even existed. I slowly began to contact him, and eventually my mother as well. But when I first spoke to her after so many years, I could hardly understand her. And she could hardly understand me. I had forgotten my mother tongue after growing up in India. She cried. And I cried too — not just because of the language, but because distance had taken away even our words.

Determined to rebuild that bond, I started watching movies and listening to things in my language. Over time, my fluency returned. Now I can speak freely with my mother and my twin brother. Each conversation reminds me that love can survive any separation — time, distance, and even forgotten language. Although my twin brother and I have never met since the day we were separated as children, we talk often, share stories, and hold on to the hope that one day we will embrace again.

My journey — from Tibet to India, from separation to rediscovery — has shaped me into who I am today. I am grateful to His Holiness and TCV for giving me a home when I had none, and for guiding my life with compassion and wisdom.

I carry the pain of my past, but also the strength it gave me. And I continue to believe in the day when I will stand alongside my mother and my twin brother, completing the circle that life once broke.

Navigating Homelessness

If you ever have the chance to interact with the homeless, be kind. It is not their choice to live that life.

MEOR DANIAL

Have you ever seen a homeless person by the side of the road? Or in front of a shop? How about on a park bench? What is the first thing you think of when you see them? Is it something along the lines of "Aw, I feel so bad for him," or more along the lines of "Ugh, he looks disgusting. I do not want to get near him"? Whether you think of them in pity or repulsive sight, you should know that you are closer to joining them than you might think. All it takes is one accident that will leave you with a bill that you will have to worry about and probably couldn't pay your whole life, or being let go from your job when you don't even have two months worth of emergency savings, or having your house burn down because you left the iron on, or the loss of a parent who is providing for the family. Whatever scenario it is, you are much closer to going through what they have been experiencing than you are to being that rich millionaire with a mansion for a house and a pool in the backyard.

I have had my share of volunteering, from helping the homeless, to helping the orphanage, to feeding people Iftar during Ramadhan. I have talked to some of the homeless people, and their stories are both sad and shocking to hear. To know that people treat them like animals and shoo them away just for asking for change or food to eat. To hear that she was chased out by an abusive family because she was not a perfect child. To hear that some of these people were born into the homeless life and that's all that they have ever known. That to them, us talking to them like human beings and treating them nicely was the best memory they had that year, more than any food or items that they have received.

Doing volunteering work has humbled me, and it has opened my eyes. It has let me see their point of view, has let me imagine the glimpse of walking in their shoes, and let me tell you, you are much closer to experiencing what it feels like to not have anywhere to go. To have to come early and fight for a spot at the homeless shelter for a night. To have nothing at all but the clothes on your body. To have to rely on soup kitchens or NGOs or volunteers for your next meal. To have to search for scraps of metal to sell to get money and survive. To be looked upon by other people as trash, as scum of the earth, just for lying down on a cardboard box on the streets and not being able to find a place to rest. You are much, much closer to experiencing that than you think.

That is why, if you ever have the chance to interact with them, be kind. They don't choose to live that life. They don't choose to sleep under a bridge while it is raining heavily. They don't choose to lie down on hard cement floors while cars, trucks and motorcycles are honking left and right. You don't need to give them all your money. Just treat them like a human being. Talk to them, ask them how it's going, listen to their stories, maybe buy them a meal. They are more appreciative of a conversation and being treated nicely than they are of being given an absurd amount of care packages when they don't have a place to keep them.

Don't get me wrong, please donate to the homeless if you can. Buy them food or essential items like toothbrushes and pads and soap if you want to. But when you do, don't exploit them.

These days, we can see posts on TikTok and Instagram of influencers buying a large amount of food and distributing it to the homeless people, all while shoving a camera in their faces. To some, it may come off as a way to get views. To others, it's a feel-good video of people doing a kind act and inspiring others to do the same. But how do you think the homeless people feel? To have the hardest moment of their lives showcased for tens of thousands of people, if not more. To have their faces shown as the faces of the homeless people that needed charity, the faces some of which people might recognise. To have the lowest points of their lives be recorded for Internet clout.

These are real people with real stories, real histories and hardship that they are going through. It's not their choice to be homeless. No one wants to be homeless. Everyone wants a home to go to, a warm bath to take at the end of the day, a delicious meal to eat and a comfy bed to sleep in for a good night's sleep.

But the odds are against them. To change their lives, they need resources, resources that they most likely don't have. They need to get a haircut, proper clothes and shoes, transportation, an address to a home, a bank account, a phone. How are they supposed to have that opportunity to get a job when all the things that they need to earn money, costs money? They can't even start to change their lives, forever stuck in that loop of wanting to get out but not being able to.

So the next time you see a homeless person, don't mock them. Don't harass them. Don't be angry with them. Push aside the fact that you might also one day end up like that. They are also human beings, and every human being deserves decency and kindness. Offer a coffee or a sandwich or just have a proper conversation. I promise you, that simple act of kindness will mean the whole world to them.

Existential Musings on Home

I try to make peace with the realisation that life is just a journey of understanding which place you can call home every night.

ISRA SHAIKH

Two of my friends got married last week and I put aside my mortal enmity toward the concept of marriage and stagnation in my grief arc to realise that I have no idea what I'm doing or where I'm going and that we all try to find meaning in the work we do. But life happens sometimes and we end up homeless. The moral of the story—everything is a D&D campaign if you think hard enough.

Home is a word that feels like sanctuary—a safe space where who we truly are feels welcome and whole. It is a place where freedom lives, yet freedom is a paradoxical gift. To me, home is freedom. The freedom to be myself without constraint. Yet freedom, in its existential truth, demands a painful price. It is fleeting, elusive, a promise glimpsed behind curtains that only vanish. Freedom tempts me with visions of who I might be, leaving me to wonder what that would feel like.

Existential philosophy teaches us that this experience touches the core of what it means to be human. Existential thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger reveal that freedom is not merely a right or condition but an ontological reality: we are condemned to freedom, forced to choose and create our essence through those choices. I personally find that incredibly disturbing yet alluring. The notion that we are truly in control of how things end up. Sartre famously said, "Man is condemned to be free." So what do we do with the weight of absolute responsibility for defining ourselves in an indifferent universe? This freedom births anxiety and existential loneliness, a homelessness that Heidegger describes as "uncanniness", a feeling of not-being-at-home-within-the-world but which also ignites the possibility for authentic movement and transformation.

I, for one, have found much that is uncanny. I have found much loneliness. More so in terms of my relationship with acceptance of the way life has been. While I currently find myself in the stage where I struggle to get back on my own two feet, I also try to make peace with the realisation that perhaps life is just a journey of understanding which place you can call home every night. Which home accommodates your fall.

The soul becomes a nomad, lost in a landscape of possibilities and failures, seeking a home that escapes capture. Yet Heidegger and others argue that this homelessness also holds transformative power. It provokes an "existential mobility", a restless, creative movement toward new possibilities. Where do we go from here? The answer, I have come to realise, has always been —to yourself. I can see you roll your eyes. No matter. That is the journey. Here are your dice.

The word "home," then, expands from a physical place to a profound existential metaphor. It signifies a process, a continual "dwelling-mobility," where we live in the paradox of freedom and rootedness simultaneously. The task is not to eliminate homelessness but to welcome it as a vital part of growth. It is in the trembling space of not-being-at-home that we open our hearts to authentic self-expression. This is the existential invitation: to live courageously in the uncertainty and make a home out of ourselves. I think the balance is delicate. And that is exactly why I would miss home fondly when I was studying, and then miss studying when I am at home.

In this light, my experience of homelessness, or failing to be who my visions demand—is not an end but a call to movement. Although I lack the creativity in this time or space, it is a call nonetheless. Back in school, my headmistress used to headbang at morning assembly—"This is a wake up call". I used to struggle to stay awake at 8 am back then. And maybe that was the point.

To embrace existential freedom is to accept that true homecoming requires the courage to face our own naked existence. Sartre's heroic one-liner—(I'm sure he must have thought it in the shower, the best things come from showers) "existence precedes essence" reminds us that we are not bound by fixed roles but are very much free to craft meaning through our choices, even amid failure and loss. I have always tried to remind myself that resting in the present moment and reaching toward open horizons are not opposites but a unified way of being fully alive. And my good friends—bless them—have always reminded me the same too. And these reminders are necessary because it is the nature of man to grow accustomed to his thoughts.

Ultimately, home is found less in external certainty and more in the embrace of our existential homelessness with open arms. It becomes the courage to stand in the vast unknown, to hold our contradictions and vulnerabilities, and bravely weave a refuge from the possibility that nothing ever happens. Freedom and home are, paradoxically, two faces of the same reality: the challenge and promise of being fully, authentically ourselves in an ever-shifting world. When you are free you yearn to rest your head. When you are resting you yearn to stretch your wings. The lack of direction means you can embrace the wind. The lack of wind means you are stuck in the same spot.

This is the haunting beauty of the journey. To be forever homeless yet continually coming home. It is a freedom that demands everything but offers the possibility of true belonging: within the confines of yourself.

Currently I struggle to make meaning out of the life that I dreamed myself to have and the life I've made for myself so far. We all made friends and lost friends, and made lovers and lost lovers, but have tried to sit with our thoughts and maybe then we realise that it's all a part of it. And the best part is just letting life live through you. And that will always be the best part.

Where the Heart Lives, Home Exists

AREEJ DURRANI

This winter morning, while sitting at home and sipping a hot cup of noon chai (pink tea), enjoying it with freshly baked Kashmiri girda, a message arrived asking me to write on homelessness. The irony of the moment was striking, for in the warmth of familiar taste lay the true meaning of home. For some time, I wondered what could be written about homelessness. In that very moment of thought, a familiar ache returned, the longing to stay forever in one's hometown. This quiet longing revealed that homelessness is not always about the absence of shelter, but about the absence of belonging. Even when surrounded by luxury, safety, and comfort, the heart continues to long for familiar streets, food, culture, and routines. Leaving home, Kashmir, has never been easy. With each goodbye, the pain deepens and love grows stronger. In that quiet moment of departure, a part of the heart stays behind even as life begins to move forward.

