

weekend WEEKEND

metro PLUS THE HINDU

SPEAKING HER MIND

Zeenat Aman on her Gen-Z connect, mental health awareness, and *Bun Tikki* **P6**



An unprecedented rise in culinary collaborations brings together competing chefs and mixologists to create inventive new menus. Are pop ups changing how we eat out?

Be seated.
This is a
takeover



Suman Mahfuz Quazi

It would be imprecise to say that restaurant takeovers are a new phenomenon. This F&B trend's seeds were, in fact, sown more than a decade ago, but it is inarguably more unprecedented today.

Take a conversation with film professional Sidharth Mirchandani for instance. Even as he chats about what makes such events appealing to him as a diner, he is gearing up for a Nose to Tail pop-up at Magazine Street Kitchen (MSK), an experiential events space in Mumbai's Byculla where Chef Shriya Shetty (the mind behind Mangalore's Cafe Buco) and independent Chef Christopher Fernandes (of Goa's Cravings By Chris) will be laying out a meaty spread. "It's part pleasure, part unwinding," he confides. Sidharth finds himself regularly attending one-of-a-kind and often, time-limited culinary experiences. These range from collaborations between two restaurants and pop-ups helmed by guest restaurants to time-bound takeovers by guest chefs and mixologists.

Incidentally, the brainchild behind MSK, veteran restaurateur Gauri Devidayal, became one of the first to experiment with these formats back in the day. It was

2012 and Gauri was looking for a way to perk up her kitchen team's morale at the now-revered The Table, a fine diner – and one among her many restaurant brands – in South Mumbai. But the two-day 'collab' dinner that transpired between the diner and California-based Chef John Paul Carmona – also a mentor to Chef Alex Sanchez, who was heading the kitchen at The Table at the time – was a result of happenstance.

"The culinary landscape was so different then; restaurants worked in their little silos. When we brought the chef to spend three weeks with us, the idea was just to have fun together and create some new dishes," Gauri recalls, adding how spontaneously the dinner menu emerged as a way of introducing newness to the city and also, to recover some costs. "There was no concept of sponsors at the time," she stresses, referring to an important facet of these experiential shindigs today. But more on that later.

At that first dinner (and a few more later), Gauri observed a hunger in the market for exclusive soirées. And therein lay the first ripples of this monumental culinary wave.

CONTINUED ON
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TRENDS

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FROM TRENDS



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Literary musings: The Hay Festival's stellar line-up includes Nobel Prize-winning activist Maria Ressa and National Poet of Wales, Hanan Issa. However, several writers have backed out of the top literature festival to protest its chief sponsors' alleged financial links to Israel. On till June 2 at Hay-on-Wye. @hayfestival



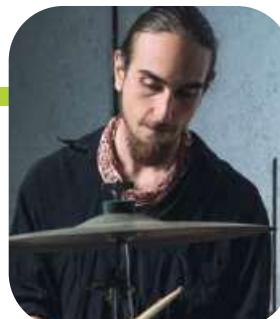
Talking point

Fiery start: Goa's first-ever lantern festival, Glowfest, to be held today at Morjim beach, has irked environmental groups like Marine Life of Goa and Chameleon Wildlife Organisation, who have raised concerns over the beach's natural ecosystem, including the turtle-nesting site. Seems like, all that glitters is not gold, after all.

Pick of the week

Concerts, workshops, tours and everything else you need to plan your social calendar.

For events, contact us on weekend@thehindu.co.in



Draping designs
Shanti Banaras's summer edit **The Line** re-imagines linear forms that engage with graphs, patterns, and distortions when tied together with geometric textiles. Shop pure silk saris starting at ₹13,165 on shantibanaras.com. Those looking for western wear, check out **The Vacation Edit by Forever New**. Ruffle dresses, co-ords, linen tops and frill neck blouses start at ₹3,600 on forevernew.co.in.

The unusual plate
Create a four-course meal at **Madras Kitchen Company** of The Westin Chennai Velachery. Choose one from each: small bowl, bao and hawker's bowl, large bowl and desserts for ₹2,000 approx. Available till June. Those in Bengaluru, head to **Copitas** at Four Seasons on May 31, to try its award-winning menu **Transcend** by Edinburgh-based bar Panda & Sons. Expect cocktails infused with ice creams and sorbets.

Laughter riot
Wondering what it is like to be a '90s kid in 2024? Allow comedian Syama to explain it with a funny twist in her standup **Adultrying**. At Medai - The Stage, Chennai, today, 8.30pm. ₹299, in.bookmyshow.com. City's comedy lovers can also head to Hibiscus Cafe at 9pm on May 31 to attend an English standup by comedian **Navin Kumar**. ₹299; in.bookmyshow.com.

Blues and jazz
Are you in the mood for jazz? Saxophonist, pianist, and composer Matt Littlewood will unveil his latest project, **Beginnings**, at 365 A.S. in Hyatt Regency on May 31, 8pm onwards. If you like the blues, head to Barracuda Brew, Chennai, today at 7pm, where band **Blues Conscience** will pay homage to the legends and perform their original compositions too. ₹399 upwards; insider.in.

Sporting stars
Celebrating team Inter's 20th Scudetto win in the Italian soccer league Serie A, Tudor launched the **Black Bay 58** watch with the team's logo. Limited 1,908 pieces it is available at all Tudor retail points. Closer home, cricketer Shikhar Dhawan has partnered with eyewear brand **Que**. Get the brand's Que Advantage Pass on pre-booking; sale of sunglasses, ₹2,499 upwards, begins on June 12.

Artsy explorations
Heritage conservator Rachita Choudhary's brand **Rach** offers traditional Pichwai paintings starting ₹5,000 on handspun cotton cloth and in organic colours. Place your orders on Instagram page @pichwai.rach. If you are looking to engage in an artistic activity with your partner, paint your masterpiece at the **couples' painting workshop** in Chennai's Pink Lotus on Sunday at 3.30pm. ₹1,199 upwards; insider.in.

