



MATHRUBHUMI INTERNATIONAL
FESTIVAL OF LETTERS 2023

MBIFL'23
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Nobel laureate
Abdulrazak Gurnah
presents the Book of
the Year prize
to Peggy Mohan

MBIFL'23
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Words soar, minds enlightened

▶ A celebration of the power of words, where thoughts took flight and imaginations danced to the rhythm of the pen, the MBIFL 2023 concluded, a four-day journey of discovery and enlightenment

The fourth edition of the Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters concluded at the sprawling Kanakakkunnu Palace Grounds in Thiruvananthapuram on Sunday.

The festival brought together some of the biggest names in Indian and world literature.

Peggy Mohan was awarded the Book of the Year prize for her work, 'Wanderers, Kings, Merchants: The Story of India through its Languages'. Nobel laureate Abdulrazak Gurnah presented the award to her.

"I hope that my book inspires others to explore the power of words,"

she said.

Addressing the valedictory function, P. S. Sreedharan Pillai, Governor of Goa, highlighted the importance of literary festivals and their impact on youth.

He said that everything in society should be people-centric. "People are supreme. They are more supreme than the Supreme Court."

Damodar Mauzo, Jnanpith award winner, praised MBIFL for its eclectic brilliance. "It rivals any other festival of its kind," he said.

M. V. Shreyams Kumar, Managing Director of Mathrubhumi, said it was heartening that MBIFL stimulated discussion and debate.

"I am so happy to see many young people here, asking relevant questions and interacting with the speakers. This is the greatest achievement of the festival."

P. V. Chandran, Chairman and Managing Editor of Mathrubhumi, said that the festival marked the confluence

of literature lovers from different continents.

Festival Director M. S. Devika and Mathrubhumi Senior General Manager (Public Relations) K. R. Pramod also spoke.

Curator Sabin Iqbal summed up the vision behind MBIFL. "Literature has the power to transport us to new worlds and introduce us to new ideas," said Iqbal. "And this is what the Mathrubhumi Festival of Letters is all about – providing a platform for writers and readers to come together and celebrate the power of words."

As the curtains close on this literary extravaganza, let us cherish the moments spent in the embrace of words, where thoughts took flight and imaginations danced to the rhythm of the pen. The four-day journey of discovery and enlightenment has been a testament to the power of storytelling, a reminder of the boundless possibilities of the human spirit. ▶

P. S. Sreedharan Pillai,
Governor of Goa,
addresses the valedictory
function of MBIFL in
Thiruvananthapuram
on Sunday.

Also seen are
Festival Director
M. S. Devika,
Jnanpith award winner
Damodar Mauzo,
Mathrubhumi
Managing Director
M. V. Shreyams Kumar,
Mathrubhumi
Chairman and Managing
Editor P. V. Chandran,
Curator Sabin Iqbal,
Nobel laureate
Abdulrazak Gurnah
and Mathrubhumi
Senior General Manager
(Public Relations)
K. R. Pramod



‘No one imposes Hindi in India’



REIMAGINING INDIA

Prakash Javadekar envisions India as a global superpower, highlighting its achievements as the world's fifth-largest economy and the mother of democracy with a thriving startup culture, digital payment leadership and successful Covid-19 management

BJP MP Prakash Javadekar said that history portrays India as a failed state but today India had become the world's fifth-largest economy, surpassing the United Kingdom, a Western power that ruled us for decades.

“In 2047, when we celebrate the centenary of India's Independence, India will emerge as the world's third-largest economy. The vision for ‘Amrit Kaal’ is aimed at transforming India into a global superpower,” he said while sharing his views on the topic, ‘Reimagining India’, at MBIFL on Sunday.

“Our civilization tells us to live and let live. We believe in ‘Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam’ and consider the world as one family. Unity in diversity is our strength. ‘Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat’ is aimed to enable people across India to learn different languages of different states and come closer to their culture,” he said.

He said that India was the mother of democracy and over 90 crore people would exercise their franchise in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls. “Voting percentage of 70 in India is much higher compared to the 30 per cent recorded in the U.S. and Western countries. At present, India is ruled by a full majority government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi,” he said.

