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Step into the world of women-only travel groups, where like-minded adventurers come together to embark on unforgettable journeys and build lasting connections



Sangita Rajan
sangitarajan.pb@thehindu.co.in

In the quaint village of Turtuk, one of the northernmost villages in India deep in the Himalayas, close to the Line of Control between India and Pakistan, surrounded by strangers-turned-friends, I celebrated my 22nd birthday. Freezing toes, a cake made of halwa and a night filled with Kishore Kumar songs set the scene. I had met the women I was travelling with just a week ago. Yet, in the dark of the night, with only the stars to guide us, our group of 20-somethings paraded our way through narrow bylanes like we had known each other for years.

Exploring new destinations solo can initially seem daunting, especially without the familiar comfort of friends or family by your side. However, over the past decade, many women have courageously embraced this opportunity, empowered by increased disposable incomes and a desire to broaden their horizons with fresh experiences. It is in this dynamic landscape that women-only travel groups have emerged as sanctuaries for those who desire the freedom to explore.

Trips are anywhere between four and 10 days depending on the destination and are priced at an average of ₹15,000 for most domestic tours. A start and end point is decided where travellers are expected to reach by themselves. Since most travel organisations do not set an upper age limit, the responsibility to ensure good health for the trips signed up for, falls on the travellers themselves. Especially on trips to the mountains and those with adventure activities like trekking, camping and water sports, travellers are advised to use their own discretion.

These curated expeditions offer more than just destinations; they provide a haven where like-minded women can weave tales of adventure, laughter, and newfound friendships.

In 2016, Nitesh Chauhan, founder of travel group Jugni, a year-old organisation then, found himself in Gangtok, Sikkim, with only three women who had signed up for the trip. Even though the minimum number of travellers for the group was capped at 15, he led these women on a four-day journey into the mountains of north-eastern



(Top to bottom)
Bengaluru-based Valkyrie Riders; women on a trip organised by Wander Womaniya; a group trip to Sri Lanka through Jugni. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



India. "I did not want to cancel the trip because we had made a promise," he says, emphasising his humble beginnings. Jugni now boasts of having successfully organised trips in over 30 countries, and is one of the most reviewed women-only travel groups in the country.

Safety on the road

At a time when the country is once again been put under the spotlight as an unsafe destination for women travellers, one of the major concerns about travelling as a woman is safety on the road. "I've travelled solo, in a mixed group, and also in a women-only group, and felt safer travelling with other women. I've made friends more easily. I'm still friends with the women I met on these trips over two years ago," says Varsha Mullick, an avid traveller, adding that even if the women she met were strangers, she never felt that way and was comfortable sharing her personal space with them.

Akshankaha Bumb, 40, the

co-founder of F5 Escapes, a women-only travel group that was founded in 2013 after the Nirbhaya case in Delhi, says, "India's view on travel for women changed after that incident, and it started being perceived as the rape capital of the world. We knew that it was not the case, and that India can be safe if done right. We wanted to be the ones to provide that space." F5 Escapes aims to redefine the way women travel in India and has led trips to over 40 destinations all over the country, with a focus on authenticity in terms of food and stays that are rooted in local experiences.

Nitesh adds that the key to responsible and safe travel is to always make friends with locals, since they understand the surroundings and terrain better than tourists. "In Ladakh, having a local driver and doctor on our team in case of medical emergencies has been a huge plus," he says.

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100 years of Souza: Christie's is celebrating FN Souza's 100th birth anniversary. The auction house's South Asian Modern + Contemporary Art will present 36 artworks by Souza. His paintings, like *The Lovers and Men in Boats*, will go under the hammer on March 20; online auction will be held between March 13 and 27. @Christie's



Talkingpoint

96th Academy Awards: *To Kill A Tiger*, directed by Indian-Canadian Nisha Pahuja, has been nominated in the Best Documentary Feature category at the Oscars. In the race for Best Picture, including 13 other nominations, is Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer*. Disney+Hotstar will live telecast the ceremony on March 11 at 4am.

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



Threads of tradition

Studio Samasta is displaying designer wear by Paromita Banerjee, The Summer House, Soares and Warm at its launch pop-up. 29, CP Ramaswamy Road, Alwarpet, Chennai. If you fancy chikankari, Anjul Bhandari's **Zabahaar** edit offers an anti-fit range of traditional wear, gilets and asymmetrical jackets with two-toned beads, sequins and mirrors; available at Ensemble across India, Ogaan-New Delhi.



Sculpting homes

Planning to add statement pieces to your home? Check out **Opulin's paper sculpture** collection of hand-folded, old volumes of books by Crizu, which come with stitched binding. ₹70,000 upwards on opulin.com. From paper sculptures to the ones made with wood and metal, **Beyond Designs' edit** has moulded models of angels, canines, tribal wall art and antique pieces on beyonddesigns.in.



Quarter-life crisis?

You must have heard of mid-life crisis, but comedians Venkat Ramanan and Nikhil are bringing a comic perspective to quarter-life crisis with their set **Mid 20s Madness** at **Fika**, Chennai, on Sunday. Tickets on in.bookmyshow.com start at ₹249. Meanwhile, the city's comedy surfers have a reason to throng **Offbeat Music Ventures** at 8pm today for Gautham Govindan's stand-up. ₹399; in.bookmyshow.com.



Spice it up

The Whisky and Spice menu at **Radha Hotel**, Chennai, offers Tamil cuisine with dishes like pudalagai thuvattal and mutton thalakari kuzhambu. Available till March 31; 30% discount on single malt. Foodies in Bengaluru, savour the flavours of seven States at Marriott Hotel Whitefield's **MCafe**. Expect Hyderabad biryani, kaithchakka moru curry and more, till March 14.



