

weekend WORLD

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FOOD AND THE CITY

Chef Regi Mathew launches Chatti in New York, inspired by Kerala's toddy shops **P6**

Quick, wish for something outrageous

From last minute reservations at Michelin star restaurants to getting entry to the Oscars, concierge services in India are growing. Meet the real life genies that high net worth individuals depend on



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It's 6am. And Karan Bhangay is frantically trying to source Tom Ford shoes for a client. The client has an 11am flight and has just decided that he wants these shoes before he leaves for the airport. Karan's team manages to fill a car with a selection of footwear from the specific luxury label and despatches them to the client's house just in time.

On other days this team is on its toes trying to fulfil a gamut of requests from their HNI (High Net-worth Individual) clients: from playing tennis with Roger Federer to getting last minute tables at Michelin star restaurants.

Karan, who started Indulge Global, a concierge service company along with Advita Bihani in June 2022, thrives on making the almost impossible possible. "From pin to plane, we can get you anything. We even negotiate on deals,

like land deals for example. In addition, we remind clients about birthdays, anniversaries and if they want us to buy gifts for their loved ones, we do that. We know their preferences: red wine or white, favourite colour, how many kids they have, who is their driver, almost all the data," says Karan, who is based in Goa but has a 600-plus billionaire clientele across the globe from Los Angeles to Africa. Eighty per cent of them are from India. He has teams based out of London, Paris, and Riyadh.

Karan says that people often wonder how a concierge service is different from that of a travel agent or personal assistant. "A PA can book flights and make dinner reservations but can they get you a reservation at SOHO House London, or pull off a quick Rolls Royce purchase or get a Rolex or Birkin that is not even on the rack of a luxury store? We can," he grins.

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Taylor Swift performs as her record-breaking The Eras Tour comes to an end with the first of her three concerts in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. REUTERS



A few requests fulfilled by Quintessentially include getting members a private 20-seater box at a sold out Taylor Swift concert in London, and curating a food tour in Japan with Michelin star restaurant chefs cooking omakase for the select group



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The 25-35 year olds are mostly trying to possess things, and some of them are impulsive with their purchases. They like to buy luxury cars, limited edition watches. The 45 years and above have experience-driven demands like playing the guitar on a mountain top, trying a specific activity in Antarctica, or booking a private island

KARAN BHANGAY
Co-founder
Indulge Global



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Luminous celebrations: The Lantern Festival lit up Taiwan and China, marking Lunar New Year's end. In Taiwan, thousands released wish lanterns at Pingxi, while Beijing dazzled with grand light installations and rice dumplings. From ancient rituals to modern artistry, the celebrations blended history, hope, and spectacle.



Talkingpoint

Legend live: Paul McCartney stunned fans with a surprise show at New York's Bowery Ballroom on February 11, playing a 22-song set filled with Beatles classics, Wings hits, and solo tracks. A second secret gig followed, fueling speculation of more performances while he was in town.

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.



Harmony hour
For a musical weekend, first head to St. Andrew's Church, Egmore for a concert **Upon This Rock, I Will Build My Church** by the MGPA today at 6.30pm featuring artists like Timothy Madhukar, Megha Srinivasan, and more. On February 16 at 6.30pm, head to Avichi College for a retro music concert by **Satrangi** featuring timeless songs of Kishore Kumar. For tickets call 9884778073.

Laugh riot
Chennai's **Late Night Comedy** is back with unfiltered humour and raw, club-style comedy. With a line-up of anonymous yet seasoned comics, expect surprises, spontaneity, and plenty of laughs. Catch the action at Trinity Studio, Kodambakkam, on February 15 and 16, with shows at 10pm and 8pm. This is where Chennai's late-night scene comes alive! Tickets on in.bookmyshow.com at ₹200.

Denim rush
There's never a bad time to shop for denim! **Onitsuka Tiger** redefines denim with the Denivita Collection, a fusion of Japanese craftsmanship and classic-meets-rock aesthetics. The SS25 lineup showcases bold silhouettes, unique dyeing techniques, and artisan-printed apparel. From yellow-washed denim to versatile knits, this collection brings a fresh take on everyday style. Shop on the official website.

Art in motion
Indulge in some art and head to the **Apparao Galleries** for Anjali Venkat's Dance of the Five Elements from February 18 to March 8. Exploring Fire, Earth, Water, Air, and Space, her works capture their dynamic through material, light, and form. Each element reflects transformation, movement, and vastness, inviting viewers into an immersive experience. Open to the public 3pm to 6pm.

Green thumb
Want to grow your own vegetables but don't know where to start? Join the **kitchen gardening workshop** with urban organic farmer Kalpana Manivannan on February 15 from 11am to 1pm at Hibiscus Cafe, ECR. Learn about soil mix preparation, seed selection, and essential gardening techniques to cultivate fresh, organic produce at home. Tickets on in.bookmyshow.com at ₹750.

Farm to fest
The **Chennai Farmers Market** Festive Edition returns with a vibrant mix of fresh produce, artisanal foods, and handcrafted goods. Featuring brands like Anglo Aunty's Kitchen, Kala's Gateaux, Dreamscape, and Wira Kadai, this celebration of local craftsmanship takes place on February 15 at Hanu Reddy Residences, Poes Garden, from 11am to 8pm. Entry is free and open to all.

Fiery feasts
Explore the spicy cuisine of Madurai at Hotel Turyaa in a **Grand Madurai Food Festival** until February 28. Try dishes like kari dosa, bun parotta, mutton chukka and more crafted with authentic spices at ₹1,600. For another unique binge, head to Little Soi, Anna Nagar for the **Sum of Dimsum Festival** until February 23. Indulge in lamb jiao-zi, fire cracker prawns, truffle asparagus, and more at ₹1,500.

Praachi Raniwala

Design has been an intrinsic part of Payal Singhal's life, for as long as she can remember. Today, the Mumbai born-and-bred fashion designer is known for giving a contemporary spin to traditional Indian crafts with her eponymous label. Think leather strips used like gota patti, kurtas paired with jogger pants and saris reimagined as jumpsuits. Though her brand turns 25 this year, her journey with fashion began long before her label.

Back to the start
Payal's grandfather JP Singhal was a renowned painter and photographer while her father Dinesh Singhal owned fashion retail brand, London Fashions. The creative baton was passed on to Payal at an early age, who won the Shoppers Stop Designer of the Year Award when she was 15. A degree from SNDT Women's University followed, and seven years later Payal was helming her own design house. "I was a young girl from South Bombay trying to find ways to wear my culture in cool ways, and that resonated with others like me," she says of her early days.

Not just city girls, but NRIs across South-East Asia showed interest in her brand. "These were Indian girls who were wearing tube tops to clubs, and then they saw our brand that was doing tube kurtas with pants and beaded scarves. They loved it," reminisces the designer. "You have to remember that 25 years ago, words like 'global' and 'modern' were not used in the same breath as Indian wear. That blurring of lines may be



Sliver of silver

As Payal Singhal celebrates 25 years of her label, she looks back at her journey of innovating Indian wear to give it her signature global update

very common today, but back then, there were very clear demarcations between ethnic and western clothing," says Payal.

Then came a six-year chapter, starting 2004, when Payal moved to New York, in the process strengthening her

understanding of global Indian women who have now become a loyal community of customers she fondly calls the PS Girls. Her diaspora audience is still one



(Left) Outfits designed by Payal Singhal; (below) designer Payal Singhal. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

A new language
"We started disrupting Indian wear without realising it. The brand language emerged very organically, it was never contrived," says Payal of her label's 'India modern' DNA that has been their party trick for the last 25 years.

