

STET



MITALI SARAN

Merrily down the stream into 2019

Contrary to my expectation, 2019 has opened with a bang. First there was that glorious Vanitha Mathil, the Women's Wall, made up of five million women lined up shoulder to shoulder along 620 kilometres in Kerala, pledging to stand against patriarchy. Shortly thereafter, two women became the first ever to enter the Sabarimala temple. This event short circuited everyone's brains so badly that they had to shut the place down for an hour to conduct "purification" rites, which I bet involved harmonic swearing at the Supreme Court. They really do loathe women, so it makes me terribly happy to know that they have to let them in.

Then there was a scene in Parliament, when Rahul Gandhi lobbed a few Rafale type apples at the treasury benches, and the treasury benches hurled some Bofors type oranges back, presumably in the hope that the nation cannot tell an apple from an orange. The Speaker forbade Rahul to speak Anil Ambani's name, so he asked if he could call him AA instead. This caused me to tweet a "Dassault and AA battery" joke, with which I was extremely pleased even though the internet totally ignored it.



Coming from the frigid northern plains, I gladly shed my layers and walked the sun-washed streets in a happy sweat, observing that inordinate numbers of people were wearing woolly hats with pompoms

And now I find myself on a boat sailing down the placid waters of the Hooghly river on an overnight cruise for a friend's 50th birthday, and what's not to love about that? I have been in Kolkata only four times in my life, each time only briefly, so I can tell you nothing about it other than that the metro is old but gold, some parts of it are strikingly litter-free, Mamata Banerjee is the Modi of West Bengal in the Put Your Mug On Everything department, and the food is to die for.

Coming from the frigid northern plains, I gladly shed my layers and walked the sun-washed streets in a happy sweat, observing that inordinate numbers of people were wearing woolly hats with pompoms. Thank you, new year, for validating another cultural cliché.

Given that the cruise involved four dozen people, there was a fair amount of good-humoured confusion about where the ship left from, and at what time. Millennium Park was filled with people striding purposefully in all directions. There was also much confusion about which bottle of booze was in which room. The bottle I'd brought as a birthday present was half gone by the time the birthday boy got anywhere near it. When I woke up in the morning not only was it empty, but another half-full bottle had materialised beside it, and I swear on my mother's head that I had nothing to do with it.

As usual I was the most underdressed person present, clomping about in jeans and walking shoes amid ladies in beautiful saris, who had helped to dry each others' thick long black hair and applied *surma* to each others' eyes. The ship was lovely, and so was the river, but since I have the sense of humour of an eight-year-old, I continue to be unable to take the name "Hooghly" seriously. If anyone saw me standing on the deck smoking a cigarette and gazing out at the sunset, they should know that I was shouting "Hooghly, Hooghly, Hooghly! Hahahahahah!" in my head the whole time. Still, there was much Bengali singing, Bengali food, and Bengali chatter, and a good time was had by all.

The first week of January isn't done and 2019 already feels action packed. Who knows how much more action the year will have brought by the time we're done wishing all our WhatsApp groups a happy new year, in June?

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#NowTrending

Good sport

RITWIK SHARMA

Who: From baby of the side to "best babysitter", Rishabh Pant is Indian cricket's man of the moment. The 21-year-old wicket-keeper, seen as heir to the legendary M S Dhoni, got a chance to demonstrate his babysitting — and diplomatic — skills when the Indian and Australian Test sides met with Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison in Sydney earlier this week.

What: Bonnie Paine, wife of Australian captain Tim Paine, posted a photo of herself, her two young children and Pant on her Instagram account. She tagged Pant, who posed with one of the kids in his arms, with the caption: "Best babysitter". Pant's gesture followed good old-fashioned banter between him and Paine during the ongoing series.