Mastering puppets

Shreedevi Sunit of Talking Turtles Storytellers will be at Chennai's IDAM today for a workshop (fee: ₹1,499) on puppetry (10.30am - 2.30pm). She will stage a **puppet show** too; 4pm-5pm. ₹349 on in.bookmyshow.com. The city's theatre lovers could also watch Binoy Mohan's English play **Hold the mushrooms** at The Medai, Alwarpet, on March 12 and 13 at 7.30pm. ₹300; in.bookmyshow.com.



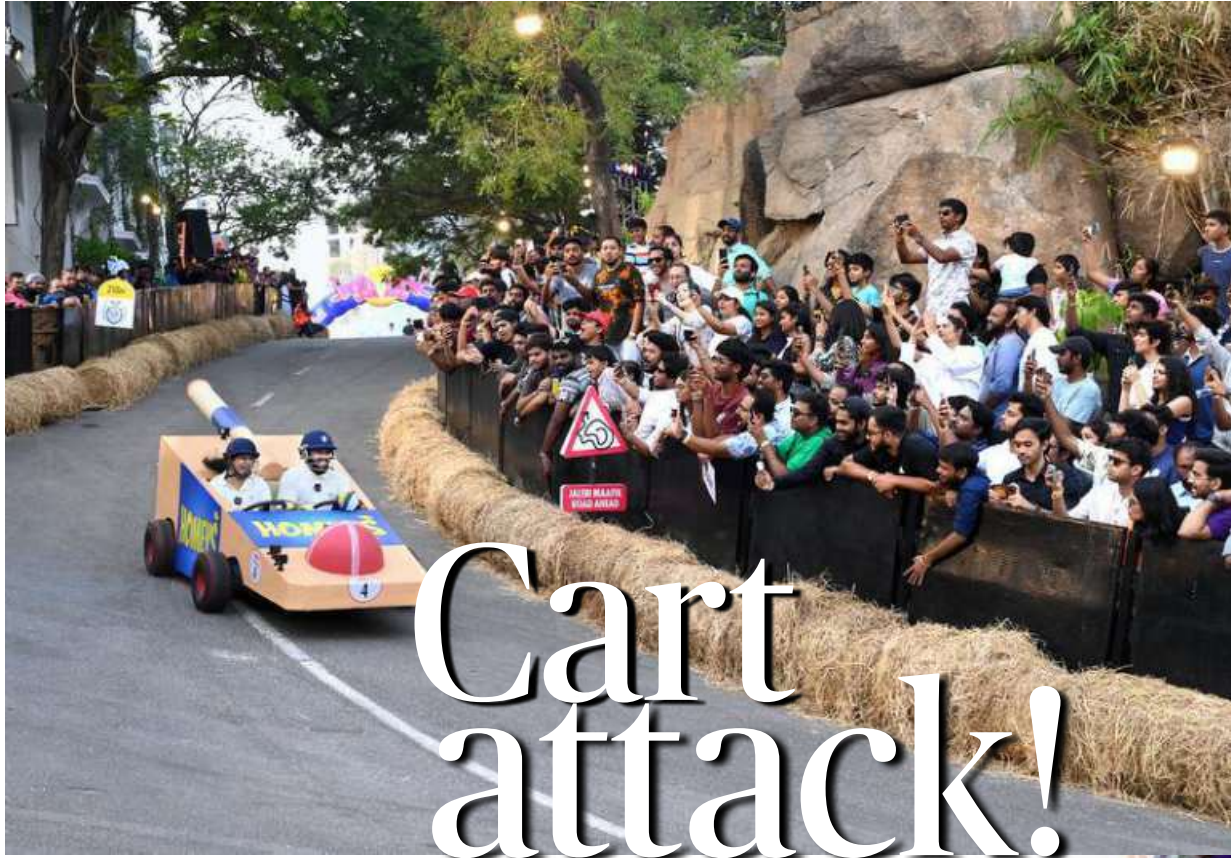
Watch out!

Carl F. Bucherer Heritage BiCompax Annual, a watch centred on the dial design of its retro predecessor, features a 30-minute counter at nine o'clock, nubuck leather strap and a calendar. ₹8.2 lakh at Ethos Watch Boutique. There's an option for smartwatch lovers too. Honor's **Honor Choice Watch** is 5ATM water resistant and has a stress-monitoring function too. ₹6,499; explorehonor.com.



Beat it

Mahindra Percussion Festival's second edition features the traditional percussion sounds of **mridangam** along with electronic, rap, poetry and dance at Prestige Srihari Khoday Centre for Performing Arts, Bengaluru, on March 23, 24; in.bookmyshow.com; ₹750. The city's music aficionados can also visit WL Superclub for 'Teri Baaton Mein' fame singer **Raghav** today at 8pm. ₹499; insider.in.



Cart attack!

Srinivasa Ramanujam
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A car crash isn't fun. But it could be, if your car is built like a soapbox and if you are at Hyderabad's Ramanaidu Studios for the Red Bull Soapbox Race 2024. It was smooth sailing for some, but for others, it was a drive full of ups and downs as 28 five-member teams from across the country assembled their cars and manoeuvred their way on the track. Soapbox racing, for the uninitiated, revolves around teams battling it out in non-motorised vehicles that they have designed themselves. The objective is to

Can you imagine a non-motorised vehicle inspired by superheroes? Or a car modelled on biryani? Here's how five-member carts battled at the Red Bull Soapbox Race in Hyderabad

plummet down a hill using gravity and avoid any obstacles en route. Born in 2000 in Belgium, the race has been organised in more than 50 countries, with over four million spectators watching the thrilling action, creatively designed cars and, sometimes, memorable crashes too.