He added that the Narendra Modi government was committed to the ideals of Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas. “The BJP-led government at the Centre has ensured social justice and India got its first tribal woman President after 75 years. Over 12 crore toilets were built across India under the Swachh Bharat Mission. With more than 80,000 startups, India is emerging as an entrepreneurial hub of the world. India also leads the world in real-time digital payments,” he said.

Referring to the World Health Organisation praising India for Covid-19 management, he said that India was the only country in the world having four different Covid-19 vaccines.

Rubbishing the allegations that Hindi was being imposed on southern states, he said, “No question of imposing Hindi. Tamil is one of the oldest languages in the world. We respect each other's language and want to promote all Indian languages.”

PRIDE, PREJUDICE AND PUNDITRY

‘Parliamentary democracy under serious threat’



Author and politician Shashi Tharoor has alleged that parliamentary democracy is under serious threat in India as a result of the Bharatiya Janata Party and its Hindutva agenda.

He was talking to journalist S. Prasannarajan at a session titled ‘Pride, prejudice and punditry’ at MBIFL on Sunday.

Referring to the comprehensive collection of fiction, non-fiction, poetry and essays written by Tharoor, ranging from politics to cricket, Prasannarajan

Shashi Tharoor alleges that political Hindutva, built on bigotry and intolerance, has seriously affected India’s social fabric

described Tharoor as a man who perennially played with ideas. “Tharoor is rooted in the idea of Kerala and India despite being a global soul,” he said.

Tharoor stated that parties belittled historical figures for petty political gains. “I may have critical views on Jawaharlal Nehru but it doesn’t mean that I can

diminish the contribution of Nehru in building India. The questioning of Nehru’s legacy started in 1999 during A. B. Vajpayee’s regime but it has now become a full-blown assault on India’s first Prime Minister. At the same time, the BJP appropriated Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, forgetting the fact that Patel regrouped Muslims in Red Fort during Partition and protected them. On the other hand, the BJP-led government in Gujarat did nothing to stop the riots in Gujarat in 2002,” Tharoor said.

Comparing Prime Minister Narendra

Modi and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, he said, “Although Modi displayed India’s soft power to the world by organizing events such as ‘International Yoga Day’, he is shaping India by promoting majoritarianism and minority-bashing. ‘Bharat Jodo Yatra’ has increased Rahul Gandhi’s prospects as a future Prime Minister. It helped him shed his image as a non-serious politician. He displayed his stamina and determination by walking for 135 days. Rahul has attended press conferences with ease while Modi still needs teleprompters.”

‘Learn to push the envelope’



AN ACTOR'S LIFE

▶ Kabir Bedi knocked together the bridge between Bollywood and Hollywood

Actor Kabir Bedi recalled meeting the Beatles. “It was like walking on clouds,” he said, at a session at MBIFL on Sunday. “And I was in the room with them, all four of them.” His memoir, ‘Stories I Must Tell: The Emotional Life of an Actor’ was published in 2021. Priyanka Chopra who launched the book described him as the actor who paved the way for people like her to journey from Bollywood to Hollywood.

“The biggest problem was that Hollywood was not writing roles for Asians or Indians. And if they are not writing roles for Asians or Indians, how can Asians or Indians get a foot in Hollywood?” he asked.

He talked about his personal and professional ups and downs, life lessons and elaborated on his experiences as a newbie in the industry, starting with the time he met and interviewed the Beatles when they came to India. His career spanned three continents. He is celebrated in Italy for his role in the TV series, ‘Sandokan’ (1976). Emperor Shah Jahan in ‘Taj Mahal: An Eternal Love Story’ (2005) and the villainous Gobinda in ‘Octopussy’ (1983) are his other noted roles.

Giving us a glimpse into the time when he worked with Alyque Padamsee and Girish Karnad for the play ‘Tughlaq’, he said, “That (the opening scene of the play) created shock waves across Bombay and it went on to become the biggest theatrical hit in Bombay.”

He recalled his friendship with Rajiv Gandhi and Sanjay Gandhi. “I was very close to the Gandhi family at that time. Politically, we’re not on the same page now. But I certainly have the fondest memories of Rajiv and Sanjay and the kindness of Indira Gandhi towards my family and the education of my sister, which she helped with.”