Adrenaline rush
Head out on an adventurous trek to **Dudhsagar falls**, located on the eastern fringes of Goa. Discover Bhagwan Mahaveer Sanctuary and Mollem National Park. To register, log on to insider.in. Price: ₹6,400 upwards. Those interested in an 11-kilometre trek to **Kodachadri**, Karnataka's 10-highest peak, over a period of two days and three nights, register on insider.in; ₹6,000 upwards.



SAGARIKA GHATGE
Founder, Akutee

The actor, from the erstwhile royal house of Kolhapur, interweaves her rich legacy into her fashion brand, Akutee, with hand-painted saris and jackets

Anagha Maareesa

anagha.maareesa@thehindu.co.in

Fit for a princess

Actor Sagarika Ghatge Khan, who hails from the erstwhile royal house of Kolhapur and is a descendant of Maharaja Tukojirao Holkar III, weaves her rich legacy into her fashion brand, Akutee, launched in 2023.

Akutee, which means princess in Sanskrit and Marathi, offers bespoke garments that are hand-painted by Sagarika's mother, Urmila Ghatge, along with a team of artists.

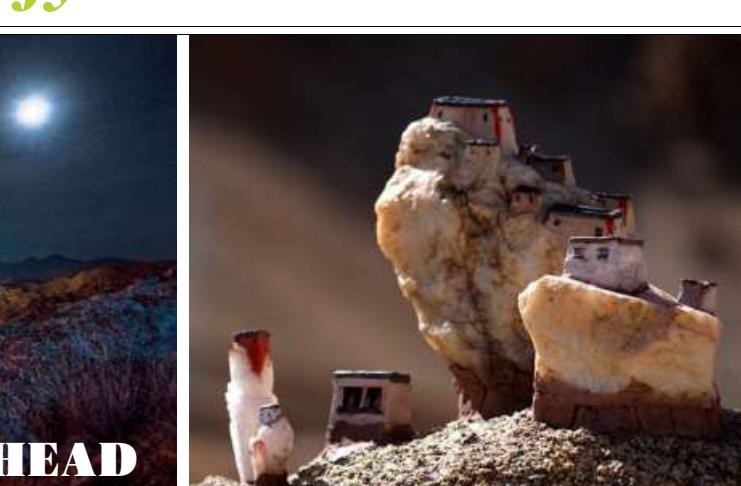
The actor, with her mother and husband, former India cricketer Zaheer Khan, were in Bengaluru last weekend as part of the Four Seasons Festive Showcase.

Sagarika describes Akutee as an ode to all the women in her

family, like her great grandmother Tarabai Rani Saheb. "Everything I've learnt and seen from them, is what the ethos of the brand is – classic, elegant, and



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PLAN AHEAD

High art

At an altitude of 3,500 metres, South Asia's highest contemporary land art festival, *sā* Ladakh, is back with its second edition



cohort quickly expanded from three artists to 40. While being a platform that spotlights Ladakhi artists who get little exposure outside, the project also aims to bring international attention to climate change and the awareness around it, not as activism but as "optimism."

The question posed to the artists was how they would imagine or engage with a landscape, so vast, in times of a changing environment. The 2024 edition features works by renowned artists like Minerva Cuevas, Shilpa Gupta, Manisha Gera Baswani, Kunzies Angmo, Tsetan Angmo, Kundan Gyatso, Stanzin Tsepel, and others.

In an interesting collaboration with Austrian public arts institution, Museum in Progress, flags that constantly expand at different locations within the space will track the movement of the wind.

Another collaboration with Royal Enfield, an artist residency titled The Himalayan Knot, will bring Himalayan communities,

local artisans and textile conservationists to preserve pastoral land and its living heritage by spreading awareness around the rich fibre culture of Ladakh.

"It's a demanding landscape. The main physical challenge is the weather – strong sun, winds, snow, cloudbursts (which is happening more often now). Sometimes, it is also about letting go and trying to adapt according to the situation and learn from the local work as well."

Sometimes, the artist comes with a concept, but it changes when it is placed in the space," says Raki.

A big question that remains with public art is what happens once it is created or displayed. Raki says that each artist is asked to address this question right at the open call stage – "We see how the artwork can go back to the community, like for instance, how reused timber could perhaps be used for the construction of a building. It could also be artwork that can travel and be exhibited elsewhere." This is also the beauty of contemporary art, as it is sans limit, which encourages every artist to think about the possibilities of the materials used.

sā Ladakh opens to the public from June 1 to 11. Entry is free.

A sneak peak into the country's biggest events and festivals before they happen. So, you want to travel more? Watch this space.



(Clockwise from far left) Works from the previous edition like CHU, Liquid States by Phillip Frank; an untitled work by Jigmet Angmo; and River of Sweat by Anshu Singh. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

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Ruma Singh

The release of *Bridgerton's* Season 3 saw many around the world glued to their televisions to see what unfolds in one of Netflix's most popular series. This season's narrative sweeps viewers giddily across breathtaking historic locations in the UK.

The locales form an integral part of the story – past seasons have showcased Bath's Royal Crescent (the Featherington home) and Hampton Court Palace (Queen Charlotte's residence) among others. During filming, the locations are kept strictly under wraps to avoid being overrun by *Bridgerton's* vast fan brigade.

Equally low-key as the filming locations has been the story of English sparkling wine's rapid rise to fame. The main reason for its success is England's vineyards, located in Kent and Sussex are separated from France by the English Channel; a short distance from the world's most famous sparkling wine region, Champagne.

So, there was even more reason to cheer when the gardens of Squerryes Court were picked as a location to film *Bridgerton*. Home to the Warde family, owners of the award-winning Squerryes vintage-only sparkling wines, Squerryes Court features in the opening scene of the season: a lavish garden party held post the introduction of the season's debutantes to Queen Charlotte.

