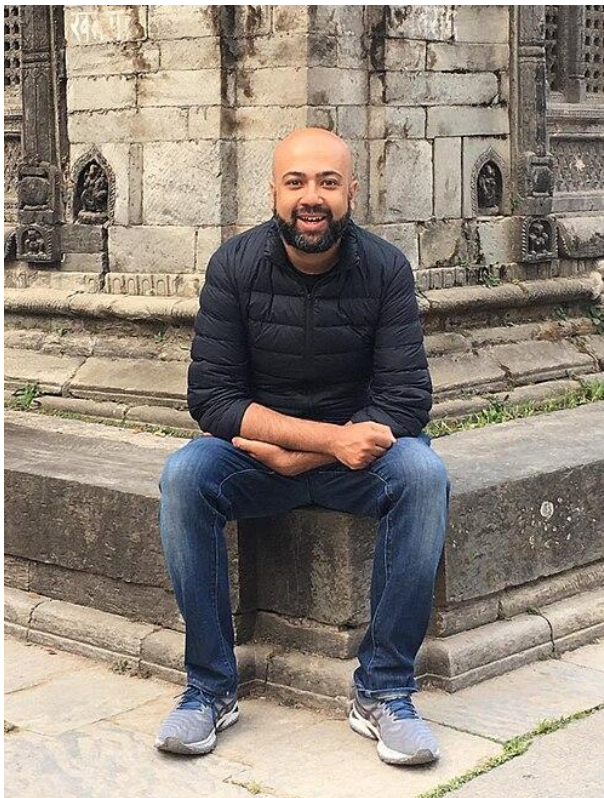


PRAJWAL PARAJULY

Biography/ie

Prajwal Parajuly is the author of *The Gurkha's Daughter* and *Land Where I Flee*. He loves idli, loathes naan, and is indifferent to coffee. He teaches Creative Writing at Krea University and oscillates between New York City and Sri City.



Romancier népalo-indien originaire de Gangtok dans l'État du Sikkim, Prajwal Parajuly vit entre Calcutta, New York et Londres. Cet écrivain bourlingueur s'intéresse à la langue et aux diasporas népalaises. Acrobate du verbe, il ajoute la corde d'universitaire à son arc à travers des contrats d'enseignement à Londres. À l'occasion de la traduction de son roman en français *Fuir et revenir* (Emmanuelle Collas, 2020), il passe plusieurs mois en France dans le cadre d'une résidence artistique à Saint-Nazaire.

May 21, 2025

Author Prajwal Parajuly discovers the organised charm of Sri City

The writer exchanges the high-rises of New York and the sidewalks of Paris for Sri City in Andhra Pradesh, where he discovers ramen, snakes and a little American sliver of India

Novelist Prayaag Akbar had promised that the students were smart. That was reason enough for me to move to Sri City, in the middle of nowhere, sight unseen. Friends and family had reason to be skeptical. For a few years I had been flitting between New York and Paris, convincing everyone that I was leading a rockstar's life. Why then would I abandon that for a city in Andhra Pradesh that no one had heard of? Alas, the rockstar existence I aspired to actually felt like I spent half my life at airports and the other half on planes. Do that in your twenties – it's sexy. You're still doing that once you step into your forties – it's a bit sad. Besides, what was not to like about building from scratch a Creative Writing programme at a new university that was making news for all the right reasons? Yes, I could design my own curriculum. Yes, the faculty-student ratio was excellent. Yes, New York could continue being part of my life. No, Sri City wasn't really a city in the British sense of the word.

I had been to Chennai once before and looked forward to rating the best idli and chutney there. I'd judge every fault at Avartana and Southern Spice and Pumpkin Tales and Kappa Chakka Kandhari. I'd visit the temples of Mahabalipuram and the beaches of Kovalam. I'd weekend in Pondicherry like the perfectly pretentious snob that I was. On the way back, I'd stop at The Farm.

But Sri City? What of Sri City? The information online was scant. Yes, it was what they called a special economic zone, poetically abbreviated to SEZ. And yes, there was a supermarket. Yes, Krea University, where I'd teach, was the city's pride and joy. And yes, Krea's main building was ugly while the newer buildings were pretty. Was that a smirk on my driver's face when I asked him to tell me something about the city?

"So, lots of factories?" I asked the driver. He smirked.

“Have you been to Krea before?” I asked.

“Many times.” He continued to smirk.

“And?”

Smirk.

Someone would get tipped zero rupees.

“We are almost there,” he said.

Outside, the landscape changed. We were fast leaving the chaos and colour of average Indian streets. The roads became wider and smoother. The dividers were more ornamental. They sported flowers. On either side of the tree-lined avenues were tall walls housing well-known brands: Mondelez, Pepsico, Sodexo. This felt strangely familiar. And why was that? I could have been in... Texas. Sure, few things in life were more mind-numbing than American suburbia – I’d sooner live in war-torn Mogadishu than on the outskirts of Philly – but here I was, suddenly excited by the similarity. Finding this level of organisation and cleanliness – what I’d have otherwise dismissed as abject soullessness – anywhere in India felt incongruous. Travel just outside the economic zone, and there they all were: the potholes, the frenzy, the roads snapped in two. But Sri City? Oh, Sri City was Oklahoma in Andhra.