During the third Test match in Melbourne, Paine, also a wicket-keeper, had

sledged Pant suggesting he would lose his place and make way for Dhoni when the one-day leg of the tour kicks off. The Tasmanian also offered to draft Pant into the T20 team, Hobart Hurricanes, for the Big Bash League. "Can you babysit? I'll take the wife to the movies one night and you'll look after the kids," the Aussie skipper was heard on the stump mic. The joke wasn't lost on Pant, who was heard the next day telling his teammate: "We got a special guest today. Have you ever heard of a temporary captain, ever, Mayank?"

The photo shot up the number of followers on Bonnie Paine's profile. Pant won hearts and Amul was typically on point with an ad showing the cricketer with the babies and the tagline, "Child's play for Pant"

Where: The rise of the Indian team, first emerging as a challenger to the all-conquering Australian team led by Steve Waugh and now enjoying the upper hand against an opposition on the wane, has thrown up some epic contests between bat and ball as well as some unsavoury moments. Fans will recall

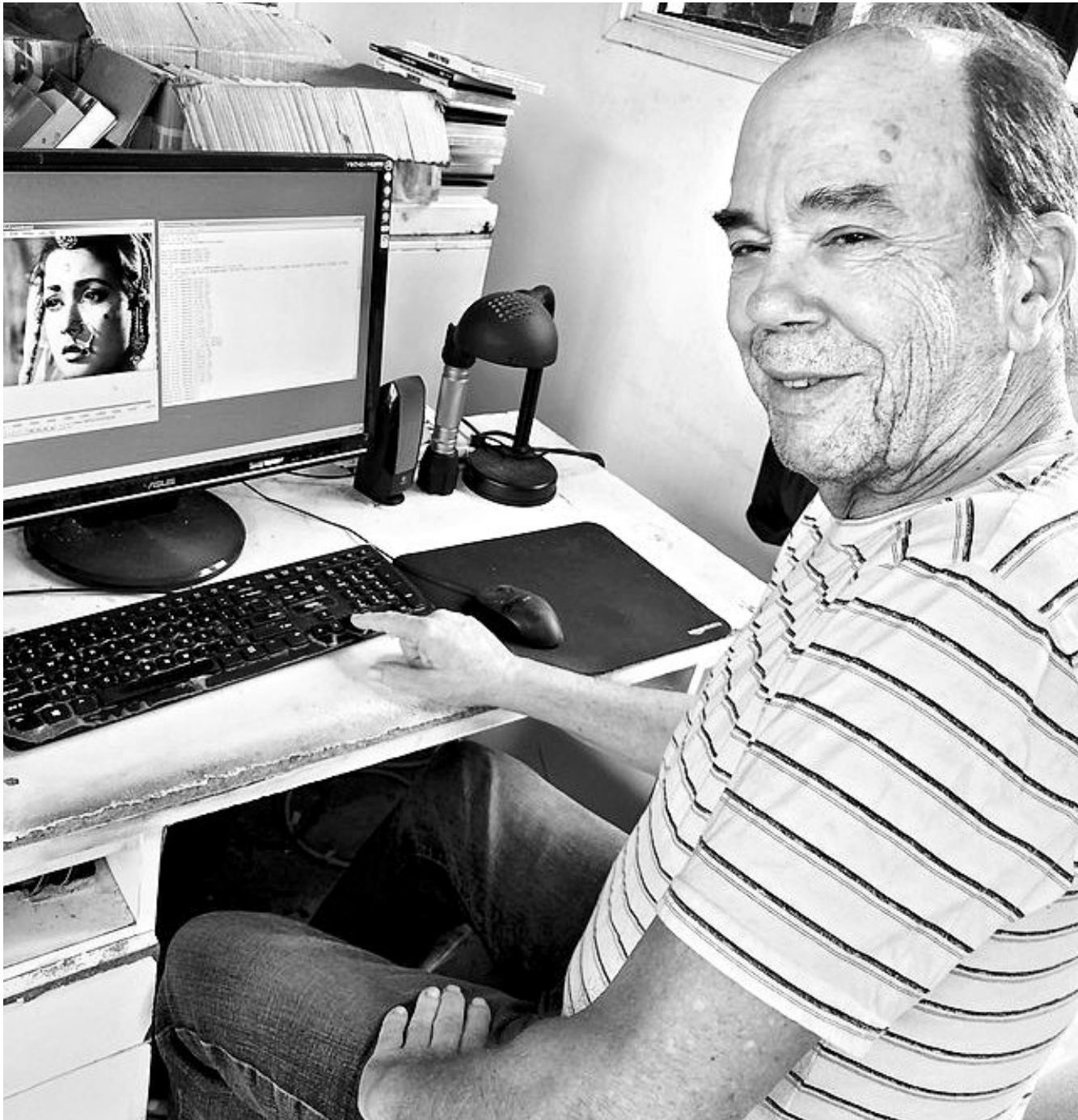
the infamous "Monkeygate" scandal during the Sydney Test of 2008, when off-spinner Harbhajan Singh was accused of hurling racial taunts at Andrew Symonds by the Australians. It strained ties between the two teams and India lost the match that is also remembered for umpiring blunders and frosty behaviour from the Aussies.