Often, while being caught in traffic on unfamiliar roads, thoughts wander toward the quiet comfort of life in one's hometown, where everything felt known, where public transport was never a necessity, and where daily life unfolded within the safety of familiarity. Although the unfamiliar city does not feel unkind. Life moves smoothly, opportunities unfold, and adaptation slowly takes place. Yet, despite growth and adjustment, a quiet sense of homelessness lingers within. This feeling does not arise from rejection of the new surroundings, but from the absence of shared experiences that once shaped identity so naturally. Different languages, histories, and rhythms of life create a subtle emotional distance.

As the days pass through these roads, the sight of tall coconut trees, people sipping hot filter coffee, and the smell of steamed idlis and masala dosa often awaken a quiet longing for home, for chinar leaves, noon chai, wazwan, saffron kehwa, traditional bakeries, and the familiar images of Kashmir's

Homelessness here is not about shelter, but the loss of belonging, identity, and connection.

roads. The towering buildings and endless apartments, impressive in their own way, gently bring to mind the open gardens and the warmth of home. The contrast does not create distance, but it deepens the awareness of two different worlds that shape identity in their own ways.

Everything feels different. The new city teaches many things, independence, growth, resilience, and exposure to unfamiliar worlds. Yet, in this process, the quiet comfort of home is left behind, the hometown where childhood unfolded, where the best memories were made, and where countless changes in society were witnessed from close quarters. Distance, in its own silent way, becomes a teacher too. It teaches gratitude for what was once taken for granted and an appreciation for roots whose value is truly felt only in absence. Growth always arrives with change, but change always carries loss within it. The comfort of the hometown, where childhood was spent, lifelong friendships were formed, and social changes were witnessed closely, slowly turns into memory.

The joy of meeting someone from one's own homeland is deeply emotional. It lies in being understood without explanation, in shared references, familiar food, similar festivals, and common stories. These shared experiences create an invisible bond that no adaptation can replace. When such connections are missing from daily life, homelessness begins not on the streets, but within the self.

Small moments, like seeing different kinds of food in lunch boxes, bring a silent awareness of belonging. Each culture carries its own beauty and uniqueness, shaped by its own history and rhythm of life. Even these smallest moments—shared meals, conversations, and language are woven with identity. It is through these ordinary details that the sense of home is formed.

Thus, homelessness in this sense is not about lacking shelter or safety. It is about the quiet loss of belonging, the subtle displacement of identity, and the emotional distance from a place that once defined existence.

As the old Kashmiri saying goes, "*Ghar'e wandhai ghar'e saasaBarr'e nearhai ne zahn*," reminding that no matter how far one moves, the pull of home never truly fades, and the heart always continues to return to where it belongs.

Migration and Identity

Those who live far from home carry with them a cultural and spiritual soil that cannot easily be displaced.

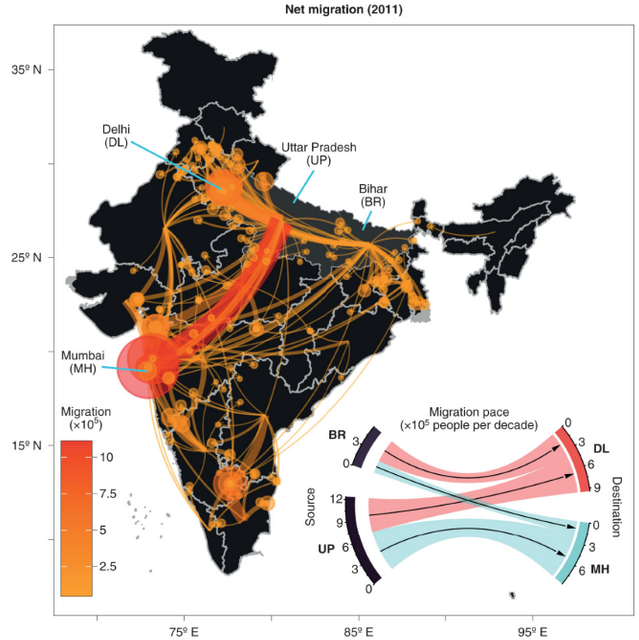
GINS FRANCIS OFM

People are carriers of worlds; wherever they go, worlds go with them. The name Gershom carries a quiet ache. It emerges from a moment when a man far from his homeland confesses, "I have become a stranger there." The word is brief, but it holds an entire world of displacement, of waking up in unfamiliar landscapes, of carrying memories in one's hands like fragile treasures, of standing between what was and what is yet uncertain. In the Bible, this confession does not unfold as tragedy but as honest recognition: the human heart knows when it is not at home. The story of Gershom thus becomes a symbolic doorway into understanding the condition of countless people today who live and work away from their place of origin, often feeling suspended between belonging and non-belonging.

To live as a stranger in a foreign land is not merely to change one's address. It is to inhabit a space where identity feels unsettled. Many who journey far for livelihood or education describe this unsettling as a kind of homelessness. It is not the absence of shelter, but the absence of rootedness. One may live in a comfortable room, yet the heart drifts restlessly. The familiar sounds, rituals, climates, and languages of home become distant landscapes recalled in fragments. This form of homelessness is subtle yet deeply human, shaping the inner life of those who must constantly adjust themselves to new customs, new expectations and new expressions of community.

This condition is visible in many parts of the world. In the Gulf, workers often live with the awareness that their stay depends on fragile permissions. Any change in rules can interrupt the life they have built. In European cities, those from South Asia or Africa experience a similar sense of impermanence, walking a thin line between opportunity and uncertainty. Even within India, those who move from one region to another in search of livelihood experience a quiet distancing. Interstate migrants face language barriers and exclusion from local welfare systems. They are unable to fully claim the festivals, languages, or social rhythms of the place where they now reside. Their homelessness is not material but relational. It is the homelessness of not being able to say, "I am truly from here."

Yet, this experience does not remain only a wound. Those who live as strangers often demonstrate remarkable creativity in preserving their identity. People recreate their cultural worlds even in the smallest spaces. The smell of their traditional food cooking in a rented room, the gathering of friends to celebrate a festival with improvised materials, or the quiet pride of teaching a child the language of their ancestors. In cities like London, Munich, or Barcelona, Indian and African communities have introduced festivals that the local population now joins. In South India, North Indian workers prepare Durga Puja in temporary spaces. These efforts reveal a deeper truth. Those who live far from home carry with them a cultural and spiritual soil that cannot easily be displaced. Their creativity becomes a means of survival and a subtle assertion of dignity. Zygmunt Bauman, one of the renowned sociologists, calls it "liquid identity," a flexible and adaptive sense of self, formed in response to constant change.



Seen in this light, the experience of being a stranger is not merely one of vulnerability but also one of possibility. It is a call to become "Pilgrims of Hope" that offers a way to reimagine this condition. A pilgrim is not defined by where he stands but by the direction of his journey. Homelessness, when understood through this lens, becomes more than a social condition. It becomes a pathway toward new forms of meaning. Those who live away from home often discover resilience they did not know they possessed. They learn to form relationships across cultures, to adapt without losing themselves, and to build communities from fragments. In their longing for home, they also uncover a longing for deeper human connection and a more just and compassionate society. Migrants carry the wounds of exile, yet they also bear the seeds of renewal. They remind us that hope is not the privilege of the settled, but the courage of those who continue to move forward despite uncertainty.

There is an invitation for societies to reflect on how they receive those who dwell among them as strangers. It challenges us to see the stranger not as an outsider but as a co-traveller whose presence enriches the shared journey. When hospitality is extended, homelessness becomes less of a wound and more of a shared responsibility. When dignity is honoured, the experience of being Gershom becomes an encounter with human solidarity rather than isolation.

In conclusion, Gershom is not only a name from distant history. It is a living metaphor for the countless individuals who dwell away from their origins, carrying both longing and courage. Their homelessness is real, but it is shaped by resilience, creativity, and hope. When framed through the vision of being Pilgrims of Hope, the experience of estrangement is transformed. It becomes a narrative, not only of loss, but of becoming, of finding identity in unfamiliar spaces and discovering new forms of belonging. In their journey, society is invited to recognise a truth often forgotten. Every human heart seeks a home, and every society is called to make room for those who search for it. Pope Francis beautifully says, "every migrant has a name, a face and a story. They are not numbers, but brothers and sisters."

READ

Climate hazards are threatening vulnerable migrants in Indian megacities

In recent decades, India has witnessed a rapid pace of migration from areas with intensive agriculture to populated megacities, which are faced with increasing threat from climate hazards. Greater attention is needed for vulnerable new migrants who lack necessary resources when designing adaptation and mitigation policies.

REFERENCE Hari V, Dharmasthala S, Koppa A, Karmakar S, Kumar R. *Climate hazards are threatening vulnerable migrants in Indian megacities*. Nature Climate Change. 2021 Aug;11 [8]: 636–8.

STAR POWER, POLITICS AND STAMPEDE

The lure of the mighty political stage is something that many actors cannot resist.

DR RUPA PETER

The stampede during a political rally and the resultant deaths in Karur, Tamil Nadu on 27 September is deeply distressing. It once again reeks of repetitive themes of poor crowd management, bad timing and lack of preparation by key stakeholders. However, beneath these layers lies another recurrent pattern that has marked the political history of Tamil Nadu. Yes. I am talking about Tamil Nadu's obsession with stardom and the inter-twinning of cinema and politics that has continued to shape the state's landscape.

Traditionally, Tamil cinema was closely tied to the Dravidian movement. Script writers like CN Annadurai and M Karunanidhi infused films with Dravidian ideology, rationalist messages and rhetoric against caste-based discrimination. CN Annadurai, who founded the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), later went on to become the Chief Minister of erstwhile Madras State and the first Chief Minister of the newly formed state, Tamil Nadu. Of course, M Karunanidhi, went on to become the longest serving Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu as he held office for over eighteen years in multiple tenures.