His book is all about the challenges he faced in life and art. “The theme of my life has been how people can push the envelope. How can you take things one step beyond? What is it that takes you to the next level? And how you can reinvent yourself, even after your success? And above all, how do you rise from the worst adversities and setbacks in life? I was the first Indian actor who acted in a Bond film. And then the Bond film happened to come to India.” ▶



Sabu Cyril in conversation with writer M. P. Surendran

Shape of dreams

EVERYTHING SET

Production designer Sabu Cyril turns into physical reality, the concepts and ideas of some of the best directors in India

Sabu Cyril gives shapes to dreams.

As a production designer, he turns into physical reality the dreams of movie directors. He combines the skills of an architect, a draughtsman, a quick sketch artist, a quantity surveyor, an art historian and a magician. He collaborates with costume designers and cinematographers, and turns into physical reality, the concepts and ideas of producers, writers and directors.

He spoke about his life and work at MBIFL on Sunday.

"When I studied in the 11th class, I didn't even know there was a college for fine arts," he said.

Convincing his family was not easy. "My dad was totally against my interest in fine arts. He feared I would die in poverty," he said.

Cyril proved his dad wrong. He worked with the best directors in the country and won four national awards.

"Getting opportunities to showcase your talent is very important. I was lucky in this respect," he said.

He spoke about his work on 'Bahubali', 'Enthiran' and 'RRR'.

The job of a production designer is not easy. "We do a lot of research. Futuristic films are easier to do than period films. At least for me. Period films are very difficult to conceive and execute," he said.

RAY-MEMBRANCE

Ray revisited



A congregation of Satyajit Ray enthusiasts convened at MBIFL on Sunday to remember the iconic filmmaker and delve into his legacy.

Among the panellists were Adoor Gopalakrishnan, veteran filmmaker, Pinaki De, a renowned graphic designer and illustrator, Riddhi Goswami, Associate Professor at the Heritage Institute of Technology, Kolkata and Premanka Goswami, the executive editor of Penguin House India.

The conversation centred on preserving Ray's enduring impact and uncovering the numerous articles and

illustrations that remain hidden from view. Adoor shared his lifelong reverence for Ray's style. He was first smitten by Ray's masterpiece, 'Pather Panchali', where he was captivated by the intricate details in the character's faces. Despite literature linking Ray's films to neo-realism, Adoor revealed Ray's own words, "neo-realism had nothing to do with his films". Adoor's personal

favourite of Ray's films was 'Aparajito', while Ray himself considered 'Charulata' his finest work. Adoor also emphasized Ray's writing abilities, saying "Cinema runs in his veins."

Adoor fondly reminisced about his interactions with Ray, including a screening of 'Kodiyettam' in New Delhi in 1979 and a screening of 'Mathilukal' in Kolkata. He spoke of Ray's infectious laughter and his admiration for Adoor's own work. All the speakers concurred that Ray continues to inspire not just those of his own generation, but generations to come. Pinaki De, the graphic designer and illustrator, stated

that Ray's work "should reach the younger generation as it is. Premanka Goswami spoke of his unwavering commitment to publishing Ray's works.

Adoor concluded the discussion by noting that like Rabindranath Tagore, Ray captivated each and every generation with his timeless appeal. He added that there was a "sense of timelessness" in Ray's art, with emotions that are "universal and timeless." Asked to rate Ray's films, Adoor replied that he couldn't do so objectively, as Ray was both his friend and the person he admired the most. ▶

THE FUTURE OF THE INDIAN ECONOMY

‘Step up engagement with global finance’

Political considerations drive India's economic policies

Tamil Nadu Finance Minister Palanivel Thiagarajan has asserted that India has the potential and opportunity to step up its engagement with global finance.

He was speaking on ‘The Future of the Indian Economy’ at MBIFL on Sunday.

“India is in a position to benefit from a global downturn. Though we will be somewhat affected, we will be able to position India, Indian talent and businesses on global economic platforms,” he said.

He observed that the very notion of an economy was subject to interpretation. “Gross economy is a good indicator. A more important indicator is the Gini coefficient which is used to measure how disparate the outcomes within a society are. In India, we find great variations in the Gini coefficient and if India's average Gini coefficient is 44-45 per cent, we can assume

that the higher the number the greater the disparity. The lower the number, it is more equal in society,” he added.

