

PHOTOGRAPH BY: VENKATESH RADHAKRISHNAN



ZINEB AND HUSSAIN PACHMERIWALA,

who run a family business and a home-based chef service respectively, spent a year and a half looking for a 3BHK apartment that would suit their family of three, which often has guests visiting—their non-negotiable requirements included sufficient space, a building where they felt their children were safe and secure, and proximity to family, all reasonable requirements for anyone. They had allocated a budget of ₹2.5 crore for this. Eventually, they decided to spend twice the budget

Finding the Way Home

Indian realty is in a state of flux. Middle-class Boomers find affordable quality homes in metros out of their reach, leading to growth in suburban living at lower cost. Millennials, fearing financial instability, prefer renting to buying homes, while some buy property as investments

By KASMIN FERNANDES and IRAM ARA IBRAHIM

There is catharsis in India's real estate sector. The premium housing market has exploded while the middle class finds 'affordable housing' a joke, since most of them cannot afford the price tags. Meanwhile, Millennials and Gen Z have a flexible attitude towards housing—some of them stay away from getting a home of their own, and prefer renting even as others see ponying up for a place as an investment. After a lurch during the pandemic in 2020, luxury housing is driving the market. Mumbai architect Vikas Dilawari, who typifies the educated middle-class Indian, is disappointed. He has spent three decades working on heritage structures and earned numerous accolades. His website lists 18 UNESCO Asia Pacific Heritage Conservation Awards. He has restored old, classic residences across the country. Ironically, when it came to buying his own house, it was a nightmare. In August 2017, he had booked a 2BHK flat in a Goregaon project, and hoped to move in by 2019-2020. The project, like so many other in the country, stalled due to land issues, transforming what should have been a joyous occasion into a prolonged ordeal.

The rich have got richer from the stock market bull run. Average lower middle-class personal income in 2024 is just ₹35,000 in metros. The middle class comprises households with an annual income of more than ₹15-20 lakh. Hence, the average middle-class, middle-income Indian stands no chance of owning a house in a big city without disinvesting savings, taking a loan or selling off possessions. Millennials and Gen Z in India are either postponing house-buying, or treating it as investment, especially after the pandemic. Karan Kumar, a 39-year-old Google professional prefers to rent a floor in Delhi's pricey Panchsheel Park, paying ₹1.5 lakh as monthly rent, which is low for the pin code. He sees buying a house as an emotional

decision rather than taking a financial call: his wife is keen to get one. "If a house is worth ₹10 crore and I have the same amount in the bank, I can live well even after taxes," he points out. His age group invests in Mutual Funds a lot. Kolkata-based 32-year-old economist Soumya Bhowmick says, "Residential property values in the top six cities in India increased by 10-15 per cent in 2023, the highest capital appreciation rate in a decade. It is still lower than annual returns from well-performing mutual funds." Kumar says that many people of his generation live with their parents and know the house or cash, at some point, will come to them. The reason why the majority of Millennials are either postponing or don't wish to buy houses is fear of

financial instability, preference for flexibility in personal and professional life and delaying marriage. During and after the pandemic, jobs were cut ruthlessly or salaries were halved. "I won't buy a home because I don't see a stable financial future. Companies like Google have sacked people ruthlessly; hence Millennials don't see loyalty to a company worth it," says Vivian, a design professional based in Bengaluru. High-rollers have a similar viewpoint, but for different reasons. Raunaq Kamath, a successful 38-year-old intellectual property lawyer, who owns his own firm, is of the opinion that "buying a home is a waste of money. It's better to invest the money and take good holidays when one has the time". It is not just wallet logic; Millennials travel light: they like the freedom and self-worth that moving cities and jobs gives. Hence, rent, not buy, is their motto. Gurugram-based Raghav Malik, 30, the founder of creative production house Kaamkhor, says, "The quality of life matters to me more than the assurance of owning property. Staying in a rented apartment can save me a lot of money for other experiences. People my age have an Airbnb hangover: The idea of house-hopping, like bar-hopping, fascinates me more than being a house owner." Millennials are also marrying

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DEMAND & SUPPLY

Sales of luxury housing units priced at ₹4 crore and above INCREASED BY 27% DURING THE JANUARY-JUNE PERIOD according to Coldwell Banker Richard Ellis, the world's largest commercial real estate services and investment firm



LUXURY

According to a comprehensive report by Knight Frank India, luxury apartments in Delhi-NCR are characterised by premium amenities, including landscaped gardens, top-tier security systems, concierge services, and opulent finishes. Luxury apartments in Delhi-NCR are priced at a premium, typically ranging from ₹5 crore to ₹20 crore

ULTRA-LUXURY

Taking exclusivity, a notch higher, ultra-luxury apartments boast high-end designer interiors, private elevators, panoramic city views, and amenities tailored to the whims of the affluent. Prices for ultra-luxury apartments in Delhi-NCR soar beyond the ₹20-crore mark. These residences boast bespoke features, personalised services, and panoramic city views

PREMIUM

Premium apartments strike a balance between luxury and affordability. These residences offer modern amenities, well-designed living spaces, and convenient urban living at relatively more accessible price points, typically range from ₹1 crore to ₹5 crore in Delhi-NCR

The Delhi-NCR, Mumbai, and Hyderabad markets accounted for around 84% OF LUXURY HOUSING SALES

SALES GREW NEARLY SIXFOLD on an annual basis in Pune

Luxury homes in Mumbai priced above ₹10 CRORE SAW SALES TOTALING ₹12,300 CRORE in the first half of 2024. Worli area alone represented more than a third of these transactions

India's millennials, who make up 36% OF THE POPULATION, ACCOUNTED FOR 54% OF HOMEBUYERS IN 2023, according to Knight Frank

ACCORDING TO THE MAGICBRICKS PROP INDEX REPORT (APRIL-JUNE 2024)



quarter-on-quarter (QoQ) increase

Hyderabad and Bengaluru are seeing the highest annual appreciation for two-bedroom homes, at 15% and 13.5%, respectively, while Mumbai saw a 10.3% increase. DELHI-NCR SAW AN AVERAGE 12% RISE IN PROPERTY VALUES, followed by Pune at 11%, according to a report by NoBroker



SOUMYA BHOWMICK,

a 32-year-old economist believes that most millennials who can afford real estate investments can also establish premium banking accounts. These digital investment options eliminate the need for personal research or trading, while offering higher returns. They also come with added benefits such as no maintenance or transaction costs associated with property buying and the avoidance of bureaucratic procedures in government departments

- Exquisite blend of Indo-Portuguese design, French-Chateau architecture, and African tribal-inspired accessories
- Carefully curated world-travelled art and decor collectables, evoking a sense of history and nostalgia
- High-speed internet is critical to support remote work and smart apartment features
- Smart lock and keyless entries
- Motion sensors, timers, and automated lights turned on when they're needed and off when they're not
- Smart thermostats to adjust temperatures, and smart appliances
- Voice assistance through Google Home and Amazon Alexa
- Indirect lighting
- Stone countertops
- Heated washrooms
- Soaking tubs
- Walk-in closets
- Steam rooms
- Rooftop decks
- Outdoor kitchens
- Separate dry and wet kitchens
- Fire pits
- Screening rooms
- Golf simulators
- Electric car charging stations

Continued from page 1

late because they are risk-averse: they wait to have enough money in the bank and feel they are mature enough to take informed decisions about crucial personal issues like getting hitched and buying a home together. Public health professional Sapna Surendran moved to Delhi from Mumbai in 2020, ironically when the pandemic was at its height. In 2017, she had bought an apartment in Bandra. "I hadn't been willing to put down roots career-wise. But, then I bought my place as a rainy-day house because it gives me a sense of stability. Besides, I was making enough money to cover the EMIs, and it is now a good investment. The rent is covering the EMIs now; so the house pays for itself."

Middle Trouble: People like Dilawari have no such luck. "It took a lot of time and work to get the place right. Now, the interiors are being finished and we should move in soon," he says. His decision to purchase the 815 sqft apartment was driven by his living situation at the time. "We put down our savings and borrowed the rest to book our apartment. We stayed in a rental for the last five years," Dilawari shares. It was the affordability factor that prompted the family to book in an under-construction project, "since apartments in south Mumbai are prohibitively expensive". A 1BHK property in Mumbai costs between ₹80 lakh and ₹1.5 crore, depending on the location according to tech company MyGate. A 2BHK in the western suburbs is priced at an average of ₹2.5 crore. This is when the average monthly cost of living in Mumbai of a middle-class working couple is between ₹30,000 and ₹60,000. Do the math. According to RBI guidelines, the price for affordable houses should not exceed ₹65 lakh in metros, and ₹40 lakh in non-metro areas. These are violated breezily by builders with political connections. As a NoBroker report highlights, the average price for even a 2BHK flat in Mumbai is ₹1.5 crore. "There is no sense locking your money to buy a house," feels Karan Kumar.

UHNIs, HNIs, NRIs and industrialists are in love with luxury residential real estate housing segment. Sales of state-of-the-art luxury housing units was up by 27 per cent in



ANISH CHANDRAN, a 42-year-old Merchant Navy officer, is in the process of shelling out ₹1.7 crore, slab-wise, for a 1,000 sqft apartment in Kharghar, Navi Mumbai, in a complex developed by Satyam Developers. Chandran and his wife, Aarthi, decided to invest in a larger home to accommodate their growing family. To finance their new home, they combined a 50 per cent home loan with personal savings, including what had accrued from previous investments



SAPNA SURENDRAN, a public health professional, moved to Delhi from Mumbai in 2020, when the pandemic was at its height. In 2017, she had bought an apartment in Bandra, as she was looking at putting down roots career-wise. She believed her house would give her a sense of stability. Earning enough to cover the EMIs, she thought buying was a good investment. Now that she moved cities, her house in Mumbai is literally paying for itself, with the rent covering the EMIs

the first half of the year. Many Millennials who made money in startups are buying up luxury condos like in Magnolias in Gurugram. People who invest a windfall in real estate need not pay capital gains tax. Others are picking up houses in the ₹2-crore range in smaller cities as investments. Or, they are buying holiday homes, which can be rented out on Airbnb when they're not visiting. According to Bhowmick, "Millennials who invest in real estate can establish premium banking accounts in public and private sector banks. This eliminates the need for personal research or trading, offering significantly higher returns than property investments."

Builders are aware that well-travelled clients identify luxury living clearly. High-end features means higher construction costs and property prices. Juxtaposed against Dilawari's experience, the widening gap between aspirational living and affordability is clear. According to Karl Nagarwalla, Head of Residential and Commercial Real Estate at Nagarwalla Estates, a leading brokerage in Mumbai, "most buyers today

look for buildings with extensive amenities," he says, adding, "Basic amenities are a gym, swimming pool and banquet halls. However, current developments are pushing the envelope with luxury amenities. For instance, Oberoi 360 West features a bowling alley, spa, indoor and outdoor pools and a pickleball court, which has become quite popular. The list of amenities offered in new buildings surpasses those offered by top sports clubs." Knight

SPOT THE RED FLAGS

Deals that seem too good to be true: They probably have issues such as water damage, termites or a cracked foundation

Homes located in emerging neighbourhoods

Sellers lack proper documentation or are in a rush

Photos seem heavily edited

An excess of for-sale signs, foreclosures or abandoned lots in the area: These can be indicators of stagnant growth and under-performance

Pest infestation and moldy interiors

Frank's 'India Real Estate: Office and Residential Report' reveals that 34,895 homes priced above ₹1 crore were sold between January and March this year, a 51 per cent increase compared to the same quarter in 2023. Conversely, homes priced below ₹50 lakh saw a decline from 25,714 units in Q1 2023 to 23,026 units in Q1 2024. Sales of homes priced between ₹50 lakh and ₹1 crore fell by 6 per cent to 28,424 units.

Luxe no Bar: It's location, location, location. Lots of open space, greenery or a golf course, if possible, are taken for granted; many condos have become mini cities since malls, restaurants and other services have sprung up around them. Aesthetically premium homes in high-security gated communities have playgrounds, pet parks, lakes, gardens, walking and jogging paths, auto wash facilities and charging stations for electric cars. Each block has multiple lifts made by premium brands such as OTIS and Schindler. The concierge service is the cherry on top. Smart homes sold by a real estate company in the heart of Hyderabad are equipped with voice commands for indoor appliances like lights, fans, AC, geyser and TV. They have motion sensors for washroom lights, a panic button and gas leak detectors as well. Bathrooms with heated toilet seats that rise automatically when you enter are no longer a novelty. "In Mumbai, a ₹2-crore ticket price is considered too low, at least in prime neighbourhoods. ₹10 crore is a reasonable rate," says Nagarwalla, who cites an upcoming project in Tardeo. "It offers a two-lane bowling alley, arcade, hammam bath, Vichy shower, escape zone, café, guest rooms, steam room, sports lounge and card table—and a 3BHK here is roughly priced at ₹9 crore," he says.

Affordability Crisis: According to the Magicbricks-Propindex Report (April-June 2024), several cities have seen significant hike in property prices. Noida witnessed a 7 per cent quarter-on-quarter (QoQ) increase, followed by Gurugram at 6.8 per cent, Mumbai at 6.5 per cent, Delhi was at 4.3 per cent. These hikes have far outpaced wage growth, putting immense pressure on middle-income budgets. Such a person is Anish Chandran, a 42-year-old Merchant Navy officer, who is shelling out ₹1.7 crore, slab-wise, for a 1,000 sqft apartment in Kharghar, Navi Mumbai. Chandran and his wife, Aarthi, decided to invest in a larger home to accommodate their growing family. They combined a home loan with personal savings, 50:50. "Initially, we had intended to move into a pre-existing apartment, but the better projects were all under construction, prompting us to opt for one of those," he explains.

