

weekend

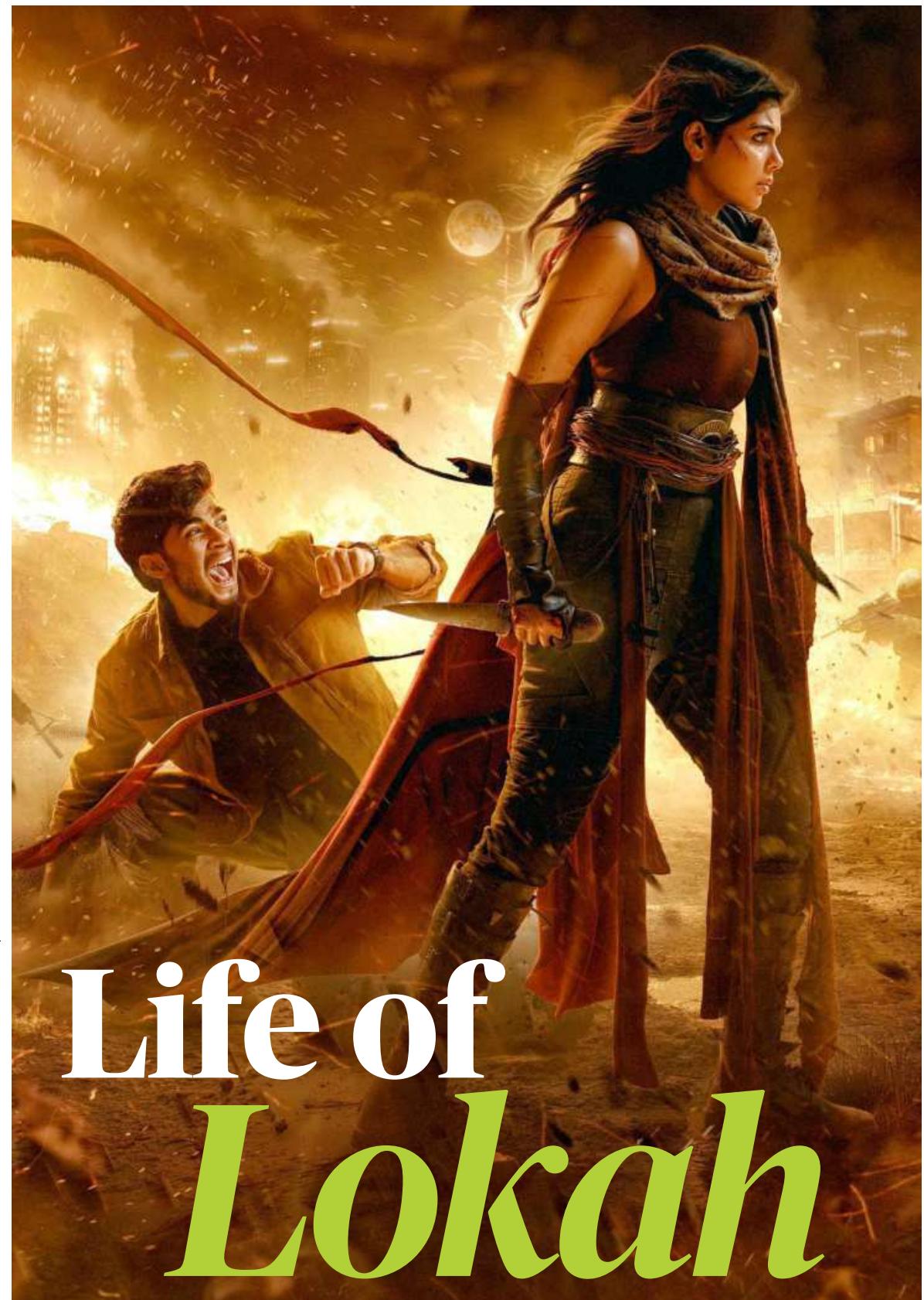
WEEKEND

metro PLUS THE HINDU



GOOD, BAD, UGLY

The cast of Aryan Khan's *The Ba***ds of Bollywood* talks about their struggles as "outsiders" **P6**



Life of Lokah

She is India's first female superhero. Meet Kalyani Priyadarshan, whose *Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra* is breaking box-office records and gender stereotypes

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Heoes don't always wear capes. Sometimes, they wear black and red T-shirts and strut around the streets of Bengaluru.