He stated that the quality of an economy was more important than quantitative numbers.

“Economies can be large or successful on multiple dimensions. But the point of progress should be inclusive,” he said.

Talking about the policies of Central and State governments, he noted that the Centre's policies were driven more by political considerations than an economic perspective. “Major investments focussed in Gujarat. Accumulation of assets, mainly ports and airports, by certain people raises concerns of crony capitalism,” he said.

On the infrastructure investment policies of the Centre, he stated that most investors want to see harmony in society, continuity of policy and rule of law. “The Government should maintain constitutional values and make the judiciary conflict-free,” he added.



Ambedkarite thoughts relevant to modern India

Congress MP Shashi Tharoor highlights the relevance of Ambedkarite thoughts in a polarized society, calling B. R. Ambedkar the first male feminist who fought against majoritarianism and the caste system

ON AMBEDKAR

Congress MP Shashi Tharoor has said that Ambedkarite thoughts continue to be relevant at a time when polarization is dividing Indian society.

He was talking to Meena Kandasamy at MBIFL on Sunday.

“B. R. Ambedkar was against majoritarianism and always stood for the annihilation of the caste system,” he said.

Calling Ambedkar the first male ‘feminist’, Tharoor said, “Ambedkar urged women not to allow themselves to be forced into marriage and to delay marriage and

childbirth. As a member of the Mumbai Legislative Assembly, he asserted that women should get equal wages as men.”

Referring to Dr. Ambedkar's speech in the Constituent Assembly in 1949 on the adoption of the Constitution of India, Tharoor said, “He was the Chairman of the drafting committee of the Constitution, an outstanding Parliamentarian and an economist of considerable distinction. No one can match Ambedkar in output. He had astonishing achievements to his name.”



Sashi Tharoor, Meena Kandasamy

‘Communities need stories to survive’



Kenyan oratorist Mshai Mwangola talks to Tiffany Maria Brar, social activist and trainer for visually challenged people



What does storytelling mean to you?

I define storytelling as the creative representation of real or imagined human experience. I see my work as bringing back humanism into our intellectual discussions. We find people discuss ideas and events, but not people in the fullness of humanity. I believe storytelling is unique as it is capable of changing lives.

Tell us about your work?

I am 55 years old, and I have been telling stories for as long as I can remember. In terms of a career, I wear three hats. I think of myself as an orator. I take the stage as an artist, working with all age groups, and telling stories in different spaces. I work in the academy. My research is based on our traditional cloth, which we call kanga. It is an East African tradition. I also work with civil societies. We look at the issues that people face such as abuse of human rights. Instead of using legal language, stories can be used to convey these concepts to the common man.

Can you tell us about traditional African storytelling?

Right across the continent, storytelling exists in one form or the other, in different genres. If you look at indigenous traditions, there are


legends, myths and folk tales. Using these stories, we may speak about practically anything. **How is your way of storytelling unique?**

I try different genres. I start by asking the audience what genre the presentation is. I tell audiences about what I want that particular genre to do. What makes my stories unique is mixing historical events, connecting with the future, bringing emotions, and using metaphors.

Please share some interesting anecdotes

At an international conference, I was asked to fill in at the last minute. I was hesitant, but I performed. After the event, the organizer of the event told me that the session changed her life. She was so tired of her work and was planning to give it up. The story connected with herself. Often I rehearse one story and end up telling another.

How is storytelling important to mankind?

A poet wrote a poem during the pandemic. It went viral. It talked about the budget allocation for arts being channeled into health and other sectors. The truth is that the world cannot survive without art. For me, stories are as important as food and water. If there are no stories a community dies. 



Motunrayo Famuyiwa Alaka

Writer
 "Culture and religion, they are the big elephants in the room about equity between men and women, we don't want to talk about them so much, they are very important, they are good, but there are some parts of culture and religion that restrict us."



Aruna Nambiar

Writer
 "I think everybody has some baggage and you know, the way you relate with the world, in general, is based on what is happening in your life now as well. You might not be a bad person."



Malachi Edwin Vethamani

Writer
 "When I'm out of the country, I describe myself as Malaysian-Indian. When I'm in Malaysia, I am an Indian though everybody knows that I'm a Malaysian national. We have a lot of issues with ethnicity and race in Malaysia. Your race is often foregrounded."