To the finish line
The race saw a lot of creative machines in Hyderabad. From 3,300

registrations across 23 states of India, the final 28 carts drove down the slope. Like team Kith and Kin 2.0, which had come from Mumbai and stood second, not very far behind the title winner Kraken Wagen from Hyderabad. Introducing Kith and Kin was Kirsten Gonsalves, a self-confessed old-school team that

consisted of his family members. "My dad, my sister, my cousin and my brother-in-law are here," he beams, pointing towards them. Kith and Kin based their snazzy-looking green vehicle on the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles concept because "we are all '90s kids, and we don't like these new-age cartoons". Kirsten was Shredder, and his sister, Aquilia, was Donatello. "All the costumes were made with Amazon and Myntra boxes, so we have been as sustainable as we can. Every part of our cart moves." Like them, the Buttmobile – a team dressed as Justice League superheroes – also took the sustainability route. "Our cart is full of crap, literally. They are completely re-purposed to fit the cart," shows off Komal Mekala, strutting around as Superwoman.

Speed thrills

- Soapbox racing combines speed and creativity. It involves racing down a hill using non-motorised vehicles.
- Vehicles in such races rely solely on gravity for propulsion. They also use basic steering and braking mechanism to navigate the course's twists and turns
- Speed and the time taken are not the only important criteria to win. Putting up a show and being wacky counts as well.

Other whacky teams included Team Dholamite, which modelled their cart based on the musical instrument dhol, and a biryani-based cart, because, well, the team members hailed from Hyderabad. Judging these carts were some

eminent sportspersons, including chess champion Tania Sachdev, hockey player Manpreet Singh and racer Harith Noah.

The best moves

Tania, known for her brilliant moves on the chess board, describes the event as "crazy", but delves deep into the design of the machines, based on which she ranked them. "I looked for creativity. Not just in the making of the machine, but also in the little performances that the teams put up before they hit the track."

Tania hopes to come back for another season, but as a participant. "I will design my car as a knight-shaped car and it will gallop to the finish line," she smiles.

Harith did exactly that, when he test-rode a bike on the track before the start of the race. The first Indian racer to win the Rally 2 class at the prestigious Dakar Rally, Harith feels that such fun events will showcase the concept of racing to wider audiences. "Mostly, when I go to races, it's all serious faces and everyone's trying to focus and win. But this was about creativity and entertainment and not just about speeding your way downhill," says Harith.

Manpreet Singh, who looked out for teamwork among the participants, singles out a team called Orange Juice Gang for their energy and zing. Manpreet sums it up saying, "Like in hockey, team unity was important here too."

The writer was in Hyderabad at the invitation of Red Bull



Scan QR code to watch soapbox race video

(Top-left) A car races down the track at the Soapbox Race 2024; (above) Team Kith and Kin 2.0. JOHAN SATHYADAS



SATHEESH VELLINEZHI

THE COLUMN THAT WASN'T
Are you ready for the Cyrus Broacha Academy Awards?
It comes at a prize

Cyrus Broacha

Folks, you won't believe it. I'm scared to tell you. Okay, since you insist, I'll tell you, just to avoid you from throwing a tantrum. Here it is – I'm in pain, excruciating pain, but I'm still writing the column. That's different from you being in excruciating pain while reading this column.

The thing is, I was playing cricket with my three-year-old nephew, and he swung the plastic ball onto my big toenail. It sounds innocuous, but the pain was unbearable. If you don't believe me please drop a plastic ball on your toenail, and see if you survive to tell the tale. The worst part was my

nephew's malicious, nay make that, malevolent grin at my screams of terror. I think three-year-olds shouldn't be exposed to general society; they are far too feral and dangerous.

Now, onto some good thoughts. It's award season. Awards will be coming thick and fast. In a subsequent column, (depending on both, yours and my pain threshold), I'll share with you my idea on the C.B.A.A. the Cyrus Broacha Academy Awards.

However, this week, we go into our first huge award splurge, and it's to do with March 8, also known as International Women's Day. First, let's clear some doubts, both, March 7 and March 8 can be celebrated as Women's Day.

But, not March 9. By then, men have had enough, and will probably start behaving as badly as my three-year-old nephew. The reason why March 7 and 8 are made available is (a) it's a women's prerogative, and (b) depending on if you are in a first world, or third-world country, you could adjust your

choice accordingly.

By the way, there is only one second-world country, and that is the country of San Marino. This is a country with a total land mass of 60 kilometres. If you want to leave the country, you just have to drive at 80

kilometres an hour and you are out of the country, in a second. Hence the name. (Readers are advised not to calculate this scientifically, and then write angry letters to me). Let's leave the quiet solitude of second-world country San Marino and get back to International Women's Day. Where paradoxically, we tend to award women of our very own nationality, but add international to the presentation to uplift the occasion and cause confusion and infighting.

This week we must all make a choice: me to choose my international, national woman of the year, and you whether to continue reading this column. Please remember, you'll be inundated by award presentations, such as, Woman CEO of The Year, Changemaker of The Year or Woman's Rights Campaigner.

In the spirit of this er... global movement, let me wish all the readers, a very happy international, national, Women's Day.

The writer has dedicated his life to communism. Though only on weekends.

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Praca Prazeres, The Tanjore Tiffin Room, and Sarvaa open in the State, serving three different styles of cuisine

Fresh off the Goan plate

Deepali Singh

In Goa, comfort food comes in many guises. With a competitive restaurant scene, the State offers a vibrant variety of cuisines, set in memorable spaces. The Goa ‘season’ now stretches through the year, so here are the hottest new openings to add to your itinerary.



ground floor houses an open kitchen and the main dining area. Past a black, satin curtain, a hidden-from-view staircase takes you to the bar and a lounge seating. Artworks by local artist, Gabriella Gomes, adorn both floors and a bit of greenery adds a touch of lushness to the otherwise sparse décor.

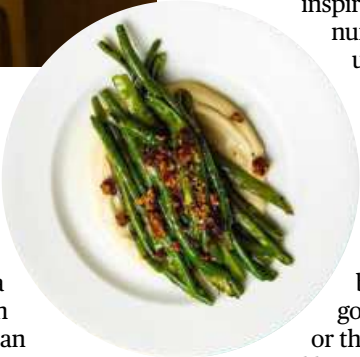
The bar programme by Hideaway, listed number 66 on Asia’s 50 Best Bars 2023, pours enhanced classics with drinks like mamasita, a vodka-based drink with custard apple puree, and picante, with tequila, cilantro and jalapenos.