The Navy man's situation highlights a broader trend among middle-income families who are looking for better living conditions. Recognising the potential growth in this sector, HDFC Capital Advisors, the world's largest affordable housing platform plans to invest more than \$2 billion in this segment by the end of 2025. Says Vipul Roongta, MD and CEO of HDFC Capital Advisors, "The government has just announced support for building three crore affordable houses, including one crore homes in urban areas. This is a \$500-billion business opportunity that calls for investment of at least \$100



ANWESH PATNAIK, a 29-year-old Learning & Design specialist from Delhi, plans to buy a house in the next five-10 years. Patnaik's views on investing in property changed in his late twenties. Buying a house means more stability and having an additional source of income for Patnaik

UP, UP AND AWAY

In Delhi-NCR, realty major **DLF SOLD ALL 795 APARTMENTS FOR ₹5,590 CRORE WITHIN THREE DAYS OF THE LAUNCH OF ITS NEW LUXURY HOUSING PROJECT** in Gurugram in May. The new project, DLF Privana West, is spread over 12.57-acre comprising 795 apartments. Earlier this year, the company had sold 1,113 luxury apartments in Gurugram for ₹7,200 crore within three days of the launch of its project DLF Privana South, which is spread over 25-acres. The apartments are priced at Rs 6.43 to ₹7.15 crore for a 4BHK measuring 3,577 sqft and penthouse measuring 5,472 sq ft, respectively.

Lodha Ciel and Lodha Malabar in Mumbai cost **₹35 CRORE AND ₹125 CRORE** approximately

Isprava Group properties in Goa, Alibaug, the Nilgiris, and Kasauli typically start from **₹7 CRORE AND GO UP TO ₹45 CRORE**

Viceroy Privé, a stand-alone signature residential tower in Thakur Village, Kandivali East, **DESIGNED FOR 61 BESPOKE 4BHK APARTMENTS AND 5BHK DUPLEXES PRICED AT ₹8 CRORE ONWARDS**



Aaradhya Avaan by MCL Group, an upcoming project in Tardeo, offers a two-lane bowling alley, arcade, hammam bath, Vichy shower, escape zone, café, guest rooms, steam room, sports lounge, and card table. **A 3BHK HERE IS ROUGHLY PRICED AT ₹9 CRORE**

billion infused through public, private markets and debt."

All the talk apart, there is no clear definition of what is "affordable" and where. Atul Goel, Managing Director of E-city Ventures, points out, "In Ahmedabad, we see an oversupply of affordable housing, specifically homes priced around ₹25 lakh. In Gurugram, homes of that price would sell out almost immediately on announcement," he notes, adding that a one-size-fits-all approach to affordable housing may not be effective, given the varying market dynamics across cities.

Thirty-two-year-old Bengaluru-based pet-care startup founder Sharang Sharma says, "We have seen our parents struggle with loans. One needs a larger capital to invest in buying a house. An increase in financial awareness has made me realise that there are other areas of investment that are more beneficial. Corporate bonds, gold bonds, mutual funds and equities gives better returns than property."

Floored aspirations: Buyers like Zainab and Hussain in Chennai place a premium on comfort and quality of life. According to PropTiger's quarterly report 'Real Insight Residential January-March 2024', the share of affordable homes, priced up to ₹45 lakh each, in total housing sales more than halved to 22 per cent in January-March 2024, down from 48 per cent in the corresponding period of 2023. Niranjan Hiranandani, founder and chairman of the Hiranandani Group and chairman of the National Real Estate Development Council (NAREDCO) explains, "High home loan interest rates have increased to 8-8.5 per cent from the previous 6 per cent a year or two ago."

Meanwhile demand for high-end properties has surged. Delhi-based Learning & Design Specialist Anwesh Patnaik, 29, says, "For the large part of my twenties, I was against the idea of buying a house. Renting felt feasible because it gave you the freedom to move here and there easily. As I approach my thirties, I'm definitely considering stability. And if I own a house, I don't have to necessarily live there. I can rent it out for additional income."

Recently, Godrej Properties Ltd (GPL) achieved record-breaking sales in their new project, Godrej Reserve, in Kandivali, offering bookings for flats priced upwards of ₹2 crore

for a 750 sqft 2BHK apartment and upwards of ₹6.85 for a 4BHK, 2,000 sqft place. The total sales was worth ₹2,690 crore in a remarkably short period, marking GPL's most successful launch in Mumbai in terms of both value and volume of sales.

Drawing the Curtains: The change in consumer sentiment towards such homes are driven by rising disposable incomes, changing aspirations, after the pandemic and growing NRI money power. Khilen Shah, of Hubtown, says, "One significant driver is the stock market boom, which has created a new class of property buyers. Consumer confidence has increased substantially after the implementation of the Real Estate Regulatory Authority (RERA), leading to a shift in behaviour, with more people willing to purchase properties in earlier stages of development, especially the ones developed by trusted names. The expanding options available in the market has contributed to an overall increase in demand."

Tirthankar Poddar, a musician and former corporate executive, who recently moved into a 3BHK in Kandivali's Lokhandwala Township, cites the need for more space and a better quality of life. "I wasn't keen on buying a resale flat. The project in Kandivali is brand new and has the amenities I was looking for," says Poddar, who shelled out ₹2.25 crore for his new home. While he cherished his old neighbourhood in Charkop, he found the quality of life and access to key hotspots significantly better in the new location. The shift in demand towards higher-priced properties is a concerning trend, since it suggests that the housing market is becoming increasingly inaccessible to a large segment of the population, which will be forced to the margins of the city.

While there are smaller ticket-size projects in Mumbai, with apartments in the city centre priced at less than ₹1 crore, Shah points out that the high land and approval costs in Mumbai make it challenging for builders to cater to this segment. "Today, interest costs for most projects are one of the largest components after land and approvals. It is difficult to reduce project costs," he says.

Home may be where the heart is, but the heart is no longer the deciding factor in a landscape of new options and lifestyle attitudes.

PHOTOGRAPH BY: AJINKYA SAWANT



RAHUL BHAN, a 41-year-old IT sales professional used to live in Vasai, Mumbai, but moved to his 2BHK in Balewadi, south Pune, because of the affordability factor as well as the fact that he'll get better return on his investment. In Mumbai, he would only get a small apartment in Borivali or Kandivali, at the price, but in Pune, he got a much larger place with better amenities. He bought his Pune flat for ₹1 crore in 2016, and now it's valued at ₹1.6 crore

CAN THE DIVIDE BE BRIDGED

Abhishek Bhadra, Head of Research at MagicBricks, emphasises the crucial role of infrastructure development regarding the affordable housing crisis. He cites the example of the Yamuna Expressway in Noida, which has significantly enhanced connectivity and reduced travel times between cities. "By improving transportation infrastructure, the pressure on high-demand neighbourhoods can be alleviated, as people can more easily commute from other areas," says Bhadra. As Abhishek Gupta from CRE Matrix points out, "The problem with Indian real estate is that it's limited to seven metro cities: Mumbai, Delhi, Pune, Bengaluru, Chennai, Kolkata and Ahmedabad," he explains. We need more metro cities to alleviate pressure on existing ones." Indeed, addressing the middle-income housing issue could include measures such as:

1. Redefining affordability
As Hiranandani and Bhadra suggest, the current definitions of affordable housing must be revisited to be realistic and inclusive of middle-class aspirations. Raise the price ceiling for affordable housing projects and provide incentives for developers to build more mid-range housing

2. Streamlining approvals
Streamline the currently complex and time-consuming approval processes for housing projects to simplify the regulatory burden on developers who can accelerate the construction of new housing



At the individual level, middle-income homebuyers need to become more proactive in their house-hunting process. As Zaineb and Hussain discovered, "There is a suitable home for everyone, and resale properties are always an option. For new constructions, many payment schemes are available, such as paying the initial booking amount and the rest after possession."

HOME LOAN TIPS Banks and non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) offer a wide range of home loan products for middle-class homebuyers. But rising interest rates have made a mockery of affordable housing. According to the Knight Frank report, EMIs have surged sharply across top cities over the past year, with EMI-to-income ratios leading to an average 14.4% surge in instalment burdens across cities, forcing middle-class families to tighten their belts to service home loans

Shadow Lines

It was 9 pm. There were another two hours for the Tholpavakoothu performance to begin at the Bhagavathy Devi temple in Palakkad, Kerala. Ramachandra Pulavar, one of the greatest artists of the art form, a Padma Shri Award-winner, was sleeping on a mat under a tree in a field. The moment stayed with filmmaker Saheer Ali, who was shooting his documentary on the 2,000-year-old art form, Tholpavakoothu, called *Nizhal Yathrikan (Shadow Traveller: A Puppeteer's Tale)*. "That single moment portrayed the sad situation of the art form. Film stars rest in air-conditioned

Filmmaker Saheer Ali's documentary on Tholpavakoothu portrays the dismal state of the 2,000-year-old art form

By SHEVLIN SEBASTIAN



The leather puppets; (below) the lamps used to make the shadows



"In 2012, I came across Ramachandra and his family. Later when the Pulavar family decided to make a documentary, I was happy to helm it." SAHEER ALI, filmmaker

caravans, while these greats don't get any facilities," says Ali as he trained his camera on Ramachandra, the protagonist of the film.

The art form uses theatre, dance, visual arts and music. And they tell stories from Tamil poet Kamba's version of the Ramayana. The performances generally begin late at night and continue till dawn. There was a time when people would flock to see a Tholpavakoothu performance. Today, there are only 20 artists who practise the art form. But the Pulavar family, from Shoranur, is undeterred. To them, Tholpavakoothu is a form of devotion. They get paid a few hundred rupees for a performance, which is staged during the festival season, which starts at the end of December and concludes at the end of May. When not performing, the Pulavars cultivate the land and nurture cows at their farm at Palakkad. The artists apply to the Centre

every year and get a grant of about ₹60,000 each annually—not enough, but it helps them tide over tough times.

"It is true that there is not much revenue. But we are lifelong devotees of the art form. It has been in our family for eight generations. So, it is important that we remain dedicated. If we give up, Tholpavakoothu will die. So, irrespective of the financial difficulties we will continue to support it," says the 64-year-old Ramachandra, who has diversified from the Ramayana in order to attract a new audience. He recently did a play on Mahatma Gandhi and Jesus Christ. "Plays are also scripted about the dangers of alcohol, women's safety, and the evils of littering the streets," says Ali.

How did he decide to make a documentary on the art form? "While working as an associate on Mollywood actor P Balachandran's film, *Ivan Megharoopan*, in 2012, there was



a sequence of Tholpavakoothu in the film. I came across Ramachandra and his family and it piqued my interest. Later, when the Pulavar family decided to make a documentary on the art form, I was more than happy to helm it," says the 52-year-old Kochi filmmaker. "We wanted to spread the details of this art form all over the world. We felt that the best way was to archive it through a documentary," says Ramachandra, whose US-based son has funded the project.

At the start of a performance, there is a smaller white and black curtain in the middle. The white curtain represents the sky, while the black is a reminder of the earth. The filigreed puppets—earlier made of deerskin, but nowadays goat or buffalo skin is used for easy accessibility—appear on the screen. They fight, they fall off. Sometimes, they hold hands. At other times, they exchange angry dialogues in a mix of Tamil, Sanskrit

and Malayalam, accompanied by the sound of traditional drums, cymbals and gongs. Arrows move across. An opponent is felled, an elephant rumbles across. "Preparing the puppets is a painstaking process. First the hair from the skin is removed, before it is dried in the sun. After that, an artist draws the outline of the character. They then cut it out and paint it with vegetable colours. The movements are manipulated by sticks extending from the figures," says Ramachandra.

Behind the screen, on a straight line are placed 21 lamps. And the performers, about 10 in total, stand behind the lamps and move the puppets, in an extraordinary display of skill, coordination, understanding and dexterous use of the hands, and always moving the story forward without a pause. And that is what the Pulavar family is doing with the art form—moving forward without a pause.



Life in a Metro

COURTESY: AKSHATHA SURYANARAYANA



By RASHMI GOPAL RAO

(Above and below) Members of the Urban Sketchers Bengaluru

It is a busy Saturday morning for the group of artists gathered near the Jayanagar BDA complex in Bengaluru. A bustling shopping arena that was set up decades ago, it is an unmissable landmark in South Bengaluru. Much like the location, the sketches that the group have made are a kaleidoscope of colour, character and composition. "This is the best part of the meet; every sketch is from a refreshingly different perspective even though the location is the same. It is as if a canvas of memories and moments are captured in the sketchbook," says Urban Sketchers Bengaluru co-founder Akshatha Suryanarayana, a professional artist and a children's book illustrator.

Started in 2017 by Rohit Kulkarni, Suryanarayana and Shruti Vijay—all in their late 30s, who met through Instagram because of their shared passion for drawing—Urban Sketchers Bengaluru aims to capture the spirit of the metro, its daily life, the heritage buildings, the local markets etc. From a small group of five to close to 700 members on their Facebook page and 400 on their



WhatsApp group today, the number of sketchers has grown steadily. The venue and theme for each meet, conducted on Saturdays between 8 am and 10 am during summers, and 10 am and 12 noon in other seasons, is announced on Instagram—@uskbengaluru—and are attended by more than 50 people each week.

"We have a diverse group and a unique venue each time. Being new to Bengaluru, I have discovered many places since I joined the group in 2022. We end up learning so much about the city apart from sketching at the location," says Vijay, a finance professional. The movement gained tremendous impetus during Covid as people looked to go out in the open and connect with one another. "These meets are a great place to make friends and nurture social bonds," says Kulkarni, who works in the apparel industry.

The group was recently invited to be a part of the Karnapex event—an annual state-level philatelic exhibition in Karnataka, which promotes stamp collection as a hobby and also educates people about the state's history, culture and heritage. Works by five artists were selected for the state-level philately exhibition. The meets have people of all ages coming in from different walks of life. The group has also been a boon for people like Aparna Hegde who, in spite of being an animator and trained artist, had inhibitions of drawing in public. Thanks to Urban Sketchers Bengaluru, today she has begun enjoying the process. "I like drawing in a group, interacting with amateur and professional artists, and discovering different aspects of the city," she says. A picture speaks a thousand words and pictures are what they have to say.

