

THE HINDU

The Hindu on Books | Book on Anne Frank betrayal pulled, two polemical plays, Myanmar blind spot and more

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The Hindu On Books newsletter aims to take you deeper into the world of literature every week.

Welcome to this edition of The Hindu on Books Newsletter.

Publishers of *The Betrayal of Anne Frank: A Cold Case Investigation* have decided to withdraw the book after experts critically evaluated the content and picked holes. The book, written by Canadian writer Rosemary Sullivan, had contended that a Jewish man betrayed the hiding place of the Frank family, leading to their deportation to concentration camp. A team of World War II experts and historians discredited the research, saying there was not enough evidence for the “grave accusation”. The Dutch publishers, Ambo Anthos, issued an apology while recalling the book from stores. BBC reported that the book’s investigating team had earlier said they stood by their research, saying they never claimed to have uncovered the complete truth: “Our theory is a theory and nothing more,” chief investigator Pieter van Twisk had told Dutch news agency ANP. There is a clamour from Jewish groups urging the English publishers, HarperCollins, to withdraw the book too. Anne Frank had written a diary about her two years in hiding before she died in a Nazi concentration camp in 1945. Her posthumously published book, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, has sold millions of copies.

In reviews, we read a book by an Islam scholar where he implores Muslims to stop deifying received tradition, Saeed Naqvi’s satirical play, a new translation of Utpal Dutt’s trailblazing play, *Barricade*, in its 50th year, India’s Myanmar strategy, Tagore and Gandhi’s friendship despite differences, and more.

Books of the week

As Islam happens to be the second-largest religion in the world, the unyielding legalism that prevails in Muslim societies is one of the biggest instances of close-mindedness affecting humanity today and scholar Mustafa Akyol, of the US-based Cato Institute, makes this issue the central theme of his passionately written book *Reopening Muslim Minds: A Return to Reason*,

Freedom, and Tolerance (Macmillan). In his review, A. Faizur Rahman writes that following in the footsteps of Fazlur Rahman Malik (1919-1988), the great Pakistani hermeneutist of the Koran, Akyol implores Muslims to stop deifying received tradition and undertake a critical study of their religious past. “He takes the reader through the intellectual twists and turns of Islamic history to call for a ‘theology of tolerance’ rooted in the non-judgmental idea of irja wherein the decision about a person’s belief or conduct is left to God.”

Reopening Muslim Minds: A Return to Reason, Freedom, and Tolerance review: Theology of tolerance

Literary Review

Eminent historian Rudrangshu Mukherjee delves into the deep bond between Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore in Tagore and Gandhi: Walking Alone, Walking Together (Aleph). In the development of their ideas, writes Mukherjee, it is possible to trace areas of convergence. Both arrived at the conclusion that the building of a new India would have to begin at the village level and that “swaraj would be vacuous unless people had the power to rule their own lives.” Both drew strength from the enduring qualities of Indian culture; both were influenced by western and eastern thinkers; Gandhi was greatly influenced by Leo Tolstoy, John Ruskin and the Jain mystic Raychandbhai. Mukherjee, says K.R.A. Narasiah in his review, emphasises that both of them thought India was a kind of civilisational sponge where many cultures and people met and fused.

Tagore & Gandhi: Walking Alone, Walking Together review: A vision of an inclusive India free from hatred and bigotry

The premise of Saeed Naqvi’s satirical play, The Muslim Vanishes (Penguin Random House), is explosive. What if India, with the second largest population in the world, were to wake up one day to find that all Muslims have disappeared? As absurdities of such a notion mount, the reviewer Sudhanva Deshpande writes that the main interconnection the author wants readers to see is the one between the three sides of the political triangle that has shaped Indian political and social life since Independence and Partition – the Hindu-Muslim relation; the Kashmir question; and India’s relationship with Pakistan. And then there is India’s deep-rooted caste pyramid that structures all aspects of life. The play, says Deshpande, works as polemical literature, but not as theatre. “There are too many characters, many of them popping up only to allow the author a certain point and then disappearing without a trace. The play fails to give its antagonists credible, powerful, believable voices.”

In Hindutva heaven: Sudhanva Deshpande reviews Saeed Naqvi’s ‘The Muslim Vanishes’

Literary Review

There has been a renewed focus on the implications, both regionally and globally, of developments within Myanmar in the aftermath of the ouster of the democratically elected National League for Democracy (NLD) by the military in February 2021. In that context, Jaideep Chanda’s book, Irrawaddy Imperatives (Pentagon Press), on India’s strategy towards Myanmar is both timely and instructive. India shares a land border of about 1,600 km with Myanmar which

spans four Indian States (Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram) but interest within India about Myanmar is relatively lacking, especially when compared to interest in and knowledge about India's South Asian neighbours. In the review, Sinderpal Singh points out that the book's key point is the geo-political significance of Myanmar's Irrawaddy River for India's strategy towards Myanmar. "The author is realistic about the scale of China's presence in Myanmar and cautions against making policy towards Myanmar purely with an anti-China aim. Instead, India, he believes, should seek to limit China's influence between the India-Myanmar Border (IMB) and Myanmar's Irrawaddy River."

Irrawaddy Imperatives review: A blind spot

Spotlight

Utpal Dutt and Badal Sircar are acknowledged as among the trailblazers of post-1947 Indian theatre, two of the tallest in original Bengali drama, with over 50 plays each. Ananda Lal, who has translated Dutt's trailblazing play, *Barricade* (Seagull Books), as it completes 50 years, says that as a political play, it is apparently about the Nazi takeover of Germany in 1933, but is really about events taking place in India in the turbulent years leading to the Emergency. "History repeats itself," says Lal. "Consequently, the purpose of political theatre alluding to the past as a warning to the present retains utmost validity. Today, the surge to power of rightist parties and fundamentalist fanaticism across the world means that the co-option of democracy and civil society leading to Nazi fascism can happen again – or indeed has already happened – thus restoring *Barricade* its immediate urgency."

Browser

- Experiencing grief at the death of a person we love or who matters to us is central to the human condition. Michael Cholbi offers philosophical insights about what grief is, whom we grieve, and how grief can lead us to a fuller realisation of our humanity in *Grief: A Philosophical Guide* (Princeton University Press).
- Events in West Asia demand global attention due to regional conflicts, faith-based divisions, sectarian violence and wars that are often ignited by external powers. Written by a veteran Indian diplomat, Talmiz Ahmad's *West Asia at War* (HarperCollins) explores the diverse forces shaping the politics and economics of the region.
- In Pronoti Datta's *Half-Blood (Speaking Tiger)*, the adopted child of an odd Bengali couple, journalist Maya must confront her past and open a box she inherited. She is led on a journey of discovery at whose centre is an illegitimate child of a Parsi man and a tribal woman, and thereby hangs a tale.
- If Avery Chambers can't fix you in 10 sessions, she won't take you as a client. In *The Golden Couple*, by Greer Hendricks and Sarah Pekkanen (Macmillan), Marissa and Mathew Bishop seem like the golden couple till Marissa cheats. Later, wanting to repair things, she takes a chance on the maverick therapist and their lives upturn.