So that was how it would be. I’d be living in a bizarre little American sliver of India.

I made my way to the university accommodation. It had “Exotica” in its name. I’d be on the top floor. Of course I’d tell everyone I lived in the penthouse. Outside, a canoodling couple plucked lice off each other – they would be an integral part of my Sri City vista – oblivious to the game of cricket factory workers played on a makeshift pitch. The glaze-tile-floored flat had toilets that didn’t have showers in the middle of the room. That was a win. But the two bathrooms were divided by a wall that stopped three-quarters of the way up. You could throw toilet paper across the wall from one bathroom to another.

“You like?” the driver asked when he saw me consider the partition.

I ignored him. My colleague Anannya would take me out for lunch.

“Japanese?” she asked.

Here? A jittery bus disgorged a gaggle of daily-wage earners next door.

I was whisked off to Asagao, which served Japanese and Italian cuisine, and not to Tokyo Ryokan, which served Japanese and Indian. Like I wasn’t confronted by an embarrassment of riches already, a third Japanese restaurant named Senri even bragged views. The Sri City expats – many of them Japanese and Korean – working at the various international companies needed their karaage fix. My ramen bowl could have been from any Japanese restaurant in New York or Singapore.

“That was a great meal,” I started to text Anannya on the drive back to Chennai. I’d have to do a social-media post about this strange cosmopolitan experience. “Best ramen I ate in India,” I’d brag. The driver swerved. A pair of snakes slithered to safety.

June 18, 2025

Author Prajwal Parajuly's newly minted fondness for train journeys

There are two constants in Prajwal Parajuly's life: Senthil's Toyota and unsolicited air conditioning. Until the Chennai Express whistled in, bearing sambar, flatulence, and a side of guilt

Back in the day when I was a Sri City newbie, I'd book a cab to and from Chennai. After trying out a few drivers, I settled on Senthil. Senthil is everything I want in a Man Friday: he picks up the phone well past midnight, likes the chutneys at Murugan Idli almost as much as I do and pretends he has his road rage under control when I am in the car.

But he also has issues.

He has the weakest eyesight I have encountered in a human: when I call him to fact-check this column, he says he wears between -10 and -11 glasses. I understand he can do nothing about that but often wonder how he'd drive me if his glasses flew off mid-journey. He also is that rare Indian driver who cannot function without AC. I think air-conditioning is evil, and excessive air-conditioning an American barbarity that's becoming ubiquitous in India. That I must go to every hotel, mall and theatre with an extra jacket even when it is 43 degrees outside should tell you how dire things have become. Senthil and I play a game where I ask him to switch off the AC, which he does... for about 15 minutes. He switches it back on thinking I won't notice. I call attention to the cold. Off. On. Off. On. The cycle is endless. It's exasperating.

Senthil charges me ₹2,700 per trip. The first two times, I tipped him an additional 300. He now thinks the fare is 3,000 rupees. Neither of us has spoken about it.

Now that I am a Sri City veteran, I have eschewed Senthil's Tundra-like Toyota Etios for the more tropical – and pocket-friendly – Chennai Express. Sure, I still call Senthil when I need to go to the airport or have more than one suitcase. But on other trips, the train serves my purpose just fine. You will not find an air-conditioned train that stops at Tada – the closest railhead from Sri City – en route to Chennai. What's not idyllic

about leaf-plate food, cross ventilation and the forced camaraderie of a commuter train?

You will accuse me of romanticising train travel, and you'd have a point. I grew up in Sikkim, in the Himalayan foothills, the one place in India unpenetrated by railway lines. I should be forgiven for getting stoked at the sound of a train whistle in the same way you'd excuse a Chennaite for squealing at the sight of a mountain. Frequent two-hour rail voyages in my adulthood are just the catharsis needed to compensate for the daily absence of trains in my youth.

The general fare from Tada to Chennai is 10 rupees, the first-class fare a whopping 18 times that. The women's buggy shares its borders with the first-class compartment but isn't as much of a free-for-all as our cabin. I have ridden the train about two dozen times but am yet to see a ticket collector.

As we weave through lyrically named towns – Anuppambattu, Nandiabakkam, Kathivakkam – tittering school kids join us. The clamour heightens. On one trip, an office goer – blessed with an iPhone 13, a Lenovo tablet and a jargon-heavy tongue – gets on at Attipattu. I owe him my knowledge of the difference between a station and a junction. He's unhappy, though. He declares that hardly anyone in the cabin has first-class tickets.

I ask him to live and let live. Outside, the industrial air in Ennore is rancid.