Unlike many modern English wineries, Squerryes has the advantage of being part of a historic estate. The 2,500-acre estate in Westerham, Kent includes a 17th Century estate house.

Squerryes Court was built in 1681 in the early Georgian style with an impressive mellow orange brick façade. "The family moved in, in 1731 and has lived here since," said Henry Warde, eighth generation owner of Squerryes. The gardens were laid in 1692, designed in the



Bridgerton gets bubbly

Squerryes, an award-winning producer of English sparkling wine, features in the opening scenes of Netflix's *Bridgerton* Season 3

formal style of Hampton Court Palace, the royal residence of Henry VIII.

The filming at Squerryes took place in August 2022, over a period of two and a half weeks. "We had five meetings with the production team before they decided on the venue. We managed to find a three-week window when they set up everything in absolute secrecy," says Warde.

The secrecy meant he had to sign a non-disclosure agreement with Netflix: "We could not talk about this for two years!" *Bridgerton's* massive fan following meant secrecy was essential, so 16 security guards accompanied the team. "The actual filming took just four days, during which we (Warde, his wife Claire and their children) were confined to the living area of the house not in

use," said Warde.

Unfamiliar with *Bridgerton* stars, Warde said, "I really didn't know who the actors were, but they were all so polite and

(Left) Squerryes Court; (below) Squerryes sparkling wine. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT.

appreciative." Did they get to drink Squerryes wines? The crew did celebrate with wine at the wrap party once the shooting was over, he confirmed.

Boutique and beautiful
Squerryes makes only vintage sparkling wines in the traditional method from its 55 acres of vines. The Squerryes 2011 LD was awarded Best in Show at the Decanter Wine Awards in 2021, placing it on the list of the top 50 wines of the world that year.

Squerryes encourages buying its wines via the membership route – these are currently sold in the UK only, as production is limited (1,00,000 bottles in 2023). Besides getting discounts on the wine, members get exclusive invitations to the events hosted at Squerryes, including musical evenings, fine wine dinners and black-tie opera evenings at the Great Hall.

Visits to Squerryes are welcome, says Warde, though by prior appointment only. Being a mere one hour from London, access is easy by car or by rail. Says Warde, "Start with a wine tasting in the historic Cork Room, full of memorabilia and photos, have a nice lunch at one of our estate restaurants. This is

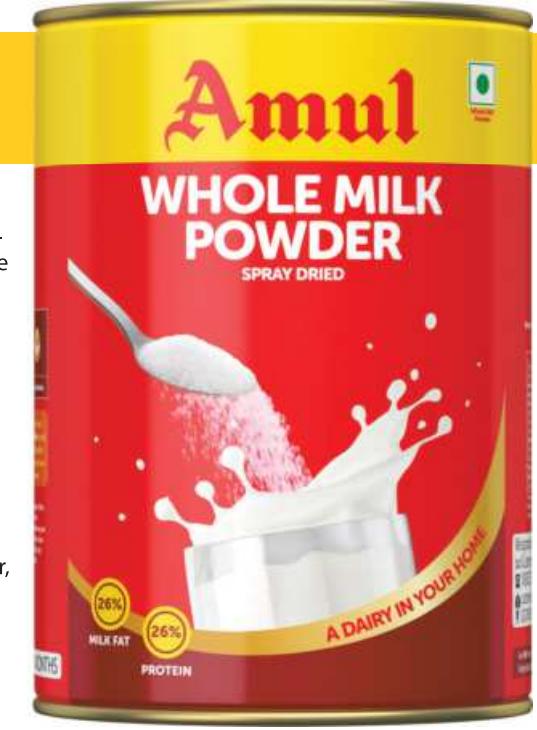
a true experience of Kent and life as it was on an English estate established 300 years ago. It makes us quite unique and very intriguing."

What's next? Summer festivities at Squerryes are on in full swing, and summer 2025 might be even more fun – with a *Bridgerton*-style summer party

planned – so those who register can experience the joy of English life as it was in the Regency era.

As Warde says, "Our family motto is *Licet esse beatis*: Latin for 'it is permitted to be joyful'. Indeed, we have been in the business of creating joy for 300 years – now we are bottling it."

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While Gauri went on to set-up MSK, an out-and-out events space, where takeovers and pop-ups form the business model (versus a diner hosting the occasional guest chef/restaurant/mixologist), other restaurants, especially those inside five-star hotels, began flying down the teams behind accomplished hospitality brands from countries far and wide. The genesis of takeovers, pop-up, and guest-chef series, ie, different formats that essentially featured a cross-over or coming-together between two or more F&B entities, was decidedly underscored by an international flavour. "When we started, people were hungry – pardon the pun – for these things: new experiences and different options because there were such few restaurants and bars," Gauri echoes, explaining why in the first-wave of culinary events the focus was greatly on international players.

Today, the culture has shifted to focus on local talent with bars, restaurants, and home chefs between Mumbai, Delhi, Goa, Bengaluru, Kolkata, Pune, (and sparingly from the Northeast) coming in cahoots for unique dining collaborations. "It's a saturated market and you need to keep it fresh, keep innovating... but how many times will you keep changing your menu? So, you create something for a weekend and it generates buzz

Popups at Magazine Street Kitchen featuring Chef Alex Parker; and Navu; (below) Avinash Kapoli at Bandra Born. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Be seated. This is a takeover

to bring people in," Gauri says about the pivot from "discovery" to "marketing" in this space.

Be that as it may, for mixologist Avinash Kapoli, Bengaluru's latest cocktail bar, SOKA's owner, takeovers and collaborations have proven to be "a great marketing tool". In its six months of existence since opening doors in November 2023, the bar has already popped up at Mumbai's Bandra Born and Slink and Bardot.