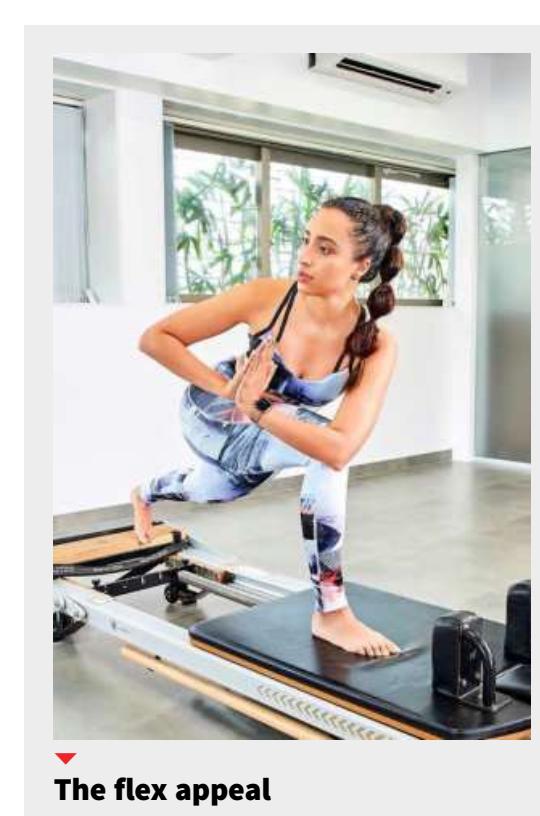
But do not mistake that with a one-trick pony approach, clarifies Payal. "I don't think people realise the extent to which our brand focusses on innovation with Indian crafts. For instance, back when zardozi was mostly being used as floral

patterns, I started creating animal motifs with the technique, mixing materials like nakshi and kora with cords, wool and leather."

Mughal art and architecture remains her enduring love, stamped onto the core of everything she designs. "It's one of the richest and most robust periods in our cultural history. The way Persian design fused with Rajput and Indian influences to create a new language was the ultimate creative collaboration in my eyes," says Payal. Her brand boasts about 20 collaborative lines across footwear, jewellery, beauty and home furnishings with younger homegrown brands. In the process, it has grown from a fashion brand to a lifestyle label.

A great part of continuing to be relevant even a quarter-century later, is not just forward-thinking design, but also the courage to buck the bandwagon. At a time when every designer wants a piece of the wedding day pie, Payal declares that her clothes are not for the bride's pheras. "It doesn't come naturally to me and I cannot put out a forced product. I would rather innovate for the pre-wedding functions, and dress the 400 guests at the wedding rather than just focus on the one person," she says.

What lies ahead, as she looks ahead at the next 25 years? PS Homes and PS Weddings, she admits, are cherished dreams. But more immediate, is the impending launch of a western occasion wear line, called PS - jackets, pant-suits, vests and tops in her signature embroidery. "The PS Girl is evolving. And with her, so are we," concludes Payal.



The flex appeal

The Pilates Studio Chennai expands to Anna Nagar, marking its third location after Nungambakkam and Adyar. Founded by Samir and Namrata Purohit, the studio has long been associated with celebrity fitness, counting Kareena Kapoor Khan, Janhvi Kapoor, and Malaika Arora among its patrons. Known for its emphasis on strength, flexibility, and control, it has played a significant role in popularising Pilates across India.

The Anna Nagar space is its largest yet, designed to offer an immersive experience in Reformer Pilates. This form of exercise, rooted in precision and controlled movement, enhances posture, core stability, and overall muscle tone while remaining gentle on the joints. Suitable for all ages and fitness levels, the method is often favoured for rehabilitation and performance training alike. The studio's clientele ranges from teenagers to seniors, with the oldest member being 82.

To mark the occasion, Samir and Namrata Purohit will be present at the inauguration. For details or bookings, contact +91 7550263088 or +91 7358227504.

binge watch that will take my mind off the problems of the world outside their island.

On the other end of the sexually aggressive spectrum, is Netflix's Korean take on dating. *Singles Inferno* is as vanilla as it gets, with a panel of five celebrity commentators who gasp when the contestants even attempt to hold hands.

Amidst struggling to come to terms with the many, many terms that define modern dating culture that manifests itself mostly through the big bad world of dating apps, the success of *Indian Matchmaking* and how it put high-profile arranged marriages under the spotlight feels like a case study of sorts. What did we actually enjoy – matchmaker Sima Taparia's quirks, or the couples themselves comically struggling and showing us how hard it is to even get through the cardinal first step of a good conversation? I still can't forget the chicken farm discourse.

Sima aunty might truly believe that one simply can't be 'so much picky', but if people being picky is going to give me three extra seasons of dating and relationship chaos which I'm going to curl up and watch in morbid fascination, then the stars truly have aligned. Relationship growth is great, but the chaos is most compelling.

From The Hindu cinema team, a fortnightly column recommending films and shows tied to a mood, theme, or pop-cultural event.

Steel the show

Gaurav Jai Gupta of Akaaro brings to Chennai Beams of Steel that is high on glaze and shine

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Gaurav Jai Gupta's work is inspired by the future. "I am not excited about the past. I am interested in what the future is going to be: perhaps a lot to do with experimentation, innovation, relevance. I associate the future with shine, glaze, and steel. It's very space age," he says. And this reflects in his creations.

At Collage in Chennai, Gaurav is currently showcasing his edit titled Beams of Metal. The clothes – mostly high on shine and glaze, but not blingy – represent favourites from previous collections like The Sky Is



Mine, Irreverence, and Moonrise, along with new pieces. There are tops in his famous shade of Klein blue, silk and cotton trenchcoats, jackets made of upcycled fabric, kinji palla saris with stretchable pallus, shararas, and saris with seven to eight different weaves. The designer has a special affinity for metallics. "It gives me the scope to play around a little more. The moment people want to celebrate, they prefer the glaze. It brings a twinkle to the eye," he says.

Gaurav launched his label Akaaro in 2010 in Delhi. "Akaaro is a Sanskrit term. It is to Sanskrit what A is to English. To me it seemed like an auspicious word, it also sounded Japanese," says Gaurav, who draws from Japanese aesthetics and minimalism. His creations, deep rooted in Indian heritage, are contemporary with a global appeal. "We use traditional skills in the base

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(Clockwise from far left) Fashion designer Gaurav Jai Gupta; models in creations from Beams of Metal.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

but what you see is extremely modern and contemporary," he says.

Akaaro's brand narrative is 'Look within seek within'. That is where Gaurav's ideas come from. "Everything comes from within; for me it is a lot about questioning. It's a quest. Quest is what keeps you going," he says.

It is this quest that led him to work with unconventional fabrics. He has used paper, stainless steel and blended metal and wool in ikat. This fascination with developing fabrics started in 2001 when he was studying in NIFT and working on a project. "My first fabric was made of copper wires. We then imported steel yarn to create more fabric. I did not want to do what everyone else was doing. I heard of this term called creative weaving. I wanted my fabric to be sculpted, scrunched, tactile. There was definitely an influence of Japanese design as they were doing



Akaaro is a Sanskrit term. It is to Sanskrit what A is to English. To me it seemed like an auspicious word, it also sounded Japanese

GAURAV JAI GUPTA
Fashion designer

work with interesting materials," he says, adding that it became a passion. "You know as a child how it is to get a new toy, it got me very excited," he adds.