LEISURE CORNER



MAPPING THE WORLD

Ojas Art presents an exhibition of unseen historical maps from the 17th century to 1946. This period saw extensive commissioning of maps by Western powers. Cartography helps to understand changing geographical boundaries and their causes. The displayed collection emphasises maps of Pre-Independence India, encompassing present-day India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. *Cartographical Tales: India through Maps; Till September 22; Ojas Art, Delhi; Entry: Free*

FOR THE CHILD IN YOU

NMACC is back with the second edition of *Bachpan*, an annual celebration dedicated to children. The festival takes its inspiration from the concept, 'joys of childhood', creating a safe space where entertainment meets learning through fun and interactive experiences. *Bachpan; Till August 11; NMACC, Mumbai; Tickets: ₹250 onwards; Details on nmacc.com*

BEYOND RELIGION

The decimation of Vijaynagara is often depicted as a civilisational clash between Hinduism and Islam. Contrary to this, Girish Karnad shows that religion played little role in this battle. *Crossing to Talikota; August 9-10; Srihari Khoday Centre for Performing Arts, Bengaluru; Tickets: ₹589 onwards; Details on BookMyShow*



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Baby on Board

Pregnancy care in India has got an upgrade. There's technology that monitors round-the-clock health of both mother and baby, and fashion gets a fillip as hip maternity outfits on Instagram feeds boast functionality and glamour **By DHWANI AJMERA**

One are the days when expectant women relied solely on the wisdom of caregivers at home. Today, the smartphone has emerged as a constant companion and a primary source of guidance for the modern mother-to-be. A plethora of apps not only offer advice and suggestions on how to navigate the complexities of pregnancy but also provide a step-by-step guide in tracking the baby's growth and development. Alongside the rise of digital tools, pregnancy technology has taken centre stage. Anxious new parents are increasingly turning to cutting-edge innovations to ensure a healthy and stress-free pregnancy.

This shift towards technology is not without reason. According to the World Health Organization, approximately 2,87,000 women lost their lives during and following pregnancy and childbirth in 2020, with almost 95 per cent of these tragic deaths occurring in low and lower-middle-income countries.

The stakes are equally high for newborns. UNICEF reports that every day, 6,300 babies die within their first month of life. In 2022 alone, an estimated 2.3 million newborns lost their lives worldwide. As groundbreaking research continues to

unfold across the globe, aiming to safeguard the well-being of both mother and child, it is evident that the pursuit of a safe and healthy pregnancy has become a top priority for parents-to-be.

- The US Food and Drug Administration have been discussing the use of artificial wombs that could potentially help premature babies survive. These would have artificial environments that mimic the womb, with fluid-filled containers with tubes similar to umbilical cords that would provide nutrients and medications.

- Non-Invasive Prenatal Testing (NIPT) is a revolutionary non-invasive screening method that analyses small fragments of foetal DNA circulating in the mother's blood. NIPT can detect chromosomal abnormalities such as Down syndrome with high accuracy, as early as the 10th week of pregnancy. The parents get reliable information about the genetic health of their unborn baby, so they can make an informed decision.

- Berlin-based science communicator and biotechnologist Hashem Al-Ghaili has developed the EctoLife, which claims to grow around 30,000 babies yearly. It will allow infertile parents to conceive babies, where they can engineer the embryo

genetically before implanting it into an artificial womb.

- Advanced wearable tech developed by Tel Aviv-based Nuvo Group measures various markers of foetal and maternal wellbeing. This can track everything from foetal movements and heart rate to uterine activity.

- Remote foetal monitoring uses advanced wearable devices and mobile apps to continuously track foetal heart rate, movements, and maternal contractions. This technology allows healthcare providers to monitor the health of both mother and baby in real-time, even from a distance. It reduces the need for frequent hospital visits.

- Lioness by Israel-based PregnanTech is a non-invasive solution that helps expectant mothers carry their babies to term, reducing the likelihood of premature delivery and its associated complications. It is a disposable, patented silicone ring designed to be inserted vaginally. Once in place, the ring gently surrounds the uterine cervix, providing critical support to prevent early shortening or dilation. Lioness helps to ensure that the pregnancy progresses to full term, allowing the baby to develop fully before birth.



A myriad of apps out there now promise a safer, healthier delivery. These offer a range of features designed to provide support, information, and a sense of community during pregnancy.

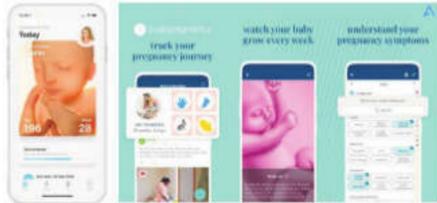
What to Expect

Based on the popular book series What to Expect When You're Expecting, this app offers personalised content and interactive features to support pregnant women. Includes helpful tools such as a due date calculator, pregnancy weight tracker, and contraction timer. **Platforms:** Android, iOS **Cost:** Free with in-app purchases



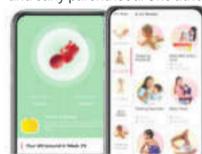
Pregnancy+

Pregnancy+ stands out due to its extensive range of features, user-friendly interface, and scientifically-backed content. Provides an extensive pregnancy guide, and tools like a kick counter, contraction timer. **Platforms:** Android, iOS **Cost:** Free with in-app purchases for additional features



Mylo

A comprehensive parenting app designed to support expecting and new parents through every stage of pregnancy and early parenthood. One advantage is the community for parents to share their experiences. The app gives access to expert advice from doctors, nutritionists, and parenting specialists. **Platforms:** Android, iOS **Cost:** Free with in-app purchases



Celebrate your weekly progress.



Baby2Body

Ideal for women looking to maintain a healthy lifestyle throughout their pregnancy. The app offers safe, trimester-specific workouts and nutrition plans. **Platforms:** Android, iOS **Cost:** Free with in-app purchases

Ovia Pregnancy & Baby Tracker

Ovia is particularly useful for its customisable health tracking tools. Moms-to-be can log symptoms, weight, sleep patterns, and other health metrics which the app uses to offer personalised feedback and insights. **Platforms:** Android, iOS **Cost:** Free with in-app purchases

Kegel Trainer

This app is specifically useful for maintaining pelvic floor health during and after pregnancy. **Platforms:** Android, iOS **Cost:** Free with in-app purchases



SKINNING IT Dr Deepali Bhardwaj



Skincare During Pregnancy

Pregnancy is a time of profound change, not only for the body but also for the skin. Hormonal fluctuations can lead to a variety of skin issues, and the shift in your skincare requires careful consideration. This article aims to provide a comprehensive guide to maintaining healthy, glowing skin during pregnancy.

1. Understanding hormonal changes and their impact on skin

During pregnancy, your body undergoes significant hormonal changes. These changes can impact your skin in various ways:

- **Increased Melanin Production:** Higher levels of melanin can lead to hyperpigmentation, including the "mask of pregnancy" or melasma, which manifests as dark patches on the face.
- **Increased Blood Flow:** This can result in a "pregnancy glow" but may also cause redness or visible veins.
- **Changes in Oil Production:** Some women experience oilier skin due to increased androgen levels, leading to acne or breakouts.
- **Stretch Marks:** As your body expands, you may develop stretch marks, particularly on the abdomen, breasts, hips, and thighs.



2. Safe Skincare Ingredients

When selecting skincare products during pregnancy, it's crucial to choose ingredients that are both effective and safe. Here are some ingredients to look for:

- **Vitamin C:** An antioxidant that can help reduce pigmentation and improve skin brightness.
- **Hyaluronic Acid:** Hydrates the skin and helps maintain its elasticity.
- **Niacinamide:** Known for its anti-inflammatory properties and ability to reduce hyperpigmentation.
- **Glycolic Acid:** A mild exfoliant that can help with dullness and uneven skin tone, particularly on the abdomen, breasts, hips, and thighs.

Ingredients to Avoid:

- **Retinoids:** These vitamin A derivatives are effective for acne and anti-aging but are not recommended during pregnancy due to potential risks to the developing fetus.
- **Salicylic Acid:** While used for acne, high doses should be avoided; however, lower concentrations are generally considered safe.
- **Hydroquinone:** A skin-lightening agent that can penetrate the skin and may not be safe during pregnancy.

3. Skincare Routine for Pregnant Women

Cleansing: Use a gentle, hydrating cleanser to remove impurities without stripping the skin of its natural oils. Look for non-foaming, sulfate-free options to avoid dryness.

Exfoliating: Opt for mild exfoliants like lactic acid or enzyme-based exfoliants. Avoid physical scrubs that can irritate sensitive skin.

Moisturising: Choose a rich, nourishing moisturiser to keep your skin hydrated. Products containing hyaluronic acid and ceramides are ideal.

Sun Protection: Sunscreen is crucial to prevent pigmentation changes. Use a broad-spectrum SPF 30 or higher, and consider mineral sunscreens with zinc oxide or titanium dioxide.

4. Lifestyle Tips for Healthy Skin

Stay Hydrated: Drinking plenty of water supports skin hydration and overall health.

Healthy Diet: A balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and healthy fats can improve skin appearance. Foods high in antioxidants and omega-3 fatty acids are particularly beneficial.

Regular Exercise: It increases blood flow and helps maintain healthy skin. Just be sure to consult with your healthcare provider before starting any new fitness routine.

Anti Skin Allergy Specialist & Consultant Dermatologist at Max Hospital Saket, Delhi

Nothing cheers up new parents than technology that promises to keep their newborns safe and in comfort. And if it is easier on the parents, who are worried about staying up all night to nurse the baby and making peace for the crankiness, then it is a win-win situation for all



The Snoo Smart Sleeper

combines womb and white noise with gentle rocking and swaddling, to ensure a comfortable sleep for the baby.



The Groegg2

Colour Changing room thermometer tracks nursery temperatures so one can dress the little one suitably for the night, without waking up through the night to change the baby's clothes or keep adjusting the AC temperature to suit the baby.



No more standing at the sink or the stove to ensure the bottles are properly washed and sterilised. With a unique all-in-one functionality, the **Baby Brezza Bottle Washer Pro** seamlessly combines washing, sterilising, and drying in a single appliance.

The **Owlet Dream Duo 2 baby monitor** has a wearable sock for the baby, which allows parents to track the baby's heart rate and oxygen levels, along with a high-definition camera for visual monitoring. Expectant and new parents get real-time insights into their baby's health and wellbeing.

Looking for a gentle rocking motion that mimics you cradling your baby, or a stroller or pram that will help babies nap or sleep on the go? Try the **Rockit Rocker**. With its compact design and adjustable speed it keeps babies snoozing on their daily outings.



Humidity levels go a long way in contributing to a more soothing environment. The **Crane Drop 2.0** is a 4-in-1 humidifier. It promotes respiratory health, skin hydration and better sleep.

We all know how babies promptly doze off in a car. Experts say it's because of the rhythmic motion.



The **Rockit Zed** does just that, only on a mattress at home. It gently vibrates the mattress in the cot, promoting undisturbed sleep.

Slay It in Style

The film industry's leading ladies have been redefining maternity style for the last few years, from Alia Bhatt effortlessly nailing relaxed, comfortable outfits to Kareena Kapoor Khan slaying in every outfit across her two pregnancies. Yet, for the average Indian woman, dressing the bump remains a challenge. Indian designers have been slow to cater to this growing segment, leaving expectant mothers struggling to find stylish, comfortable options. However, change is on the horizon, driven by a new generation of fashion-forward moms-to-be determined to celebrate their pregnancies in style.

Designer Ken Ferns echoes this sentiment. "Pregnancy is a transformative phase, and women should embrace the opportunity to celebrate their curves. However, designers often face the challenge of catering to a market where some women may feel hesitant to flaunt their pregnancies due to orthodox views or superstitions, leading them to stay sheltered and limiting the



scope for creating fashionable maternity wear," he says.

Look as Good as You Feel

For couturier Sherina Soni of Cherie D, pregnancy dressing is all about a harmonious blend of elegance and comfort. Her designs often feature soft, flowy fabrics like chiffon and crepe lycra that are great for expectant mothers as they

can accommodate growing curves while maintaining a sophisticated, high-fashion look. "Stay close to your own personal style: don't adopt a new voluminous silhouette to disguise your changing shape," she says. When it comes to maternity fashion, comfort is key, and that's exactly what drew Kareena

before the go-to for every pregnant woman who wants to look stylish," he says.

Ethnic Silhouettes Rule

The diversity of Indian attire means there's something for every stage of pregnancy and every occasion. Indian garments allow for a unique versatility. Adjustable features like drawstrings, elastic waistbands, and wrap styles allow for flexibility and can accommodate changes in body shape throughout the pregnancy. Mallika Singhan, a prominent luxury lifestyle influenc-

er, stresses on the significance of fabric choice for maternity wear. "Cottons are ideal given the weather, and free-flowing silhouettes are crucial. Marks & Spencer offers excellent maternity pants. These have stretchable waistbands, and don't appear too baggy," she says.

Transformation is Underway

Anuradha Chandrashekar, co-founder of ICH Creative Consulting, believes maternity fashion is undergoing a significant transformation. As societal attitudes continue to progress, the future of maternity fashion in India appears promising. With more women embracing their pregnancies with style and designers rising to the challenge, the art of dressing the bump is on the cusp of a revolution. "Women are becoming more self-assured to showcase their belly," she says. High-profile pregnancies, from Rihanna to Hailey Bieber, have set new standards for pregnancy style. Now, one can expect to see more diverse expressions of maternity style, ensuring that every expecting mother feels seen, celebrated, and stylish.