However, the credit for being the first superstar-politician in Tamil Nadu goes to non-other than MG Ramachandran (MGR), a legendary Tamil actor who joined the DMK in 1950's and later went on to found the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) party in 1972. MGR's film career – his choice of films and the roles he played were instrumental in his very successful stint as a politician and as Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu for three consecutive terms. In a vast majority of his films, he played the role of the do-gooder hero who mouthed strong values, was hard-working and rescued entire communities from peril. This carefully crafted on-screen persona in films like *Madurai Veeran* (1956) where he plays the role of a strong and virtuous protector of the masses and *Naadodi Mannan* (1958) where he fights injustice and win's people love through courage and sacrifice laid the foundation for his political career. Also, MGR's films were highly representative of the demograhic that he was appealing to, with films being named as *Thozhilali* (1964) – the labourer and *Vivasayee* (1967) – the farmer. His charisma, his impressive punchlines delivered with great gusto made him a mass hero and later turned him into a politician who had a formidable presence in Tamil Nadu's political scene. MGR's political rallies drew huge crowds and fans and followers hung on to every word uttered during such events. And of course, his funeral procession in 1987 was one of the largest public gatherings, marked by a grief-stricken crowd, prodding on for hours under the sweltering Chennai sun. His death like his several public appearances resulted in mass hysteria and public grief – synonymous with star appeal and political power that sways over the state.

His death heralded the domination of another star who seamlessly transformed from a glamourous actress to a political iron lady of sorts. J Jayalalithaa who starred as MGR's co-star in several box-office hits, went on to become the propaganda secretary of the AIADMK party, led by MGR and a Rajya Sabha member later on. She continued successfully onward in her political journey and was sworn in as the Chief Minister of the state for six terms, even though she managed to complete only four full terms due to legal issues and her ensuing death in her last term. J. Jayalalithaa was an orator par excellence and drew huge crowds during rallies. She was fondly called 'Amma' and had a cult-like following with women worshipping her and men prostrating before her. Despite several controversies over an adopted step-son and several corruption cases, she was able to reign strong in the hearts of people who continued to bring their babies to her overcrowed rallies for her to name them. The Amma brand name was used to the hilt with Amma canteens, Amma baby care kits and even Amma pharmacies. The cut-out culture, which is the act of installing hoardings along the path that she travelled during political rallies and campaigns reached new heights and added to her already larger-than-life image. She did create a she-hero image that caught the imagination of the state like no other – the intersection of the reel and the real, creating a strong political magic.

The lure of the political stage was something that many actors could not resist. Sivaji Ganesan, another iconic actor briefly entered politics with his own party but failed to make a mark. Captain Vijayakanth, another popular actor founded Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDK) and despite garnering huge visibility, the party did not hold strong. However, the actor's funeral was another crowd-puller, driven by strong sentiment and heavy-duty emotions, with Television channels covering his death for several days.

Kamal Haasan launched Makkal Needhi Maiam (MNM) in 2018 but the party's electoral success has been limited. There was intense speculation that superstar Rajinikanth would announce a political entry for the longest time with several of his movie punchlines interpreted as political statements by the public. However, this did not materialise with the actor citing health reasons. Very recently, actor Vijay, who is fondly nicknamed, 'Thalapathy,' meaning commander and who has a tremendous fan-following launched his party, Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam in 2024 and right now is in the middle of a maelstrom due to the stampede in Karur during one of his political rallies.

So, what makes cinema and politics such strange bedfellows in this state? One reason could be the positioning of the protagonist itself in Tamil movies. Several of these actors are positioned as superhumans with a high moral compass and the ability to be 'saviours' of certain strata of the society. Then, there is also the overload of emotions inherent in hero-themed movies, most importantly, the 'mother sentiment' which makes the protagonist, the ideal family man with a golden heart and strong societal values; a man who is destined for greatness and goodness – themes that connect with the masses and can be carried forth into the political arena. The styles, the mannerism and the punch lines are the add-ons which have a strong mass appeal. This star power, where the shine of the reel is transposed onto real life political actors is what draws huge crowds to political rallies such as the recent one. Of course, the stampede and the loss of lives is the inconsolable aftermath that has ensued.

Christmas: Tearing Down the Insolent Might

The blatant lies by those responsible for the entire country in promoting fair and truthful voting manifest the extent of corruption at high places in order to promote a government that continually exercises harassment of the minority and fortifies itself with the majority.

GERRY LOBO OFM

Christmas should be celebrated! The breakthrough of the Transcendent One into the immanent earth of the fragile, weak and vulnerable human beings, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth is a most revolutionary event in human history. That one mere flesh of the flesh should have been born to die and die to live, cannot escape our memory. The entire Book of Creation is hidden in this person and the cosmos is lit because of the energy he exudes. Plants and fruits, water and fire, herbs and bushes are transformed into a family of sisters and brothers, interconnected with the common spirit. Animals and reptiles, birds and bees live in harmony teaching the rational beings the necessity of order and disciplined behaviour. The breakthrough of the Divine is a shattering event which not only had taken place two thousand years ago, but is also in operation today, though humanity is bent on blindness of the heart and deafness of the mind, creating floods of misery and destroying the energy of the Creator with arrogant will and persistent stubborn power.

Christmas should be celebrated today to drive home to the war-mongers, the dictatorial political masters and the crony capitalists that the earth cannot be appropriated by dominant will, and let the human spirit simply be eliminated at one go. God breaks through the ideologies and systems which are nascent, and perpetuated by the spear-headed emperors, the exploiters of the widows and killers of the orphans. Christmas is not a mere historical birth but a birth that happens today when the world is growing more and more aggressive in its technological advancement and scientific progress. The creation is not a 'once-upon-a-time' invention but an ever-moving dynamic reality, which is perceived in the birth of Christ. Christmas should be celebrated because those who command and steer this universe tend very much towards its destruction for their egoic gratification and wicked concupiscence. This mind is intolerable to the Divine Child, Jesus, and he can never cease the power of Love and the mighty strength of Goodness. Who is that power who dares to annihilate life on earth in her vivid forms? Christmas is not revelry but a drastic challenge, a piercing question and a sword penetrating the hard-hearted demagogues and terror-ridden cowards.

Christmas, the memory of the Christ-birth which took place at a time of violent power of a hungry and insecure king and when the census of the populace was ordered by the Roman ruler, has a definite place today when in a country like India where politics has become a destructive force, and the citizens are robbed of their human rights, divested of their dignity and the masses are hindered from enjoying the benefits of developments on all fronts. Power-hungry leaders strive by robbing their right to franchise, by deleting the legitimate citizens of the country and eliminating them from their human existence. The outstanding Bihar vote-robbery case is a repetition of the census that was to take place when Christ was born. The blatant lies by those responsible for the entire country in promoting fair and truthful voting manifest the extent of corruption at high places in order to promote a government that continually exercises harassment of the minority and fortifies itself with the 'majority.'

Christmas, the memory of Christ's birth during a time of violent rule and Roman census, holds meaning today in India where politics erodes rights, dignity, and blocks people from sharing in progress.

Truth-telling and righteous conduct is vanishing in our country, led by those whose conscience is always at peace no matter what a citizen suffers. Christmas, on the other hand, is Truth born into this violent, deceitful and lie-ridden world, an event which vehemently opposes the manufacturers of blatant hypocrisy, those wolves in sheep's clothing. Hence, this year Christmas is alive in those leaders, such as Rahul Gandhi, who have made their home on the streets having discovered fraud and falsity in the electoral roll in different parts of our country, determined to flash to the public the reality of the murder of truth and to announce to them that justice is not merely a right in the Constitution but she is God!

While angels proclaimed 'glory to God in heaven and peace on earth to people of good will' as the Scriptures tell us, King Herod was sadly nervous and felt threatened about the poor and fragile peace-maker's birth in a stable who he thought would displace him by usurping power. Such was the anxiety of a ruler who depended solely on an autocratic dictatorship to save himself. Obviously the king was not a person of 'good will' and he knew that he would not derive any earthly profit from being a virtuous man. He inherited a murderous tendency and willed to feed it and bury himself in it without a troubling, disturbing conscience. Christmas is a weapon against the seed of violence and war rooted in the human person as quite distinctly evident in the world leaders of today, whether they are in Russia, Israel, Ukraine, the NATO powers or even in India. Peace is terror for these heads, and war is peace! Despite the defensive strength exhibited by the leaders of the nations with military apparatus or political majoritarianism, the God who breaks through the world in a weak and humble form continues to remain strong until he eliminates the destructive seed and establishes the world order that existed at the seventh day of creation. Christmas is a divine power that uproots the violent greed and the fear about justice and peace. Sadly enough, for the Herods of today, over seventy thousand, including thousands

of babies and children, killed in Gaza Strip is a matter of pride. For the different terror groups prevailing all over our continents dismantling and destabilising the peace that people enjoy is also a matter of great dissatisfaction, for they exist with the ideology and practice of terrorism and act accordingly. Christmas for these is bad news in a negative sense. The potential quality of Christmas unsettles their works and leaves them bereft of shedding the destructive tendencies within them. Hence, they prefer and decide to hold on to their lethal minds for their own final end.

Christmas should be celebrated everywhere. The Hindutva-ridden political leaders of our country fear the power of Christmas. They fear the stillness, gentleness, compassion, forgiveness and a sense of universal home for all of Jesus of Nazareth whose birthday is celebrated every year. The immediate reaction to Christmas, from these religious men and women, is violent protest for fear of proselytism. This clearly indicates their narrow perception about themselves, about God whom they worship and suspicion about others' legitimate practice of religion. The God who breaks through is a non-partisan divinity, unconcerned about what religion one belongs to, and one who embraces sinners and saints, drunkards and robbers, prostitutes and cloistered virgins committed to God. Christmas respects each one and does not pluck out anyone of any religion. There is no end to accusations against the believers in Christ or the believers of Islamic religion in our land by the strong-headed and fanatic Hindutva propagators. Even the deeds of compassion served to the needy, irrespective of their religious practices, are understood as tactics employed towards conversion to one's religion. Christmas, on the other hand, is life and compassionate practice of those Christian religious Sisters, who were accused of converting the marginalised women who were already Christians and who had willingly opted to work with them to earn their livelihood, and were unlawfully arrested recently in North India. This clearly points to the insecurity of religious-political leaders before the break-through of God who comes to be at the side of the oppressed. Christmas should be celebrated in order to eliminate such criminal thinking from the protectors of religion and clear their consciences of evil intent.