Much like what Kalyani Priyadarshan does in recent Malayalam superhit film *Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra*. With the film reportedly clocking over ₹200 crore at the box office and catching the attention of filmgoers across the country, this delightful fantasy thriller puts onstage India's first female superhero.

At the centre of all the attention is Kalyani

Priyadarshan. Even as the actress juggles several promotional appearances and events in various cities, requests for which have multiplied since the film's triumph, she also has had to deal with a nasty bout of influenza, something that has prompted her doctor to advise her to cut down on talking.

But she has to, doesn't she? With her powerful performance in *Lokah*, Kalyani has catapulted herself to a place that many only dream of. She has recently climbed to the top slot in IMDB's list of popular Indian celebrities, which is determined by fan votes.

Her overwhelming emotion at this high point is gratitude. "It's humbling and energising at once," she says, in an exclusive chat with *The Hindu*. "The success feels like permission to tell bigger, bolder stories. I'm excited for what's next."

That will take some time, but for now, Kalyani is just basking at the unreal numbers that the film, originally made on a budget of ₹30 crores, is making at the box office. Above all, she is pleased that the

audience has cheered the fantasy flick that revolved around a female superhero. "For us, the real goal was to tell this story in the best way we could, so seeing it cross ₹200 crores is overwhelming.



Kalyani Priyadarshan and Naslen in film stills.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

While the numbers don't mean too much to us personally, we do understand the value it brings... they open doors for more female-led stories to be backed."

Queen of the night
In *Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra*, Kalyani plays the lead role, of a young girl who uncovers mystical skills. The storyline derives inspiration from *Aithihyamala*, a collection of ancient fables from Kerala, but is set in modern-day Bengaluru. "I think Chandra clicked because she feels possible, not alien. There's something about her that makes people feel maybe someone they might have crossed paths with, could be like her," explains Kalyani, adding, "She's deeply human, even though parts of her are emotionally numb and stoic. People relate to her loneliness, her regular job, the fact that she comes home and cleans her house like anyone else. And at the same time, she's larger than life and rooted in our folklore, which allows audiences to see their own culture and identity reflected in her."

Kalyani might have the experience of having done about 15 films in Malayalam, Tamil and Telugu since her debut in *Hello* in 2017, but becoming Chandra for her current hit was a different ball game altogether. Physically, the stunts demanded her to devote months to training in boxing, Muay Thai, strength work, and even learning to handle ropes and harnesses. But beyond all that, getting into Chandra aka Neeli's mind was the biggest challenge.

"Dominic (director Dominic Arun) had such a specific vision for her, and I had to unlearn a lot of my own naturalism to access that. It was difficult, but also deeply rewarding, because it pushed me to grow as an actor and show a side of myself the audience hadn't seen before."

Lokah: Chapter 1 ends with a lot of possibilities, suggesting an extension of a cinematic universe that will also feature stars like Dulquer Salmaan and Tovino Thomas. The makers have already hinted this to be a five-part franchise. Like many of us, Kalyani too is excited to see how things will unfold. "What I can say is that Dominic has built a universe with endless possibilities, and you can already sense that in the way *Lokah* ends. The next film is going to be a full-on Chathan show.... and yes, you will see me in it," she reveals.

Flying high
Kalyani is India's latest female superhero, but the actress – who grew up in

Chennai and later studied

Architecture – herself grew up watching several superhero flicks. "We live in a Marvel era, after all," she laughs, "But... we didn't base Chandra on any specific character. That said, we all subconsciously draw from characters we've loved, and audiences also connect new things to what they already know. So, comparisons to Black Widow or Scarlet

Witch come up, even though they weren't conscious choices."