ALMANAC
TODAY 04.08.2024
 Year: Krodhi.
 Aadi: Thei Pirai / Ashadh: Krishna Paksha.
 Tithi: Amavasya till 16.43hrs.
 Nakshatra (Star): Pushya till 13.26hrs.
 Moon in Karka. Today is Deep Pooja, Darsh Amavasya, Friendship Day.
 Rahukaalam: 04.30 pm to 06.00 pm
 Yamagantam: 12 noon to 01.30 pm
 Gulikakalam: 03.00 pm to 04.30 pm



BIRTHSTONES
LEO

(July 24 - August 23)
 The birthstone for Leo is the Peridot. The Zodiac sign of Leo also responds to Onyx, Diamond, Carnelian, Sardonyx and Ruby. The tradition of giving gifts of jewellery containing these stones dates back to thousands of years. The gemstone or birthstone Peridot is believed to conduct the energies of the planet Sun with which it is sympathetic and that wearing jewellery containing the gemstone will focus the energies of the planet and sign through the gem. The properties with which the Peridot, the birthstone of the Zodiac sign of Leo, is associated are Love, truth, faithfulness and loyalty Fame, dignity and protection. The Peridot is also used to enhance prosperity, growth, and openness. The healing properties of the Leo birthstone are reputed to be effective for health problems relating to: lungs, lymph, breast and sinuses. Birthstone jewellery as a gift for a person born under the sign of Leo is popular.

HOW THE CARDS FALL Meenakshi Rani
 meenakshirani33@gmail.com



WHAT TO EXPECT, HOW TO COPE

LOVE RELATIONSHIPS WORK HEALTH MONEY

ARIES



A project hits a roadblock and you look for ways around it. From bank loans having a spanner in the works to requirements of green technology; you put in twice the effort in quick tempo. A core adviser sticks to ideas that have outlived their usefulness and you look for a substitute. Grey areas in accounting, public relations and ethics are cleared up as someone realises core values matter more than cultural norms. A youngster gets a lesson in courtesy and parking manners as they pick on a management big shot. A short term assignment is reassigned leading to questions of prestige and vacuum in revenue. Wear bottle green, beige and brown with moss agate and malachite for Uranus and Mercury.

TAURUS



A turnaround in perception has officialdom look at you with new eyes. Bureaucratic affairs are smoothed and permissions, approvals, licences and permits arrive. Unfinished paperwork is back on track to completion. Money locked in escrow or contractual liabilities moves and partial recovery makes work-life easier. Young teamsters go out and accomplish something you hoped to do yourself. A new client dreams big and extends an invitation to be part of something meaningful and impressive. An advertising campaign gets people talking and lost market turf is regained. Wear orange, teal and brown with greenish turquoise and coral for Saturn and Mars.

GEMINI



You work out the hidden catch and stay ahead in the game. Recovery of property, status, dues and customer base shows the world exactly the great mettle you are made of. Success crowns new business ventures, acquisitions, collaborations, mergers and even a takeover bid. Some look at a new business asset or property with a critical eye and ensure it develops to its full potential. A new connection is useful and puts in a good word for you where it counts. A loyal market following multiplies. Family owned businesses witness up-skilling, purchases, expansion and rapid gains. Overheads are lowered, increasing profit margins. Wear pink and red with pink sapphire, rose quartz and ruby for Venus and Sun.

CANCER



Kindred spirits collaborate and before you know it you've got together a solid team. Deadlines are easily met and you relax amidst amenable faces. Rather than get too comfortable in a new job; you raise the bar for excellence chasing trophies, awards and accolades for professional and business categories. A scam is exposed and you decide to walk away from people who used your name in vain. Youngsters decide to change streams and transition into competitive fields with a stint apprenticing overseas, under expat run companies or an MNC. Wear sky blue, grey, white, pearl and aquamarine for Moon and Neptune.

LEO



A well designed plan starts to come apart at the seams. Old targets are missed due to someone's ego and you realise you still have time to make amends. A dialogue box opens with higher authorities who seek explanations for missed deadlines and missed cues. Appraisals are long and detailed and linger on flaws rather than gains. A rival finds a more efficient way to reach an outcome or common destination. Research is expedited to find solutions and the necessary logistics. A paper tiger rule turns out to have real teeth. Labour matters and unions form a powerful force. Wear grey and black with agate and black onyx for Saturn and Rahu.

VIRGO



You stick to the plan and refuse to kowtow to creative distractions. Well entrenched in success, you are about to diversify, attract the right sources of funding or collaborators. Short term gains derail a project that demands focus and undivided attention. Entrepreneurs receive funding, grants, permissions and approvals. Professionals stay with the battering ram to open a closed door that's about to give way. Internships get tough before they get easier and you keep a cool head and sail through to a win. Negotiations have you deal with people who have the same idea as you and want the same results. Wear yellow, chocolate brown, forest green, yellow sapphire, hessonite and jade for Jupiter, Uranus and Mercury.

LIBRA



A shield is lowered and you wave a flag of truce. People spot overtures and respond to them. Career highlights are lauded and openings enable important placements including honours and honorarium. Some extricate themselves from the limiting clauses of employment contracts. A rival pays top dollar for services that are crowning glory to a career. A change of guard has someone return with more heft. A youngster botches up an assignment with an off colour remark. Diplomacy and tact save the day and you are hailed for restoring trade links, business or even a coffee program. Wear navy blue, ivory white, mother of pearl and labradorite for Saturn and Neptune.

SCORPIO



A well entrenched philosophy is about to be amended. All eyes are on you to lead a team out of a morass. Inspections and assessments have you second guessing plans and you develop confidence and a back up plan. Rewards percolate into a trickle as management looks to save face with incentives and promises. Professionals grab an opportunity to turn entrepreneurial as angel funding comes with perfect timing. Someone helps themselves to the corporate kitty and you get to the bottom of it. A miscreant is let go off sans a letter of recommendation. Wear red and white with ruby and clear quartz for Sun and Venus.

SAGITTARIUS



Presentations have you burn the candle at both ends. However fanciful and creative an approach; solid grounding wins this round of competitive analogies. Bosses want exact figures and facts rather than 'guesstimates'. Much time is devoted to due diligence, background checks, fact finding and research. Government inspections put you on your best behaviour. A rumour is easily doused and you steer clear of circulating or being the subject of office gossip. Fieldwork opens doors to an opportunity that an air-conditioned view may have denied. Wear sand gold, khaki and olive with sandstone for Uranus.

CAPRICORN



It's all hands on deck as you galvanise a team to do the heavy lifting for you. Old rivalry plays out and you desperately search for new surprises. Someone's arsenal of manoeuvres seems unending and you work harder to gain a position or regain footing. Bosses lean towards someone's expertise and friendships or carefully cultivated ties scarcely water down some hardcore decisions. Youngsters feel the pressure on internships and swallow their pride and ask for help. A new boss is unmoved by degrees and qualifications and wants to reinvent the wheel on a daily basis. A chauvinist is firmly put in place. Wear sea green and green cat's eye for Ketu and Neptune.

AQUARIUS



A meeting has you starry eyed and perform a handshake even though you hardly know your new business bedfellows. An idea is pushed to the point of bullying and you realise you must find your voice before it's too late. Skipping processes or the extra spade-work has you act in haste. You quickly undo orders, decisions and approvals that could actually have you repent at leisure. You are grateful for your work ethic and sixth sense that leads you to discoveries and information that make all the difference to an idea and its implementation. A mischief maker is outed for trying to push their own candidate against your specific instructions. Wear mauve, grey, moonstone and amethyst for Venus and Moon.

PISCES



An adventure opens up new doors. You embrace a challenge and find you have all the experience and expertise to make a solid go of it. Promotions stem from rising to the occasion and in Star Trek terms 'boldly going where no man/one has gone before'. Placements, transfers and assignments combine global and local elements and you enjoy the power and pace. Cutting through red tape gives a project wings. A difficult colleague is finally on board and you welcome their astute though blunt advice. Protocols are revamped and you have a masterclass to learn everyday by rule and norm before the weekend passes. Wear mustard yellow, tan and tiger's eye for Mars and Sun.

THE WEEK AHEAD Peter Vidal

Mar 21-Apr 20:
 Life is good, but the real question at the moment is where you want to live, how - and who with! The problem is an excess of choice, or perhaps unrealistic hopes, and the answer is to keep your feet firmly on the ground at all times. Towards the end of the week a partner will begin to offer you real help.

July 24-Aug 23:
 Inspirational planetary alignments take first place this week. There's nothing wrong with day-dreaming. In fact, you might be better off following your imagination and leaving practical chores to those who are on the ball.

Nov 23-Dec 22:
 A truly unique planetary aspect will give you a gentle nudge in the right direction at home. However, there's one thing which will oil the wheels of domestic contentment, and that's a little extra cash. Why don't you get together with family members, and lay down some ground rules for the future?

Apr 21-May 21:
 Bend the rules but don't break them! If you have strayed from the straight and narrow you will eventually be called to account, but perhaps not for another four weeks. This week you have a chance to change your mind. At work it is now essential that you learn new skills.

Aug 24-Sept 23:
 Monday and Wednesday bring passion, Thursday and Friday adventure, so can you really afford to stick to the same old life or are you prepared to launch yourself into a wonderful new world?

Dec-23 Jan 20:
 If you manage to make an early start to all important activities, it is likely that others will be happy to follow your lead. Fair but firm is the best way forward and partners will do whatever you tell them as long as you give them good reason.

May 22-June 21:
 There is a youthful spirit in the air, which has to be good news. A partner's generosity may have dried up, at least for now, and you may be feeling a little alone. A spot of window-shopping, though, will be a wonderful way of distracting yourself from the cares of the world.

Sept 24-Oct 23:
 Last week's emotional difficulties and spiritual doubts should be a thing of the past. By the end of the week you may even be getting an inkling of the new, confident you. In love, aim for the top and, at work, set your sights on a promotion.

Jan 21-Feb 19:
 Your stars are moving fast. In fact, there's no escape from busy pressures, and you may be putting in extra time at work. Even people of leisure must eventually get down to all those essential routine chores. Health-wise, a good tonic is now required.

June 22-July 23:
 How sweet life is when partners bend to your will and satisfy your desires. Even when you think you've got it tough, you'll have it easy compared with other people. In short, count your blessings. Your personal power will be enforced if you behave with wisdom and compassion.

Oct 24-Nov 22:
 Sometimes the planets just don't behave as planned, and unexpected personal developments will cause you to rethink your plans. Good communication is the key but, if you are to persuade people you're right, a poetic touch will carry more weight than the facts.

Feb 20-Mar 20:
 Your guiding principle this week is that a little pleasure does you a lot of good. If you are forward-planning, set Monday to Wednesday aside for making money. Leisure should be put on hold for spending. Professional hopes will be satisfied on Monday, but domestic plans must be tackled on Wednesday.

YOUR FORTUNE THIS WEEK Amarakosha

What the planets say about your prospects for wealth, romance and professional success this week

ARIES (Mar 21-Apr 19)
Work: Higher authority may trust you with important tasks, giving you budget, resources, and more decision-making power.
Money: Your daily expenses may increase. Be vigilant as you may lose your valuables.
Couples: Your over-friendliness toward someone may trigger jealousy.
Singles: You may approach someone respectfully whose appearance matches your preference.

TAURUS (Apr 20-May 20)
Work: You often finish your tasks before the day ends. However, colleagues may seek your help and increase the workload.
Money: Your approach towards money is prudent. You may get a luxury gift from a close friend.
Couples: You may act irrationally or get easily upset, yet your partner offers comforting words.
Singles: Your friends or family may play cupid and introduce someone to you.

GEMINI (May 21-June 20)
Work: Sudden unexpected changes and challenging situations may increase your workload significantly. Seniors can provide valuable support.
Money: You will be able to manage income expenses, and investments smoothly.
Couples: Relationships may feel stagnant. You may discover secrets about your partner.
Singles: You may fall for the same person as your friend possibly straining friendships.

CANCER (June 21-July 22)
Work: You are intuitive and assertive, driving yourself towards peak productivity. However, remain vigilant to avoid conflicts with colleagues.
Money: You could expect income and new avenues for earning money unexpectedly.
Couples: Resolving disagreements swiftly, you both may have a new offbeat couple's activity.
Singles: If you are in a situation, conversations may lead to pursuing a serious relationship.

LEO (July 23-Aug 22)
Work: You'll be happily engaged in the main job and side hustle, maintaining high levels of productivity.
Money: Your instincts for generating income are sharp, ensuring a steady financial influx.
Couples: Balancing professional and family obligations might inadvertently lead to lapses.
Singles: You may notice familiar faces expressing interest or affection towards you.

VIRGO (Aug 23-Sept 22)
Work: You should back up and secure your data against potential cyberattacks or technical failures, as these risks are significant.
Money: Expenses related to your health care may come to you unexpectedly.
Couples: You and your partner may encounter challenges, but brainstorming can lead to solutions.
Singles: Close friends or family members may play matchmaker to introduce you to someone.

LIBRA (Sept 23-Oct 22)
Work: You are creative, intuitive, and proactive in your approach towards work. You turn unexpected challenges into opportunities.
Money: If managing debt, you could allocate some funds to reduce it.
Couples: Despite potential constraints on private time, your relationship feels secure and nurturing.
Singles: You may experience sparks of romance and instant connection with someone younger.

SCORPIO (Oct 23-Nov 21)
Work: You will demonstrate efficiency in your work, consistently meeting deadlines. Entrepreneurs may get a promising collaboration.
Money: If you are the family's financial pillar, be prudent as unexpected large expenses may arise.
Couples: Challenges may arise if an older member of your partner's family causes disruption.
Singles: If you have been dating online, it's time to meet in person.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov 22-Dec 21)
Work: You may be trusted with crucial tasks due to sudden manpower reductions. This will result in longer working hours.
Money: You may have lifestyle inflation and impulsive spending tendencies.
Couples: While private time may decrease, your relationship remains secure and supportive.
Singles: Love at first sight may happen to those who have never experienced love.

CAPRICORN (Dec 22-Jan 19)
Work: You will work smart and embrace the hustle and grind. You will turn conflicts and unexpected challenges into opportunities.
Money: Increased expenses on social activities could lead to money-making opportunities.
Couples: You may have to use some white lies to avoid argument.
Singles: You may fall for the same person as your friend. It may strain your relationship.

AQUARIUS (Jan 20-Feb 18)
Work: You complete tasks before the deadline and turn challenges into positive outcomes. There's chance for career advancement.
Money: Your spending may outpace income, as you may have instant gratification.
Couples: Parents or elders of yours or your partner's family may disrupt relationship.
Singles: For those using dating apps there's a chance to meet someone in person.