"When we went to Bandra Born, guests who come to us regularly pinged their friends in Mumbai saying, 'Hey, you know what? A bar from Bengaluru is doing a takeover in your city, you should definitely go.' So, in that way it helps us spread the word," he shares, adding that as a 42-seater, they are targeting a niche community and it is crucial for their business. Avinash and team are working towards launching Lime House Thursdays, cocktail nights celebrating limey drinks, such

as daiquiris and margaritas, with twists and hope to host mixologists from India and beyond.

In another part of the collaborations' universe, the script has flipped – from Indian establishments playing host to international culinarians to homegrown restaurants taking their oeuvre overseas. In October last year, Mumbai's Slink and Bardot took over the line and pass at Singapore's Indian-Mexican restaurant, Ms.Maria & Mr. Singh for the latter's first anniversary. Whereas, the chef-duo Seefah Ketchaiyo and Karan Bane of Bandra's Thai-Japanese restaurant, Seefah, flew to Maldives for a pop-up at the Four Seasons Resorts in April 2024. "We love

exploring – new cities, different cultures, and new ways of eating," Karan says of what prompts chefs to pack their bags and showcase food despite the challenges of a new atmosphere. "It also allows for increased exposure; for us and



Upcoming takeovers worth sampling:

■ Haawm Takeover, a supper club from Bangkok takes over MSK on May 31 and June 1

■ Two Bengaluru outfits – Naru Noodle Bar and SOKA join hands for a pop-up on May 26

■ Pune-based Cobbler and Crew and Mumbai-based Mizu come together for a bar collaboration on May 29

■ Burnt Ends Singapore comes to Khi Khi in Delhi on June 21

■ Khi Khi pops up at SOKA on August 8

our team," he adds.

"These formats provide a platform for culinary experimentation and innovation, enabling chefs to showcase their creativity to a wider audience. They also facilitate collaboration within the industry," summarises Avinandan Kundu, head chef, Sienna Calcutta, which concluded its first international pop-up, Epar-Opär (literally translating to 'across') at Singapore's modern Vietnamese diner, Lo



Quay in April.

The award-winning, progressive Indian restaurant Ekaa, Mumbai, too has seen its own share of international 'collabs' – at The Elephant Room, Singapore in 2022; a bar takeover at Nairobi's Hero Bar and Sinnerman the same year;

and an 11-course degustation menu pop-up at the South Indian and Sri Lankan cuisine restaurant Nadodi in Kuala Lumpur in 2023.

You would think this

emanated from crucial planning, but chef-owner Niyati Singh feels, "Our thought was never to sit in the beginning of the year and set targets for the number of pop-ups we'd like to do. We prefer natural collaborations with like-minded partners and that's how most of our national and international pop-ups happened. Although meticulous planning is necessary, the best ones unfold effortlessly."

Which brings us to the question of arrangements, and importantly, budgets. From travel to stay, and transportation of ingredients and raw materials – there is quite a bit of logistics involved. Then there is means required for promotions. This is where sponsors come in. And increasingly for F&B experiences, it is the liquor brands, who are already manoeuvring their way around restrictions on advertising alcohol. "For them, it becomes a way of marketing their product. For the bar/restaurant that's coming, it's to promote themselves, and for the space that's hosting it's to bring in guests. That entire ecosystem is hinged on promotions," Gauri adds.

For Avinash though it is equally about fostering a sense of community and keeping things fresh. "Consumers always like it when there's something special" he says. Which is true; it all boils down to creating a memorable experience, for the industry and its patrons, in equal measure.



(Clockwise from left) The Albion; Mary's Den; Golden Dew; avocado and cucumber sushi. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



as boarding rooms or secluded celebration venues.

What's on the menu

At the Yard, against a backdrop of black and white seaters and patterned tile floors, guests savour innovative concoctions like the Sassy Jamun, a spicy purple gin cocktail made with jamun and topped with yuzu foam and the Golden Dew, a refreshing turmeric-infused gin-based delight with elderflower cordial and a house cumin soda.

"We had a lot of time to experiment with our beverages and are still learning. The potential of Indian ingredients to produce creative cocktails is exceptional. We have a vettiver highball which uses coffee vodka, home-infused vettiver cordial, bitter coffee demerara and citric acid," says Ankur Kashyap, beverage manager and mixologist.

"We put ourselves in the shoes of Swinton and thought, 'what would a British officer of his rank try across the country' and selected the best and most vibrant options. So we looked into popular street food options. Take the spicy dabeli wheels for instance. It is a very popular dish in Gujarat and had a lot of potential to play with. You taste the dabeli and more. It is also very convenient to eat when you are on your feet on party nights," says Prince Beniwal, head chef.

Another interesting dish on the menu is the paneer mousse on a pickled kataifi nest. The dough used to make the popular Middle-Eastern dessert is deep fried and carries a piece of delicately spiced, soft, tandoor-cooked paneer tikka topped with a generous swirl of a salty, spicy and tangy paneer and mascarpone mousse.

At The Albion, we try the Tokyo Highball, made with galangal gin, sakura acids and a homemade lemongrass soda. It is bright and savoury, pairing well with the hot garlic idli, a saucy, sweet and spicy dish with cocktail idlis.

"There is a lot of charm in visiting a place like this, especially in a Tier-2 city. This was one of the main reasons I was able to convince my staff, who were working in Mumbai and Delhi, in marquee restaurants and bars, to move here," says Sagar. He adds, "Jaipur is just beginning to party."

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Where's the party tonight?

The night is young and drinks are potent at The Swinton House, Jaipur's newest hotspot



washers to put on a rave-like light show. There are not enough places in Jaipur giving this sort of a young and electrifying experience," says Sagar. There are LED panels playing AI generated visuals to amplify the vibe of the party.

The Albion is on the first floor, accessed through a narrow flight of stairs which is original to the haveli. It features opulent chandeliers, velvet-upholstered seats, quirky Renaissance-inspired installations and deep hues, with the capacity to seat only 50 guests at a time.