How: Australian cricketers have been involved in some of the nastiest incidents of sledging. Glenn McGrath versus Ramnaresh Sarwan in Antigua, 2003, and Waugh versus Curtly Ambrose in Trinidad, 1995, are two instances where the men nearly came to blows after unprintable utterances from the tourists rubbed the West Indians the wrong way. As the Australian team rose to pre-eminence at the turn of the last century, the boundaries of the imaginary line that the cricketers promised never to cross kept getting blurred. The penny dropped after a ball-tampering row in the Cape Town Test last year resulted in a purge involving some of Cricket Australia's biggest names, an impassioned and angry response from a public



Rishabh Pant and Bonnie Paine

that had had enough and opprobrium on a team that the cricketing world had for long loved to hate. Now, even as a depleted home Test team stares at a historic first-ever series defeat to India, the Pant-Paine episode will only reassure everyone of Australia's new embrace of fair play. And that Pant, babysitter, is a good sport.



Hawaiian healer

A retired commercial fisherman in Hawaii shows his love for vintage Hindi and Urdu films by carefully restoring them at home, writes **Ranjita Ganesan**

When Thomas Daniel first travelled to India, the country did not capture his imagination in the best way. He spent a short week here during a trans-Asian journey with a pal from school, with flying visits to West Bengal, Delhi and the Taj Mahal in Agra. The sights, sounds and swarms of people had overwhelmed him. He remembers waiting in line to buy a train ticket to Delhi as a malnourished woman with a baby in her arms touched his feet, asking for money. He also vividly recalls crossing the landmark Howrah Bridge in Kolkata. Years later, he would come to love a film by that name, *Howrah Bridge* (1958), starring Madhubala and Ashok Kumar, and Hindi and Urdu movies eventually became, for him, a quite favourable vehicle to traverse the Indian subcontinent.

Daniel now lives in rural Hawaii where, having retired from commercial fishing and

driving tour buses, he devotes the majority of his time to painstakingly restoring classic films from India and Pakistan, mainly from the 1930s to the early 1950s. He has so far worked on more than 120 titles that are in the public domain and made them available on his YouTube channel (tommydan55) to some 30,000 subscribers. The American spends nearly 40 hours on each film to arduously filter out scratches, flickering and humming. The result is often fairly close to how the film may have looked at the time of release, prompting old-timers to leave messages of "God bless you" in the comments section.

Growing up, Daniel did not have much access to films, only the odd television screening of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). He was exposed to foreign cinema when going on dates to an art theatre in Washington DC near where he was raised. With the launch of cable TV, his appetite for classics developed as the Turner Classic Movies channel played early

Hollywood sound and silent films. He first experienced Indian vintage films through Netflix's DVD rental service, starting with Guru Dutt's *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam* (1962). "And I was hooked," he writes in an e-mail. He began collecting old Indian films, even though they tend to be more expensive for American buyers.

This gravitation towards cinema of the subcontinent might have in part to do with "liking something others either know nothing about, or actively dislike". His wife may not yet have warmed up to the high-pitched singing in Hindi classics but for Daniel, the older a film the better. "They say that the years 1950-1965 were the golden age of Indian film, but there are earlier films simply astonishing in their virtuosity and quality."