PISCES (Feb 19-Mar 20)
Work: You may encounter opportunities to take on additional tasks outside your regular responsibilities, showcasing resilience.
Money: Good news may come from older male friends. You spend on mindful shopping.
Couples: Minor disagreements may occur, but you both prioritise each other's feelings.
Singles: You are selective in your interactions, clearly communicating disinterest where it exists.

AUGURIES Meenakshi Chawla
 Twitter: @Astrology_us

The week starts with Amavasya happening in Cancer and Mercury going retrograde on Monday. Mercury retrograde happens 3-4 times in a year and for almost 24 days Mercury stays in retrogression. There is nothing new in this cycle but this time Mercury will stay very unstable by going back and forth and crossing gandantas or the cusp line of watery to fiery sign three times during retrogression. From Leo to Cancer and then back to Leo it indicates major challenges on a collective level. With an extended amount of time in Leo, it comes under the strict aspect of Saturn and Mars. Being in the 5th House of Kaala Purusha, it has a great impact on speculation and investment. Leo is the creative fire, the ego, our joy and happiness and the opposition of retrograde Saturn to Mercury brings conflicts and challenges. The planet of cognition and thought processes, retrograde Mercury's transit is serious this time. Certain areas that would need a lot

of caution are driving, travelling, communication, the technology sector, communication devices, misunderstandings, technical glitches, software issues, documents and networks. One must avoid road rage and aggression. Political debates and the media will also witness some negative impact. It will bring to the surface many issues that need to be resolved. A very close degree conjunction of Mercury and Venus occurs this week in Leo, causing a war between them. Leo is the fourth house in India's chart which deals with agriculture, hidden treasures, caves, vehicles and other related subjects where we may see its impact. It is not the right time for big investments, taking things easy or believing everything without investigating the truth. Let us consider the other most consequential planetary transit, which is of Saturn retrograde. As Saturn is moving backwards, it is putting its malefic impact on Capri-

corn, the 9th house of India's chart where Pluto is already retrograde. All the areas pertaining to the 9th house, which is of religion, faith, belief, high-profile cases and judgments are going to stay in the limelight. The current religious month of Shraavan is also there when for Kanuara Yatra, millions of Kanuarias carry sacred gangajal and offer this holy water to shiva temples, primarily at Haridwar, Baidyanath, Uttarakhand and many other pilgrimage spots. This year a major controversy had ignited related to religion in mid-July demonstrating the malevolent effects of retrograde Saturn. Pluto retrograde also

brings its spookiness and mysteriousness. Pluto loves power struggle and its action is to expose toxicity, dysfunction and corruption. It always adds an unwanted element of stress, extra hard work, anxiety and challenges. We may feel over-energetic to express our ideas or there can be too much of conflict. There is a saying that when the monsoon comes, the rain washes away the superficial layer to reveal the reality. The extra optimism, integrity, enthusiasm and expansion is coming from Jupiter, presently the only bright spot in the sky. This gives us a reality check of what is important and what is not.



Up Above the World

Abseiling and mountain climbing in the mighty Jebel Akhdar of Oman is nerve-racking

By RIDDI DOSHI

Legend has it that when Lady Diana Spencer visited Oman in 1986, she was so mesmerised by Jebel Akhdar or the 'green mountain' that she stood staring at it for hours. It is a wonder, really; this mountain that was once under the sea millions of years ago, but rose to the sky, to 9,902 m above the sea level, because of tectonic movement. Even today, one can see fossils of marine life etched in the rock—whole shell of a turtle, many fish and several shells. It is also

home to caves and pools and is one-of-its-kind landscape in the desert country of Oman. While Muscat simmers in extreme heat, at 45°C, the weather in the mountains, just 2.5 hours away from the capital city, is 18°C even in summers. In peak winters, around December, it even snows for a couple of days.

These weathered, mountains with daunting, steep walls and valleys, make for the perfect setting for a mix of adventurous abseiling (a sport or activity of descending a rock face or other near-vertical surface by using a doubled rope, coiled round the body and fixed at a higher point). At the Jebel Akhdar Mountain, this three-hour activity is only on offer at the luxury hotel Alila Jabal Akhdar, situated right on top of one of the highest cliffs.

Ready in comfortable T-shirts, full-length, stretchable pants, and sports shoes, guests wear harness, helmets and

gloves to begin the descent from the top of the cliff. The first stretch is nerve-racking, especially for first-timers, as it's a sharp fall into the valley. Even the simple act of attaching the harness to the rope, which runs across the entire adventure route and on which your life depends, is scary. Right at the start, a few guests want to give up. But instructor Adnan eggs them on, escorting each participant, from the top of the cliff to the first landing. Participants secure their waist harness to the rope, then grip the rope tightly with their hands and with the support of their legs, placed on the rocks, throw their body weight against the harness, almost dangling in mid air to slowly climb down, their bodies facing the rock.

After a few screams, the participants come to the first landing, relieved. But little do they know that harder patches await them. These stretches demands high fitness levels and strong minds. Participants

require great arm strength to pull up and push down their bodies through the mountain. Core strength is required to keep the balance and not topple down or sideways. Thigh strength is a must to climb up and down and so is body flexibility. For when participants must cross the outer, circular folds of the mountain, they must take long steps from one tiny, narrow step made out of a square hook to another. Right below, is the never-ending valley.

The tiny hooks look deceptively small and unstable. It is hard to place both feet on it. So, one fixes the right foot on the first hook, sticks the body closer to the rock and with all the arm strength one has, takes a long step, stretching quite a distant, to place the other foot on another hook, on the other side of the curve of the mountain. It gets more thrilling from here. Now one climbs up the mountain. Again, taking huge steps and lifting one's body along the hook steps with absolutely no other



Alila Jabal Akhdar

crevices or folds to hold on to. One misstep can lead to serious injuries to the hands, knees or the head. While most people emerge out of the stretch scratch-free, others have small cuts on their bodies. But that's all part of the game. "If you want great Instagram photos, you have to be brave and do this," Adnan tells the younger participants.

What's next, make the participants gulp in unison. A suspended bridge made of a single rope connects two extremely deep cliffs; the kind one feels dizzy even looking at. Participants are

to cross the bridge to go to the other side. With harness secured on the rope above and hands fixed on the ropes on the side, participants walk, step by step, with twisted feet to keep the balance. The rope swings up and down, making it harder to balance.

Finishing strong is always the hardest in any extreme adventure sports. Climbing back up to the hotel at this point seems harder. Fatigue kicks in and legs tremble ready to buckle down. But pushing through that last mile is what makes for a strong athlete.



The Ladle of the Exile

In the hills of Himachal Pradesh, chef Prateek Sadhu whose family fled Kashmir made computers crash as people rushed to make bookings at his destination restaurant

By PRIYA KUMARI RANA

India has few destination restaurants. Naar, a cozy, 16-cover one-of-a-kind restaurant in a tiny village near Kasauli in Himachal Pradesh, is one. The mountains cast a spell on Kashmir-born maverick chef and restaurateur Prateek Sadhu, who, after working with the world's best Michelin-starred chefs in Europe, and establishing his award-winning restaurant in Mumbai, gave up the allure of the big city, to set up Naar. It recently made it to *TIME* magazine's 100 greatest places to visit in 2024.

Born in Baramullah in Kashmir, Sadhu is from an exiled Kashmir Pandit family and grew up on a farm. "In the early 90s, unfortunately our entire community was forced to leave. We were displaced, while fleeing from targeted genocide. We lived for months in refugee camps in Jammu," he recalls. The deprivation nudged the formation of his earliest memories of food. "Food became central. Through the stories we were told when we were sitting for dinner, my mother was trying to make us connect to our roots," he says.

At a recent pop-up at Indian Accent, New Delhi, with Chef Manish Mehrotra, Sadhu served up a 10-course meal. Dishes like the Masala carrod 'kadhi' with Kashmiri chutney add zest to the palate.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY: @PANKAJ_ANAND



Prateek Sadhu; (below) Naar interiors

"We wanted to serve a *kadhi* which is popular in Himachal Pradesh, and highlight simple, unfancy ingredients, like carrots," says the chef, who dried and rehydrated the carrots in carrot juice, which is then mixed with yogurt. His Pahadi pork with *bakarkhani* and acidic butter goes back to the upper reaches of Uttarakhand or Arunachal Pradesh. "The idea was to use the same techniques and flavours. We used mountain pepper sauce, which is similar to Szechuan pepper," he says.

His desire was to be a commercial pilot. Instead he joined the Institute of Hotel Management in Delhi, and moved to the Taj Group of Hotels. He went to study at the Culinary Institute of America. He worked in legendary Michelin-star restaurants such as Noma and The French Laundry, working with greats Thomas Keller, René Redzepi and Grant Achatz. "I saw how those chefs championed their region, which is what I wish to do with Naar," says the 38-year-old Sadhu.

After running the highly successful, award-winning Masque in Mumbai, he decided to take a plunge into the unknown. "They say, when it's the scariest time to jump, that is the exact time to take the leap. I wasn't sure if India was ready for a destination restaurant," he says. He remembers when his reservation lines opened in the autumn of last year. "My system nearly crashed," he says. Today, a couple of weeks advance booking is needed as diners fly down from Mumbai, Chennai, Bengaluru and Delhi.

The menu changes six times a year, as per the season. The dishes come from all over the Himalayan belt. The current specials are *Olu Churme*, a Kashmiri snack of crispy potatoes, akin to French fries, and Ladakhi sausages in a *Sinki* broth. The lamb sausages are made in the Naar kitchen, like the *gyuma* blood sausages of Ladakh.

His advice to novices? "Just shut up, and cook!"

QUICK TAKE



A SIP OF ASIAN MAGIC

Drawing inspiration from the rich cultures of Asia and India, the cocktail menu at Megumi is designed to push the boundaries of mixology with a modern take on Asia's cultural roots. Inspired by the simple Japanese philosophies, Zazen, a harmonious blend of whiskey, *gondhoraj*, and candied nori, and Shuhari, a fresh take on the classic Pina Colada with a hint of sesame oil, embody the calm and contemplative spirit of Zen. Highlighting the ingredients and culinary traditions of North-East India, the Lomba Gimlet features the tangy lomba herb from Manipur. Then there is a blend of the finest Japanese teas with alcohol, featuring the Matcha Pandan Martini and the Sencha Old Fashioned. Be sure to try the French 75 2.0 that pairs gin and sparkling wine with the unique tartness of jamun.

Where: Megumi, Bandra, Mumbai



THE RING OF TIME

Samsung, renowned for its boundary-pushing technology, is reportedly venturing into uncharted territory with the Galaxy Ring. This conceptual smart ring aims to redefine how we interact with our devices, offering a blend of convenience, health tracking, and futuristic style. While still in its conceptual phase, it promises a minimalist design packed with sensors and connectivity features. The Galaxy Ring is expected to track heart rate, sleep patterns, and possibly even blood oxygen levels. Some speculate it may offer advanced health metrics like blood pressure monitoring. The ring may enable users to control connected devices through hand movements, enhancing convenience and accessibility. The ring may function as a remote control for compatible smart home devices.

Words Worth



By SHEILA KUMAR

The Daunt bookstore almost diverts attention from the substantial collection of volumes it is stocked with. Situated on a quiet road in Marylebone, a London suburb, it was formerly an Edwardian antiquarian bookshop. That ambience has been retained: a gorgeous oak gallery, old-fashioned skylights that pour mellow light into the main hall, time-worn staircases to access the upper floors and the tomes: floor to ceiling bookcases stacked with new titles, old titles, authors read years ago and forgotten, and also authors one has never heard of.

Daunt is former banker James Daunt's *piece de resistance*. He opened the Marylebone outlet in 1990. Now there are nine Daunt bookstores across London. For sheer atmosphere, it is hard to beat the Marylebone store. It specialises in travel literature, tracked by country, not by author. There are books galore in the general category, in fiction, gardening, interior decoration, cookery. In its well-stocked children's section, young mothers often read stories aloud to their little ones. However, Daunt is where the travel aficionado make for to pick up a Bruce Chatwin, Patrick Leigh Fermor, Jon Krakauer or Bill Bryson, or just a guidebook for their next vacation.

People stand here and there, by the round tables, by the bookshelves, turning pages over, absorbed in whatever they are reading. Just out of eyeshot, but very much within earshot, comes the rhythmic sound of steps on the stairs. Customers or browsers on the upper floor look expectant-



Daunt bookstore in Marylebone

ly to the head of the weathered stairs but there is no one... is it perchance the bookstore ghost?

Upstairs there's a section dedicated to the Bard, next to the poetry section. There are travel guides and phrasebooks carrying the faint fragrance of antiquity. Signed copies of Elif Shafak's *There are Rivers in the Sky* beckon browsers; so does *Cold Kitchen: A Year of Culinary Journeys* by Caroline Eden, also duly signed. Recommended Indian fiction titles include *The Covenant of Water* by Abraham Verghese and Anita Nair's new Borei Gowda mystery *Hot Stage*.

Daunt offers their stores to hold events, talks with authors and the Daunt Book Festival that is held every spring. The bookshop chain's cotton and canvas bags have attained the status of 'IT' bags, with actors, models, celebs toting the statement tote, which was originally meant to carry a hefty pile of books. Purchases above GBP 80 gets you one of those for free, others pay upwards of GBP 10 for Daunt bags, which are incidentally made in India by Re-wrap, a social enterprise; the Empire hits back? In 2010, Daunt began its publishing arm to bring out literary fiction, non-fiction and some out-of-print books.

What else can a bookworm do at Daunt but turn, the pages?

The Value of Workplace Wellness

It's a known fact that most of us spend nearly a third of our life at work. So, the quality of our life is greatly connected to our experiences there. That is why it is very important to have a wonderful workplace that can enrich our lives, provide a sense of purpose and accomplishment, and a source for friendships and social connections. But, very few of us are lucky to get such an environment at our offices, because today, with so much competition around, offices are becoming a crazy place to be in, as a result of which we spend more time working under highly stressful environments, which is taking a negative toll on our overall well-being.