On the same floor there is Mary's Den and Man's Cave, speakeasy spaces with more chandeliers, private dining and comfortable beds. They cater solely to select guests, doubling

When we move into heritage buildings, there is a rule to preserve at least 50% of its original form. It took around eight months to fully renovate the place

SAGAR NAGPAL
Co-founder, The Swinton House

with different personalities. While The Yard is a casual area with Indian-inspired dishes, The Albion is more of an elegant speakeasy serving pan-Asian fare."

Insta-worthy interiors
The Yard, a 100-seater open courtyard, transformed into a chic Victorian-themed dining area with a contemporary allure, invites patrons to

experience the booming nightlife of the Pink City.

As daylight fades, The Yard morphs into a playground for sundowner parties, its mechanical roof closing to reveal captivating light projections against the night sky. "On Fridays and Saturdays, the place is at max capacity, with around 700-750 people. Things get playful – lights are dim, music is loud and we use

The Swinton House is at B, 20, Gopinath Marg, Jayanti Market, New Colony, Jaipur. Here a meal for two including alcohol costs ₹5,000 (approx)

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Grace under fire

Zeenat Aman recently rolled up for the #WeSeeEqual summit, a corporate symposium to drive conversations on parity, inclusion and mental health

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"Is it Dior, Chanel?" Zeenat Aman wonders aloud when I ask her about her lavender-tinted sunglasses. It is Gucci, someone pipes in, and Aman nods along. "It is Gucci," she beams sweetly. Aman, 72, is the only source of stately exuberance in the stark conference room in Mumbai where I meet her at #WeSeeEqual summit, a corporate symposium to drive conversations on parity, inclusion and mental health. It was a fit for Aman, who has leveraged her social media popularity (she debuted sensationally on Instagram in 2023) to lend her voice to a variety of causes.

Edited excerpts from a conversation with the actor:



Question: What's your advice to Gen-Z them on using social media purposefully?

Answer: Firstly, I feel the current generation is more aware and

well-informed than anybody of my time was at their age. I recently learned that 60% of my Instagram followers are between 25 and 44 years old. It's a delightful, unexpected, and exciting position I find myself in.

My only word of advice to youngsters is that they should see the Internet as a space for more than just uploading selfies. They should educate themselves on DEA – diversity, equity, and inclusion. Because this generation is so clued in, it's important for them to find a cause, campaign or organisation that appeals to them and find a way to support it.

Q: May is mental health awareness month. In India, there is a lot of stigma, still, around seeking help.

A: There's no shame in seeking therapy, and now there are so many avenues that are open, both online and offline.

Among the youth, I have observed, there is a lot of peer pressure, especially on the Internet, that affects their mental well-being.

Parents, too, should

be supportive towards their kids no matter what they are going through... be it at work, school or in their private relationships.

Q: Your Instagram posts regularly make news. Does this take you back to the tabloid circuses that swirled around you in the 1970s?

A: I have learned to come to terms with it. In the digital age, everyone is entitled to their opinion and so am I. Whether someone agrees or disagrees with me, it's fine.

Q: Tell us about your upcoming film, Bun Tikki, with Shabana Azmi and Abhay Deol...

A: Shabana and I had worked together in Ishk Ishk Ishk (1971) and Ashanti (1982). We had a lot of fun on those films. The same held true on Bun Tikki. The story is really not about Shabana and myself – it's about Abhay and the little boy who plays his son. Shabana plays the grandmother and I play.... well, never mind, it's a surprise! I am doing a special appearance in the film. At this point in my career, I don't want to prove anything to anybody. Because I've been there and done that. I just want to do little parts that bring me joy and that wouldn't exhaust me.

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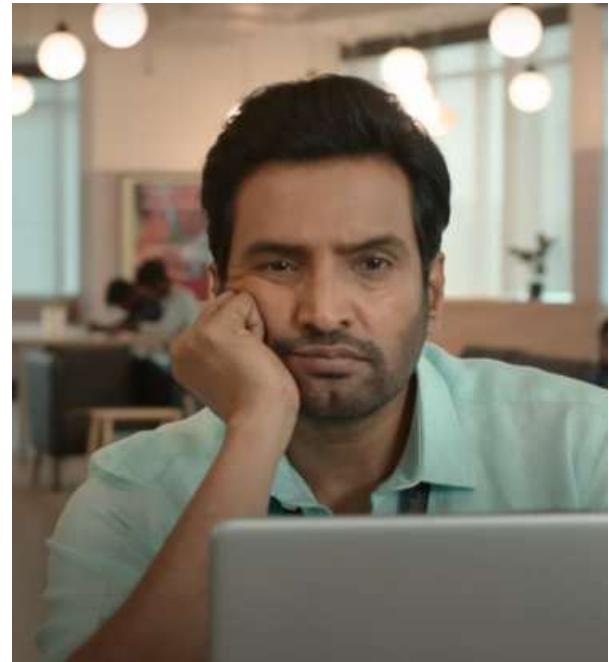


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Tamil

More error than comedy



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There is a terrorist attack in Mumbai and the next target happens to be in Chennai. The police are on their toes. Will they be able to avert an impending disaster?

But that can wait, alas, as *Inga Naan Thaan Kingu* is not one of those thrillers that Kollywood routinely dishes out or an edge-of-the-seat tale. It is a comedy starring comedian-turned-hero Santhanam as Vetri, a man who desperately wants to marry but just cannot find a girl. So what does he do? He joins a matrimonial company as an employee!

"Sweet kadai-la vela panna rendu sweet saapta thappaa?" (If a person working in a sweet shop eats a couple of sweets, is it a sin?) Vetri tells his manager when asked why he is more interested in getting married himself, rather than achieving targets, which is getting other people married.