The food menu at Praca Prazeres is the result of Ralph’s six years spent on studying and working across kitchens in Europe. “I’ve taken inspiration from a number of chefs under whom I have worked,” he says.

Every element on the plate tells a story, whether it is the beetroot and goat cheese salad, or the pillowy lemon and brown butter

gnocchi, short rib croquettes and the roast chicken.

Address: I/95, Behind Sona Hotel, Abreu Road, Off Rua de Ourem, Panaji. A meal for two is approximately ₹1,800 without alcohol.



Praca Prazeres

In 2019, when Chef Ralph Prazeres and his wife Stacy Gracias moved back to Goa, after six years in London, they wanted to open a restaurant that served, as Ralph likes to call it “fuss-free European fare in the heart of Panjim”.

Logistics, and later the pandemic, did not exactly help matters and the couple found themselves opening an artisanal bakery and café, Padaria Prazeres, instead, in 2021.

Make your way through the colourful lanes of Fontainhas, the Latin quarter of Goa, to get to this simple, yet charming restaurant. Its

Sarvaa

At Sarvaa, which means ‘all’ or ‘whole’ in Sanskrit, the focus is on the coastal cuisine of India – from the Konkarn coast to the Kanara coast and Malabar Coast. Local ingredients, comprising fresh, seasonal produce, and spices, are sourced from Kanyakumari and Wayanad.

Mixologist Johnson kicks off the meal with a Goan Breakfast Martini, an easy-going morning drink with jamun preserve. The Aam Panna Mule, however, wins hands down – dukshiri (a type of feni made with Indian sarsaparilla root) is infused with curry leaf and blended with aam panna and ginger beer for a heady, savoury concoction.

At Sarvaa, the main menu is not vast, but packs a punch. From small plates, go for pepper fry with squid or prawns sautéed with onions, tomatoes and varied spices. The crab and fish cakes are minced cutlets served with housemade mayo and a red cabbage mash. The mango salsa garnish gives the dish a much-needed zing.

The edamame galouti, injipuli pork ribs and pulled lamb on coin parotta are some of the other must-try dishes on the menu. From the mains, try the creamy malai lobster curry or the drunken pomfret pollichathu, which is flambéed on the table with dark rum.

For the fire and ice section, the Parilla grill, imported from Spain’s Basque country, makes its debut in India, allowing open-fire cooking on the restaurant premises. One can choose from a variety of proteins and pair them up with sauces and sides. The restaurant also takes inspiration from Japanese shaved-ice dessert kakigori and transforms it into luxurious desserts in spiced guava, nolen gur and Chikmagalur espresso flavours.

At CMM building, Rua de Ourem, near old Patto Bridge, Panjim, Goa. A meal for two costs approximately ₹2,000 without alcohol.



The Tanjore Tiffin Room

The newly-opened restaurant, which pays tribute to the flavours of traditional Tamil cuisine, is housed inside a 150-year-old Portuguese bungalow. For restaurateur Kishore DF, expanding his popular F&B space to Goa was a natural progression, since he also owns a home there.

We are told that about 15 new dishes have been added to the original Mumbai menu, including a couple of vegetarian options.

The jackfruit ghee roast birria tacos, for instance, are stuffed with pulled jackfruit and cheese, which you dip in the Uma Athai curry – named after Kishore’s childhood cook.

A Tamil take on the Maharashtrian batata vada, are the puri bondas, and also try the stuffed grilled calamari and Madras tiger prawns.

There is a possibility that one might never reach the mains, given that there is such a wide variety of starters, but we plough on. Although there is plenty to choose from here as well, including a superlative chonak curry and crab kolumbu, we recommend the nattu-khozhi kolumbu, country chicken simmered in a village-style curry.

End the meal on a sweet note with a payasam platter with four varieties of the pudding.

Address: IIII, Road, near Orchard Stores, near Corporation Bank, Mazal Waddo, Anjuna. A meal for two is approximately ₹1,600 without alcohol.

Sisterhood of the travelling pants



CONTINUED FROM
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Anuj Jain, founder of Wander Womaniya, an exclusive women’s travel group, says that when these exclusive groups started popping up a decade ago, they did not focus on niche destinations, but rather on tourist heavy locations. Identifying this gap in the market in 2018, Anuj started Wander Womaniya to help his sister travel better. “We focus on lesser-known gems such as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Madagascar and more, and our itineraries are well researched based on personal experiences,” he says.

Wander Womaniya has now conducted female-only trips in over 35 destinations in India and internationally, and the women who join range from 20 to 65-year-olds. “Women-only travel spaces have been thriving in western countries for a long time now,” says Anuj, adding that in the future as more women from tier-2 and 3 cities start opening themselves up to travel, they will look for spaces they feel safe in.

Surbhi Sharma, 38, from Jaipur says, “Different places in the country have different degrees of safety. I really like travelling to the



(Top) Women on a trip to Munnar through Jugni; a trip from Wander Womaniya to Bali. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

North-East and South India, because I have felt safer walking alone, even at night in places like Chennai and Arunachal Pradesh.”

Whether it is stargazing in Ladakh, bar hopping in Goa, or teapicking in Assam, women-only travel groups help you bridge the gap between plans and realities with safety. According to a *Forbes* report, a bold 86% of women declare they are not afraid to travel. Whether journeying alongside partners, families, friends, or venturing solo, the driving force behind 80% of travel choices remains women. This isn’t just a passing fad; it’s a vibrant continuation of a

longstanding trend in leisure exploration. The surge of travel companies exclusively tailored to women, skyrocketing by 230%, underscores the undeniable allure of female wanderlust.

Women on wheels
Bengaluru-based Valkyrie Riders is one of the many groups around the country who are forming a community of women riders. Sheba Cornelious, a community building manager and a mother of two, started Valkyrie Riders two years ago.