Research done over the past few years shows that positive environments at the workplace produce positive benefits specifically in engagement, relationships, health and the bottom line. Conversely, one of the biggest downfalls of a negative or fear-based environment is higher healthcare costs due to workplace stress and lower engagement. According to a popular analytics company, disengaged workers had 37 per cent higher absenteeism, 49 per cent more accidents and 60 per cent more errors and defects. All these figures call for a higher need to create a positive and employee-friendly environment at offices because a positive workplace leads to increased productivity, better employee morale, and the ability to keep skilled workers. However, before introducing any changes at the workplace, one needs to do a reality check first.

To start with, let us see what a typical office day is like. So, as soon as the day begins, ask someone a customary 'how are you?' and the usual reply that comes in is 'life's just going on' as if they are just dragging through it. Many old-timers who are always late, order tea as soon

Not many of us have experienced the pure feeling of satisfaction and fulfilment that springs from doing a task well, on time and with honest intention

Transforming offices into positive spaces is essential for well-being, productivity and happiness

By RAJYOGI
BRAHMAKUMAR NIKUNJ JI



as they arrive in the office. The newness of the day is no kick-start to them as they are always in their own self-created world. As tea is served, they lavishly splurge all the messy information of the day before and blame those who are not present there. Many employees soon pick up a distaste for such colleagues for "not doing their job properly." They are just too burdened to peacefully manage with them and succumb to being judgmental, adding more load to their already burdened minds. While criticising things that they have little control over—the sad ways of the world, the corruption at all levels, and the wrongs done by other people—they circulate so much waste and negative energy that the atmosphere in the office is hardly left with any zeal and goodwill to make a difference in areas where they really can.

Amidst this whole negativity, some honest employees, bubbling with creative energy, do put in a great effort but are often disappointed for yet being reprimanded or not being recognised through gestures or perks. On the other hand, overambitious and oversmart employees who are always on their toes, sneak into political discussions and play games of jealousy, hatred and animosity to win over in the race, making the air around stink with insecurity. As a result of all these, while some employees return home tired from the sheer monotony of life, or are stressed out for never getting their due, others are drained out while climbing up the ladder by hook or by crook. At home too, where another set of tasks awaits them and people look forward to receiving love and time, these poor office-goers are unable to satisfy them or

finish pending work for they always have the longest day. After so much struggle packed in one single day, all that they need is a break. So, they log on to the internet or switch on the television and take in high-speed negative, wasteful information that unconsciously keeps their battery perpetually discharged.

It is quite strange that a place that is buzzing with action should have a positive and zealous environment rather than a negative or polluting environment. The reason for this is that very few of us today are driven by simply the joy of working. Not many of us have experienced the pure feeling of satisfaction and fulfilment that springs from doing a task well, on time and with honest intention. It is priceless and keeps our minds charged and free from malice. It requires no external input, not even anyone's recognition. To

stay away from the negativity bug, one has to live an awakened life. A life where one consciously creates happiness and pledges to secure it even when situations and people turn adverse. At our workplace, which ought to be a place of creativity and healthy social exchange, one must practice tolerance and forgiveness and turn over a new leaf each day. Remember! Workplaces have the potential to become an extended family if relations are nurtured with respect and the dignity of a human being is not compromised irrespective of his performance at work. We must realise that values and human touch are the core of our being, and unless our work culture is inclusive of them, our lives may get dried out over time.

The writer is a spiritual educator and columnist. He can be reached at nikunjji@gmail.com; www.brahmakumaris.com

BELIEVE

MODERN PANCHATANTRA AT WORK

Once in a grand palace, a bug lived comfortably in the king's lavish bed, feeding on the royal blood every night. She was careful and discreet, ensuring she never disturbed the king's sleep. One day, a flea arrived and asked to share the bed. The bug, although reluctant, agreed and said, "You may stay, but be cautious. Wait until the king is deeply asleep before biting him so that we won't be discovered." Impatient and greedy, the flea ignored the advice. As soon as the king lay down, the flea bit him, causing him to wake up in pain. Furious and itching, the king ordered his servants to search the bed for the cause of his discomfort. The servants thoroughly inspected the bed and found the bug, who had remained hidden and unsuspecting. They killed her immediately, thinking she was the culprit, while the flea quickly jumped away and escaped unscathed.



MORAL: Impatience and disregard for advice can harm not only oneself but also those around you. Collaboration, patience and respect for others' expertise are essential for mutual success.

SOOTHE SAYINGS Swami Sukhabodhananda



Conquest of Fear

Varma was afraid of flying. But he had to fly once. With fear he boarded the plane. He looked out of the window and posed as though he was very courageous. He told the person next to him, "I practically fly every week. Look at the terrible height we are at now. People look like ants."

"The plane has not yet taken off" and these are real size ants on the window", said the other man next to him.

Fear speaks of us more than the situation. The object of fear is the subject. If a person is filled with fear, the object becomes an expression of fear. So, one has to learn to change oneself. Fear affects us, as we have not learned to be courageous. If at all one is courageous, it is more out of default than by design.

The greatness of fear shows us the littleness of our faith. The highway of fear is the shortest route to defeat. If one is victim of fear, it is a sure way of wasting the present. Fear emerges because there is lack of love. The problem with any absence is that you can't do anything directly with it. You can't do anything directly with it. You can't do anything directly with darkness; you have to bring in light. So, bring in adventure and love and see how you stop being a victim of fear.



Plan step by step to be courageous. Start with the value of being adventurous. If you are afraid of mixing with people, then consciously try to mix with people. Let commitment to be courageous lead you rather than the thought of fear

The more you give love the more you gain in love. The famous saying goes- "He gives not the best who gives the most but he gives the most who gives the best. If I cannot give bountifully, yet I will give freely and what I lack in my hand I will supply with my heart." Understand that the power of love is God but unfortunately we have love for power. Love for power is EGO and it is Edging God Out.

With love, negate the negative will and give yourself the loving energy. This is possible even if you love negative people. Start loving yourself, then love others as God resides in love. Love creates mystical fullness with all its problems. When you are full where the space for fear? Then learn to picture yourself as strong, good and loving. Courage is like light that can eliminate the darkness of fear. In fact, courage is not the absence of fear but the conquest of fear. Fear should not be a full stop but a comma in the sentence of our lives. Plan step by step to be courageous. Start with the value of being adventurous. If you are afraid of mixing with people, then consciously try to mix with people. If fear persists at that time, be more conscious of that fear and see it as only a movement of thought. Let commitment to be courageous lead you rather than the thought of fear. Dis-identify with the thought of fear and learn to operate from being courageous. Slowly courage emerges like a body builder who develops his muscles.

After putting in the necessary effort to deal with the fear, include an element of miracle called prayer. Learn to believe in the impossible. The impossible is possible if you say it is possible. Let Prayer be the door for the impossible. Science unfolds the law of gravitation and religion reveals the law of grace. Prayer is making grace work for us. God is the ultimate poetry of life and prayer is the ultimate path to it. Keep the mind pure so as to be available to the blessings of the Lord.

Janmashtami Free Online Celebration with Swami Sukhabodhananda Ji On August 26th, 2024.

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EPICS FOR CHILDREN | GAURAV YADAV

You are Free

Hasidism is a sect of Judaism, founded 300 years ago by Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, who emphasised love, joy and humility. From the Hasidic Jews comes a story about freedom.

Once a man was going to meet his friend, who was a farmer in a small faraway valley. This valley was surrounded by hills from all sides, and you could not see the valley until you crossed the mountains. On the way, the man came across a very small meadow. He saw an astonishing sight there. Uncountable numbers of animals were densely packed into that meadow. There was not even enough space for them to move around, and it was very crowded and noisy. The man saw that on all sides were forests with a lot of trees, but none of the animals were in that forest, though there was no fence or barrier to stop them from going there. They were all in the meadow even though it must have been really uncomfortable for them.

When the man reached his friend's house, the first thing he asked him was about the strange behaviour of the animals. The friend told him that nobody knew for sure because it had been going on for ages, but it was said that a long time ago, there was a landlord who was a sadist. He enjoyed tormenting the animals. He herded them into the meadow and erected a high fence around it. He placed guards with instructions to kill any animal that tried to escape. This went on for many years. Any animal that tried sneaking out was killed. Slowly, the animals accepted their prison. They began to associate freedom with fear and death. They stopped



trying to escape and resigned themselves to a crowded and uncomfortable life.

Years later, the landlord died. The guards stopped getting paid, so they went away. The fence was not maintained, so it fell away too. Now, there was nothing to stop the animals from going out of the meadow, but none of them tried it. They had been so conditioned to the fence that they continued to see the fence, even though it was no longer there. It became so deeply ingrained that children were born with it in their blood and bones. The idea of the fence became a part of their mental makeup.

The behaviour of the animals may seem strange, even stupid, but it is not very different from how we humans behave. We continue to act as slaves to our circumstances, and think that we have no choice. We need to stop fearing imaginary fences, and act with freedom. The poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz said: "Bol ke tab azaad hain tere (speak, for your lips are free)."

SPOTLIGHT

Astral Projection

Astral projection, the practice of consciously separating the astral body from the physical body to explore non-physical realms, is a technique rooted in ancient spiritual traditions. It allows individuals to experience a sense of freedom and gain insights beyond the limitations of the physical world. Practitioners claim various benefits from it, including self-discovery, spiritual growth, stress reduction, enhanced creativity, and improved intuition. Here are the steps to practice astral projection:

Step 1: Find a quiet, comfortable place where you won't be disturbed. Wear loose clothing and lie down or sit in a relaxed position.

Step 2: Close your eyes and take deep breaths to calm your mind and body. Progressive muscle relaxation, starting from your toes



and moving up to your head, can help achieve a deeply relaxed state.

Step 3: Clear your mind of distractions. Concentrate on your breathing or visualise a calming scene. Some use a repetitive mantra or phrase to maintain focus.

Step 4: Visualise yourself floating above your body or imagine a rope hanging above you, and mentally "climb" it. You may feel vibrations, tingling, or a sense of floating as your astral body separates.

Step 5: Once you feel detached, focus on moving away from your physical body. Explore your surroundings or travel to desired locations.

Step 6: To return, concentrate on your physical body and intend to merge back with it. Gradually become aware of your physical sensations and surroundings.

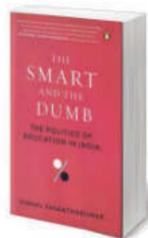
MASTER MIND

"There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root." ~ HENRY DAVID THOREAU



Divided by Letters

An in-depth examination of the Indian education system that exposes the complexities of caste, class and gender in the country



The Smart and the Dumb: The Politics of Education in India
By: Vishal Vasanthakumar
Publisher: Penguin
Pages: 200
Price: ₹599

By SOUMYA BHOWMICK

Vishal Vasanthakumar's *The Smart and the Dumb: The Politics of Education in India* provides an in-depth examination of the Indian education system through the lenses of caste, class and gender. It delves into how these social constructs influence educational opportunities and outcomes and perpetuate existing inequalities—a core issue since India's independence in 1947, making education a vital resource based on the fundamental tenets of distributive justice.

The book weaves personal stories in the context of a broader social analysis, exemplified by the compelling narrative of Nisha, a young girl from rural western Rajasthan. Nisha's journey—from child marriage to becoming an educator—illustrates education's systemic challenges and transformative power. Despite societal pressures threatening her education, Nisha's unwavering determination and her mother's support allowed her to prioritise her education over traditional norms.

Vasanthakumar's narrative is not just about individual triumphs, but also systemic failures. He critiques the Indian education system for being



disproportionately accessible to the privileged, perpetuating socio-economic disparities. The book's timeliness is highlighted by the ongoing National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) scam, which has brought significant attention to the flaws in the Indian educational system.

Allegations of paper leaks, discrepancies in exam administration, and the unfair distribution of compensatory marks have marred the credibility of the system time and again. With a population of around 1.4 billion, India became the world's most populous country in 2023, surpassing China. Approximately 65 per cent of this population falls within the working-age bracket of 15 to 64 years, presenting a unique opportunity for economic growth. The country, however, faces significant challenges in terms of youth unemployment. Even for the employed population to be more productive and

aligned with global standards, they need adequate resources, training and support, which India's education policies will define. In fact, the dependence of the Indian economy on these young people will be a direct outcome of education and skilling, and hence, it could create a human capital base that drives India's growth story.

Vasanthakumar contends that neo-liberal policies have reshaped education, emphasising individualism and self-reliance. This shift has created a competitive environment where the value of education is measured by one's ability to secure high-paying jobs, reinforcing socio-economic inequalities. Focusing on individual success often comes at the expense of those who cannot compete in this system, exacerbating educational inequities.

The book also explores the complexities of the middle class in India, encompassing complex

economic and social realities. While economic liberalisation has led to the rapid growth of India's middle class, it masks the deep-seated issues of poverty and educational inequality. This crisis is further complicated by the foundational literacy and numeracy issues prevalent in India, where many children fail to achieve essential educational milestones despite attending school.

Vasanthakumar critiques how many families move their children to private schools in search of better education. Even these institutions, however, often fall short of providing high-quality education, perpetuating the cycle of educational inequity. Additionally, he points out: "While the joint family system has been touted as a great and important aspect of Indian tradition and also as a site of education, little is spoken about the detrimental effects it has on children's self-esteem and agency, and in

some cases on educational outcomes as well, especially on the girl child."

The politics of education in India are intertwined with issues of affirmative action and the myth of meritocracy. Vasanthakumar argues that affirmative action policies, while necessary to address historical injustices, have created tensions among different caste groups. Therefore, education politics become a humiliation and exclusion, where he contends that "globalisation was meant to benefit everyone and integrate everyone into a global economy. There is, however, sufficient evidence to suggest that globalisation and the forces of globalisation have contributed to new dimensions of inequality and stratification, which have implications not just for education but for politics and culture too". This creates a class of "wasted humans"—as described by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman—who are excluded from the economic cycle.