It took him almost a decade to make these fabrics commercially viable. "I use things which will justify the usage. For our ongoing collection Kaalchakra, we've dyed yarn and created a whole range from upcycled air. We partnered with a scientist who has been able to take out concentrated particulate matter 2.5 and convert it into ink," says the 43-year-old. Kaalchakra has been a work in progress for four years now. Grey, dark and earthy, the pieces are a crossover between art, textile, and fashion. Also part of it is an art installation that is around 14 feet, apart from a pret and festival line.

Fifteen years in the fashion industry and Gaurav continues to do things his way. "We have been successful in building a community, mostly through word of mouth. If you know what you are doing you don't know need the drama," he says. He is not pressured by the numbers game that may have consumed many of his peers, Instagram followers, dressing celebrities etc. "I like celebrating individuality and I am not a brand that aligns much with Bollywood. I am trained to do certain things, if you like it, take it or else, bye."

Collage is located at 6, Rutland Gate 4th Street, Thousand Lights.

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Quick, wish for something outrageous

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The requests range from the straightforward to the bizarre. Sometimes, they can be oddly specific. An elderly couple travelling to a few cities in Switzerland, Istanbul, and London wanted a constant temperature of 25 degree Celsius everywhere they went. "We made sure their hotels, restaurants, transport etc maintained that temperature. They were very specific about their food so we flew in a personal chef," explains Karan who recently took his brand to *Shark Tank Season 4* and then secured \$1 million in funding from Gautham Pai (managing director of the Manipal Group) and Nikhil Shettar (partner and chief information officer at KGC).

The team at Indulge Global has also rescued clients and stepped in during overseas medical emergencies. "A client was stuck in the riots in Nepal last year, we airlifted him out of there. Someone had a medical issue in Bali and within 12 hours we got them on a chartered flight and brought them to their hometown, Lucknow."

Make a wish

Concierge service providers are like genies but they grant you much more than three wishes, and at a price that requires deep pockets. These services follow a membership model, with prices starting at ₹4 lakh per annum. "Some people have



an identity crisis. In their home country, their identity is secure but while travelling it's lost because they may not be known there. They want us to fill that gap. When we make reservations etc, we tell them this person is a billionaire so they get to feel like VIPs and have a fantastic experience," says Karan whose clientele is mostly in the 25 to 60-year age bracket.

A trend that he notices among his clientele is that the 25-35 year olds are mostly trying to possess things, and some of them are impulsive with their purchases. They like to buy luxury cars, limited edition watches. The 45 years and above are experimental and have experience-driven demands like playing the guitar on a mountain top, trying a specific activity in

Antarctica, or booking a private island.

Quintessentially, founded in 2000 in London by Aaron Simpson, Ben Elliot and Paul Drummond, forayed into India in 2010. Back then, a huge number of requests were for

memberships at Annabel's in

London, says Mishti Bose, CEO,

Quintessentially India. "It was about

things and places you would like to

be seen at, things that add to your

badge value. But what you see today

is people looking at their own

interests, it's a lot more experiential.

It is not just about possessing

something but experiencing. It's

about personal taste," she says,

adding, "For example, if someone is

going to Spain, it's not about

Barcelona, but about little towns

with the most fabulous food and top



These concierge services follow a membership model, with prices going up to ₹35 lakhs per annum. GETTY IMAGES / ISTOCK

chefs cooking at tiny six-seater restaurants. Getting a table at these places is very difficult but we get it for them. It is a lot more about personal gratification rather than social gratification," she says.

Other requests fulfilled include getting members a private 20-seater box at a sold out Taylor Swift concert in London, and curating a food tour in Japan with Michelin star restaurant chefs cooking omakase for the select group. Lifestyle managers pay attention to every detail. Citing another example, Mishti says, "A member had gone for the ICC World Cup at London and our lifestyle manager asked him if he was happy with the set up. The member said the seat was great, the match, fantastic, but he only wished the sun wasn't so bright. Our

manager immediately organised someone to go there with an umbrella. With our network of vendors, delivering a service is not so difficult anymore. Delivering the service at a level that delights the customer is where we keep challenging and pushing ourselves."

The core age group of members here is between 35 and 50, with younger people also taking up memberships. Earlier members were primarily from Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, then Kolkata, Ahmedabad and Hyderabad came into the fold, with little spurts from Jaipur, Lucknow, Kanpur and Pune.

The membership fee is anywhere between ₹3.5 and ₹20 lakhs. The offerings vary according to different slabs. There are two kinds of memberships: Dedicated and Elite. Dedicated provides a lifestyle manager who is available from 9am to 6pm on weekdays. For the latter, there are managers available for clients in every city plus they have access to the global servicing team. There is also a membership by invite which is at ₹35 lakhs per annum.

Home is where the concierge is
And now this trend has seeped into home needs as well. Pinch, a home concierge and lifestyle management service started in 2021 by Nitin Mohan Srivastava and Kiran Reddy, aims to do the everyday chores for their clients while their clients can utilise that time to do things that they want to. "Our zone is everyday practical problems but having said that we also got our clients tickets for a Coldplay concert," says Nitin.

Pinch is headquartered out of Gurgaon but services the whole of

India. The list of services is quite varied. "For example, if you have to be at dinner and something has to be attended to at home, our lifestyle manager can handle that. A client in Gurgaon wanted her Class X marksheets from the '90s. We called her school in Rajasthan, called the board, then sent someone to Rajasthan to procure it for her. One of our clients was travelling and needed 14 lamps to be switched on in her house and we got that done. Another client's husband was in hospital and she had pets and plants at home that had to be looked after and our lifestyle managers took care of it all," he says.

People also ask for a lot of recommendations, for the best linen for their homes, what plants to buy, the right de-tan cream etc...The dedicated lifestyle manager buys everything that needs to be bought right from pantry items to furniture and airline tickets. They even bought a wine chiller worth ₹3.5 lakhs for a client's home. "We know the dial you get, what time you wake up on weekends, what you like on holidays... the rhythm of your life," adds Nitin.

The team worked on understanding what lifestyle managers need to do, how many times a week they need to go to their client's home, how much to charge etc. "We started using the services ourselves to test them out. We are tricky and picky customers ourselves. My wife has intolerances to milk, nuts etc. So, lifestyle managers have anchored her food preferences," says Nitin.

The company now has 17 lifestyle managers and an 86-member strong team. Some of the most common requests are to find clients the right cook, nanny, train their staff... "We have created an ecosystem of sourcing help and training them – butlers, housekeepers, nannies," he says. While the team at Pinch mostly has everything under control, sometimes they are thrown a curveball. Nitin laughs, "Someone wanted a pair of Ray Ban sunglasses that were discontinued in 2012. We called every distributor in India. We sent someone in Milan to check for these glasses! And on another occasion someone wanted ice apples, after the ice apple season was over and that too within three hours! He had the same request twice, once when he was in Kolkata, and the other time in Bengaluru," says Nitin, adding that as a concierge service company they are always anticipating demands and keep building a network of vendor partners.

Pinch follows a subscription-based model. It starts at ₹30,000 per month. Nitin says the concierge space is heating up in India, with significant players popping up in the last two years. "It is also an indication of the prosperity and money people have and how they want to live. We are possibly building at the right time in India."