Lokah's success might have pleased fans of Kalyani and Malayalam cinema – but what about her own parents, Priyadarshan and Lissy, both of whom are well established in the film industry business? "My mom has always seen my work through the lens of a mother, which means she gets over-emotionally invested, while my dad approaches it as a director first, giving very specific feedback."

They are both, obviously, overjoyed with the buzz that the film has been generating. "My dad even said he probably hasn't enjoyed some of his own biggest hits as much as he enjoyed seeing this win," she reveals.

But, like most fathers, all this joy comes with a little advice. Kalyani reveals, "After the first weekend of the film, my dad sent me a message saying, 'Remember one thing... Never let success go to your head, and never let failure get to your heart. That really resonated.'

What's your story?
Backed by Dulquer Salmaan's Wayfarer Films and starring Naslen and Sandy Master in key roles, *Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra* not only explores the idea that supernatural beings live amongst us but also makes the lady its central point. Does she see it as something that would motivate young Indian women? "If it does, that would honestly be the most rewarding part of all of this. I was just telling a story I was excited to tell... but if young women see Chandra and feel

a little more possibility in themselves, then that makes it all the more special."

Even as the buzz around the film refuses to die, Kalyani has moved on to her next – a Tamil film titled *Marshall*, featuring Karthi in the lead. "It's set in a rural backdrop in the Sixties, and is a very different character. Most of my energy now is focussed on getting it right." Looking forward, she hopes to explore more shades. "I'm a greedy actor. My focus is always on being part of stories that challenge me and allow me to draw audiences into different kinds of worlds. *Lokah* has given me the confidence to keep pushing myself."

Any time a film does well, there's naturally more expectation. But I try not to see it as pressure. The success of *Lokah* gives me the confidence to stay true to the kind of work I want to do

KALYANI PRIYADARSHAN



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My role models

Kalyani looks up to women who have carried themselves with quiet strength. "Like my mom," she says, "In cinema, I admired performers who weren't afraid to take risks and push boundaries. Today, I'm inspired by women across so many fields and many age groups – actors, entrepreneurs, athletes, and leaders – who show us that there isn't just one way of being powerful, and that strength can look very different depending on who you are."

pick of the week



Embrace the blues

The J4Jazz Edition 2 Weekender unfolds with the Kirtana Krishna Quartet, blending jazz classics with Brazilian grooves on September 20, from 9.30pm to 11pm.

On Sunday, September 21, ease into a laid-back brunch as Bossa Blue sets the mood from 12.30pm to 3.30pm with bossa nova, jazz, and blues for a slow, sunlit afternoon. At Hyatt Regency Chennai. For reservations, call 9790787813.



Fashion forward

For over 15 years, Renasci has been part of Chennai's fashion story. Now, the multi-designer store enters a new chapter on Khader Nawaz Khan Road, unveiling a space that blends art and fashion. The edit expands to include brands like Maulashree Ruia, Nidhi Agarwal, Forest of Chintz, and more, with a focus on festive, cocktail, and day-to-evening wear.

The new store is at No. 9, Khader Nawaz Khan Road.



Musical memories

Step into an evening of timeless melodies as Satrangi presents Aap Ke Farmaish. Relive Dev Anand's magic through unforgettable songs from *Guide*, *Jewel Thief*, *Prem Pujari*, and more, rendered by Promod, Smriti, and Ramya on pre-recorded tracks. On September 21, from 5.45 pm onwards at TEACH Auditorium, Taramani. Tickets priced at ₹500 and ₹300, delivered via 9884778073.



Autumn feels

Khizaan — the Festive Edit is a letter to autumn with its multitudes of gold, red, and ochre. A showcase of weaving and embroidery, it brings together Divya Seth, Ka-Sha, Raw Mango, Studio Medium, and Suparna Som. Expect heritage-inspired textiles, saris, and contemporary silhouettes enriched with zardosi, appliquéd, gotta, and more. Starting ₹15,000 onwards. From September 20 onwards, at the Collage Studio, Thousand Lights, from 11am to 7.30 pm.