This is one of those routine Santhanam comedies that require you to leave your brain at home. At least that is exactly what the first half is, as we travel alongside Vetri as he scouts for a girl and finally ends up marrying a rich zamindar girl. Or so he thinks.

Inga Naan Thaan Kingu primarily revolves around two things, both of which Tamil cinema has dealt with in excess: a marriage that isn't what it seems to be, and a death that doesn't seem what it seems to be. With a complicated problem at hand, Vetri – and a motley group that end up irritating not just him but us, the audiences too – has to find answers.

For Santhanam, whose avatar as hero has seen more downs than ups, *Inga Naan Thaan Kingu* presents a good deal, because he doesn't have to do much of the heavy lifting. It is written like a comedy of errors, with Santhanam and friends finding themselves in awkward situations, most of which are not as funny as they ought to be. The humour works in just a few places; the loud caricaturish characters, played by Thambi Ramaiah and Bal Saravanan, get on your nerves a lot in this 131-minute Anand Narayan directorial.

D Imman contributes little to making things better. The music composer hasn't been at his best for a while, and that continues with this film, where he seems to have purely gone with the vibe and not attempted anything more. *Inga Naan Thaan Kingu* is one of those summer films that is more error than comedy.

Inga Naan Thaan Kingu is currently running in theatres



Humorous bromance loses steam

Vipin Das gives us a mindless fun ride with hardly a pause in between, thanks to his two lead actors, but the film finally ends up as average fare

Malayalam

Inga Naan Thaan Kingu

Director: Anand Narayan

Cast: Santhanam, Priyalaya, Thambi Ramaiah, Vivek Prasanna

Storyline: Vetri wants to marry a girl and lead a peaceful life but a bomb threat to the city throws his life out of gear

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Guruvayoor Ambalanadaiyil

Director: Vipin Das

Cast: Prithviraj, Basil Joseph, Nikhila Vimal, Anaswara Rajan

Storyline: Vinu, still struggling to recover from breakup which happened five years ago, strikes up a close bond with his prospective brother-in-law Anandan, but his attempts to set right the issues in Anandan's life have some unintended consequences

talking terms with his wife Parvathy (Nikhila Vimal). Vinu's attempts to set things right for Anandan has some hilarious consequences. Humour remains the most potent weapon yet again for filmmaker Vipin Das, just like it was in his previous outing *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey*, although here it does not serve any larger message; rather, it is humour for the sake of it. Deepu Pradeep, who scripted *Kunjiramayanam* and *Periloor Premier League* has written some laugh-out-loud exchanges as well as lines that draw

laughs just due to their outright silliness.

Humour is really not one of Prithviraj's strong points, but here his combination with Basil, having a natural knack for comedy, works well to an extent. With the bromance in the spotlight, Anaswara and Nikhila get only just enough screen time to register their presence. The sidekicks, played by Siju Sunny and Saafboi, achieve what was expected of them, but Yogi Babu does not have much to do.

The film is replete with references, right from *Nandanam to Godfather* and *Grihapravesham*, which incidentally starts off with a wedding mixup at Guruvayoor (involving Jagadeesh and Rekha, who plays Anaswara's parents here). Not to forget, the context in which they use the popular *Azhagiya Laila* song from the 1990s.

In what appears to be a gamble, the scriptwriter reveals the central conflict quite early on into the film. It turns out to be hasty as the film struggles to sustain interest beyond the halfway point, despite all the gags that follow one after the other. Later, it attempts to sustain itself on a series of mixups reminiscent of old Priyadarshan films and with the introduction of new characters, some of which does not pay off.

Guruvayoor Ambalanadaiyil, which initially rides high on the novelty of the bromance and their humorous exchanges, finally ends up as quite average fare.



Guruvayoor Ambalanadaiyil is currently running in theatres

Vasanthabalan's political drama undone by its predictability

Tamil

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Thalaimai Seyalagalam, the star-studded political thriller comes as a reassurance that the Tamil streaming space would benefit from the voices of seasoned filmmakers like Vasanthabalan. But before we get into the good and the bad, addressing the ugly is pivotal.

Vasanthabalan's series undoes itself miserably, thanks to a fumble from the director who seems to have revealed a trump card of a twist during the promotions, and the many spoilsport hints throughout this series. This is disappointing as the series is quite a novel attempt at building an immersive world.

The story spans across India, almost a dozen characters pull the weight of the story, and there are four intertwined narrative arcs. The bigger narrative revolves around the tricky situation that the incumbent Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu,



Arunachalam (Kishore), is facing.

The CM is about to be prosecuted in a 17-year-long corruption case, which is the handy work of business magnate Krishnamoorthy (Shaji Chen). To secure his Government and defeat his enemies, Aruna turns to his most trusted deputies – Amudhavalli (Remya Nambeesan), his daughter and minister with an eye on his seat; Kottravai (Sriya Reddy), political advisor and Aruna's most trust-worthy confidante;

Hariharan (Niroop Nandakumar), Aruna's son-in-law and MLA, who has his hands dirty but is hungry for the CM seat; and the most influential of them all, the party's loyal general secretary Selvapuviyarasan (Santhana Bharathi).

Meanwhile, the Central Bureau of Investigation sends officer Nawas Khan (Adithya Menon) to re-investigate a decades-long trail of gruesome murders alleged to have been committed by a woman named

Durga. Down South, DCP Manikandan (Bharath) investigates the murder of a police officer and has his suspicions pinned on a woman named Durga (Kani Kusruti), a smuggler and rebel who seems to have a history with Kottravai. Durga's story forms the fourth arc.

What strikes one instantly is the extremes between the dramatic display of gore in some scenes, the matter-of-fact manner in which shocking crimes are mentioned, and a sense of sedation you find in most stretches, which only adds to the peculiar atmosphere that inhabits the show.