Finally, *The Smart and the Dumb* captures the multifaceted nature of education in India, documenting stories like Nisha's to portray the political and cultural processes influencing education vividly. It challenges readers to think critically about the role of education in society and its potential to reinforce or dismantle socio-economic inequalities. The book will appeal to a broad audience, including educators, policymakers, sociologists and anyone interested in understanding the intricacies of the Indian education system.

The language and narration are simple, making it accessible to a large population. However, given that the book discusses the Indian education policy landscape in a unique storytelling format, it could have benefited from more comparisons with the development trajectories of other countries and their best practices that could be implemented in the Indian educational context.

While economic liberalisation has led to the rapid growth of India's middle class, it masks the deep-seated issues of poverty and educational inequality

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In God's Own Tongue

A literary celebration of Lord Murugan where the rich Tamizh language takes centre stage



Theivanai
By: Kala Krishnan
Publisher: Westland
Pages: 280
Price: ₹399

By SMITHA VERMA

The first thing that strikes you when you finish reading Kala Krishnan's *Theivanai* is why do we not have more books on Murugan in English? Why is so little written about this Lord of courage, victory and wisdom? In the world of mythological fiction where other Hindu deities vie for shelf space in a bookstore, barely any titles in English exist on the chief deity from Tamil Nadu. Krishnan's novel not only fills this gap, but also brings to life the cultural richness and spiritual depth surrounding Murugan and his divine consorts.

Theivanai is part two of the Murugan trilogy by Krishnan and, just like the first one, this too stays true to its cause and shows us Murugan the warrior and Murugan the lover of poetry and the 'God of Tamizh'. The first book in the trilogy, *Mahasena*, explores the origins of this divine figure, son of Shiva and Parvati,

and brother of Ganesha. The novel follows the fiercely brave boy's journey from infancy, separated from his mother, and raised by the Krittika maidens (his six mothers), and to his destined confrontation with the powerful demon Surapadman. The second part, *Theivanai*, takes forward the cliff-hanger on which the first one had ended. The book starts with Ganesha reminiscing about Murugan's birth, the impending war with the great *asura* Surapadman, and how his brother's birth has a larger cause attached to it.

Krishnan has neatly divided the book into two sections—each standing on its own. The first one, *The God's Test*, is all about the ensuing war, of victories and losses, of tears and sweat, of love and longing while the second one, *The Poet's Victory*, is all about how language takes shape, the poet's assembly, the due given to women poets and the great competition to find the 12 best poets. The last chapters of both the sections

are aptly titled 'In the Aftermath', and leaves one with a tinge of sadness and anger (not revealing the plot as to why you may feel so).

Krishnan's world is filled with myths and legends that bring alive the significance of the place Pazhani, Murugan's anger with his parents, the devotion he has for his adopted mothers, and how, above all, friendship rules his life.

One of the notable and the most striking aspect in the novel is how Tamizh (Tamil) language is portrayed as a fundamental and natural aspect of existence for Murugan and the people around him. The language is important not just for people to convey emotions, but also to express how objects take shape. It is also a book that shows two very strong feminine characters—Theivanai and Aambal—Murugan's wife and his favourite disciple poet,

respectively. One of passages, which truly reflect how the women were strong not just mentally but even physically, goes like this: "As they walked, Murugan stumbled, but Theivanai's left foot pressed

into the ground and she grabbed his waist... his back was still tingling in the strength it had felt in Theivanai's arms." Krishnan deftly subverts the traditional gender roles typically depicted in such scenes, where usually it is the man who supports the woman, by showcasing Theivanai's strength and steadiness. Aambal's strength is another highlight of the book worthy of praise and admiration.

The author takes readers on a journey from the intense battlefields to the tender moments of romance, of stolen glances and unwritten verses, culminating in the vibrant assemblies where poets and scholars are celebrated. It's a pity that Lord Murugan's stories are not widely known. But Kala Krishna's prose, just like her poetry, does great justice to bringing to mainstream this revered deity to life. One of the several reasons why Krishnan's writing on Murugan is like a breath of fresh air is because her prose is just as vivid as her poetry, and is a visually enriching treat to read.



Krishnan deftly subverts the traditional gender roles by showcasing Theivanai providing support to Murugan

Eye of the Survivor

By CHITTAJIT MITRA

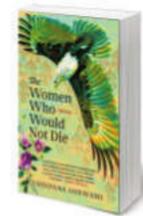
Writer and journalist Uddipana Goswami's *The Women Who Would Not Die* is a collection of short stories about the diverse lives that women live. Largely based in Assam, the tales focus on their silenced and often unheard voices.

I Thought I Knew My Ma, for instance, is a story about the narrator's gradual realisation that it is her mother, and not her artistic father, who understood the pain of separation from her Muslim lover. The epiphanic process involves the eventual brutal awareness that she was subtly blackmailed into marrying someone her father chose.

Comparing the lives of both the daughter and the mother, the story delves deeper into several conversations about the communal divide and Brahmanism that exists in the region. It also calls out the hypocrisy of the elite section that berates Muslims for having too many children and tribals for consuming pork and alcohol.

The titular story, on the other hand, captures the fight between the oppressor and the oppressed. We see rebels being forced to take shelter in a forest after the king's dogs corner them. Here, the author uses analogies from the animal kingdom to tell the story of domestic violence. A Kite's daughter is married off to one of the rebels, a python. As he constantly tries to engulf her, the Kite keeps trying to save her daughter.

The story, however, that is bound to leave an indelible impression with readers is *Colour Me Live*. As the title suggests, colour is central to the narration. We see the protagonist falling in love, and then eventually marrying a man, who



The Women Who Would Not Die
By: Uddipana Goswami
Publisher: Speaking Tiger
Pages: 224
Price: ₹499

turns out nothing like she expected him to be. As the story takes a dark turn, we are given a graphic portrayal of the violence she endures on a daily basis. But after darkness there's light, and in an unexpected turn of events, she reclaims the skies, waters and everything else.

Rooted deep into the socio-cultural realities of the Axomia people, Uddipana has successfully incorporated narratives of conflict, violence and patriarchy into her stories. The copious and fluid usage of Assamese words makes the reading experience authentic. But regionality is not a hindrance. The realities of women she presents are universal. Whether it is the hypocrisy of the so-called cultured elites or the systemic violence aimed at limiting the lives of women, it is there for us to see around us and all over the world.

The voices of the women in these stories may be limited to the intimate settings, but they resonate beyond the walls that restrict them.

Crafting an Empowered Legacy

Italian fashion designer Orsola de Castro once said, "It isn't enough just looking for quality in the products we buy, we must ensure there's quality in the lives of people who make them." That is exactly what Mumbai-based couturier Anita Dongre's latest bridal collection Raahi is doing—celebrating the master artisans of our country. Centred around the craft forms of *Bandhani*, *Ajrakh*, *Pichhwai*, *Badla*, and *Gota*, the collection seeks to marry heirloom traditional crafts with contemporary and classic silhouettes. "By incorporating these crafts, we honour and preserve traditional artistry while creating timeless and elegant designs," says Dongre.

In the process, like all of her collections, Raahi too strives to empower the Indian bride—an unapologetic, assertive, independent woman who questions and doesn't just follow. Featuring outfits with pockets, designed to blend fashion with comfort and functionality, Raahi is an ode to the modern bride who promises to be her own confidant," says Dongre, adding, "The modern bride is self-assured. She values her identity, and celebrates her relationship with herself. She seamlessly blends traditional elements with her modern sensibilities, creating an aesthetic that honours heritage while embracing trends."

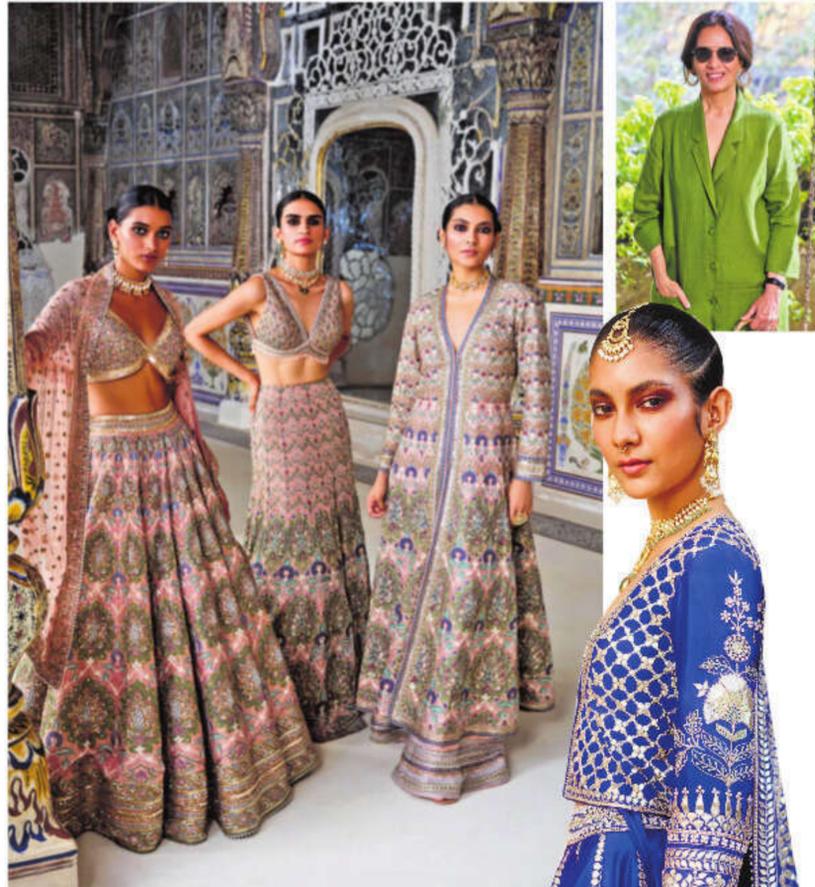
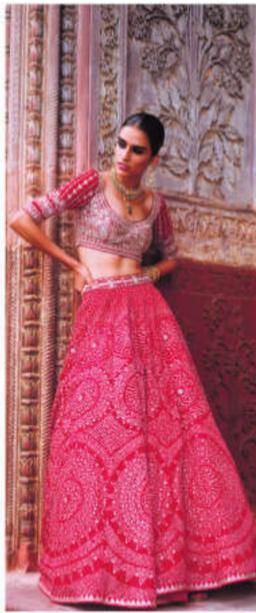
HONOURING CRAFTSMANSHIP

The hand-painted art of *Pichhwai*, *Badla* and *Gota Patti* from Rajasthan, the vibrant *Bandhani* from Gujarat and the age-old weaves from Varanasi are celebrated in a language that is global in its appeal. Dongre says, "*Gota* holds a special place in my heart as it's from my home state. It was the first craft we worked with when we started our bridal line. Its exquisite embroidery enhances the grandeur and intricate detailing of our bridal wear, reflecting the opulence of Rajasthan's craftsmanship. Our journey with *Pichhwai* was also serendipitous. I met the artisan

Designer Anita Dongre's latest bridal collection marries tradition with modernity, style with substance

By IRAM ARA IBRAHIM

(Clockwise from right) Pichhwai collection; Anita Dongre; Gota Patti collection; Bandhani range



painting frescoes in the City Palace of Jaipur on a shoot. Now, he's trained and has set up a team of artisans that paints *lehengas*, *bags*, and even panels in our store interiors," the designer says, adding, "*Bandhani* adds a splash of colour and texture to our *lehengas* and saris, bringing a playful yet elegant touch."

Dongre also collaborates once again with Reema Nanavaty of SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association)—a traditionally-skilled women artisans group in rural Gujarat. SEWA currently works with around 2.9 million

women across India, spanning multiple craft forms. This is the eighth year together for both these pioneering women. Dongre says, "Our previous collaborations have been incredibly rewarding." Raahi, however, goes a step further by experimenting with these crafts to create contemporary designs. It integrates the traditional crafts into high fashion.

OLD IS NEW

Dongre launched her first *Pichhwai* collection in 2019. It comprised of 15 hand-painted limited-edition pieces. The latest range, however, differs in its approach and scope. The idea with Raahi was to wearable pieces of art. Dongre says, "While the 2019 collection focused on Pichhwai's storytelling, Raahi integrates multiple crafts, including *Bandhani* and *Gota* to offer a more diverse tapestry of Indian heritage."

NURTURING NATURE

Those who have followed Dongre's journey as a designer, would know that nature is her biggest inspiration. Her designs are replete with bird motifs and forest imagery. She says, "Nature symbolises freedom, beauty and the intricate patterns of life. By incorporating these elements into my designs, I hope to create a sense of peace and joy. It is a reminder of our responsibility towards nature. It's also about celebrating the natural world and fostering a deeper appreciation for its wonders through fashion."

SUSTAINABILITY AND BRIDAL COUTURE

Fashion today is a lot about sustainability. This pivotal shift not only enhances the quality of the garments, but also underscores a dedication to responsible resourcing. Raahi encourages brides to wear designs that can be restyled and worn for different occasions. Dongre says, "Sustainability is at the core of our design philosophy, even when it comes to bridal couture. We believe that the grandeur and opulence of bridal wear can coexist with environmental responsibility. Which is why, we emphasise the use of eco-friendly fabrics—they are luxurious and have a lower environmental footprint. We also focus on creating outfits that are versatile and can be worn beyond the wedding day. Additionally, our packaging is made from recycled materials, and we continuously strive to reduce waste throughout our production process."

FLAUNT

HOW TO

Cleverly Colour Drench Your Home



In this living room, everything (from the ceiling to the walls) has been painted deep blue to match the colour of the sofa. This keeps the focus on the Anjolie Ela Menon painting in the foreground.



By keeping all the furniture, fittings and linen in the same soothing colour, this bedroom has been transformed into a place of huge serenity. Plus, it looks much bigger than it really is.



To detract from the low ceiling and direct the eye to the greenery outside, the walls, furniture and windows in this dining room have been given a red wash. Even the slip covers on the chairs are colour-coordinated.