Kannan Sundaram

Publisher
 "We will not stop publishing because somebody does not like it."



Swapna Gopinath

Author
 "When you talk about the nations, there is a kind of linear narrative because you don't want to hear about the 'others.'"



Vivaan Shah

Indian actor and Writer
 "I always believe that there are two schools of literature; the classical style of composition of the use of English language and the other that focuses on more vernacular, colloquial aspects of English and other regional languages."



Nilanjana Roy

Writer
 "Crime shatters a community."



Sobha Tharoor

Writer
 "I really believe what children read today is sought of informing the kind of adults they become later."



Prof. Lee

Author
 "We (Asians) had to go to west in order to make our voices heard. But we have to pause it and make the voices directly heard in the international community without having any recognition of the west."

DIALOGUE

Page-to-screen leap



Divya Dutta graced the stage of MBIFL, sharing insights into her life as an author and actor. Her first book, 'Me and Ma', published by Penguin India in 2017, is a tribute to her mother and a celebration of beautiful motherhood. Her second book, 'The Stars in my Sky' takes readers on a journey through her experiences in film, learnings and takeaways. "These two books started a new journey for me as an author...I wanted to celebrate beautiful motherhood, beautiful

Divya Dutta shares her journey through books and film, unveiling her upcoming Malayalam debut and discussing the thrill of taking on new challenges in her acting career

parenting," she says, sharing the connection she feels with her readers.

The MBIFL event also marked the unveiling of her upcoming debut in the Malayalam film, 'Otta', directed

by Resul Pookutty. "I'm very excited about it...I've had some beautiful connections with Kerala," she enthused. When asked what inspires and motivates her every day, she replied, "I pick up roles that make me nervous. I want to look into the mirror and see a different Divya over time." The award-winning actress, known for her supporting role in the film, 'Irada', which earned her a National Award and her recognition at Filmfare and IIFA, embodies the thrill of new challenges. ▀

‘My films owe their success to actors’



CINEMA

Priyadarshan says that remakes of his films will never do justice to the original

At MBIFL, director Priyadarshan recalled special moments in his career.

"There weren't scripts for most of my films," said Priyadarshan. "They were all written and improvised on the spot."

"You are the first person to ever write a script on toilet paper," Mammooty once teased him.

"The only job I know is filmmaking. I adore the job. That's what I want to do always" said Priyadarshan.

He spoke of his love for the craft, his process of bringing a story to life and the magic that transcends the script. The director, who has captured the hearts of audiences with his tales of humour, drama and emotion, delved into the language of cinema and gave us a glimpse into his world of make-believe.

"Every director should know the difference between drama and cinema. I learnt filmmaking through observation. The director is the leader of the sets, but s/he should respect and understand the contribution of other artistes in the team. I still don't know how to write an interesting screenplay. I'm still learning," he said.

He credited his actors for the success of his movies. "The actors propelled the movies," he added.

He wondered how the younger generation would respond to his work. "Every movie has its specific audience," he said.

He stated that remakes of his films would never do justice to the original. ▶

She swirls for social change



A DANCER'S MUSINGS

▶ Mallika Sarabhai uses dance as her language to advocate for a gentler, kinder and more just India

Confidence and grace lit up the face of dancer-choreographer Mallika Sarabhai as she talked about her interest in creating an India she believed in with dance as her language.

“What I wish for is a gentler, kinder and more just India,” she said at a session on ‘A dancer’s musings’ at MBIFL on Sunday.

She talked about her father Vikram Sarabhai and mother Mrinalini Sarabhai.

“Papa was not a scientist for the sake of being one. He was a scientist because he thought that science could help India, help the poorest and the most marginalized. At a time when India was broke and didn’t even have food, he convinced Panditji (Jawaharlal Nehru) that satellites were a good idea because satellites could teach millions of farmers and millions of people in villages to whom teachers could not be sent,” she said.

“My mother was a dancer who danced about political issues and violence. My older brother is an environmentalist and I use all these platforms to talk about the issues that concern me. My dancing is very often seen as either social or political,” she added.

Mallika Sarabhai is the only Indian participant in Peter Brook’s stage play, ‘The Mahabharata’, who played Draupadi.