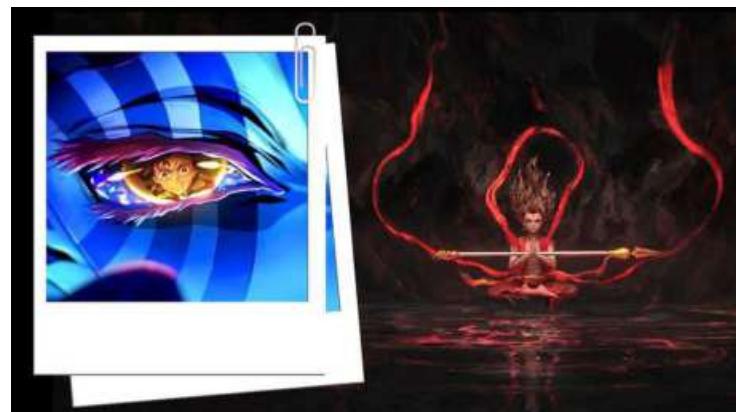
CTRL+ALT+CINEMA

(Clockwise from left) Stills from *Ne Zha 2* and *Demon Slayer: Infinity Castle*. BEIJING ENLIGHT PICTURES, SONY PICTURES AND CRUNCHYROLL



Age of anime

Here's why Japanese anime phenom *Demon Slayer: Infinity Castle* and Chinese blockbuster *Ne Zha 2* should be on your watch list



At 155 minutes, it's hardly shy about its ambition. The Demon Slayer Corps plunges into the series' final big-bad's fortress – a surreal Escher-like labyrinth that rearranges itself mid-battle like a

cosmic Rubik's cube. The spectacle is unmistakably Ufotable, with blades etching light trails across collapsing geometry and elemental duels flowing like choreographed

storms. But the franchise is also sustained through its emotional ballast. In true shounen fashion, every fight doubles as an elegiac act of retribution that somehow makes us empathise with the

worst of the worst.

Admirers of the *Infinity Castle*'s architecture would recall the fantastical landscapes of Tarsem Singh's *The Fall* (2006). The operatic violence also finds kinship with the proto-anime storyboarding of the iconic corridor fight sequence in Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* (2003). Even on the anime side, lesser-seen gems like the *Monogatari* series and Ufotable's own *Fate* series, twist memory and combat into something just as lyrical.

Foreign affairs

Across the East China Sea, another animated epic has also been laying siege to the global box office. *Ne Zha 2*, the sequel to Jiaozhi's 2019 surprise hit, is already one of the highest-grossing films ever made.

The story hails from *Investiture of the Gods*, a Ming dynasty classic that has supplied centuries of Chinese folklore. Here, the titular demon child born of a lotus, is bound to his dragon rival Ao Bing – the two sharing a body in a supernatural odd-couple arrangement. The mythology is baroque, but the heartbeat is brimming with love, loyalty, and rebellion against celestial overlords who look suspiciously like stand-ins for certain colonial rival states. That mélange of sacred grandeur and potty-mouthed vulgarity is precisely what gives the film its manic charm.

Culturally, it's also a

declaration. For decades, Chinese animation struggled to define itself between the polish of Disney and the eclipsing influence of anime. *Jiaozhi* tosses both into the blender unrepentantly, creating a gaudy, gorgeous spectacle that has asserted a new identity for *donghua*.

Fans of seasoned Chinese auteur Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002) and *Shadow* (2018) will relish *Ne Zha*'s wuxia splendour, complemented by Tsui Hark's same delirious brand of neon excess in *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain* (1983). And if you're curious about earlier *Ne Zha* incarnations, the 1979 *Ne Zha Conquers the Dragon King* is a great blueprint.

Together, *Infinity Castle* and *Ne Zha* point towards an inflection point. Despite the long, contentious history between Japan and China, the two have been exporting their myths at blockbuster scale, by uniting against the hegemonic global standards of western animation. So while Hollywood frets over whether its animated mascots should sing, cry, or sell merchandise, the East is busy building cathedrals of myth that make the mouse look like a rodent in headlights.