Self-seeking and protectionism dominate today, as ambition drives power-holders to misuse influence, while more people crave honour and compete for recognition.

Self-seeking and protectionism has become a common factor today in our country, as in the entire world. Political ambition is driving people for positions and influence for which criminal mind is utilised by those who have secured power but are not satisfied with it. More and more women and men in our society are craving for honour and are trying their mite to compete with others. Christmas should be celebrated precisely to demonstrate that the break-through of God into this world in the person of Jesus Christ is not to seek any security for self, rather to ensure human dignity to every person on earth and to let all creatures live their independence. The birth of the Poor One is to enable the human person to affirm his or her real and profound security in the Creator. Money power at work today in sectors of civic and social enterprises is scandalous and also murderous. Self-seeking is diminishment of the power within the human heart of being altruistic and inter-dependent. Christmas is the out-going of God whose love can never be protected for self-seeking goals which the human people dearly desire and hold on to. Christmas, therefore, should be celebrated, not to protect one's selfish ambitions by robbing the poor neighbour and pompously wasting and ruining the common home, our mother earth, but by creating a sensitive heart and establishing a family where no one lives without love. Insensitive celebration of Christmas is an outright rejection of the Child born in our own home, as Herod did! It is an offence against the Creator!

IN PICTURES

Where the Hills Vanish: Life Amidst Quarries in a Hill-Surrounded Village

SAM VENKAT

Krishnagiri—a district whose very name enshrines "Giri" (hill)—bears witness to its own erasure. Villages like Shoolagiri, Sundagiri, and Gunduguriki carry their mountainous heritage in their syllables, yet watch helplessly as the landscape that christened them crumbles into commodity.

While the Western Ghats command ecological reverence and international scrutiny, the Eastern Ghats remain invisible, overlooked—convenient for extraction, forgotten in conservation. These hills do not march in continuous formation but exist as scattered fragments, vulnerable patches of earth that refuse to cohere into political significance.

One such archipelago of stone shapes Krishnagiri district, perched at Tamil Nadu's edge where it bleeds into Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. This borderland breeds a distinct resilience: people here speak three languages—Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada—and more than half survive by coaxing sustenance from the soil. They celebrate festivals across linguistic boundaries, weaving a cultural fabric as interconnected as the hills themselves.

These communities do not merely live beside the hills—they worship them. The surrounding peaks stand as Kuladevi or Kuladevam, ancestral deities forged in stone and reverence, guardians who watched over generations. Small temples punctuate the ridgelines, mostly dedicated to protector deities like Muneeswara or Goddess Yellamma, shrines that testify to centuries of devotion.

Granite and M-sand extraction—branded as "alternatives" to river sand, as if destruction could substitute for depletion—gnaw at the mountains with industrial hunger. The hills are not merely threatened; they are vanishing, reduced to rubble, their vertical majesty flattened into horizontal profit. This is not gradual decline but systematic dismantling.

This photo story follows a single day in the Shoolagiri block of Krishnagiri, a region renowned for ragi and pudina production, where the rhythm of agricultural life now syncopates with the percussion of dynamite.

“We are completely dependent on the water supply from the Kelavarapalli Dam in Hosur; the lakes no longer fill naturally. I’ve witnessed the lake and well in my village dry up in my own lifetime. Later, even the tubewell stopped working—after the quarry blasts, the vibrations affected everything. Now, the average groundwater level in my village is more than eight hundred feet deep.” — Kesavan from Dam Kothapalli, first-generation graduate.

Eight hundred feet. Consider what it means to drill through that much earth just to reach water—to pierce through layers of rock that once held moisture like a prayer, now desiccated by explosions that shake the very aquifers loose. Kesavan’s testimony is not merely personal memory but geological testimony: a landscape unraveling in real time, its hydrological integrity shattered by the same blasts that fragment the mountains.

The irony is brutal. In a district named for hills, in villages christened after peaks, the communities watch their namesakes disappear while their water descends ever deeper into inaccessibility. The hills that once captured clouds and fed springs now stand as hollow monuments to extraction, their absence echoing in dry wells and silenced tubewells.

This is not development. This is devouring.

The sacred has become the sacrificial. The deities carved into hilltops now preside over their own demolition, powerless against the logic that transforms worship sites into profit margins. What price do we assign to ancestral reverence? What value do we place on a community’s spiritual geography when granite commands a market rate?

Kesavan represents a generation caught in devastating transition—educated enough to articulate the loss, rooted enough to feel it viscerally. First-generation graduates like him

inherit not opportunity but elegy, not progress but the documentation of disappearance. They are fluent in the language of development while being native speakers of devastation.

The hills of Krishnagiri are vanishing. But they do not vanish silently—they leave behind craters and dust, tremors and dried wells, displaced deities and communities forced to depend on distant dams for the water that once flowed freely from their own land. They leave behind people like Kesavan, who measure loss in feet of unreachable groundwater and speak with the precision of someone watching their world literally erode.

Where the hills vanish, what remains? Not emptiness, but extraction's aftermath—a landscape gutted, a hydrology broken, a people severed from the sacred geography that shaped their identity. The question is not whether we will notice the disappearance, but whether we will notice in time to prevent the next mountain, the next village, the next eight hundred feet of water lost to the hunger that never satisfies, the machinery that never stops.

In Krishnagiri, the hills are not merely scenery. They are scripture, written in stone, now being erased line by line—and with them, the language of belonging itself.

SPARKLING SYMBOLS OF THE SEASON

LEO ANTONY

Like many other festivals, Christmas, every year, brings with it several nostalgic memories and symbols that usher in a spirit of celebration, love and gratitude. It is a season for festive cheer, twinkling lights and warm gatherings with our loved ones. Yet, beneath the surface of these joyous celebrations lies a profound significance that resonates with people of most cultures and faiths. Symbols and gifts can remain mere outward expressions that lack the depth of the message they are meant to convey as well as enrich us unless we understand and are inspired by them.

In short, Christmas, as the reliving of Jesus' birth and the values such as selfless love and forgiveness he represented and sacrificed his life for, truly deserves a celebration worthy of everything it stands for. Someone has described Christmas as the bridge between hope and reality. Peace on earth which surely is an earnest hope in our own turbulent times can come only when we practise and spread goodness, love and kindness. This is the essence of Christmas and the context in which we need to understand all the dramatic symbols and the festivity that fittingly go with Christmas.

The most familiar and sought after emblem at Christmas time is the Christmas star, often seen as a symbol of guidance. For some, the star can stand for the strange astronomical phenomenon on that glorious night, which led both the rich wise men as well as the humble shepherds to find and acknowledge the new born child as their Saviour. For many of us today, the same star should reflect the light of love that guided Jesus to sacrifice his life for us. After World War II there was an interesting custom in the United States, whereby families would display on their homes, a flag with a golden star whenever one of their members had made the ultimate sacrifice of laying down his life while fighting for the country.

The spirit of selflessness and generosity and the act of giving without any expectation is echoed in the narration of Jesus' birth, where his humble parents received kindness, warmth and shelter from total strangers for the birth of the child Jesus who had come to spread messages of compassion, kindness and generosity. Giving gifts represents this same gesture of sharing love and kindness with others. After all, Christmas is a celebration of the human connection and the tradition of gift giving or sharing a meal underlines the importance of relationships in our lives. Around Christmas we see Santa as the big guy in a red suit, stealthily going round with a bag and distributing gifts amidst cheers. Actually, the modern idea of Santa is based on the life of the bearded Saint Nicholas, a bishop who lived towards the end of the 3rd century in Myra which now lies in modern Turkey. He was known for his generosity and kindness, especially towards children and the poor. The Dutch carried this legend to North America where the Dutch word Sinterklaas for Saint Nicholas was gradually Americanised to Santa Claus. The story of Santa Claus is actually rooted in the real-life generosity of Saint Nicholas.

Christmas is never complete without the Christmas tree. The evergreen tree that remains fresh through all seasons symbolises immortality or eternal life which had been promised to us at that very first Christmas which happened two thousand and twenty five years ago. It leaves us with hope and optimism because Jesus promises us that the lives of the virtuous will triumph and continue even after our physical death. The familiar Holly that goes with decorations and on the face of Christmas cards has a connotation similar to that of the Christmas tree. Holly was revered by ancients in Northern Europe as a symbol of winter's resilience and the promise of spring, alluding it to eternal life. The prickly leaves represent sin and pain while the rich red berries symbolise Christ's ultimate sacrifice that brought hope and joy to the world. Like in most religions, lights, lanterns and decorations around the Christmas tree signify the triumph of light over darkness and emptiness in life

Carols are very much an important and emotional part of Christmas. They evoke happy memories and warmth, often connecting us to the past, our cultural heritage and our loved ones. They bring people together and create a festive atmosphere. While some of them remind us of the scene of Jesus' birth, others often carry deep messages about the gift of oneself, highlighting the importance of kindness, humility, justice, peace, love, devotion and joy, focusing on and inspiring us with the values associated with Christmas. Even that simple and not so well known carol Early One Christmas Morning wherein the poor shepherd boy is heard singing: 'Im just a lonely shepherd boy. No earthly riches have I, but the love and devotion I give thee will last till the waters run dry' is so full of reverence and innocence. Similarly, 'The Little Drummer boy' carries with it a deep meaning on the gift of oneself, rather than material things, highlighting the importance of simplicity, sincerity and humility which made the song a Christmas favourite.