“We couldn’t bring the play to India because political forces were stopping it. But we did bring the film to India. I had warned the cast how racist we were. In the first press conference in Bombay, Bhima and Bhishma were sitting on my two sides, both of them black Africans. The president of the Bombay Press Club stood up and said, Why do you have baboons like this playing our Gods?” she recalled.

She also pointed out that in the five years that she played Mahabharata across the world, the only question Indians asked was why blacks played Gods and not even one asked why a blonde played Yudhishtira or a blue-eyed person played Arjuna.

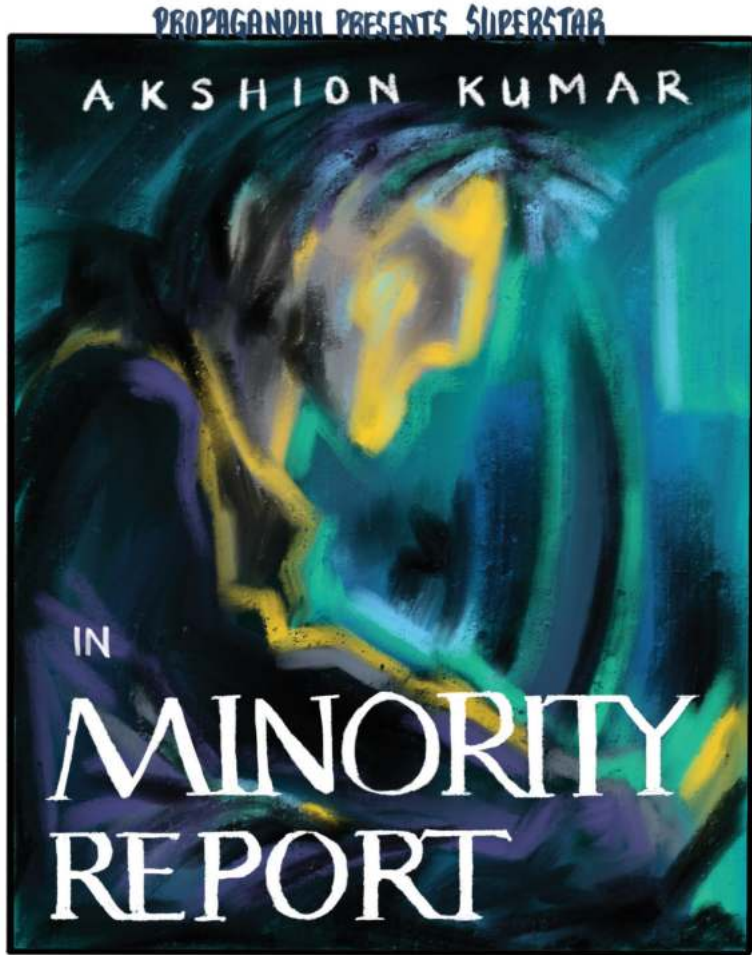
She shared her experience with the detection of a brain tumor at the age of 17 and how her interest in alternative forms of medicine stemmed.

“We only have one temple, which is our body. This is the temple we neglect. I think if one can talk to one’s body, if one listens to one’s body, then everything else in life can be tackled,” she affirmed. ▶