Ctrl+Alt+Cinema is a fortnightly column that brings you handpicked gems from the boundless offerings of world cinema and anime.



Zaeden has a secret

The singer twirls and waltzes his way through the melodic 'Raaz' a song that has been six months in the making. We speak to him about his journey, and how things are looking up for indie music

girl group W.i.S.H and more.

"I think all eyes are on India right now, and we see how amazing overall fan engagement is. We're seeing how Punjabi music has been accepted by fans, and Hindi pop music too is slowly but surely gaining traction. It is about time we see an independent Hindi song on the global charts and I really hope this happens soon, given that we have everything to support this rise," he says.

While there are exciting developments in the pop music

space Zaeden is hoping to explore but remains tight-lipped about, he is also prepping for a stint on the silver screen.

"Looking back, I feel my biggest strength has been transitions. I started touring at the age of 18, dropped out of two colleges, was a DJ, dabbled in singing, dance music, songwriting and more. I have put my family under a lot of pressure but they have also been supportive," he says.



(Left) Zaeden in a still from 'Raaz'.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

While he began the year with his debut live show in Singapore and followed it up with two shows in Australia, Zaeden is now knee-deep in promoting 'Raaz' which included a visit to colleges and engaging with his fans there, all while strumming on his guitar and singing onstage.

"I'm going to be doing a writing camp soon and hopefully something sparks from there. I think I should be a bit more consistent with songs, and in December I hope to work on an EP if the writing camp does turn out productive.

I really also want to work on a dance song again," he sings off.



Piece of art

At The Great Eastern Home, furniture becomes sculpture with a new collection that fuses ceramic and wood. Born in the Great Eastern Design Studio, the line reimagines ceramics beyond vessels and tiles, giving it structural strength through advanced shaping, glazing, and firing techniques. The result: centre tables, side pieces, and accents where ceramic's solidity is beautifully offset by the warmth of wood. Each creation begins as a hand-drawn sketch, sculpted and glazed by artisans, then paired with finely crafted wooden tops. Finally, each piece is hand-finished, ensuring every one is a unique work of art. From ₹1.5 lakhs onwards. The pieces are available to shop at thegreateasternhome.com, and their shop at Bycula, Mumbai.

Jewels on

Vinomisha Exhibitions & Events presents Jewels by Nupur & Shivani in Chennai with a collection that blends heritage and modern design. Featuring stackable bracelets, sculptural ear cuffs, chic lariats, and artisanal brooches, each piece is designed for festive gatherings, card parties, and mahjong evenings. Fusion diamonds with polki add versatility— for both Indo-Western flair and traditional look, while rare emeralds and rubies bring a touch of luxury.

Intricately detailed, these jewels celebrate functionality, artistry, and individuality. Rooted in tradition yet contemporary in spirit, they bring a vision of modern luxury. Priced ₹40,000 onwards. On September 26, from 11am to 8pm at Hyatt Regency, Chennai.



In Goa, Limoncello
made with
gondhoraj lebu
is tart, fresh and
transports you to
Goa. Next up,
Fragoncello



Her main squeeze

Anisha Menezes

In 2018, when Lolita Sarkar, founder and chief alchemist of Unusual Spirits, Goa, moved to the beach capital of India, she started hosting suppers for friends and making jams. It was during the pandemic that her experiments with spirited concoctions introduced her to the liqueur space serendipitously.

Five years on, talking about the journey of Limoncello 24 – India's first-ever locally produced limoncello (a lemon-based liqueur traditionally made with Italian lemons in small batches across southern Italy) – she says, "In 2020, when I was making pickles and squashes at home, I wondered why we didn't have any liqueurs made of local fruit, when we have such an abundance of it.

Confessing her love for travelling and Italy



A bottle of Fragoncello '412; and a cocktail made with it. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



as one of her favourite destinations, she recalls enjoying the little shots of limoncello served after meals at small establishments. "Through 2020-2021, I made over 12 batches of limoncello, using Assam limes, imported Italian lemons, and a host of other such citrus fruits, but fell in love with the one we made with *gondhoraj lebu*. The flavour and the oils from its zest give this limoncello a distinct flavour profile."