He grew his understanding of the films by reading reviews by Philip Lutgendorf, a professor of Modern Indian Studies who, aside from critiquing films, would also include notes on the standard of existing copies. For instance, "tolerable image quality" or "marred by numerous abrupt cuts". As Daniel saw more early films, he realised the quality of images was regularly poor; the makers of VHS tapes or DVDs had not always taken care to preserve their beauty. He decided not to watch them until he had fixed them up at least a little. Thus started his experiments

with free video and sound editing software such as AviSynth and Audacity. These, he reckons, can do a lot of what the "£10,000 programs" used by Hollywood restorers do, and in some cases even more.

The scrolling ads or clumsy logos that crowded the screen in outmoded copies, and which so annoyed Daniel, could be removed. He was able to steady a gloomy, shaky print of *Tansen* (1943) using an easy combination of filters. But this process takes time and care. He creates separate codes for the filtering of the film as a whole, as well as repairs for each frame. This means going through a single film three times over, frame by frame. "And the films average roughly 200,000 frames each," he observes.

In this way, he could carefully get rid of a wave of grainy damage splashed across a copy of the Bombay Talkies' *Bhabhi* (1938). Elsewhere, in a copy of Dilip Kumar and Nargis-starrer *Andaz* (1949), he erased a constant rain of white spots that was ruining the right side of the frame. He sometimes explains his efforts through 'before and after' videos.

The self-taught film restorer believes he is "pretty anti-social", especially as few people around him share such unusual interests. However, by way of YouTube and a select number of blogs that he frequents, he discovered an international community of film enthusiasts. It includes London-based Edwina, a 1950s background dancer in Hindi films, for whose songs and dances he created a channel, and the resourceful Surjit Singh in India, a retired physicist who writes about and ardently collects old film tapes, as well as another friend of Pakistani origin who, while growing up in London, had taped everything from India and Pakistan that ever aired on the television. It is this circle that obtains and mails films to him.

Such crowd-sourcing has resulted in finding rare films, such as the 1933's *Lal-e Yaman*, which Daniel restored from a Doordarshan taping shared by one of his followers. Even after restoration, the videos are not always high-definition, given that the salvaged digital sources are usually heavily worn out. Still, the pictures seem clearly defined, with legible titles and superior subtitles where available. Over the course of this work, he has learnt that VHS tapes are better, more complete sources with the right aspect ratios, as opposed to DVDs and VCDs, even if the latter two have higher resolutions.

While speaking little Hindi or Urdu himself, he has slowly gained command of the history of early films in these languages. So he can tell you that Shammi Kapoor's *Chor Bazaar* (1954) is an Errol Flynn-ish swash-buckler, or how in *Baazi* (1951), Dev Anand is seen without the pompadour hair and stylised delivery of dialogue he would acquire by the time he starred in *Guide* (1965). Certainly in the matter of films, he finds that "in India, liking easily turns to obsession",

with debates such as "Amitabh vs Rajesh Khanna" or "Lata vs Asha" routinely playing out online.

That vintage films of the subcontinent are in need of restoration is certain. They faced damage at various levels: in the handling of the reels when they were first made and showed, and in the course of being converted for home viewing using inferior digital technology. The Hawaii resident's practice of healing films is interesting in

a scenario where Indian DVD companies have not felt motivated to invest in restoring films once they pass into the public domain.

Daniel decided to create a channel because expertly-restored versions of the films he so loves were just not available. It points to how fixed-up home releases and online archives will be important for fans, researchers, and even the uninitiated to enjoy such works. "The NFAI [National Film Archive of India] has restored dozens of films but where are the DVDs and Blu-Rays?" Harking back to the director whose film was the first he had sampled, Daniel notes, "What I wouldn't give for restored versions of Guru Dutt films!"



Grainy damage across the visuals of Jairaj in *Bhabhi* (1938) was removed during restoration