The bar's set high

With fans creating bots and setting alarms to grab a bar, we decode what makes the viral Dubai chocolate tick

One of Fix's USPs is its colourful packaging combined with names like Butter To Be Safe than Salty, made with crisp filo pastry, peanut butter, caramel and a hint of cinnamon and Mind your Own Buiscoff – a white chocolate bar with Lotus Biscoff cheesecake.

"We're all about getting creative with new flavours and combinations! We love playing around with many different

ingredient inspirations like dates, karak, and knafeh. But we don't stop there, we mix it up with pretzels, Biscoff cheesecake or fudgy brownies too. It's all about keeping things fresh, exciting, and a little unexpected," Sarah shares.

She also explains what makes the chocolate click. "It's a combination of a few things, the unique concept, the quality of the ingredients, and the

(Clockwise from left) The viral chocolate bar with pistachio and kataifi filling; and Sarah Hamouda. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



emotional connection people feel with the flavours."

In Dubai and Abu Dhabi, the chocolates are available at 2pm and 5pm at the Fix store in Dubai or via Deliveroo online delivery platform, and get sold out in a jiffy. "Honestly, it was a little overwhelming in the best way possible. I never expected it to blow up like this. We get messages from people around the world, from places like India, Brazil and Japan. When people tell us how much they love the bars and how inspired they are to try them, it makes all the hard work so worth it. The support has just been incredible!"

Following the success of Dubai, Fix is expanding to Abu Dhabi and Dubai Duty Free as well. "We've always wanted to make our chocolate more accessible, and this expansion helps bring our unique creations to a wider audiences," Sarah explains.

Now, there are also several chocolate and dessert brands creating their own version of the hit kunafa chocolate – in a similar filled bar format or as desserts inspired by the flavours. Sarah says, "We've been lucky to have so many celebrities try our bars and show their support. The most recent was Millie Bobby Brown. We've seen alarms set, bots created, and even people flying in just to grab a Fix Chocolate bar! The lengths our fans go to are unbelievable, and we're beyond grateful for every bit of support."

Each Fix bar is priced at 68 AED and is available in Abu Dhabi and Dubai duty-free.



Care for a chocolate shot?

Smoor, the couverture chocolate brand, and Baileys, the Irish cream liqueur, have joined hands for a special collection of chocolates. Titled the Dessert collection, the non-alcoholic range has chocolate bars, chocolate shots, and a cake, and draws inspiration from the much-loved liqueur's flavours: original Irish cream, salted caramel, espresso crème, strawberries and cream, and Colada.

The collection is available in stores in Bengaluru, Chennai, Mumbai, Pune, Delhi, and Gurgaon and can be ordered in these cities from their website. Prices start at ₹295.

Europe comes to Goa

The latest addition to Goa's dining scene is Oito, a European restaurant by Chef Viraj Patel and Prakriti Lama Patel. Located at Panjim's Caranzalem Circle, the venture derives its name from the numeral 8 and symbolises infinity. The 100-seater restaurant features European dishes that spotlight seafood, particularly crabs and premium crustaceans. Diners can look forward to dishes such as Singapore chilli crab ravioli, whole charcoal grilled chonak, the crab Rockefeller, among others. Oito is at Risara Elegante, Tiswadi, Caranzalem, Panjim, Goa. For reservations, call 7718885078.



For Renuka Patra, a realist, holiday romance is something she never believed would happen to her. She went to Europe to spend time with her sister and friends. On a cold, drizzly day in Budapest in 2017, while soaking in the warm pools of the Szechenyi bath, two friendly Indians – Arnav and his friend – struck up a conversation with them. "I was doing a solo trip across Europe for a month and hadn't met any Indian on that trip. And my friend who was working in Budapest for six months hadn't seen too many Indians either so we were happy to see people



Renuka Patra (35)
and Arnav Patra (35)

from our country. We soon realised that we were all from Mumbai," says Arnav Patra, a pilot currently based out of Bengaluru.

Renuka and her girl gang were in Budapest for just one night and were leaving for Vienna the next morning. After chatting for about half an hour and giving them restaurant recommendations, Arnav and his friend went ahead with their day. None of them exchanged numbers. But fate intervened, and three hours later, Arnav and Renuka

bumped into each other at a restaurant. They were waiting for tables and decided to sit together. "Dinner was fun. Arnav drank strawberry beer and I judged him," laughs Renuka.

After dinner Arnav convinced the rest to come with him to the Hungarian parliament, post which they ended up at the ruin pubs. "My sister noticed that there was definitely an interest," says Renuka.



Catch flights and feelings

Priyadarshini Paitandy
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Movies, books, and songs over the years have led us to believe in the idea of a holiday romance. New city, new possibilities... and sometimes new love. This could be a holiday fling that ends when the couple says goodbye to each other, or a relationship that thrives for weeks, months, years... despite the daily humdrum and challenges of work, family, and life. While some of us come back with suitcases full of souvenirs, there are a few who came back with a significant other.

When Su Jo Ching, aka Bebo, a Taiwanese national, visited India for the fifth time in a year, the officials at the Chennai airport were curious. "They asked me why I was visiting so many times. I said I was here to meet my boyfriend. When I told them my boyfriend is Indian, they looked shocked," laughs Bebo.

Once the investigation was done, and Bebo got her passport stamped, one of the officials asked her 'how did

down the line she would be married to him.

Gajan asked them if they would like to visit a rooftop bar owned by him. They agreed but throughout the seven-minute drive, Bebo kept her eyes peeled on the road to make sure they were on track. "He turned out to be a good guy," she laughs. The next day Gajan took Bebo and her friend out again and they stayed up and spoke till 7am when it was finally time for Bebo to leave for the airport.

Gajan, who admits he is



"you find a life partner here so easily?" "I said you can also go down to Pondicherry and find yourself a better half," says Bebo.

She explains how she came to Chennai in May 2023 for three weeks to meet a friend who was working in Chennai. In the third week, they planned to travel elsewhere. They decided to spend two nights in Auroville and two nights in Puducherry. "The last two nights in Pondy were my last in India and I was flying out to Malaysia after that. I was really craving Chinese soup and found a restaurant near our hotel. The food was great and the soup was just like they make it back home in Taiwan. The owner of the restaurant, Gajan Gnanaprakasam, came to ask me if I enjoyed the meal and we got talking," she says adding that she had no clue a year

a shy guy, says he started talking to Bebo because he wanted to understand Taiwanese culture and cuisine. "But then we started speaking a lot even after she left. I would call her on my way to work, after work, when I was taking a break," says Gajan. And then, a month and a half later, Bebo made a surprise visit to Pondy. On reaching Gajan's restaurant, Flaming Dragons, she sent a note through a waiter. It read: This is the most romantic thing I have done in my life, surprising the guy I like. "And in a few seconds, she was in front of me," says Gajan. He decided he wanted to take Bebo home and introduce her to his family.

By mid-October Bebo moved to India, she was a PhD student then. In February last year, Gajan flew to Taiwan to meet Bebo's family, and by March 2024 they were married. She wore a sari for the first time, and went around the fire, like she had seen in Indian movies. "I never expected this, but when I met Gajan on my trip, my life began to feel like a novel," signs off Bebo, who now works with Gajan in Pondy.