The Christmas Crib reminds us of the fact of God becoming one with us in very ordinary and humble circumstances in a manger or trough that was used to feed cattle. On the night of Christmas 1223, at a time when the world was turning materialistic, selfish and greedy, Saint Francis of Assisi created the first ever live nativity scene in Greccio, Italy, featuring an ox, a donkey and a manger with hay to impress on everyone, the humble circumstances of Christ's birth and to understand the values of humility and simplicity. This is the origin of the devout custom of erecting cribs in homes and churches. Cribs are meant to evoke in us, the values of simplicity, kindness and generosity associated with Jesus' birth.

Interestingly, some of today's cribs also employ sophisticated innovations to portray contemporary and social issues. Nevertheless, it is desirable that we never loses sight of the deeper messages the crib stands to convey.

Although customs and practices such as decorations, music and festivities around any religious festival, including the season of Christmas may seem like mere hallmarks that we make use of to express our devotion and sentiments, they surely serve to create and enhance the festive atmosphere and make the festival more touching and vibrant. They do bring families and friends together, usher in a joyful atmosphere and thus occupy a meaningful place in the community. At the same time, a deeper understanding of the traditional customs, their significance and their relevance to our lives can surely help to make our festivals and the values they represent, an important part of our personal lives.

May the magic of Christmas bless and inspire us to spread kindness, peace and joy.

Keep the Innkeeper IN Christmas!

The innkeeper did not just make room in his inn; he made room in his heart.

JOHN SEKAR OFM

Ever observed the missing innkeeper in the Crib set? The angels, shepherds, goats, cows, the three Kings besides the Holy Family have got their place but innkeeper hasn't. Isn't this the man who actually gave Mary and Joseph a place to stay the night?

Maybe it's because this innkeeper refused a decent room for the couple knocking at his door late in the evening? How can he not but give a room when the woman was nine months pregnant? However, he deserves at least some credit. There was a census going on and people were flooding into the town.

No inns had any vacancies! How could he drive his guests away and accommodate this couple? The best that he could do was to make some space for the couple – even if it was the animal barn – he did come to their rescue! The poor, tired innkeeper at the end of that day still did something good, even if it was little!

The innkeeper didn't know that the woman at his door had been visited by the Angel Gabriel and the man was obeying the command of the same Angel. He did not know that the baby the woman was carrying was the son of God. Were he to know, he would have emptied his own room and accommodated this couple!

One little help this Christmas – a new dress for the one who cannot afford, a good meal for the one who has not even a single proper meal, a blanket for the one sleeping on the street, stationery items for the poor children going to school, a visit to the old age home for those who seek comfort in being visited and listened to...

But how could he ever know — wasn't all this part of God's plan? When the moment came knocking at his door, he did his part by accommodating the couple in his little animal stable, which has now become part of the greatest event in human history. His animal shed, together with its cows, goats, and donkeys, has become immortal — without which Christmas is not complete.

Remember, the innkeeper's little generous act! Remember, it was a tiny animal barn where the Son of God was born? What has become of the innkeeper of the Christmas event today? What has become of the animal shed of the Christmas event?

Time to ponder...

The innkeeper did not just make room in his inn; he made room in his heart. That is Christmas — making room for the other, the needy, the desperate, and those who need you! His generous and caring heart was the first crib. Though it was a divine plan that the Son of God should be swaddled in cloth and laid in a manger, this innkeeper cooperated with God's plan.

It's still alright if innkeeper does not appear in the crib set but his caring heart should form the centre of our Christmas activities. In the hustle and bustle of Christmas, commercialised and secularised today, let us not forget the essence of Christmas – God made room for the humanity and so humanity must make room for God and one another.

While we open our wallets for our own celebrations, let us open our hearts for God and for others!

The extravaganza displays at Christmas in some places are somewhat ironic with lakhs spent on Cribs while it was only an animal shed, with serial lights adorning the Church while the starry night was all the Holy Family had and with expensive gifts and clothes showcased while it was the gifts of the poor shepherds that the Babe of Bethlehem received. Not that we should not celebrate at all, we must but with moderation appropriate to what we truly celebrate: the birth of God in a manger in humility and poverty.

One little help this Christmas – a new dress for the one who cannot afford, a good meal for the one who has not even a single proper meal, a blanket for the one sleeping on the street, stationery items for the poor children going to school, a visit to the old age home for those who seek comfort in being visited and listened to... This is opening our hearts to God and to the other!

This is how we keep the innkeeper in Christmas – by keeping our hearts open, warm, and generous. Wait — isn't our heart the first crib for Christ to be born in? Make room in your heart and become that innkeeper of that silent and holy night.

No problem if the Crib set has no innkeeper — you be the one this Christmas, and throughout the Christmas Season!

You Are Not Homeless –The Light Is On for You Always

TOM THOMAS

The Advent season always seems to draw more than the regular numbers at the early morning Mass. This morning I was a few minutes late and rushing to enter the church when I noticed a couple at the front steps to the church, by the side. They were hesitating to enter the church, and finally they went away. This was playing in my mind throughout Mass, as I had been reading a book on the life-changing power of Confession by a cardinal: "The Light is on for you."

"The Light is on for you." This phrase is evocative of the light one keeps on at home, when a family member is expected back late. The light reassures the family member of the safety and comfort of an always welcoming home; in other words, one is never homeless. It was a campaign by the Catholic Church in the US to draw Catholics back into the confessional at the Lenten time. The Church worldwide is much the same way. The welcoming light of the tabernacle draws one into His presence, and the Mass is the summit of the experience of any Catholic.

During the Advent season, we are called to come back to Him through spiritual preparation, amidst all the external celebrations the season brings. We see a lot of emphasis on Confessions too, particularly in the week before Christmas, as a means of cleansing oneself from one's sins and coming back to Him and making space for Him in our hearts. Each church gives importance to this in the days before Christmas, and there are ample opportunities for making a Confession. The mandate for a Catholic is to go to Confession at least once a year. But is that really enough for us? Do we want to be minimalistic disciples or go beyond to get closer to Him, to be able to hear Him?

So many times over the years, I have felt the need for a Confession, and there has never been an instance, when having approached a priest, no matter how busy they are at that moment, that they have turned me away. "Wait a little while" might be the maximum request from them, and my Confession would be heard.

It is worth reading about the historical figures of St Fr Damian of Molokai and also the Commander of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höss, and how Confession changed both their lives. One, a living saint, Fr Damian, a priest living on an island in a leper colony, wanted to have a Confession done so badly that when a visiting ship carrying a priest could not alight at the island due to quarantine matters, Fr Damian came near the boat and shouted out his sins across the water to confess and asked for absolution, so great was his need for confession. The other, who had personally overseen the execution of millions of Jews, had a last-minute conversion, returned to his Catholic faith and made a full confession, going to the gallows peacefully. "I have inflicted terrible wounds on humanity. I have caused unspeakable suffering for the Polish people in particular. I am to pay for this with my life. May the Lord God forgive one day what I have done. It has been a hard struggle, but I have again found my faith in my God"—these were the last words of Rudolf Höss.

Most of the saints used to frequent Confession regularly. In fact, St Teresa of Ávila, St Alphonsus Liguori and St Francis de Sales, for example, in their writings, urge us to make a regular habit of Confession, with all three of them recommending weekly Confession. Pope Francis used to go for Confession once every two weeks, as he says, "The Pope is also a sinner." Mother Teresa used to go for Confession every week. Maybe we can't go to Confession every week with the modern-day hectic schedules, but can we go, say, every month? Of course, the frequency is not determined by a schedule but by the need.

I was thinking of all this as the Mass ended. The couple at the footsteps of the church had gone away without entering. I don't know what the reason was. Were they hesitating because it had been a long time since they visited? We must all know for a fact that the Light is always on for all of us. No matter what the past is, or how long we have been away from the sacrament of confession, we can come back to Him. The priest is always ready to heal our souls through the sacrament of Confession. Let us take the first step and return to the Light. Not only at the time of Advent, but throughout the year.

One might say: I confess only to God. Yes, you can say to God "forgive me" and say your sins, but our sins are also committed against the brethren, and against the Church (society). "But, I am ashamed..." Shame is also good, it is healthy to feel a little shame, because being ashamed is salutary. Shame too does good, because it makes us more humble.... Also from a human point of view, in order to unburden oneself, it is good to talk with a priest about these things which are weighing so much on my heart. And one feels that one is unburdening oneself before God, with the Church, with his brother. Do not be afraid of Confession!
—Pope Francis.

Salvador Dalí and Nuclear Mysticism

JAMESMON OFM

Salvador Dalí was one of the most popular artists of the twentieth century. Dalí was known for his surreal paintings. He had an uncanny sense of the reality surrounding him. The twentieth-century world, with its grim facts of the human-made evils, the genocide, the Second World War, Hiroshima and Vietnam and the rest, could not have made sense to him except through his paintings. Dalí was the son of an atheist father and a god-fearing, pious Catholic woman. Because of his father's insistence, he was not brought up in a strict Catholic manner. His world was divided from the very beginning; faith and reason were at war with each other, mostly represented by his own parents. By nature, Dalí was eccentric, flamboyant and loved glamour and sensationalism. But at the same time, he believed in creating a path for himself through his artistic engagement with the world around him.

Dalí underwent various phases in his development as a painter, and towards the end of his journey, around mid-1840, we see him painting great themes of Christianity, as evident in *Christ of St John of the Cross*. He returns to the themes of religion, science and philosophy. The *Corpus Hypercubus*, renamed crucifixion, and *The Sacrament of the Last Supper* are examples of his interest in the mystical and transcendental. We see him clarifying himself through these paintings as he comes into terms with his own belief system, and in the process, we see Dalí as a man who could paint as only a mystic could. Dalí was not a believer in the conventional sense of the word. But he had a great interest in a belief system that could reconcile faith and science. He was not averse to scientific enquiry, and from his young age, he had shown an interest, and he was also a voracious reader. For Dalí, geometry could be a route to eternal salvation. He would say later that the great intellectuals and thinkers would not satisfy him and that only science would provide him with everything, even including the immortality of his soul.