“I wanted to keep it exclusive to women because I’ve experienced men looking down on women riders. For us, it’s not about the speed, but the experience,” she says, adding that the group goes on weekend rides twice a month.

Biking is a meditative activity because it is just you and the open road. “It’s easier for men to have their me time, for women, we have to consciously make time to spend with ourselves,” she says.

The longest ride Valkyrie Riders has taken is from Bengaluru to Hogenakkal Falls, covering a distance of 125 kilometres each way. A total of 26 riders took part in the ride.

“We all come from different backgrounds, and on the rides when we stop for breakfast, we sit together and share our stories. It’s like a close-knit community,” she says, adding that the community goes beyond biking together. They have pot luck, ladies nights and game nights to keep the sisterhood up and running.

Valkyrie Riders has trainers and long-time riders in the group who are willing to train new women on how to ride a bike and what goes into long-distance trips. “For a fee of ₹2,000-3,000, we train women even if they don’t have a bike. We have a tie-up with a Bengaluru-based bike rental called Twist Throttle. The only requirement is that you have a licence, and a full face helmet,” says Sheba.

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Shallow and suffers from a sense of deja vu



Sangeetha Devi Dundoo
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Operation Valentine (OV), directed by debutant Shakti Pratap Singh Hada, positions itself as the first Telugu aerial action thriller and narrates the story of a covert operation handled by the Indian Air Force. The film is inspired by real incidents during the Balakot airstrikes following the Pulwama attack in 2019. Considering the shrinking boundaries between languages as movie lovers are spoilt for choice, it is tough to dismiss the heavy sense of deja vu for those who have watched the recent Hindi film *Fighter*.

One of the pivotal plot points in both these films is the retaliation following the Pulwama attacks. The broad narrative tropes are also similar – the best pilot is a rebel who goes beyond the rulebook, is plagued by ghosts of the past and has a strained equation with someone close to him. Such tropes are oft-repeated in action thrillers and espionage dramas worldwide, but in *Operation Valentine*, the sense of fatigue is also because the writing merely scratches the surface. There is not enough to make us empathise and root for the characters.

Arjun Dev's (Varun Tej) physical scars from an earlier operation are prominent. The emotional scars still jolt him out of sleep. The bond he shares with his wife Aahna (Manushi Chhillar), a radar officer, is tense since she is concerned about his recklessness. At one point he tells her that he has no fear when she is monitoring the radar. But he is also the sort of fighter pilot who would risk it all rather than play safe. While we get a sense of how all this plays out on the work front, their marital relationship is underwritten.

The story has the scope to explore the camaraderie between the fighter pilots and how they step up for one another at crucial times. In the few minutes they get, Ruhani Sharma and Paresh Pahuja register their presence with their breezy performances but their characterisations do not pack in enough. The same goes for Navdeep whose cameo is wasted. Several others cast as senior air force officers, representing India and Pakistan, are saddled with forgettable roles. This lack of depth in writing robs the film of its emotional gravitas. While one can overlook the underwhelming visual effects in some segments, which can be attributed to budget constraints, it is hard to ignore the writing.

Varun Tej is sincere in his portrayal but even when he tears up and stoically internalises his pain, the lack of complexity in his character is a dampener. The same goes for Manushi Chhillar. As for the portions discussing the Pulwama attack and the Balakot airstrikes, despite the earnest intention to honour the brave soldiers, as a cinematic experience it is all too familiar without the *josh*.

Operation Valentine is currently running in theatres

Operation Valentine

Director: Shakti Pratap Singh

Cast: Varun Tej, Manushi Chhillar, Navdeep, Mir Sarwar

Storyline: Some of the best fighter pilots are called in for the Balakot airstrikes as a retaliation to the Pulwama attack. Can the protagonist fight the demons of his past and rise up to the task?



Kiran Rao lifts the veil on patriarchy

Rich in colour and context, the rustic dramedy on invisibilisation of women is fuelled by keenly observed writing and heartfelt performances

Hindi

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After leaving us awash with her sentimentality in *Dhobi Ghat*, director Kiran Rao returns to check the social pulse of the Hindi heartland and lifts the veil on deep-seated patriarchy. Set in the fictitious Nirmal Pradesh that shares cultural boundaries with what political journalists call 'the cow belt,' the insightful narrative beautifully captures the angularity of the region where gender discrimination is a way of life and prejudice against a forthright woman, disparagingly called a lady, organically grows in the fields. Without indulging in sloganeering or feminist discourse, a perceptive Kiran peels off the layers of an unjust society and addresses the invisibilisation of women with a light touch.

After *12th Fail*, it is yet another moving illustration of how pertinent social commentary could be woven into an engaging story. An example of excellent teamwork, the technical and aesthetic legs run in tandem with hardly any lag in tonality and pace. The rustic ambience is credible, the dialect and costumes don't seek attention, and the performances flow seamlessly. Not to forget the charming compositions of Ram Sampath and the incisive verse of Divyanshi Sharma that enrich the emotional tapestry of the narrative.

On the surface, *Laapataa Ladies* follows the quandary of two newlywed brides who get swapped during a train journey due to their veils which have both literal and metaphorical manifestations. Set in times when mobile phones were still a novelty and a cherished item of dowry, the situational humour sucks you in but as the film progresses, we discover that the story

Laapataa Ladies

Director: Kiran Rao

Cast: Nitanshi Goel, Pratibha Ranta, Sparsh Shrivastava, Bhaskar Jha, Geeta Agarwal, Chhaya Kadam, Ravi Kishan

Storyline: When two brides are lost from a moving train, it spirals a sequence of events that are both hilarious and agonising.

behind the mess is not at all simplistic. That, in this satire, irony is militant. Like a Brechtian device, a retired security guard lying in a vegetative state chants *jaagte raho* (stay awake) at crucial moments in the film.