Su Jo Ching (Bebo) (33)
and Gajan Gnanaprakasam (36)



A missed flight or a spur-of-the-moment trip can lead you to your romantic interest. Think that happens only in the movies? In the spirit of Valentine's meet these real-life couples who met on vacation



Anamika Bharucha (29) and Harish R (33)

For Anamika Bharucha and Harish R, in a way, a quest for biryani brought them together. The two met at Zostel in Munnar in August 2022. "I was travelling alone and was texting a friend. She said a friend of hers named Harish from Chennai would be visiting the next day," says Anamika over a call from Vadodara.

The next day Anamika and Harish met at the common room and got talking. The following morning they planned to drive around, joined by their friends. "I was craving seeraga samba biryani and thought I could make them all try it. So we drove to Udmalaipettai, a town in Tamil Nadu," says Harish.

It was a four-hour drive, and with Anamika riding shotgun. The two got to speak a lot while their friends dozed off in the backseat. "Soon we left and I went back to Bengaluru and he, to Chennai," says Anamika.

Five days after that, Harish called Anamika to rant about a really bad Bumble date. The conversation went on for an hour and a half and it eventually led to more messaging everyday. In September they planned a trip to Kodaikanal for

Harish's birthday. "A few days before that I told her that I like her," says Harish and with a grin adds, "She had been dropping hints that she likes me too but I am not good with these things. When I told my friends about our conversation, they said I should have picked up on these hints earlier."

The travels continued.

Harish proposed to her in Singapore and by December 2023 they were married.

"For our honeymoon we did a bucket list road trip from Kanyakumari to Kashmir, driving around for a month,"

says she.

Since Harish has a remote job and Anamika runs a travel company called Nxtrip, they get to explore the world as and when they please. We were in Bengaluru then we were in Himachal for a few months, we are in Vadodara for now... she says adding that they are both slow travellers and like staying longer in a place.

And so their car is their most prized possession. This is the same car they drove around in Munnar when they first met and in a way this is home for them.

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In 2016, when Lilian Albrecht came to India from Germany, to spend time with her school friend, little did she know that this would eventually become home. "We met in Goa, rode around town on a two wheeler, and then took a sleeper train to Bengaluru to meet other friends. We had planned to go to Mysuru but one of them fell ill. So we decided to go to a city with good hospitals and landed in Chennai, unplanned," says Lilian aka Lily, an assistant events manager. In Chennai, her friend suggested they stay at a common friend's house. That is how they landed up at musician Shrey Tandan's house. "I came home to my future husband," laughs Lilian, adding that the first thing Shrey said to me was, "My mother's name is also Lily."

Since Lilian had had a bad food experience outside, Shrey cooked her meals the next day. He made pancakes for breakfast, followed by dal chawal for lunch and paneer sabzi for dinner. "That was the first Indian food that I really enjoyed," she says, much to Shrey's delight.

Shrey showed Lilian and her friends around the city, took them to Mamallapuram, and then just the two went out for pizzas. Shrey asked her to stay back but shortly after that Lilian had to go back to Germany. However, she returned after a month. "I came back to see if what Shrey and I had was really magical or just a holiday thing. Instantly we realised this is it!" she adds.

After that Lilian came to India 11 times, sometimes staying for up to three months. It was Shrey's turn to go to Germany and meet Lilian but "despite a valid visa I was not allowed to board the flight," says Shrey, adding that his visa got rejected thrice. In 2019 they got engaged and decided to get married but then life threw them another curveball – the pandemic. "We could not meet for 14 months because of the travel ban," says Shrey. When restrictions started lifting, they met in the Maldives, and travelled to Southeast Asia as well.

"Long distance relationships are not easy but we are proof that if there is real motivation and support from friends and families it is doable," says Shrey, adding, "When she was in Germany, I used to wait for her to come back from work and watch shows like Gilmore Girls together (virtually) and then I used to sleep by 5.50 am."

In 2021, Shrey and Lilian got married. "I wrote to the Indian Embassy in Berlin and requested them to give her a special visa to travel to India. They finally responded and put her on a repatriation flight," says Shrey.

"We solemnised our marriage in a District Court in Kanpur, which is where my parents live. Lilian and I now live in Goa with our five cats," he says. Last year, Shrey finally got to visit Germany with Lilian. "When the passport control official stamped my passport in Frankfurt, I teared up. I met Lilian's friends, visited places she grew up in..." he says. Shrey is now learning German and Lilian, Hindi, while getting used to Indian flavours with Shrey still whipping up meals for her.



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FARNAZ

(Clockwise from below) The restaurant in Manhattan; at Chatti, the focus is food from 'kallu' shops; Chef Regi Mathew; and pearl spot parcel. LAH STUDIOS AND ALEX STANILOFF



Karimeen in New York City

Chatti by Regi Mathew launches in the heart of Manhattan, introducing the Big Apple to the home-style cooking of Kerala's toddy shops, along with spiced cocktails and touchings

Shonali Muthalaly

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Walk five minutes from New York's Times Square to listen to the sound of Rameswaram's sea waves.

"It's cold outside," shivers Chef Regi Mathew, on a video call, from the snow-laden pavement outside his newly launched restaurant, Chatti. As he enters his warm restaurant, featuring gleaming wooden floors, teak furniture and laterite brick walls, painstakingly transported

from Kannur, he says, "We wanted to give the feel of a Kerala house."

On each plate, there is a large shiny seashell, brought from Rameswaram. "New York is a busy city. When diners come in, we want them to feel that calm that comes from reaching home. So, we ask them to hold the shell to their ears and listen, the whisper sounds like waves," he explains, swivelling his phone camera to show the rest of the space. There is a wall covered with a flock of dragon flies, "because they represent resilience," and behind the bar a copper cut-out depicts the image of a toddy tapper

at work.

Chatti by Regi Mathew is the chef's tribute to home. The Chennai-based chef, who runs the successful Kappa Chaka Kandari (KCK) restaurants in Chennai and Bengaluru, is building on his success with this New York opening. When KCK was created in 2018, Regi and his business partners travelled across Kerala hungry for recipes, eating at 265 homes and 65 toddy shops for research. The bustling restaurants quickly got popular for their duck mappas, appams, and puttu biryani.

At Chatti, the focus is food from

kallu shops – traditionally places where men gathered to drink freshly harvested toddy, a cloudy, mildly boozy drink made from the fermented sap of coconut or palmyrah trees. Over the past few years, these spaces have been gaining popularity for their freshly cooked local food, drawing more women and families.

Regi's 'touchings' menu, printed across the placemats, offers a flurry of hot, tasty small plates: coconut clams, chilli

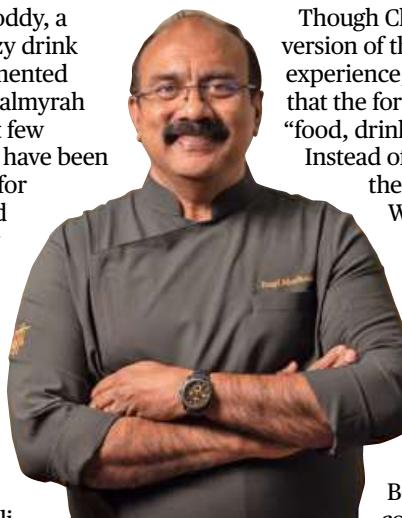
roasted calamari, Calicut mussels, and of course, the popular Trivandrum chicken fry. The 'BDF' or beef dry fry is already a favourite, as are the delicately spiced prawn kizhi, steamed in banana leaves along with coconut masala and Malabar tamarind.