Dalí's later surreal paintings on themes of Christianity, was truly in search of a mysticism that would enable him to come to terms with the duality he experienced. Dalí, who returns later to biblical themes with renewed interest in atomic physics and Mysticism, had an encounter with a Spanish mystic of the 16th century, which inspires him to create compositions that dwell on mystical elements.

By 1940, there was a marked change in the outlook and reflection in the way Dalí painted, and that came after he encountered two World Wars. His personal life was also greatly affected by the rise of the Nazi regime. He had to take refuge in the United States of America in order to survive and continue with his painting career. It was at this time that the news of the great atomic bombing of the Japanese cities came to him. The nuclear explosion over Hiroshima and Nagasaki shook him thoroughly as he would say: "The atomic explosion of 6 August 1945 shook me seismically...Henceforth, the atom was my favourite food for thought. Many of the landscapes painted in this period express the great fear inspired in me by the announcement of that explosion."

Dalí painted and held exhibitions in the States, but he had made a clear break with the surreal that had its source in Sigmund Freud. His interests now shifted to atoms, nuclear physics and Mysticism. He would even write something called the mystical manifesto. Dalí would love to address himself as a mystic, though he may not exactly fit the mantle of a mystic. We shall look at one of his paintings, which was a result of his encounter with St John of the Cross, who himself had drawn a crucifix with a different perspective that was never seen before, which was a result of a vision St. John had. The encounter with this great mystic of the 16th century, through John's writings on Mysticism, Dalí himself was transformed inwardly. This new insight he gained from St John of the Cross, together with his own scientific enquiry, pushes him to create something totally fresh and ground-breaking.

Dalí and Christ of St John of the Cross

St John of the Cross was not known as an artist, and yet in the late 16th century, after he had a peculiar vision of Christ hanging on the cross, he made a drawing of the crucifixion with an unusual perspective. In this perspective, John drew Christ crucified, hanging between the sky and earth, the lifeless body contorted, his head hanging forward, with the body supported only by nails. It looked as though someone was observing him from above. In 1945 and later in 1950, Dalí was invited to have a discussion on this drawing, and he was greatly inspired by the Spanish mystic and even read some of his works.

Dalí and His Painting of the Crucifixion

Before St John of the Cross, who was a mystic rather than an artist, no one had ever depicted the crucifixion in this manner, with an unusual perspective. This was something new and opened up a new way of looking at the whole life, and this particular event in the life of Christ. St. John wanted the viewer to take a new standpoint from which to look at Christ. He was invited to stand above Christ, from a new vantage point, where he/she would get new insights and visions of the world in relation to the crucifixion. This is what moved Dalí greatly. This vision of the mystic John of the Cross began to resonate with the quest that Dalí had carried within himself all the time. When Dalí reads the works of St John of the Cross, he sees a master in him who could guide him to new avenues of Mysticism, together with science. Dalí's quest to find a way to reconcile faith and reason finds an answer here.

John of the Cross was not a professional artist, and therefore, his mystical vision and the subsequent drawing of what he saw in his vision were not controlled or limited by the rules

of artistic engagement. His perspective went beyond the common.

This vision and perspective is what Dalí was looking for. He sees his own struggle to break free of all contemporary, artistic limitations put on any painting of the biblical themes or portrayal of the crucifixion. Daly would say later in 1950 that he had a 'cosmic dream' in which he encountered a vision that represented in colour the 'nucleus of the atom.' This nucleus later took on a metaphysical meaning; he considered this 'the very unity of the universe,' the Christ! Secondly, through the guidance of Father Bruno, a Carmelite, Dalí saw the Christ drawn by Saint John of the Cross; he sketched geometrically in a triangle and a circle, which 'aesthetically' brought to a conclusion all his earlier explorations. Just like in the drawing of John of the Cross, Dalí too wanted his viewer to see what he sees about the crucifixion. He sees in Christ the way to the absolute, his body acting like a bridge, uniting the whole universe in himself, acting like the nucleus of the entire universe. It is here that Dalí combines science and faith. The painting is done with much help from geometry and physics. He would call it Nuclear Mysticism.

Dalí and Mysticism

The world wars and the atomic explosion in the 20th century affected Dalí in myriad ways. He saw the transitory nature of human life, its fleeting nature, and at the same time, he fell in love with the power and energy of the atom. It is here that Dalí begins to explore a mysticism through his painting involving science, especially geometric possibilities, together with atomic physics. He even comes out with something called the nuclear Mysticism. Here we see that Dalí always wanted to push the boundaries of classic belief systems and explore ways to reconcile the impossible in the opinion of many of his contemporaries.

In his *Mystical Manifesto*, one can easily see the deepest yearning of a man who could see the entire universe as one unit, though manifested in millions of ways. He saw the possibility of reflecting this harmony through geometric structures and his knowledge of nuclear physics. It is to see oneself in the universe and the universe in oneself, all realities coming together as one whole. This was the supreme state of Mysticism that Dalí explored through his paintings. His arguments are expressed through his way of composition. The image of Christ is symbolically standing as the nucleus of the atom around which the entire universe is built. For Dalí, his drawings in preparation for such a composition act like his logic and reasoning, and his painting stands as proof that such unity and harmony are possible.

Dalí's paintings stand out for capturing profound human struggles—psychological, social, political, and spiritual—reflecting both theistic and atheistic conflicts.

Dalí's paintings have been exceptional in the sense that they express the deepest human struggles with regard to one's psycho-socio-political and spiritual make-up, theistic and atheistic struggles. Dalí painted what he was. He painted his struggles and his quest for the sublime. He painted in order to satisfy his own need for affirmation of what he believed in, namely, a universe that was not fragmented but one.

Dalí experimented with all kinds of media and styles, surrealism being the prominent one. In surrealism, he found a way to understand his own psyche, and through the act of painting his inner world, he tried to make it into a medium that all could relate to. That is why Dalí had a lot of admirers and takers for his painting as much as there were ardent critics. Dalí prompts our minds to think deeper, not to remain satisfied with the apparent. His paintings achieve a transcendental and mystical quality that only he could have created.

SHORT STORY

Theirs to Tell!

CELESTE CHARLES

I've been rummaging time and time again for words that quantify the loss of what once felt familiar within the confines of my walls. Sheets of coffee-stained recipes, written in a language now crusty and withering, crumble under the weight of leftovers. They hold the musk of a woman whose presence still clings to their edges: Aani Maasi, who would arrive at 9 with lauki and shak wrapped in old newspaper. Her black beaded skirt shimmered with mirror lace, her pallu tucked firmly into her waist as she sorted through the day's pickings with the practised ease of someone who had spent a lifetime coaxing life from stubborn earth. The marks left by birthing five children traced themselves across her body, softened now by the hand-poked flowers she had allowed to bloom over those old stitches.

Ammachi, on the other hand, was a curious cat. In her pale yellow cotton saree, fringed at the bottom and neatly pleated, she would sit on the cool floors around noon, shredding bitter gourd. She sipped her tea in the verandah of the government quarters in Jamnagar, eyes fixed on the tulsi in the quadrangle. Sometimes she peered out, her small head floating above the parapet, tiny enough to disappear into the long walls stained with the red of beedis. There was always the quiet dread of speaking to people who couldn't roll their tongues enough to make space for her avial and moru curry in a lunchbox.

Back home, she loved her dew-covered blades in her parambu, the cattle mooing, the tall coconut trees guarding that small piece of land that came alive at four. The veragu would be lit to steam tapioca, chilli and coconut crushed with ginger on a stone, fish rubbed with pepper, chilli, kokum, and curry leaves. Ammachi was plucked clean from her family, transplanted

into a strange land that struggled to meet her halfway.

Aani Maasi would spread her tarpole right outside the verandah of the little blue quarters. That was her spot, her small kingdom, and with a poise sharp enough to quiet even the boldest tongues, no one ever dared drift too close. The street always woke up to bikes humming, kado rickshaws sputtering, and employees waddling toward offices with bags slipping off their shoulders.

On one such sun-bright morning, Ammachi realised she had run out of lemon to clean the fish. Dreading the heat, the haggle, the idea of stepping out, she walked down to Maasi's tarp. A man on a cycle suddenly swerved in, his arm shooting out to grab the thin gold chain on her neck. She froze, but her reflexes reacted—balancing on one foot like a startled flamingo, catching herself. Before she even registered what she was doing, her hand shot out and clamped onto the thief's wrist.

What came next was a sharp, furious "Arre, kamino!"" Bastard!" followed by the aerodynamic whistle of a flying chappal, Maasi's chappal, cutting through the air and smacking the thief square enough to throw him off balance. The cycle wobbled, skidded, toppled like a badly stacked onion basket.

Maasi marched over, pallu tucked, chin lifted, looking like the patron saint of civic duty and good lemons. Ammachi stood there, heart thudding like someone knocking on her ribs from the inside. The chain hung half-broken, and her hair had come loose in that stubborn curl she never managed to pin down. Maasi dusted her palms like she'd just rearranged a crate. "Jha," she grunted. "Go." She nudged the fallen cyclist with her toe. He scrambled away, leaving tyre marks wavering like a badly drawn line. Ammachi exhaled, one of those long breaths she usually reserved for burnt tempering or unexpected guests.

Maasi picked up her chappal, dusted it, then looked at Ammachi, checking if she was okay. Ammachi nodded, adjusting her saree pleats that had gone rogue. The verandah felt strangely smaller, as if the air had folded in to watch. "Nimbu che?" she asked: "Lemons?" in broken Gujarati she'd picked up from the verandah, maybe to change the topic, or so to justify being outside in that heat. "Haan haan," Maasi said, already reaching into a crate. She brought out a steel tumbler of water and nudged it towards her.

And that was that. The incident folded neatly into the ordinary morning. Bikes, rickshaws, gossip, heat everything resumed. But something had shifted. Maybe it was the way Ammachi accepted the water without protest, or the way Maasi was around a moment longer. After that, something loosened between them. Ammachi lingered near the verandah when she heard the tarp being shaken out. Maasi, who usually operated with the briskness of someone perpetually late to her own life, arrived a little earlier.