The deep blue door set in a matching blue wall opens into a powder room where everything, including the vanity, is drenched in the colour of wine.

Drenching your rooms in colour is the best way to evoke a mood, and create an atmospheric effect in your home. You can dip into a colour because you or someone in your family loves it. Alternatively, you can pick up the colour of your favourite piece in a room (it could be a sofa, the curtains or even a painting) and use that to inform the colour choice of the entire room. Designer-curator-stylist **Namrata Datt** swears by the practice of colour-drenching and has been using it to great advantage for the last five years. Here, she gives us some handy tips on how to go about it:

What is colour drenching?

Colour drenching is when you paint everything in a room, from the walls and woodwork to the ceiling, in the same colour. I sometimes paint the fans too, and go a tone up or down between the ceiling, walls and wainscoting.

How does colour-drenching change the look of a room or house?

It removes all the stark lines in a room, blurs the boundaries between the walls and the ceiling and makes the room look seamless. It visually creates an expansive space, and makes it look cohesive and stylish. I especially recommend it for rooms with low ceilings.

Can you give us examples of rooms where you've used it to enhance the look of the space?

Check out these pictures of rooms I've colour drenched. I've even matched the slipcover fabrics in some rooms with the tones of the walls and ceiling.

Should we paint air-conditioners the same colour as the walls?

Yes indeed. Air-conditioners can be an eyesore especially since most of us don't even remove the stickers that the manufacturers paste on them to

tom-tom their features. Painting them in the same hue as the wall they sit on is the best way to disguise them.

The same goes for wainscoting and skirting boards. By painting them the same colour as the wall, you allow them to seamlessly blend into the floor, even if the flooring is not the same colour.

What are the best colours to use in a bedroom?

Bedrooms bloom with a lavish use of pale to mid pastels. The hues soothe our

eyes and nerves. Another advantage is that many bedding companies create sheets and pillow cases, and even duvets, in these colours. By using those together in a room that's drenched in the same shade, you achieve a perfect tone-on-tone look that's great for bedrooms.

What are the best colours for living spaces?

Living rooms look best in tones of greige, which is a mix of grey and

beige. A bar can be more dramatic, and be done up in blues and reds. A study can be experimental in brown or shades of green.

Should you colour drench bathrooms and kitchens too?

Kitchens are tricky, as large durable items such as refrigerators, freezers and ovens can visually disrupt the seamless look. But you can certainly colour drench bathrooms, particularly powder rooms.

Luxe Buys for the Summer



Triple-Duty Luxury: Two years ago, Chanel's Watch Creation Studio introduced *Premiere Edition Originale*, a reissue of Chanel's very first watch. The timepiece evoked the stopper of the *N°5* fragrance bottle while the chain bracelet interlaced with leather echoed the chain of classic Chanel handbags. In 2024, the House has reimaged the iconic watch as *Premiere Sound*, a three-in-one piece that incorporates a necklace, watch and earphones. The watch bracelet has transformed into a necklace, connected to black and gold in-ear headphones emblazoned with the signature double C logo. The headphones are equipped with a microphone and a remote control to adjust the volume, control audio and video playback and receive calls. The steel case is coated with 18k yellow gold, with a black-lacquered dial. It is powered by a quartz movement. The necklace chain too is coated with 18k yellow gold, and interwoven with black leather and a matte black audio cable. The wired headphones are removable. Are you ready to listen to the *Song of Time*?

Making a Racket:

Now that India's SEC AIs have taken to playing pickleball, they might as well get the gear too.

American accessory maker **Dooney & Bourke** has this stylish Italian canvas sling on offer for all picklers. With two external zipped pockets, an inside bottle pocket, a racquet holder, an adjustable strap and a drawstring closure, this sling bag is perfect for carrying your equipment on the go. Now all you need is the perfect smash.

Going Places: Remember the vanity case, the essential travel accessory of all fashionable women once? Well, **Bottega Veneta's** new line in bags includes a vanity case called *Bang Bang*. It's fitting given that the collection is called *Andiamo*, which means 'Let's go' in Italian. Made and lined with calfskin, the case has a detachable strap and gold-finished hardware. The main compartment has

a zipped closure and can fit an iPhone 15 Pro Max, a credit card case, AirPods and your keys. Maybe your lipstick too. It would be a poor case of vanity without that.



'TV has the Best Storytelling Now'

What can you tell us about Season 2 of *Unstable*?

John Owen and I are back as father and son, and we really raise the bar this season. We have some new hilarious situations and brilliant writers.

How did the idea of making a sitcom with your son come about?

My son and I had this running joke that involved him trolling just about everything I posted on social media, to the point that everyone started getting a kick out of it. I have to give my son credit because the idea of turning this running gag into a show was really his. But we spoke a lot about what people were responding to and the particular father-son relationship. That's really where *Unstable* came from. It's an exaggerated version of who we are as father and son.

What is it like to work with your son?

I feel grateful that we are able to do this. Sometimes I have to remind myself that we are actually playing characters and that the putdown he's firing at me isn't actually him, but otherwise it all feels very natural. He's so smart and talented. But it is also a little weird to be sharing scenes with someone who, it doesn't seem all that long ago, I was changing diapers for every day.

Does your other son act too?

Matthew? No. He has a real

A still from *Unstable 2*



Rob Lowe on working with his son in *Unstable 2*, ageing gracefully and a possible sequel to *St. Elmo's Fire*

By ADAM STONE



job. He works in finance as an attorney. I'm proud of both my sons, including John Owen who, despite everything I could do to stop him, followed me into this crazy world of make believe. Matthew listened to me, John Owen did not.

How much did your experience working in comedy come in handy for this project?

The experience of working on shows like *Parks and Recreation* and *The Grinder* was incredibly helpful. They taught me how to trust myself with a character and deliver a line rather than get bogged down with the method of it all.

Do you prefer making movies or working in TV?

It's funny because it used to be all about movies, but right now I think the best storytell-

ing is happening in TV. I've always liked taking a leap, trying new things and jumping from one genre to the next. I did that in the Nineties with the *West Wing* and it paid off, and I'm excited about the possibilities in TV now.

What is your secret to longevity in show business?

My wife. We have been married for 34 years now and she's still my rock. She's saved me more times than I can mention. The rest has been about challenging myself to operate outside my comfort zone. There was the time I was playing JFK and Chris Traeger in *Parks and Recreation* all in the same month. Even now, I get to do the more traditional leading man thing in *911: Lone Star* and then full-blown comedy in *Unstable*. That's the dream.

You recently turned 60. How do you feel about that?

I'm cool with it. I can honestly say that I feel better now than I have ever felt in my life.

'Working on shows like *Parks and Recreation* and *The Grinder* taught me how to deliver a line rather than get bogged down with the method of it all'

ing is happening in TV. I've always liked taking a leap, trying new things and jumping from one genre to the next. I did that in the Nineties with the *West Wing* and it paid off, and I'm excited about the possibilities in TV now.

How was it getting back together with the cast of *St. Elmo's Fire* for Andrew McCarthy's documentary on the Brat Pack era?

I loved it. I hadn't seen Andrew for 25 years, but when he told me he was going to not only do a documentary, but get everyone back together, I didn't really believe it.

There are rumours about a *St. Elmo's Fire* sequel. What can you tell us about that?

It's all very meta right now but it could happen. I know people want it. It's 35 years later, and I think there is a story to tell. Those characters

You don't look 60. What do you do manage to stay looking so fit?

I'm just outdoors all the time. I love surfing and hiking. I do something every day. Because if I don't, I make everybody's life around me miserable.

And the youthful looks?

I have my own skin care range; it's online. That's the secret. It's that and staying off the alcohol. I'm serious. It's actually been about 34 years since I've touched a drink. That's why I look younger than my actual age.

Finally, will there be a Season 3 of *Unstable*?

We hope so. Johnny and I have some great ideas for more. I have some favours to call on, for more people would be great to appear on the show. So we'll see. It's exciting.

—Asia Features

BUZZ CUT



FOR NATION'S SAKE

John Abraham's next—*Vedaa*—will hit the screens on Independence Day. The action drama has been directed by Nikkhil Advani, and also stars Sharvari Wagh and Tamannaah Bhatia in pivotal roles. The actor also has *Tehran*, *The Diplomat* and *Tariq* lined up for this year.



THE BIGGER THE BETTER

Jr NTR, who is gearing up for the release of *Devara*, will have a busy schedule for the remainder of the year. Following *War 2*, where he plays the antagonist, the actor has reportedly signed a two-part film with *Hi Nanna* director Shouryuv. It is touted to be "a high-octane action drama that will tap into the strengths of NTR".

SOBHITA DHULIPALA ON THE THIRD SEASON OF *MADE IN HEAVEN*



'I am also waiting.'

WATCH

Lights Camera Reaction

Sanam Saeed's new show *Barzakh* was a masterclass in the art of reacting for the Pakistani actor

By PUJA TALWAR

Acting is reacting. Pakistani star Sanam Saeed hadn't truly realised the oft-quoted thumb rule until her latest project *Barzakh*. The ZEE5 show features her as Scheherazade—an assistant to a reclusive septuagenarian (Salman Shahid), who invites his family to witness his wedding to the ghost of his first love.

"I don't think I am a very good actor. The only way I can give a performance that is real, is when there is a part of me in the character, or it is something I have experienced first hand," says Sanam adding, "Scheherazade, however, was developed in the rehearsal space. During our interactions Salman Shahid's energy would push me to complement his tempo, pace and style. That was new for me. It made me try a voice that was not heavy, but airy; her look had to be wondrous but without being coy. The energy of the men around her—from a 10-year-old to a 70-year-old—influenced her."

Barzakh, which borders between mystic realism and a family drama, is Sanam's second project with director Asim Abbasi after *Cake*. The 2019 film that was the filmmaker's directorial debut, was also Pakistan's entry to the Oscars. It touched upon themes of dysfunctional family dynamics, guilt and grief. Sanam admits that she likes working with Asim not just because he is an impressive writer, but also because he allows her to question.

"He gives his actors a large canvas and is not thrown off, with a different point of view. He has written the character with his perspective. But

Fawad Khan (l) and Sanam Saeed in *Barzakh*



'The only way I can give a performance that is real, is when there is a part of me in the character, or it is something I have experienced first hand.'

as a woman, I have my stance. I try to be real and relate to some things myself, and then try to find the



answers with him," she says adding, "I have witnessed his writing so closely. *Cake* was a brilliant family drama, with the female perspective, love, loss and parenting. In *Barzakh*, you have magic realism and supernaturalism. He pushes us all out of our comfort zones."

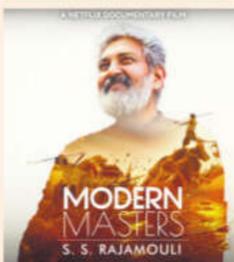
The biggest reason, however, for *Barzakh* to be among the most anticipated productions of the year was Sanam's reunion with her *Zindagi Gulzar Hai* co-star Fawad Khan after 12 long years. Their portrayal of Kashaf and Zaroona, a married couple whose evolution from college rivals to husband

and wife, as they navigate the intricacies of married life and personal egos, made them television's most popular pair across the subcontinent. "From the conversations I have had with Fawad, he has always been keen on playing a character like Shehryar, someone who is complex, has shades of grey and is a departure from what he has done before. *Barzakh* is a good palate cleanser for the audience to get a feel of Fawad's acting chops. It is good to shake up the audience," she says.

Sanam would know for, she does that herself quite often. From playing a woman seeking her identity in *Firaq* to the strong-willed matriarch in *Diyare Dil*, or the whimsical socialite-turned-artist in *Qatil Haseenon Ke Naam*, she has been conscientious in showcasing her range. She calls Pakistani actors Nadia Jamil, Sania Saeed and India's Tabu her role models. "They have always done brave and impactful work that has struck a chord with viewers. The films may not have been mega box-office earners, but have stayed with people. I too want people to see all that I am capable of I have never aspired for stardom."

After *Barzakh*, Sanam, along with Fawad and a host of other popular Pakistani TV stars, including Mahira Khan, will be next seen in Pakistan's first Netflix original *Jo Bachay Hain Sang Samait Lo*. "I love the power of OTT and the opportunity it has given us. There is so much talent and stories waiting to be told across the world. Just like Korean and Turkish dramas, Pakistani dramas also took off in the subcontinent, but we were lacking budgets to enhance production values," she says, adding, "This drama is the story of five couples. It moves between past, present and future, and spans across London, Italy and Pakistan. We haven't had anything like this."

BINGE BOX



MAVERICK IN MAKING

This engrossing documentary throws light on the roaring success of filmmaker SS Rajamouli with interviews from family and friends. It has been directed by Raghav Khanna and Tanvi Ajinkya, and features actors and directors from across industries, including Ram Charan, Jr NTR, Prabhas and Karan Johar. Watch *Modern Masters: SS Rajamouli* on Netflix.

TRENDING

Savi Netflix

CAST Divya Khosla, Anil Kapoor, Harshvardhan Rane
PLOT When her husband is arrested for his boss's murder, a determined woman plots to break him out of prison

Futurama Hotstar

CAST Billy West, Philip J Fry, John DiMaggio, Bender, Katey Sagal
PLOT An animated comedy about a man frozen in 1999 who thaws out on the eve of the 31st century

Elite S8 Netflix

CAST Itzan Escamilla, Omar Ayuso
PLOT Brimming with love triangles and murder, this suspenseful high school drama has won multiple awards, including the Premios Feroz for Best Drama

A Good Girl's Guide to Murder Netflix

CAST Emma Myers, Asha Banks, Raiko Gohara, Zain Iqbal, Jude Morgan-Collie
PLOT Five years after the murder of a 17-year-old girl in a sleepy English town, one student is determined to uncover the truth and find the real killer

Eve Netflix

CAST Seo Yea-ji, Park Byung-eun, Yoo Sun
PLOT A tumultuous past and a thirst for revenge drives a young woman to infiltrate the powerful chaebol family who wronged her own



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SUDHAKAR
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