"In Kerala, these small plates with bold flavours served in toddy shops are colloquially called touchings because they are meant to be eaten with your hands," says Regi, adding "If tapas can represent Spanish food, why can't touching represent Kerala? Toddy shop food is homestyle cooking, as it's usually made by the housewives."

Though Chatti is a rather luxe version of the toddy shop experience, Regi emphasises that the format is the same: "food, drinks, conversation".

Instead of toddy, you can try

the Elephant Whisperer, a blend of white rum, coconut, Prosecco and coconut puree. Or the Malayali Old Fashioned, a cheeky spin on the classic cocktail using Bourbon, toasted coconut, jaggery and



bitters. In a hat tip to his original Chennai restaurant, there is a Kandhari, made with the deadly little chilli and tequila. Regi explains that they also do a Sambar cocktail, an amber powerfully familiar drink with clarified sambar and a dusting of curry leaf powder with vodka. Or settle down with tall, cool glasses of refreshing buttermilk laced with shallots.

With cooks, hired from Chennai and Bengaluru, and local waiters, the restaurant is suitably international, blending into the fabric of New York. Flavours, however, are straight from Kerala, with no tweaks or muting of spices. "It's not necessary for our food. We use spices, but it's not spicy," says Regi.

For the main course, there is a classickarimeen pollichathu, with pearl spot fish brought all the way from Alleppey, wrapped in banana leaves with shallots and tamarind masala, and then grilled on a tawa. New Yorkers can also order duck mappas, clay pot fish curry and lobster moilee. For vegans, there is red pumpkin stew, kadala curry with black chickpeas or kadachakka (breadfruit) curry, all teamed with pathiri, dosas, string hoppers, vattayappams, and more. Staying true to its Malayalee roots, Chatti also offers red rice, mashed tapioca, and Telicherry biryani.

This involves some dexterous sourcing: the mathi (sardines) come from Aaroor, while the tapioca, coconut and raw jackfruit are from Ramapuram in Kerala. "We have tied up with someone who harvests, blast freezes, and sends them to us," says Regi. He adds that he is also enjoying sourcing food from the local markets. "There is so much available here, and such great quality," he says, "I have visited about six markets, and found fresh prawns, lobsters, scallops, mussels and clams."

Regi is visibly pumped about the venture, and so his family back home in Kerala. "Mom is very excited – the prawn kizhi is her recipe. She gets on a video call every day, asking for updates," he chuckles. "For me, this is a dream which is coming true. We are blessed with such great regional food in India. It is time to show it to the world."

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Hindi

Architecture of father-son relationship



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Is he an adult? Is he a child? He is your father. In his first directorial venture, Boman Irani renders a keenly observed, lived experience of an urban Indian family as he finds the simple answer to the tricky question. Boman and co-writer Alexander Dinelaris walk the rope in this tender exploration of a jagged relationship that leaves a sobering impact. Rich in detail, redolent with melancholy, and peppered with meaningful motifs, the film caresses a raw nerve.

A charming, emerging architect, Amay (Avinash Tiwary) returns home after the sudden demise of his mother to see his grieving father Shiv (Boman) wilt. Though grappling with loss, Shiv does not seek his son's shoulder to cry. Amay does not offer it either. Like most Indian families, the two share a silent relationship that appears strained from the outside. His sister Ana (Shikha Sarup) is the link connecting the two. She wants to take her father to the US. But is the father ready to make the emotional shift?

Circumstances force Shiv to spend two days with Amay. The septuagenarian boy refuses to accept a helping hand. He treats Amay as if he is driving his life with a learner's licence.

Amay feels his 'redundant' father makes fun of his work and lifestyle, not realising he is an unfinished project that requires some tinkering.

Boman and Dinelaris deftly juxtapose the commentary on contemporary Indian architecture with the barbs that the father and son throw at each other. Glass and steel do not always meet the demands of the Indian climate. We need to keep the jharokhas or the small windows open to keep the heat out and the relationships ventilated.

The best part is that Boman and Avinash look and talk like father and son. The intricate architecture of Avinash's close-up invites you into the mental maze of Amay. While Avinash is adept at underplaying the emotional turmoil of his characters, Boman accentuates the Parsi father's tone and tenor in his trademark style. He has inhabited this space before.

Shikha Sarup uses her experience in theatre to make the usual sister part shine. Shreya Chaudhry is efficient as the puzzled sounding board to a boy who does not behave the way he is expected to, and Siddharth Basu lends class to the smartly written boardroom discussion.

In a bid to keep the pot boiling, the narrative falls into a pattern after a point. The lessons threaten to become declamatory, and there are moments in the second half where Boman's performance almost transcends into the theatrical zone. Eventually, however, the loose threads come together, making it a textured experience.

The Mehta Boys is currently streaming on Prime Video



Ajith Kumar shines in this actioner

In a character that's both vulnerable but still has enough in him to rise to the occasion, Ajith Kumar is fantastic in Magizh Thirumeni's *Vidaamuyarchi*, a predictable actioner

Tamil

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In a scene in director Magizh Thirumeni's *Vidaamuyarchi*, Ajith Kumar's character Arjun, trying to move a stalled car from the road to the shoulder, wraps the car's seat belt around him to push the vehicle safely. That, in a scene, encapsulates the film and the contribution of its lead actor to make it work. Walking out of the film, the biggest takeaway is how Ajith, the star who takes the road less travelled when compared to his contemporaries off-screen, also pulls off the same with his choice of scripts. Irrespective of whether the payoff is worth the trade, it's fun to see the star shed the vanity of stardom and surrender completely to the script in hand and that's what makes *Vidaamuyarchi* work... almost.

Heavily "inspired" by the 1997 Kurt Russell-starrer *Breakdown*, *Vidaamuyarchi* is the story of a couple whose road trip is interfered with by some uninvited guests and it's up to the husband to save his kidnapped wife. More than a decade after Arjun (Ajith) and Kayal (Trisha) fall in love with each other and decided to tie the knot, the romance seems to have faded. When Kayal breaks the truth of having an affair and wants to file for divorce, Arjun decides to hit the road to drop Kayal at her parent's place. Magizh layers the narrative by intercutting the journey of two strangers who fell in love 12 years ago, with the one last journey they take through the open roads of Azerbaijan.

The film spends a considerable amount of time on the formative years of this relationship, and we get to witness several timeline jumps to understand how their concept of love has evolved. Fascinatingly, when the jumps stop and the film moves from a story of years to a day's tale, it picks up pace. We get introduced to Rakshith (Arjun), Deepika (Regena Cassandra) and Michael (Arav) as they

Vidaamuyarchi

Director: Magizh Thirumeni

Cast: Ajith Kumar, Trisha, Arjun, Trisha, Regena Cassandra, Arav

Storyline: A road trip goes awry when a man has to fight the odds to save his kidnapped wife

rain on our lead couple's parade, and what follows is a chase to uncover the truth.

Over the last few years, Ajith's filmography became infamous for following the good-guy-bad-guy routine, with most of his recent roles either being a cop/upholder of the law or someone on the wrong side of the law. This is why, *Vidaamuyarchi* feels like a breath of fresh air as Ajith plays a commoner with relatable problems. When trouble comes knocking on his doors, he's not someone who takes it head-on but avoids confrontation. Even when hell breaks loose, he aims for his opponent's extremities as he's not a killer but just a regular guy who wants to escape from the situation as unscathed as possible. And boy does he get battered in the fights!