In his series debut, Vasanthabalan seems well-adapted to this style of long-form storytelling; cliffhangers seem organic, background scores are justly used, and there are hardly any unnecessary camera movements or cinematic gimmicks. What truly makes *Thalaimai Seyalagalam* an unusual political drama is how we never see rallies or crowds, reactions of the common folk, rival party men clashing, or dramatic television debates. There is also the smart use of animation to tell some

backstories, but you wish the series had used more of this technique to solve the predictability around a central mystery character.

Unfortunately, all this only translates into a mostly engaging but haphazard narrative. The issues, as you might have guessed, are the

predictability in the larger narrative and the limited runtime. The schemes that Amudhavalli, Kottravai, and Hariharan plot against each other aren't as innovative as one hopes, and the politics behind the power plays are as shallow as they can get.

More space could have also helped the series balance its many players and their arcs.

Bharath's Manikandan turns out as quite an ordinary character, a stock cinema cop defined by just one trait: he likes to bend the ways for the greater good. Even his relationship with his girlfriend-cum-fellow policewoman Sundari (Dharsha Gupta) goes nowhere.

Thalaimai Seyalagalam is definitely something new for the audiences but, with a more measured screenplay, tight lips during the promotions, and some red herrings to throw off the predictability, it could have been so much more.

Thalaimai Seyalagalam is currently streaming on ZEE5

Thalaimai Seyalagam

Creator: Vasanthabalan

Cast: Kishore, Sriya Reddy, Bharath and Remya Nambeesan

Episodes: 8

Storyline: When the Chief Minister faces the bars of prison, a power struggle brews among the members of the ruling party. Meanwhile, the CBI follows a trail of murders from Jharkhand that might have a connection with another murder case in Tamil Nadu

Bridgerton Season 3 (Part One) Episodes: 4

Creator: Chris Van Dusen

Cast: Adjoa Andoh, Julie Andrews, Lorraine Ashbourne, Jonathan Bailey, Harriet Cains, Bessie Carter, Nicola Coughlan, Ruth Gemmell, Claudia Jessie, Luke Newton, Golda Rosheuvvel, Hannah Dodd, Luke Thompson.

Storyline: While two of the Bridgerton siblings are enjoying marital bliss, the others and the Featheringtons are en route to finding it



Snippets



Oscar Isaac to voice Jesus Christ in *The King of Kings*

Oscar Isaac will voice the part of Jesus Christ in animation film *The King of Kings*. Seong-ho "Jay" Jang, a South Korean visual effects expert, is directing the film for MOFAC Animation. The cast also features Kenneth Branagh, Uma Thurman, and Roman Griffin Davis. Forest Whitaker has been cast in the role of the apostle Peter. *The King of Kings* is loosely inspired by a lesser-known Charles Dickens short story, *The Life of Our Lord*, about the life and times of Jesus. The film's story follows Charles Dickens and his son, Walter, on a "multi-dimensional" adventure as the master storyteller engages his youngest son's vivid imagination with the fascinating life of Jesus.



Ajith Kumar looks trendy in first look of Adhik Ravichandran's film

The first look of actor Ajith Kumar's upcoming film *Good Bad Ugly*, directed by Adhik Ravichandran, was unveiled by the makers. The poster shows a tattooed Ajith donning Hawaiian shirts and in three contrasting moods. Announced on March 14, *Good Bad Ugly* is set for a release during Pongal next year. The film is produced by Naveen Yerineni and Y Ravi Shankar under their Mythri Movie Makers banner. The film will have music composed by Devi Sri Prasad, who is reuniting with Ajith after their 2014 film *Veeram*. Abinandhan Ramanujam serves as the cinematographer while Vijay Velukutty is on board as the editor.



Fahadh Faasil joins hands with *Drishyam* director Jeethu Joseph

Malayalam star Fahadh Faasil has joined hands with *Drishyam* filmmaker Jeethu Joseph. The film, to be produced by E4 Entertainment, will be written by Santhi Mayadevi. Fahadh Faasil is currently filming for *Odum Kuthira Chadum Kuthira*, directed by Althal Salim. The film also stars Kalyani Priyadarshan, Dhyan Sreenivasan and Lal. Fahadh Faasil will also be seen in *Pushpa 2*, the upcoming pan-Indian film with Allu Arjun in the lead. Meanwhile, this is Fahadh Faasil's first project with Jeethu, who rose to fame outside of the Malayalam film industry with his *Drishyam* films, headlined by Mohanlal.

Back in the Ton

Streaming

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We are back in the Ton after two years. Season 2 saw the eldest Bridgerton, Anthony (Jonathan Bailey) find love and marry feisty (Kate Simone). Season 3, based on Julia Quinn's fourth book in her Regency romance series, *Romancing Mister Bridgerton*, follows the story of Penelope Featherington (Nicola Coughlan) and Colin Bridgerton (Luke Newton).

This season has a debutante from the Bridgerton family, Francesca (Hannah Dodd), the sixth Bridgerton, who has a love for music and a practical bent of mind. She looks on marriage as a way out of her mother, Violet's (Ruth Gemmell) machinations. That is an underlying thread of the season with all the girls looking at marriage as a way out, a

path to freedom and asserting their individuality. Eloise (Claudia Jessie) the fifth Bridgerton, gives sarcastic commentary on the proceedings.

Queen Charlotte (Golda Roshevvel) holds off naming the diamond of first water, prompting a duel between her and Lady Whistledown (Julie Andrews, voice), the author of the scandal sheet of all the happenings in the Ton. Her friend, the doyenne of the Ton, Lady Danbury (Adjoa Andoh) cannot do much but nudge the monarch in the right direction – towards Francesca.

The Featheringtons, the dowager Portia (Polly Walker) and her daughters, Prudence (Bessie Carter) and Philippa (Harriet Cains) do what they can to cement their place in society. The youngest Featherington daughter, Penelope, has also decided to seek expert help (Colin, the third Bridgerton son) to land herself a husband.