Based on the story of Biplab Goswami and carefully nurtured by Sneha Desai and Divyanshi, the novelistic writing peels the layers off the bucolic scenery as Anusha Rizvi attempted in *Peepli Live* where Kiran was a co-producer.

Though it is a period piece set in 2001 when '*beti bachao, beti padhao*' was yet to be coined, one could relate to the milieu and metaphors where a politician promises to take the electorate from '*vikas se vijay ki or*' (from development to victory) but girls still struggle to get higher education; where lack of jobs means migration and an endless wait for the spouse is normal.

In this scenario, when a resolute Jaya (Pratibha Ranta) finds an opening in the iron curtain, she escapes like a sheaf of grass from a crevice in the rock of tradition. In a parallel space, there is this naive Phool (Nitanshi Goel) who also gets lost, but is wedded to a patriarchal structure in the name of culture. No wonder, when she is left behind on the

railway platform she hides behind a huge dustbin that has 'use me' written in bold letters. They are juxtaposed with two kinds of men who seem to be cut from the same cloth but have acquired different social shapes. While Deepak (Sparsh Shrivastava) is progressive in thought and action, Pradeep (Bhaskar Jha) is rooted in medieval values. When the paths of these four characters cross, we see an intriguing search for identity and dignity of women.

The relatively unexposed but talented cast ensures that the surprise element remains intact. While Pratibha and Nitanshi deliver an unpretentious performance, seasoned actor Chhaya Kadam plays a single woman who runs a stall on the platform and provides space for Phool to plant herself. She emerges like a theatrical device, the director's voice of reason, but gradually the conversation between Manju and Phool becomes a healthy exchange between the creator and the creation where both inform each other.

The scene stealer, however, is Ravi Kishan as he aces the role of a greasy police officer whose conscience has not completely been corrupted. Essentially a single-screen actor, Kishan knows how to walk the thin wall that separates the gallery from the balcony. He brings the colour and texture of the region without letting Shyam Manohar spoil the tonality of the film.

The only hitch is that after a point an experienced eye can see a pattern in the meticulously crafted algorithm that ticks a social cause after every five to seven minutes. It threatens to give the film a *Panchayat* kind of feel. Although the detailing is remarkable, there are minor oversights like instead of *nirikshak*, the plate on the police inspector's desk describes him as *adheekshak* (superintendent). But, overall, a welcome departure from the rut that deserves a family outing.

Laapataa Ladies is currently running in theatres

Gautham Menon loses the plot in this chaotic mess

Tamil

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Anbuselvan. Raghavan. Sathyadev. Karthik. Suriya, son of Krishnan. The tale of Gautham Vasudev Menon's male heroes and the equation they share with 80s and 90s kids is already a decade old. And yet, the 'GVM hero' still finds a special place among audiences, as the recent re-releases of several Gautham Menon films have proved. The GVM hero is sensitive and seasoned, occasionally ill-tempered but with a moral fibre, and a gentle Romeo who could make Shakespeare blush. He is usually an upper-middle-class man who refuses to be a pushover, brings a certain charm to riding bikes and jeeps with aspirational value, and rises to the occasion despite his flaws.

And then came Joshua... He is an emotionless mess, a desi John McLane who is a bit of a prick, and a man you would not wish to



meet even in your dreams. And so to see a filmmaker like Gautham mount a criminally underwhelming *Bodyguard*-esque story on this underfed John Wick wannabe is an upsetting affair. Making matters worse is the actor playing the titular role, Varun, who seems to have been told that acting is all about eyebrow movements and nothing to do with convincing delivery.

Everything about *Joshua* makes it

seem like an amateurish attempt; almost a spoof on Gautham's earlier films. Joshua, a merciless contract killer, as plain as a plastic action figurine, falls in love with Kundhavi Chidambaram (Raahe), a lawyer on track to become an assistant district attorney in New York. After realising who he is, and witnessing him plunge knives into a dozen men outside the airport, Kundhavi leaves him.

However, the time Joshua spends with Kundhavi changes something in him and he decides to mend his ways and become a Close Protection Unit bodyguard. But when Kundhavi finds herself in the crosshairs of a powerful Mexican drug lord, Madhavi (Divyadarshini/ DD, as Joshua's Nick Fury) asks Joshua if her team should go for the ₹6 crore bounty on Kundhavi's head.

These are trained, ruthless killers, sure, but an AI robot could speak more humanly about "a woman he loves" and ChatGPT could have written a dialogue with more life and drama.

This is the biggest letdown from Gautham in the film; there seems to be no motivation to use strong, novel emotional beats to support the progression of events, something his films are known for. After becoming Kundhavi's bodyguard – and saving her by risking his own life – Joshua wins over her heart. But why is this independent, educated woman falling for this walking red flag of a man who lied to her about his identity, has no moral fibre, and keeps failing to come up with a solid

plan to protect her?

It's also quite infuriating to see how these so-called highly-skilled contract killers-cum-protectors go about their mission. Their plan to protect Kundhavi from a far-reaching drug mafia is to move her from one safehouse to another – only within Chennai – until the bad guys attack them!

There have been countless films in both Hollywood and the Indian

context in which the drama and dialogues that glue together the action blocks fail, but at least you get a few memorable gun fights or car chases. But in *Joshua*, even these scenes are written and constructed abysmally, and the film bores you as a showreel of action set-pieces too. Sequences written purely for an adrenaline-pumping experience, with little value in the plot, lack convincing emotional build-ups or cathartic pay-offs.

Why Varun for this role? Why choose to tell this story in 2019, after *Achcham Yenbadhu Madamaiyada* and *Enai Noki Paayum Thota*? Why bring in Krishna (who plays Koti, a local gangster) just to serve a lazy plot twist? There are several other spoiler-y questions *Joshua* frustrates you with and, in the end, you only wish you had hired a contract killer to shoot down such ideas in Gautham Menon's mind. Unfortunately, ideas are bulletproof. The bad ones as well.