For an action film, *Vidaamuyarchi* comparatively has fewer scenes where the hero is "giving it back". Contrary to clichés, the lead character gets cheated on, double-crossed, pranked, insulted and beaten down to a pulp multiple times. Boiled down to its core, *Vidaamuyarchi* is the tale of an ordinary man put under extraordinary circumstances. When Arjun stops reacting to the occurrences and finally decides to play the game his way, the hunted becomes the hunter and Ajith is a treat to watch irrespective of which end of the punch he's at.

While Arjun and Arav stick to playing textbook examples of an evil mastermind and a cocky crook respectively, it's Regina's Deepika that comes off as a pleasant surprise. After her tryst with a dark character in *Chakra*, Regina pulls off the psychotic nature of Deepika really well. While the relationship between Deepika and Rakshith (Arjun) might initially give us Harley Quinn and Joker vibes, it reminded me of Cletus Kasady and Frances Barrison from *Venom: Let There Be Carnage*. Speaking of superhero films, one of the character's gory demise might also remind you of another Batman villain.

It's in the execution of ideas that *Vidaamuyarchi* falters the most. The basic plot is painfully simple and predictable,

and the makers' attempts to add tension fall flat as we see a fair share of twists coming a mile away. Who's the character that randomly helps Arjun? Of course, he's an accomplice of the baddies. What to do when Arjun is clueless about how to track the villains? Make him meet a tertiary character who can give him the co-ordinates, and oh, extra points for the new character being a wife-beater and an abusive father so it can be "cathartic" when he's manhandled in front of those abused. While it's easy to call mass, theatre moments as cheap thrills that double as fan service, it's this catharsis *Vidaamuyarchi* heavily misses out on.

What works heavily in favour of the film is the technical excellence behind the camera. Anirudh's 'Pathikichu' track doubles as a fantastic background score in the action blocks though it leaves us wishing there were more tunes for him to use instead of counting on just one. His pathos songs are generally underrated and 'Thaniye' is the latest addition. Om Prakash does a brilliant job with his camerawork and the stunt sequences – especially the one within a Hummer – are well executed and captured.

What rounds them all up is the fantastic characterisation of Arjun and how Ajith initially succumbs to and later conquers his vulnerabilities. It also leaves you wishing the other characters had similar arcs – especially Trisha, who ends up as nothing more than a damsel in distress. Nevertheless, with Vijay in *Master* and Ajith in *Vidaamuyarchi*, it's wonderful to see established stars trusting the vision of filmmakers with a unique voice and knowing where exactly to pull the punches instead of mindlessly playing to the gallery.

But films like *Vidaamuyarchi* also double as a reminder that only star power alone can't steer a film towards success. Without multiple aspects working in tandem, a breakdown is often imminent and that's not what one would expect from a star vehicle.

Vidaamuyarchi is currently running in theatres

Sai Pallavi, Naga Chaitanya elevate a partly choppy romance saga

Telugu

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Based on true incidents from a few years ago, in which fishermen from Andhra Pradesh unknowingly crossed international waters into Pakistan, *Thandel* weaves a love story that transcends all odds. The storyline, penned by Karthik Theeda, is straightforward, but Chandoo's screenplay immerses viewers in the world of the fisherfolk, with an emotionally stirring romance – between Raju (Naga Chaitanya) and Satya (Sai Pallavi) – at its core. The poignant love story comes alive through the lead actors' performances, complemented by Devi Sri Prasad's evocative music. But is that enough to overlook the weaker, more turbulent portions? Almost.

The film wastes no time in establishing Raju and Satya's romance. Through the opening title



cards and initial sequences, we are introduced to a couple deeply in love. The story unfolds from Satya's perspective.

Thandel takes its time, allowing the love story to unfold in all its shades – the joy, the conflicts, the anxieties, and the heartache. It is fitting that the first words Raju utters

are 'buji thalli', an endearment that, as the film progresses, proves to be far from empty sentiment. The men work off the Gujarat coast for nine months at a stretch, while the women wait in quiet hope. Though little seems to happen in the first hour, the film gradually weaves in the economic struggles of the

families and the deep bond within the fishing community.

Chaitanya and Sai Pallavi share a natural on-screen chemistry that makes their romance feel authentic. Chaitanya also makes an earnest attempt to match Pallavi's flawless dance moves, holding his own alongside her captivating screen presence.

When the film shifts away from the romance, it navigates choppy waters. The sequences set on the high seas are undermined by unconvincing visual effects, making it difficult to stay immersed in the narrative. Additionally, the film's persistent effort to elevate Raju to a larger-than-life heroic figure – justifying his role as a *thandel* (anchor or leader of the group) – feels more like a cinematic construct than a natural progression of events.

The film takes several creative liberties in its portrayal of events inside the Pakistani prison, heightening the drama for emotional impact. While it is unclear how much of this is based on actual incidents, these portions lean heavily on mainstream film tropes,

lacking the authenticity that makes the Srikakulam sequences feel so rooted.

What keeps the film grounded during its more unsteady moments are the performances of Naga Chaitanya, Sai Pallavi, and the women of the village who spend months waiting for their loved ones.

While depicting the plight of the fishermen caught in a hostile situation, the film acknowledges the role of former External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj (though her

Thandel

Director: Chandoo Mondeti

Cast: Naga Chaitanya Akkineni, Sai Pallavi

Storyline: When a group of fishermen cross international waters unknowingly and are arrested, a gritty woman goes to great lengths to get them back.

name is altered).

At times, *Thandel* nearly derails, but the love story steers it back on course. As always, Sai Pallavi delivers a stellar performance as Satya, who will go to any lengths for the love of her life. Naga Chaitanya rises to the challenge of portraying a fisherman from Srikakulam.

Prakash Belawadi, as a Pakistani jailer, along with Parvateesam and Mahesh Achanta as part of the fisherfolk, add weight to their characters with measured performances. Nagendra Tangala's production design enhances the film's authenticity, while Shamdat Sainudeen's cinematography bathes the frames in warm, sun-kissed palettes, adding to the film's visual appeal.

Had the latter half been more tightly written, *Thandel* could have lived up to its ambition of being an epic romance saga. Yet, despite its flaws, it remains an engaging watch, carried by its deeply empathetic love story.

Thandel is currently playing in theatres



The Recruit Season 2

Creator: Alexi Hawley

Cast: Noah Centineo, Laura Haddock, Aarti Mann, Colton Dunn, Teo Yoo

Episodes: 6

Storyline: Another graymail finds Owen in Seoul trying to rescue an aid worker while tangling with the yakuza, the Russian mob, and the Korean and US spy agencies



Snippets



Shah Rukh Khan and Farah Khan set to reunite for Main Hoon Na 2

Filmmaker Farah Khan is reportedly working on a sequel to the 2004 blockbuster *Main Hoon Na*, which marked her directorial debut. Nearly two decades after the film's release, she is said to be developing *Main Hoon Na 2* under Shah Rukh and Gauri Khan's production banner, Red Chillies Entertainment. According to reports, Farah has conceptualized a fresh storyline for the sequel, and Shah Rukh Khan is intrigued by the direction she is taking. Currently, the script is in development. However, the superstar remains cautious about moving forward without a strong foundation. SRK is expected to review the first draft by mid-2025 before making a decision.