APPUPEN'S

DYSTOPIAN TIMES

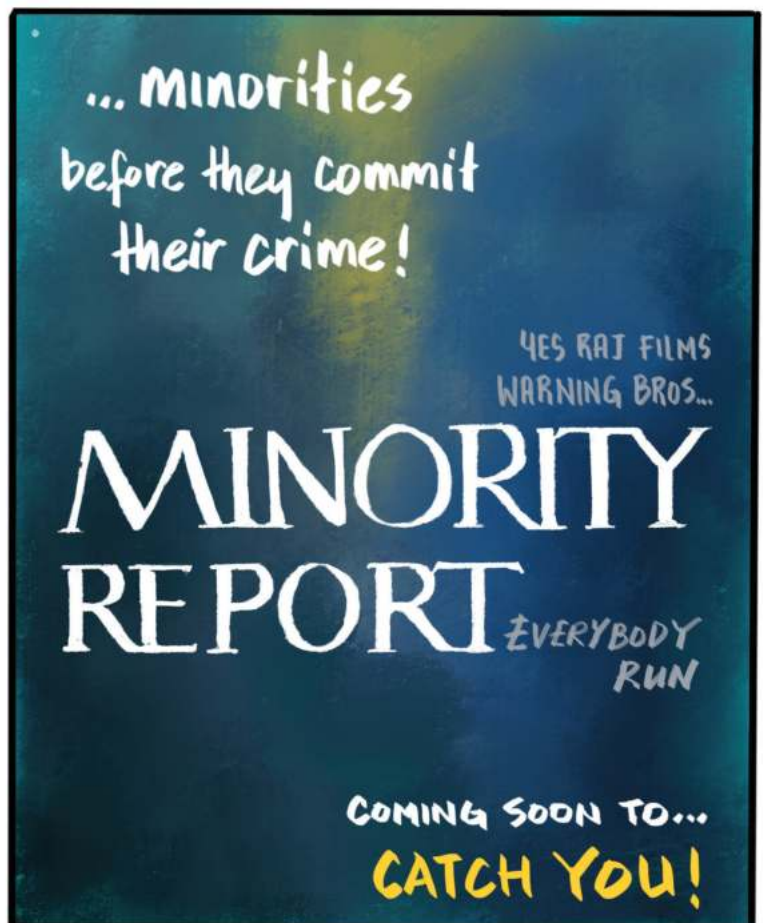
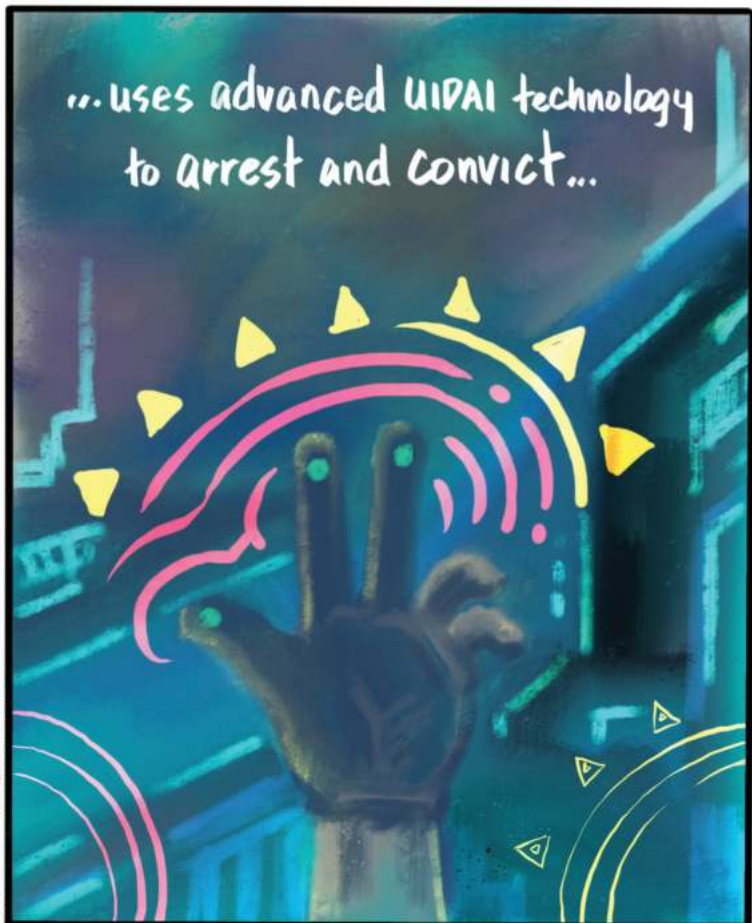
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ALL