Their conversations started small. "Garam che," Ammachi would say, wiping the sweat off her face. "Haan, kale vadhse," Maasi would shoot back. "It will increase tomorrow." Some days it was a nod, a shared eye-roll at a loud rickshaw. Other days it was a ten-minute conversation, Ammachi's Malayalam-laced Hindi, Maasi's Kutchi-Gujarati rolling like warm dough. They understood enough. Soon, Ammachi started sending bowls of idiyappam, eggs boiled just right, coconut grated so fine it looked like snow in the heat. Maasi sent back parcels wrapped in old newspaper; sukhdi, crisp outside, collapsing into sweetness. "For the kids," she'd gesture.

One afternoon, when the heat pressed on their necks, Ammachi invited her upstairs for tea. Maasi arrived with an eggplant roasted directly on flame. She mashed it with garlic, chilli, salt, and oil, making odho. Ammachi watched, fascinated.

And the kitchen became a place where two languages, two geographies that never met on a map, found a shared corner. Ammachi showed her how to wring coconut milk; Maasi showed her how to test sukhdi dough, pressing her nails in until pale crescents bloomed. They laughed at each other's tangled pronunciations, both of them rehearsing the other's language long after the kitchen had gone still. No grand declarations. Just a slow stitching.

Years went by. Seasons shifted. The shade of blue on the quarters peeled like dry skin. But Maasi's tarp still appeared, and Ammachi's verandah still smelled of tea and grated coconut. But language kept slipping in. Maasi's Kutchi frayed at the edges, sometimes cracking like an old mirror. She paused mid-sentence, searching for words that once came easy. When they didn't come, she sighed: "Bhuli gayi. I forgot."

Ammachi never corrected her. She waited the way one waits for a pot to cool before lifting the lid. She knew how language thins first at the edges, then in the echo of your own name. But what they held on to most was sukhdi. Not the dish itself. Anyone could learn it. What mattered was how Maasi made it: the warmth of dough, the crisp-soft promise beneath her palms, the rolling pin clicking against the board, layer folding over layer, her murmured words hovering between instruction and prayer. Ammachi listened, taking in what she could, unaware that forgetting seeps through generations.

She too began losing little bits, not the written recipe, but the muscle memory: how long the dough needed to rest, the weight of the rolling pin, Maasi humming over each spiral. Between the two women—their half-held languages, their stubborn insistence on feeding each other—each kept a portion of home intact.

I grew up on stories of Maasi's mirror-laced skirt, Ammachi's tea, of chirotis and sukhdis that never tasted the same twice and idiyappam that always did. But I didn't grow up where they grew up. I didn't hear Kutchi in the air or Ammachi's Malayalam softened by longing. My language came from elsewhere—English, city-light Hindi, and the thin strand of Malayalam stretched through phone calls.

Ammachi's hair softened into silver. Maasi's laughter thinned into memory. Her tarp stopped unfurling at dawn; the street breathed without her, unbothered, unchanged. But their kitchens refused to disappear. They hovered, warm, insistent, alive in ways the women no longer could be. I didn't lose a language; I never fully had it. But I hold the fragments of two women who did.

Glossary

aachar a metal container or tiffin box.

appam soft, lacy fermented rice pancakes from Kerala.

avial a Kerala dish made of mixed vegetables, coconut, and yoghurt.

bhugo Kutchi dish made by sautéing meat or vegetables with spices usually dried to preserve it.

chiroti a festive flaky pastry made from layered dough, deep fried and dusted with sugar or dipped in syrup; also called *chirote*.

dabba a metal container or tiffin box.

idiyappam Kerala string hoppers made from rice flour, steamed into delicate noodles.

kado rickshaw black auto rickshaw

Kutchi language and culture of the Kutch region in Gujarat; distinct from standard Gujarati.

lauki bottle gourd, a common indian vegetable.

moru curry a kerala yoghurt based curry tempered with spices.

odho Kutchi style mashed and smoked eggplant preparation (similar to baingan bharta).

pallu the loose end of a saree draped over the shoulder.

parambu Malayalam word for a compound or piece of land around a house.

rotli thin Gujarati flatbread (similar to roti, but typically softer and made with wheat or bajra).

shak vegetables or cooked greens; Gujarati term for sabzi.

sukhdi sweet made with wheat flour, ghee, and jaggery.

veragu firewood used for cooking in traditional Kerala kitchens.

Home as Prison: Contemporary Indian Cinema's Domestic Interrogations

NIKHIL BANERJEE

A home is where the heart resides, where memories forge and relationships anchor. Every home is a house, but not every house is a home. You can buy a house, but you must build a home with love. This philosophical difference—between physical and emotional, structural and spiritual—forms the axis upon which contemporary Indian cinema has been rotating, particularly in its interrogation of familial spaces as sites of both sanctuary and suffocation.

Recent Indian cinema, particularly Malayalam, has examined the home not as the "sweet home" of greeting cards but as a complex place where love and control become indistinguishable, where protection transitions subtly into restriction.

Veettilekkulla Vazhi (The Way Home, 2010)

Dr. Biju's National Award-winning film follows a doctor (Prithviraj) who lost his wife and child in a terrorist attack, yet undertakes reuniting a boy with his terrorist father. Here, home transcends physical structure. The doctor journeys through Kerala, Rajasthan, and Ladakh seeking a home defined not by walls but by belonging. What does home mean to a child whose father is wanted? To a doctor carrying grief? The film suggests that home, at its core, is connection—fraught, dangerous, yet essential.

Home (2021)

Rojin Thomas's *Home*, starring Indrans, presents a father desperate to bond with smartphone-addicted sons. Beneath its feel-good surface lies a painful study of invisible walls. Oliver Twist navigates a world that has left him behind, while his sons' sarcasm reflects generational cruelty. The film's sharpest insight: modern homes are full of people physically present but emotionally absent. Winner of the National Film Award for Best Feature Film in Malayalam (2023), it shows that protection and presence are not the same.

Kishkindha Kaandam (2024)

Dinjith Ayyathan's ambitious film borrows the Japanese maxim of three wise monkeys—"see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil"—and turns it against familial protection. Appu Pillai, a retired officer with dementia, his son Ajayan hiding a family secret, and Aparna, a new bride, embody willful ignorance. Appu denies illness, Ajayan avoids the past, Aparna silences questions. Families protect themselves not from threats but from truth. The forest house symbolises isolation, where "love" is surveillance and "protection" is deception.

Eko (2025)

Ayyathan's *Eko* uses ecofeminism to interrogate protection. Set in a bygone era, it follows Mlaathi, an elderly woman secluded in misty hills. Dogs trained to confine her act as barbed wire—one even bites when she tries to leave. They obey only one master, exposing patriarchal protection as control. The home, meant to safeguard, becomes a cage.

Kazhcha (2024)

Shyamaprasad's *Kazhcha*, adapted from MT Vasudevan Nair's story, presents a home that must be escaped. Sudha, living in 1990s Madras, returns to Kerala to announce separation from her alcoholic husband, facing family disapproval and stigma. Her marital house was confinement. The film shows how women often enforce patriarchal oppression, with criticism harshest from other women. By choosing separation—claiming "a room of her own"—Sudha disrupts the myth of marital sanctity. Her grandmother, speaking without prejudice, offers a counterpoint: belonging through acceptance, not enforcement. The film recalls Kerala's matrilineal past where women enjoyed greater freedom.

3BHK (2025)

Sri Ganesh's Tamil film examines aspiration. Here, home is not reality but dream—a family's longing for a three-bedroom house. Vasudevan's lifelong goal organises family life, with everyone sacrificing the present for the future. The film captures the yearning to own a home in rising Chennai, showing how the dream itself can imprison—lives defined by what they lack rather than what they have.

Aachar & Co (2023)

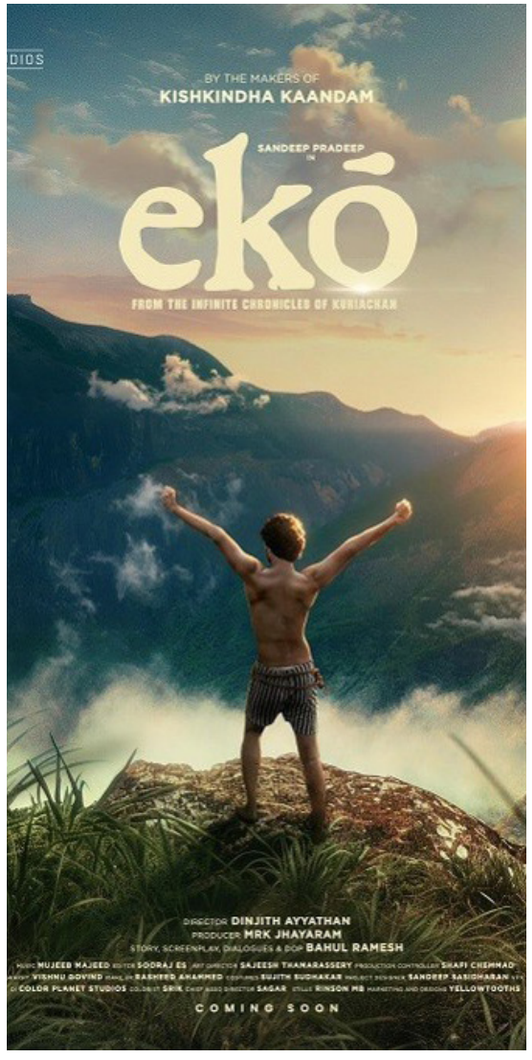
Sindhu Sreenivasa Murthy's Kannada film takes us to 1960s Bangalore, into Madhusudhan Aachar's household of ten children. Following Suma, the eldest daughter, it explores how traditional homes functioned as factories producing gendered citizens. The home nurtured yet confined—a place where women learned resilience because survival demanded it.