Siddharth's next with Sri Ganesh, co-starring Devayani, titled 3BHK

Actor Siddharth is teaming up with 8 Thottakkal director Sri Ganesh for a new film, which also stars veteran actors Sarath Kumar and Devayani, and actors Meetha Raghunath, Chaithra Achar and Yogi Babu. It's now known that the film is titled *3BHK*. The makers released the film's first look and a title teaser, and from the looks of it, the film seems to be a breezy family drama about a middle-class family's aspirations to own a new house. Notably, with *3BHK* and Jayam Ravi's upcoming film *Genie*, Devayani is returning to Tamil cinema after six years.

3BHK went on floors in July last year.



First look of Siddhu Jonnalagadda's Telusu Kada out

Actor Siddhu Jonnalagadda, who was last seen as the lead in *Tilli Square*, is working on a film titled *Telusu Kada*, which is helmed by debutant Neeraja Kona. Also starring Raashii Khanna and Srinidhi Shetty, the film went on floors in August last year. The makers of the film have now shared the first-look images of *Telusu Kada*. The first look features Siddhu along with the two female leads of the film. *Telusu Kada* is bankrolled by TG Vishwa Prasad and co-produced by Vivek Kuchibhotla under the People Media Factory banner. Gnana Shekar Baba is on board as the cinematographer.

Charmingly unbelievable binge-fest

English

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Season 1 of *The Recruit* ended with the lovely and vicious criminal Nichka (Maddie Hasson) holding a gun to rookie CIA lawyer, Owen Hendricks' (Noah Centineo) head. Nichka is Max's (Laura Haddock) daughter, the greymailer from season 1 who brought Owen into all kinds of trouble. After Owen is rescued, his boss, Nyland (Vondie Curtis-Hall), benches him till a decision can be taken on Owen's future.

The others involved in the Max affair, including Violet (Aarti Mann) and

Kitchens (Colton Dunn) are banished to Warsaw and tasked with turning Nichka, while Dawn, (Angel Parker) who tore out Owen's fingernail in Yemen as a way of saying hello, is sent off to cool her heels in Mauritius.

After spending time doing push ups and creating excellent wall art, Owen is in the midst of action again when a graymail threatens to expose all kinds of awful things about the CIA. Owen heads for Seoul with his paranoid colleague, Janus (Kristian Bruun). In Seoul they meet NIS deputy director, Grace Cho (Young-Ah Kim).

There is also Jang Kyu (Teo Yoo), who everyone thought was a nobody but is actually a very good agent. His wife, Nan Hee (Sanghee Lee), an aid worker, is kidnapped in Russia and Jang Kyu wants Owen's help to get her back. Owen's decision to do the right thing sees him bouncing from Seoul to Washington and back with stops in Doha and Vladivostok with dizzying regularity.

He meets allies, such as Tom Wallace (Felix Solis), who works for the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs. As they head to meet the Taliban at Doha, Wallace is horrified Owen has not signed the "death and dismemberment waiver."

In Doha, Owen meets Olive Bonner-Jones (James Purefoy), who is

willing to look through his spy rololex for people that can help Owen.

Back in the States, Hannah, (Fivel Stewart) Owen's ex-girlfriend and roommate, wants to move on when she meets the handsome and charming Jai (Omar Maskati), only he proves not to be completely trustworthy. Amelia (Kaylah Zander), Owen's colleague and occasional date, is facing an enquiry while getting lost in "all the negatives," including non-operations and non-conversations.

CIA director, Alton West, (Nathan Fillion) is dragged out of his fishing holiday to deal with the firestorm and Owen takes time out to head to a karaoke bar to meet his childhood girlfriend, Yoo Jin (Shin Do-hyun).

The writing remains sharp as ever, with terms such as "occupational exorcism", "mercenary for psychopaths" and "perfect storm of chaos" being bandied with the same alacrity as the bullets and punches. Like its first season, each episode is titled with increasingly impossible acronyms, all taken from dialogues in the episode – the finale is called I.D.N.W.T.B.D.I. aka "I do not want to be dead inside".

The Recruit is fast, furious and full of fun, or in spook speak, F.F.A.O.F!

The Recruit is currently streaming on Netflix



Exploration of faith

A beautifully mounted white-knuckle ride through an ancient election process, with meditations on the nature of humanity

English

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There is a grand yet simple beauty to *Conclave*, which bristles with contrary images. There are the Renaissance paintings and sculptures, the weathered stones from an earlier time, the scarlet and purple of the cardinals' and bishops' robes, and the distinctly analogue tilt to the election of the new Pope, as well as a priest looking at his smart phone and technicians looking for ways to smother buggering devices, that news channels are thinking up.

Based on Robert Harris' 2016 novel, *Conclave* starts with the death of the Pope. The responsibility of running the conclave to elect a new pope falls on the dean of the College of Cardinals, Thomas Lawrence (Ralph Fiennes). The four front runners are an American liberal, Aldo Bellini (Stanley Tucci), an Italian traditionalist, Goffredo Tedesco, (Sergio Castellitto), a Canadian moderate, Joseph Tremblay (John Lithgow), and a Nigerian

Conclave

Director: Edward Berger

Cast: Ralph Fiennes, Stanley Tucci, John Lithgow, Sergio Castellitto, Isabella Rossellini

Storyline: The election of a new pope finds the Dean of the College of Cardinals investigating secrets and deceptions while battling his crisis of faith

conservative, Joshua Adeyemi (Lucian Msamati).

Vincent Benitez (Carlos Diez), the archbishop of Kabul, who also served in the Congo and Baghdad, was named Cardinal by the late pope *in pectore* (in secret) a year ago, might be a wild card. Lawrence opens the conclave with a homily where he underlines the importance of doubt in faith. Certainty, he says, "is the great enemy of unity. Certainty is the deadly enemy of tolerance. Even Christ was not certain at the end." This speech seems to signal Lawrence's papal ambitions however much he denies it.

As the conclave progresses over three days and seven ballots, the favourites are revealed to have the legendary feet of clay. From sins of the flesh to greed and ambition, they are all on display even as Lawrence looks into his heart and admits to his ambition by saying his chosen papal name is John.

While there is a reality show-sheen to the proceedings and the final mystery might not be as earth shattering as it is built up to be, *Conclave* is a beautifully mounted effective thriller, which keeps one riveted till the last frame.

Each one of its eight Oscar

nominations including Best Picture, Adapted Screenplay, Editing, Costume Design and Production Design are well deserved. Ralph Fiennes earns his Best Actor nod by imbuing Lawrence with faith, vulnerability, intelligence, courage and conviction, mainly through his haunted eyes and furrowed brow. In the mainly male cast, Isabella Rossellini, who got a supporting actress nomination, makes her presence felt as Sister Agnes, the housekeeper and caterer.

The gorgeously detailed costumes underline the importance of colours in a presentation. And the frames, whether of a sea of white umbrellas sheltering red clad cardinals, or a small figures beneath immense walls and sweeping staircases, or the immaculately set tables are stunning.

While the pulpy *Angels & Demons* (2009) based on the Dan Brown novel with Ewan McGregor as a dapper Camerlengo, also dealt with the conclave, the Oscar-winning Edward Berger (*All Quiet on the Western Front*) has fashioned a serenely gripping ride through one of the most ancient election processes of all time.

Conclave is currently running in theatres