Tart and fresh, Limoncello 24 instantly transports you to the coasts – not to Amalfi in Italy but to the Bay of Bengal and Goa. It owes its moniker to 24 Paraganas – formerly known as the largest district of Bengal at the time of bifurcation – where *gondhoraj lebu* (a hybrid citrus, neither a true lemon nor lime) grows in abundance. Typically larger than other lemons, the *gondhoraj lebu* has a crumpled skin, thick pith, green hue and is notoriously stingy with its juice.

From picking to packaging, the entire process has a turnaround of just three days. "We use around 200 kilograms of produce per batch. Once we receive the limes in Goa, we have a team of women that zest them by hand. The zest meets a grain-based ENA (extra neutral spirit) and very little added sugar. In Italy, they use grappa as a base spirit (made from remnants of grapes after juicing) but sourcing that in India is not practical," explains Lolita, who is also a filmmaker and former restauranteur (two locations of Desi Delhi in Mumbai, which closed down during the pandemic).

The liqueur, though made in small

batches, is available through the year. Unusual Spirits has roped in small farms from Bengal, for a consistent supply of *gondhoraj lebu*. From the pickers in 24 Paraganas to the all-women team of peelers in Goa, Limoncello 24 is handcrafted, retaining the freshness of the lemon zest, with zero additives, preservatives, and no artificial flavouring or colouring. While most liqueurs are cloyingly sweet, this one has only 200 grams of sugar per litre compared to 250 grams, usually found across markets. "We lab test our batches for consistency, but you will find slight changes in the shade of the spirit, due to the produce, and there's a beauty in those natural fluctuations," states Lolita.

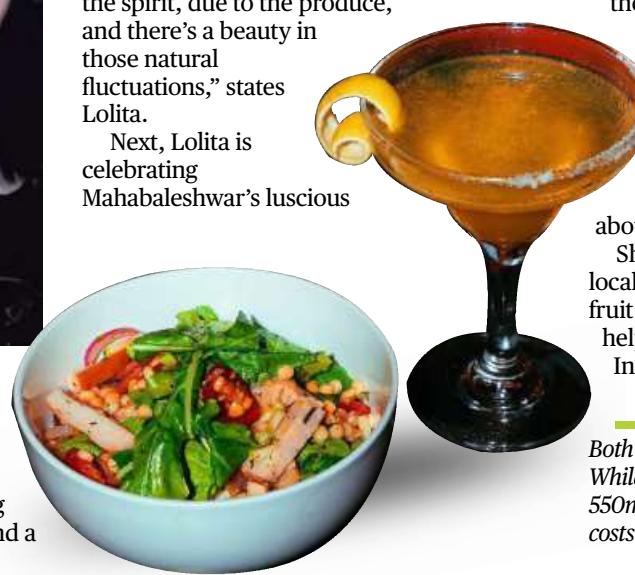
Next, Lolita is celebrating Mahabaleshwar's luscious

strawberries with Fragoncello '412 (Fragola is the Italian word for strawberry and 412 comes from the first three digits of Mahabaleshwar's PIN code). About the delicate liqueur – with its rich aroma, deep scarlet hue and tart-sweet flavour (150 grams of sugar per litre) – Lolita says, "It is distilled in small batches and is only available between November and February due to the seasonality of the produce". Fragoncello '412 offers versatility. It can be sipped on ice, used in cocktails and desserts like cakes or sorbets.

Unusual Spirits has three more liqueurs in the works for 2025-2026, with a launch slated for late September in Goa. "One is herbaceous and layered with Indian spices, the other is an annual drop made from Indian fruit. The third one is especially exciting, since it will be the first of its kind in the country," says Lolita, who is tight-lipped about its details.

She is buoyant about the prospects of locally produced liqueurs. "Using Indian fruit adds a deeper flavour to cocktails and helps the bottomline at the bar, since Indian-made liqueur is cost effective."