Joshua: Imai Pol Kaakha

Director: Gautham Vasudev Menon

Cast: Varun, Raahe, Dhivyadarshini, Krishna

Storyline: A contract killer-turned-bodyguard has to protect the woman he loves from the men who are after the bounty on her head

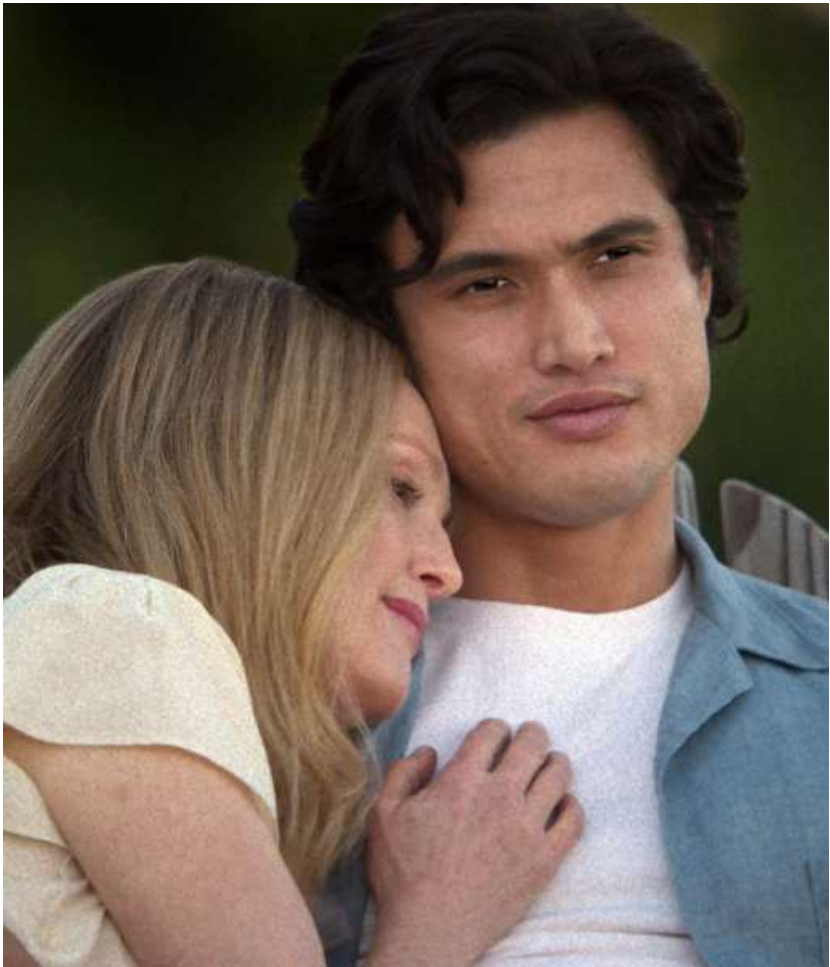
Joshua: Imai Pol Kaakha is currently running in theatres

May
December

Director: Todd Haynes

Cast: Natalie Portman,
Julianne Moore, Charles
Melton

Storyline: An actor visits
the home of a couple who
made tabloid headlines
as part of her research



An
unsettling
watch

English

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May December is a difficult watch. The skittering tone contributes to the unease. Is it a campy comedy or a study of guilt and shame, of toxic tabloid celebrity? Based on the notorious Mary Kay Letourneau case where the 34 year-old-teacher initiated a sexual relationship with her 12-year-old student, May December looks at the radioactive fallout on the lives of the principal and peripheral players in the horrific tragedy.

In 2015, a method actor, Elizabeth (Natalie Portman), comes to Savannah, Georgia, to meet Gracie (Julianne Moore) and her husband,

Joe (Charles Melton), as part of research for her new project. Gracie and Joe, who were at the centre of a tabloid storm in the 1990s when they were caught having sex in the store room of a pet shop where they worked, are the subjects of a film Elizabeth is working on.

The scandal was because Gracie was 36 while Joe was 13. Gracie was sent to jail where she delivered a daughter by Joe. When Elizabeth visits them, Gracie and Joe have been married for quite some time and are getting ready for their twins', Mary (Elizabeth Yu) and Charlie (Gabriel Chung), graduation. Their elder daughter, Honor (Piper Curda), is already in college.

It promises to be an awkward time as Gracie's other family – first husband Tom (D W Moffett) and her children with him including Georgie (Cory Michael Smith), who was Joe's classmate at school – will also be there. As part of her research, Elizabeth meets Tom, Georgie and Gracie's lawyer, Morris (Lawrence Arancio).

Todd Haynes uses the imagery of mirrors and reflections to explore our reactions to seeing and perception. When Elizabeth and Gracie meet for the first time, their first words to each other set the tone for the rest of the film. Gracie says, "We are basically the

same size." Elizabeth replies with, "We're basically the same."

As the movie progresses, Elizabeth begins to mimic Gracie's speech patterns, her way of dressing and her make-up. The scene where both are looking into the mirror as Gracie shows Elizabeth her way of applying makeup and choice of product is eerily cannibalistic. There is no easy resolution or absolution, which also contributes to the disquiet the film generates.

The writing is so sharp that it cuts to the bone – the letter Gracie writes to Joe is a masterclass in denial. While we have come to expect incandescent acting from both Moore (who is brittle, blithe and alarming as Gracie) and Portman (a sly, slick and unsure Elizabeth), it is Melton as Joe who is a revelation. Reggie Mantle from Riverdale has transformed himself into this hulking boy-man skulking around the corners of life like a ghost of past sins and recriminations.

Watch May December for the acting, the acute writing and the questions it poses, which uncomfortable though they are, need to be asked.