Kapoor & Sons (2016)

Shakun Batra's film situates us in a dream house in Coonoor, then dismantles it. The Kapoor family simmers with anger and resentment beneath rituals. Secrets—infidelity, rivalry, hidden sexuality—are maintained not despite love but because of it. Protecting secrets becomes the poison of relationships. Dysfunction is not exception but rule.

Piku (2015)

Shoojit Sircar's *Piku* offers an intimate look at domestic entrapment. Piku Banerjee (Deepika Padukone), an architect, revolves her life around her hypochondriac father Bhaskor (Amitabh Bachchan). The irony: Bhaskor makes feminist claims about her independence while demanding her constant presence. His love stems from a desire to keep her close. Parent becomes child, daughter becomes mother, and home becomes a system of dependence that stunts both.



Conclusion

These films collectively suggest that homes should protect, but protection becomes prison when boundaries are imposed without consent. The opposite of suffocation is not homelessness but a home that breathes—where freedom coexists with care, love does not demand sacrifice, and belonging does not require conformity.

Contemporary Indian cinema redefines home as both refuge and restraint, exposing how love and protection can blur into control. These films remind us that true homes breathe—spaces where care nurtures freedom, belonging thrives without conformity, and love sustains without demanding sacrifice, making sanctuary inseparable from dignity and choice.**

Between Words and Worlds

A conversation with Dr Sushri Sangita Mishra by Dr RAMAKRISHNA PERUGU

Dr Sushri Sangita Mishra is an eminent Odia poetess whose work bridges the realms of creative expression and corporate leadership. Her journey spans poetry, finance, and philosophy, making her a distinctive voice in contemporary Indian literature.

Dr Perugu Ramakrishnan: ***Your journey spans creativity, intellect, and leadership—combining poetry and finance. On one side is the inner world of poetic sensitivity, and on the other, the demanding outer world of decision-making, clarity, and precision that is part and parcel of the corporate world. How do you balance them both—the poetic and the pragmatic? How often do they clash?***

Dr Sushri Sangita Mishra: In my experience, they are not two opposing worlds, but two different sides of the same consciousness. Yes, at micro-incident levels, handling both sides often becomes challenging, but in a broader sense they are complementary.

The corporate world demands structure, speed, display of power, and precision. The experiences and understandings that come therefrom often refine poetic sensibilities. And the poetic side that brings empathy, intuition, and vision adds value to the corporate role.

Please share the story of how you discovered your passion for poetry. What inspired you to become a poet?

Poetry came to me even before I understood what poetry was. It arrived not as a choice but rather as a voice. As a child, I would often sit with curiosity and questions about birth, death, and the purpose of life. And thoughts started taking the shape of verses which I was scribbling in my notepad. A few years later, my father discovered my notepad on my bookshelf and shared it with his writer friend, who sent those poems for publication. I was fourteen when I saw my first poem in print. It was in Amrutayana.

After that, my work found its way into several esteemed literary journals in Odisha and was warmly received by many senior and celebrated poets of Odisha like Shri Ramakanta Rath, Shri Harihara Mishra, Shri Prasanna Patasani, and Shri Satakadi Hota. They not only inspired and encouraged me to have my book published but also followed up with me for that! I feel indebted to them. At nineteen, my first poetry book, Nirabatara Sabda, came out.

Please share a brief portrait of your formative years—your birthplace, education, and your parents.

I was born and brought up in Bhubaneswar. My father was a state government employee, and my mother was a teacher. I studied in Unit 2 School and then BJB College, Utkal University, and IIM Kolkata. Today, when I look back, I find that the importance of learning, humility, and sensitivity to the world around were instilled perhaps into my subconscious from early childhood. I feel grateful to my parents for that.

Which genre is your favourite in literature? And why?

Poetry captivates me the most—its rhythm, its depth, its ability to distill the vastness of thought, emotion, and imagination into a few words. Personally, for me, poetry is my sanctuary—it is where words transcend structure and become pure essence.

I also read and write prose, primarily non-fiction—mostly philosophy, history, human evolution, and management literature. I have a deep interest in essays that explore culture, consciousness, and the human condition with depth and subtlety.

You are a bilingual poet. Yet if I may ask you, in which language do you feel more comfortable expressing your thoughts?

Choosing a language for any poem has never been a conscious decision. I write in Odia as well as in English. Thoughts find their expressions in different languages at different points in time. In fact, not only in Odia and English, but I have also written quite a few short verses in Hindi too. In my experience, the flow of poetry is not bound by language. It captures the essence of our thought in its own way and becomes a language in itself.

Tell us about your books—the latest work,* Line of Illumination*, and earlier works and forthcoming publications.

Apart from *Line of Illumination*, my English poetry book which was just released this year, *Unlocking Hopes—A Global Anthology of Poems*, which is co-edited by me along with Prof Ananta Kumar Giri and Dr Marcus Bussey, has been published in 2025. Besides, my books of Odia poems—*Nirabatara Sabda* and *Nishtabdha Akasha* (*The Silent Sky*)—have been published earlier. There are three books underway: a book of Odia poems, a book of English poems, and a book of essays on poetry, philosophy, and society.

What is your definition of poetry in your own words?

Poetry begins as a conversation with self. It appears in response to the quest, search, sense of wonder, pain, and joy which the outside world fails to respond to. In the process, poetry makes the poet transcend the individual self and makes her the voice of the collective self. Poetry speaks like an echo of our core—where meaning lingers between the lines and silence carries its essence—both for the poet and the reader.

How do you perceive the contemporary landscape of Odia poetry? What are the latest trends?

I see a mixed pattern. While I see some poets, including some young emerging poets, embracing lyrics and classical styles of expression, I also find more and more abstract free verse equally arresting. However, what is common is the clarity of expression. There seems to be a conscious or subconscious approach not to be a victim of unwanted complexity and ambiguity in expressions, which in my view is a welcome trend.

Would you like to reflect on the recognitions and awards you have received? Which one is the most cherished for you?

Bharat Bhasha Bhushan Samman in Andhra Pradesh in 2024, Michael Madhusudan Smriti Samman in Kolkata in 2023, Mukta Chetana and Bharatiya Vidyabhavan Samman in Odisha in 2022.

I received a Doctorate in Literature from the World Academy of Arts and Culture, California

in 2021 and also a Senior Fellowship from the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, for my work on Literature and Society the same year.

And there have been many more. Each one is inspiring and humbling. The most cherished memory is of my first award. It was Shreekshetra Shree Samman in Odisha in 1992, which made the seventeen-year-old me the youngest recipient of the award. Many honors have followed over the years, but that first recognition remains closest to my heart—not just for its prestige, but for the quiet affirmation it gave to a young poet finding her voice.

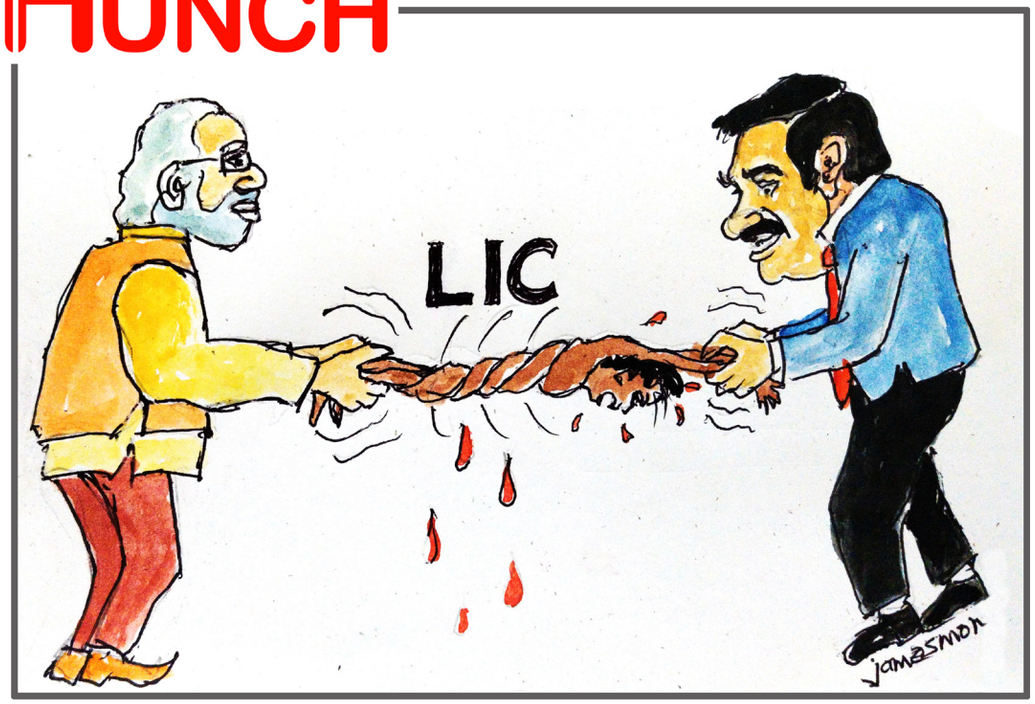
Please quote your favourite lines from your poetry.

Extremely difficult to pick any one as my favourite. Each of them carries my heart and soul and vice versa.

Let me give a few lines of my poem *Odyssey*, which reflects upon the continuous search of poets and seekers, which brings in the creative flow:

Sitting still under the efflux of words
it keeps sculpting
a figurine of the unseen.
Who knows when,
someone would silently descend
into them
and smile in the mirror
where Truth sits translucent.
There, roads may end,
Journey extends...

HAVE A HUNCH



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2. Psychology, Journalism, Computer Science (PJC)

POST GRADUATE COURSES

M.Sc. Degree

1. M.Sc. Psychology
2. M.Sc. Counselling Psychology

MSW Degree

1. Master of Social Work

Post Graduate Diploma

1. Post Graduate Diploma in Psychological Counselling (PGDPC)

SHORT TERM CERTIFICATE COURSES

1. Basic Counselling Skills
2. Art Therapy
3. Learning Disability
4. Personal Excellence Program
5. Applied Behavioural Analysis

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