Season 3 follows Francesca's attempts to find a husband, Penelope and Colin's lessons in charm, through which they realise they would like to be more than friends, and Eloise' fractious friendship with gossipy Cressida (Jessica Madsen).

Mondrich (Martins Imhangbe), the retired boxer, who runs the

gentleman's club, enters the Ton, thanks to his son being made the Duke of Kent. Newcomers include Earl of Kilmartin (Victor Ali) who is smitten by Francesca, Lady Danbury's brother Marcus Anderson (Daniel Francis), Lord Debbling (Sam Phillips) who is courting Penelope, and Lady Tilley Arnold (Hannah New), the rich widow who catches Benedict's eye.

The clothes are to die for, Penelope rocks her makeover and Queen Charlotte's hair makes a statement before she even opens her mouth. In episode 4 there is that intricate hairpiece with sparkling swans swimming around a glowing lake, which drags one's eye away from the energetic ballet performance.

The conversation about Violet not moving out to make way for Kate, the new Viscountess Bridgerton could have been developed but otherwise the show delivers on all its promises from sizzle under and over the sheets and swooning romance to stunning costumes and music.

Now to wait for June 13 and part two of season 3...

Bridgerton Season 3 Part One is streaming on Netflix



Sweet ode to childhood innocence

Despite its occasional flashes of sweetness, the film's lack of depth makes it more of a half-hearted daydream than a vivid adventure

English

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In John Krasinski's *IF*, the boundless frontier of childhood imagination takes center stage, yet the film struggles to capture the genuine wonder it aims to celebrate. While the premise of bringing one's childhood imaginary friends to life shows promise, *IF* falters in executing Krasinski's whimsical vision.

The story revolves around Bea (Cailey Fleming), a 12-year-old grappling with the impending loss of her father (Krasinski), who faces life-threatening surgery. This personal crisis is compounded by the recent death of her mother, situating Bea in a predictably susceptible state of mind, making her vulnerable to her mind's creations swooping right in. When Bea discovers her ability to see people's imaginary friends—termed "IFs"—she is thrust into a fantastical world guided by her neighbour, Calvin (Ryan Reynolds).

Fleming, having grown up from her days in the post-apocalypse of *The Walking Dead*, would have found the colourful CGI-rendered fantasia of *IF* a tamer environment to say the least. Yet, even the remarkable upcoming star's spunk and vulnerability is tethered to a narrative that often feels more like a school play than a Hollywood production.

Reynolds delivers his signature brand of sardonic charm, but his constant state of exasperation quickly wears thin. The physical comedy (which usually involved tripping over an invisible IF) lands with a thud more often than not, with so much

IF

Director: John Krasinski

Cast: Cailey Fleming, Ryan Reynolds, Steve Carell, Phoebe Waller-Bridge, John Krasinski, Fiona Shaw, Alan Kim

Storyline: After discovering she can see everyone's imaginary friends, a girl embarks on an adventure to reconnect forgotten 'IFs' with their pals

more to Reynold's character left to the imagination.

The IFs themselves, including the fluffy Blue (voiced by Steve Carell), a creature that seems to have wandered off the set of *Monsters Inc.*, the wide-eyed Blossom (Phoebe Waller-Bridge), and a whole bunch of outlandish, idiosyncratic creatures come off just a tad more unsettling than the film would like you to believe. For all the hype Krasinski drummed up about the film's stellar voice cast, most characters are barely explored and feel more like glorified cameos. You could tell me Blake Lively, Awkwafina, Bill Hader, Matthew Rhys and Keegan-Michael Key were involved, but I'd sooner believe I imagined them.

However, amidst the crowded mediocrity of the voice cast, the unmistakable standout is the gentle, inviting presence of Louis Gossett Jr., who voices a wise old teddy bear. A sunset sequence on the dock of the pier emerges as the film's most poignant moment, beautifully elevated by Gossett Jr.'s heartfelt performance.

Set in the nostalgia-saturated 1990s, *IF* appears to be longing for the days before smartphones supposedly zapped our collective imagination. However, the era's trappings—think suspenders and analog gadgets—feel more like a desperate plea for authenticity than genuine context for worldbuilding.

The film's central conflict offers a metaphor ripe for exploration. Yet, Krasinski's script fails to delve into this premise with any real substance. The narrative posits that these IFs can only find purpose by reconnecting with their original creators or finding new children to imagine them. The idea, while touching on the obvious themes of loss

and reconnection with one's inner child, is inconsistently developed over the course of the film.

Blue's offhand remark about IFs disappearing when forgotten is a hint at a more profound storyline, but the film quickly abandons this thread. The IFs' existence, caught between the realms of forgotten dreams and persistent childhood nostalgia, is never fully unpacked, leaving a wealth of narrative gold unmined.

Despite these 'could-have-beens,' *IF* occasionally sparkles when it explores adults reconnecting with their childhood selves. Fiona Shaw's insistence that nobody wants to watch an "oldy" like her dance is delightfully contradicted by her beautifully shot ballet sequence, brimming with regret and rediscovered joy. Sadly, it feels like that's all the film had to offer on that front, with Bea's less convincing adventure hogging the spotlight for the most part.

Krasinski, who struck gold with *A Quiet Place*, seems to have lost his touch here, unable to find the right blend of heart and humour. The result is a film that feels both overly sugary and sluggish, never quite capturing the effervescent spirit it seeks to celebrate. Even the seasoned heartstring-tugger Michael Giacchino's valiant attempts to infuse the film with a sense of melodic wonder can only do so much heavy-lifting to mask the film's disjointed storytelling.

Despite its occasional flashes of sweetness, *IF*'s lack of depth makes it more of a half-hearted daydream than a vivid adventure. Perhaps Krasinski should stick to his terrifying, sound-sensitive imaginary friends than the cute and cuddly ones.

IF is currently running in theatres