May December is currently running in theatres

Snippets



Tamannaah Bhatia joins Odela 2, shooting begins

Tamannaah Bhatia is set to play the main lead in Odela 2, a sequel to the 2022 Telugu-language thriller Odela Railway Station. Created by Sampath Nandi and directed by Ashok Teja, the movie will be produced by D Madhu under the banners of Madhu Creations and Sampath Nandi Teamworks. Hebah Patel and Vasishta N Simha are featured in the cast, along with Yuva, Naga Mahesh, Vamshi, Gagan Vihari, Surrender Reddy, Bhupal and Pooja Reddy. Odela 2 has gone on floors in Varanasi. The sequel is centred around the fictional village of Odela, its rich culture, heritage, and traditions, and how its true saviour Odela Mallanna Swamy always protects his village from evil forces.



Dabba Cartel announcement: Shabana Azmi, Jyotika cook up a racket

Netflix unveiled the first look of its upcoming drama thriller series Dabba Cartel at its Next on Netflix event. According to a logline, the series follows five ordinary women who begin dealing drugs through a 'dabba' delivery business. As their secret cartel expands, they must navigate treacherous alliances, the law, and their own inner conflicts. The series stars Shabana Azmi, Jyotika, Shalini Pandey, Sai Tamhankar, Nimisha Sajayan, Anjali Anand, and others. The series is produced by Farhan Akhtar's Excel Entertainment and directed by Hitesh Bhatia.

Priyanka Chopra Jonas to play a pirate in next Hollywood film

Priyanka Chopra Jonas has announced her next Hollywood project, The Bluff, a 19th Century yarn about a former female pirate (Chopra Jonas) in the Caribbean who must protect her family when the mysterious sins of her past catch up to her, Deadline reported. The film is being directed by Frank E Flowers. Karl Urban, best known for playing Billy Butcher in the popular series The Boys, is in talks to star, the report added. The Bluff is a collaboration between Amazon MGM Studios and Anthony and Joe Russo-led AGBO. The film is expected to enter production in spring this year. It will stream on Prime Video.



An epic, planet-levelling conclusion

Timothée Chalamet, Zendaya and Rebecca Ferguson, ably supported by Josh Brolin, Javier Bardem and an electrifying Austin Butler, execute Denis Villeneuve's majestic vision to the lush beats of Hans Zimmer's operatic score

English

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The sandworm sequences in Dune: Part Two are apparently director Denis Villeneuve's favourite. They were, however, just that wee bit underwhelming. Dune (2021) only teased these mighty denizens of the desert much like the mean shark in Jaws where we saw the circling tail fin and heard scary music forever till it came out of the water to chomp up Robert Shaw.

That is not the case with Dune: Part Two as we still only see sand gushing like a geyser as the gigantic worms move and their gaping mouths with many teeth like a sea anemone; we do not see its eyes or the 'legs' that propel it at warp speed. How does the sandworm move? Does it have legs or does it move like an earthworm? Or, does it burrow in the sand, though it would need legs even for that? Maybe it ate the sand and expelled it and thus moved forward?

Let us not get distracted with the movement mechanics of the sandworm, which as Villeneuve has rightly said, author Frank Herbert (whose 1965 sci-fi epic the two films are based upon) did not provide adequate information on. We have a film to review. Dune: Part Two picks up the action where Dune left off.

After the cowardly attack on the House

Dune: Part
Two

Director: Denis Villeneuve

Cast: Timothée Chalamet, Zendaya, Rebecca Ferguson, Josh Brolin, Austin Butler, Florence Pugh, Dave Bautista, Christopher Walken, Javier Bardem

Storyline: Paul meets his destiny, while walking the tightrope between desire and duty

Atreides, Paul (Timothée Chalamet) and his mother, Jessica (Rebecca Ferguson), have to face the suspicion of the fremen, the native people of the spice-rich Arrakis. Though a desert, Arrakis is important to the empire as it is the only place that produces spice, which is necessary for interplanetary travel and to remain forever young.

There are power struggles between the all-round bad guys, the Harkonnen – led by the corpulent Baron (Stellan Skarsgård) and his nephews, Rabban (Dave Bautista) and the psychotic Feyd-Rautha (Austin Butler) – and the Emperor (Christopher Walken), who might or might not be involved in the dirty deeds. His daughter, Princess Irulan (Florence Pugh), also has stakes in the power struggle.

The shadowy order of the Bene Gesserits is embedded in every part of the empire; Jessica is one of the order as are the emperor's truthsayer, Gaius Helen Mohiam (Charlotte Rampling), and friend Lady Fenring (Léa Seydoux). Though initially resistant, Paul finally comes to accept his role as the leader of the Fremen. He is mentored by Gurney Halleck (Josh Brolin), a former military leader of House Atreides, and Fremen leader, Stilgar (Javier Bardem). Paul also finds love in Chani (Zendaya), a Fremen warrior, much to his mother's dismay as she wishes him to make a politically relevant marriage.

The meditative aspects of Dune have been eschewed for a conventional sci-fi

war movie, with a spot of romance and a suitably epic, martial score by Hans Zimmer. As with all Villeneuve projects, Dune: Part Two is visually arresting and the battle sequences leave one gob-smacked. The transport vehicles, whether the dragonfly-inspired ornithopters (Herbert does not describe them either, but they are extraordinarily well-realised in the movie) or the huge carriers, are awe-inspiring.

One cannot get a handle on Paul and Chani's relationship as it struggles to find a balance between a teen romance, planet-leveling emotion and a saas-bahu saga. The philosophical concepts of the cult of messiah and the environmental impact of greed are touched upon. Acting-wise, Butler has a rollicking time as Feyd-Rautha (he looked to sharks and Mick Jagger for inspiration!) while Ferguson continues as Elsa Faust brooking no nonsense from Hunt, Harkonnen or her son.

Dune: Part Two has all the hallmarks of an epic event movie, from the costumes to the battles and language – Game of Thrones language creator David Peterson and Villeneuve created the Fremen's language, Chakobsa. If only one could have seen the sandworms better, we would not have to stare into the night wondering how they move. Guess we might have to wait for Part Three based on Dune Messiah.

Dune: Part 2 is currently running in theatres