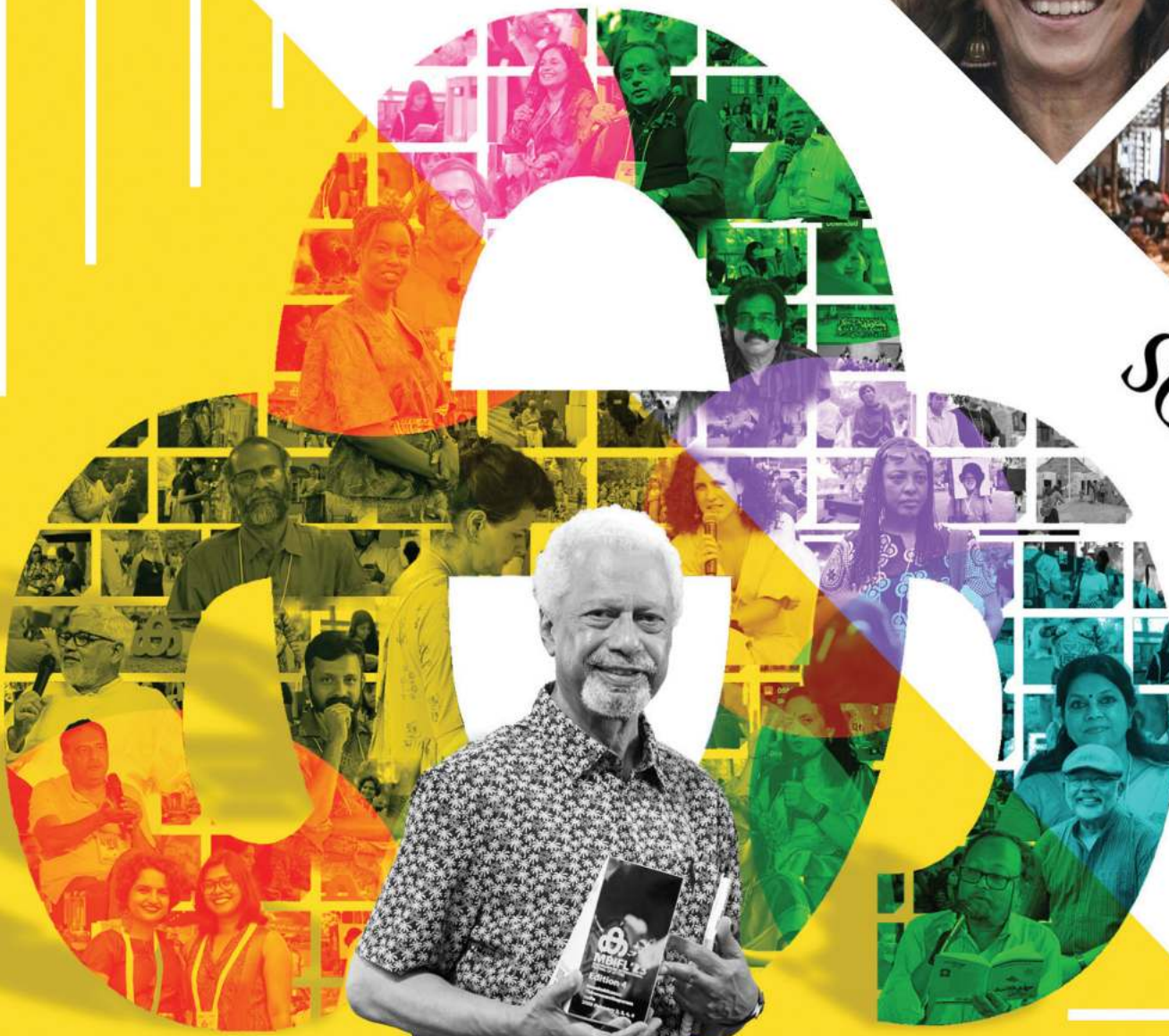


BRANDEZIN / APPUPEN



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As Mathrubhumi has embarked on a new chapter in its century-long journey, the theme of this year's MBIFL, 'Shadows of history, lights of future,' held a special significance. The festival was a thought-provoking exploration of the past and a glimpse into the possibilities of the future.



SIGHTS AND SOUNDS

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MBIFL featured a diverse lineup of talented writers and artists from around the world. They came from various backgrounds and had different artistic styles, themes, and influences.

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Literature has the
power to transport
us to new worlds and
introduce
us to new idea

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MATHRUBHUMI INTERNATIONAL
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Books, friends and lessons gained

The four-day journey of discovery and enlightenment has been a testament to the power of literature, a reminder of the boundless possibilities of the human spirit. Let us take with us the lessons learned, the new perspectives gained, and the friends made along the way, as we depart with a heavy heart but a full soul. Until we meet again at the next chapter of this literary festival, farewell!



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