“That's why this country will never make progress,” he says.

“It's not like you don't have a seat,” I reply. The stench of Ennore gives way to the scent of sea at Wimco Nagar.

On another trip, my colleague Joya and I are treated to repeated decibel-shattering flatulence from a man who joins us in shameless mirth when he realises we noticed. That alone snags him a cameo in a future Parajuly novel.

A rainy day, I eye the lunch of a young man travelling in a three-generational group. Each family member has a lunchbox. “It smells like the gods descended on your tiffin carrier,” I tell my new friend. I need to be slapped. He confers with his family, who decide that one of them will forego lunch. Feeling equal parts proud and ashamed, I

accept the unopened box. I dunk a dosa in the sambar and declare it one of the best meals of my life. I reciprocate the family's generosity by offering them dark chocolate. They pronounce it inedible.

I am nervous that Senthil suspects me of cheating on him. He often calls me when I am smack-dab in the middle of Chennai. "When are you coming next, sir?" he asks. I splutter platitudes. One day I'll muster the courage to tell him about the delights of temperate train travel.

June 25, 2025

Seuls les étudiants traduiront cette chronique.

Author Prajwal Parajuly finds joy in dosa-less dinners and disappearing laundry

Sri City may not have a beach, a bar, or reliable laundromats, but for author Prajwal Parajuly, it offers something rarer: discipline, dodgy poker, occasional rocket launches, and a slow life

At the risk of reading like someone itching to be punched in the eye, I will say I am more content in Sri City than anywhere else. Friends accuse me of toxic positivity.

Sri City has allowed me to build a life I didn't know I wanted. I am a cliché and a half. For more than a decade, I led the opposite of a structured existence. I slept when I felt like it. I woke up when I felt like it. I wrote when inspiration struck. I said no to any writing that didn't excite me, fully recognising the privilege at play. I never made my bed – I say this with zero exaggeration. But humans thrive on routine – you don't need an expert to tell you that. Mundaneness is a beautiful thing. Sri City has provided me with more structure than even school did.

The regimented life I have here would make a colonel proud: wake up at 8; walk and jump rope in the neighbourhood park; say hello to Machu the dog, who makes a dash for my crotch; write a little; head to work in the university shuttle whose driver doesn't return my greeting; classes, students and administrative meetings (fun, fun, eww); head home in a shuttle where the driver deigns to smile at me; eat a dinner as tame as the day; grade papers and call it a night. Contrast this with my life in New York, where I eat breakfast at 6 pm and go to bed at 4 am, and you know where the Sri City evangelism comes from.

I may have lulled you into believing that I live in a place where nothing happens. But excitement is never far off. I find it in the scavenger hunt triggered by the Krea laundromat losing an entire bag of my clothes. At other times, excitement visits me in the building in the form of monkeys whose habitat we have destroyed. And sometimes I even invite it – excitement, that is – into the sitting room of my apartment with the

two bathrooms whose shared wall goes only three-quarters of the way up when I host poker games with a mix of players of superior, adequate and dubious skills.

But who needs excitement where there's equilibrium? Who needs excitement where there's teaching?

I am among those writers who like teaching more than they like writing. I often say, to my publicist's horror, that I got into writing not because there was a story in me bursting to come out but because it was the easiest path to fans, fame, and fortune. (*Ha*). I write for all the wrong reasons, the shallow reasons. But teaching? Teaching is what I do for the soul. Teaching is what keeps me up at night. It helps that Krea University students are smart and likeable (except when they switch off their cameras on Zoom).

Sri City is where I started writing again after quite a hiatus. For far too long, I clung to the coattails of the two books I wrote ages ago. I had stopped enjoying writing because it had become a job. But once I got settled here, I took a stab at translation. I finished a children's book. I worked on travel essays. A similar burst of efficiency had last hit me in 2019 when I decamped to Landour, in Mussoorie. Landour is pretty, though. Aesthetically, Sri City has no business being this petri-dish for productivity, and yet the words are flowing in genres and languages I didn't think I had any talent for.

I know I am aided by the lack of theatre, casinos, and concerts. But where there are no bars, there's the sky-high up, where we are sometimes treated to rocket launches from the nearby Indian Space and Research Organisation. There may not be a beach, but we have the... winter monsoons. I kid. We have Pulicat Lake close by, and waterfalls and hills to hike to. This is slow living at its best.

Could life be better? Yes, no doubt. I'll never forgive Krea University for excluding dosa from its dinner menu. The mess food is decent for campus fare, but I didn't uproot myself to eat butter chicken and egg curry and paneer lababdar. I have a problem with the freezing classrooms, but I carry a jacket with me at all times. I wish house help were easier to find. The university does send a revolving trio of cleaners three times a week – and they do a good job – but their contract dictates that they just sweep and mop the floors and clean the bathrooms. How much easier life would be if someone cooked, did

the dishes and put the laundry away. They could skip the bed, though. These days I make it first thing in the morning.