Both spirits, with 25% ABV, are available in Goa. While Limoncello 24 is priced at ₹1,320 for 550ml, the same quantity of Fragoncello 412 costs ₹1,540.



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Coffeehouse chess is the gully cricket of the game. We register via WhatsApp and head into arenas where pawns fly, minds clash and espresso machines hum



(From right) A friendly tournament at Bagh Beans Coffee and Art, Jubilee Hills; and chess enthusiasts play a tournament at the IKEA cafeteria in Gachibowli, Hyderabad. NAGARA GOPAL



Battles at the

cafe

Iaideep Unuduri

It is a rainy morning at the 'Swedish restaurant' in IKEA, Hyderabad. I'm here on a Sunday after spotting an Instagram post about a chess tournament. In IKEA? I am curious. A portion of my childhood had been allotted to playing the royal game and I wonder, whether "I've still got it".

I find the tournament players at one end. The organiser looks frazzled – nearly 50 players have turned up, and there are more participants than boards.

I look around, the crowd mostly comprises young professionals aged between 20 and 30. I register my name, and get added to a WhatsApp group, where the pairings or who will play whom will be announced. Post-it notes are stuck on the tables, numbering them and imposing an order on these 64 squares. For clocks we use apps on our phones, with about 10 minutes for each player to complete the game.

I soon find out, with names like Pawns Gambit, Tribe 64, and Chess Musketeers, virtual chess clubs

which use social media to advertise meetups and tournaments are all the rage. These tournaments usually last a few hours and are held in upmarket coffee shops. In fact, some participants will be rushing after the event concludes, to another one in Bagh Beans café.

Chess and coffee shops go all the way back, a link in a chain that stretches back across millennia to the *chaikhanas* on the Silk Route. Where chess is played, people meet up and ideas are exchanged.

Coffeehouse chess has entered the lexicon, for it is the gully cricket of the game, far removed from the Test match-like solemnity of classical chess. Instead of cover drives, there would be barbarous attacks on the king, a lack of

strategic foresight, all so that the pieces and pawns can fly in all directions. And the proliferation of cafes in Hyderabad is showing no signs of stopping.

My opponent is a techie who has won office tournaments. He essays the Sicilian Defence and we are soon plunged into battle. As we play, on the next board, one player has lost but asks, "saradaga unkoti aaduthama?" (Let's play another for fun?) and they cheerfully set up the pieces again. Between rounds, we grab our complementary coffees and wander around. I meet Salil Kumar, 28, originally from Bihar, who now helps design jet engines for an aerospace company here. "You could have sat at home, what is your motivation?", I ask.

"It's the long weekend. The past two days I've been a couch potato, so I thought I'll come out and meet my community," he says. But why chess? "It is like an addiction, but a good addiction," he says, adding that he took up the game post-lockdown to give his brain some "exercise": "I switched from Reels to chess" he says.

Our conversation is interrupted by WhatsApp notifications; the pairings are out and everyone rushes to their tables. I play with Siddharth G, a bespectacled 18-year-old, doing his BTech. He got a walkover in the previous round, so was yet to push a pawn in anger. Afterwards, "It was my first game, and I was anxious at the start", he admits.

Online or offline, I ask. "Offline", he says, "chess.com is the lazy way". Offline, there is a feedback, as you observe people's reactions, the psychology behind the game comes out".

As the tournament progresses, I make broad observations; most of the players are those who took up

online chess during the lockdown. Now, half a decade in, they have wearied of the impersonal phantom zone of the net and are keen to pit their wits in the real world. For some, like Vishal K, 28, a data analyst, it is to avoid cheating. He plays a variant called bullet chess online, a kind of frenzied T20, where players have only one or two minutes per game. He says, "It's difficult to play classical online because people are using bots".

The organiser has to contend with a dispute where a bishop of one colour has defected to another like a politician after elections.

Of course, these are impossible online, as illegal moves cannot be inputted. And neither is there the measured hush of a tournament hall, where every sonic transgression is shushed instantly.

At one point, a family tries to open the emergency exit and trigger a piercing alarm. They walk away nonchalantly, leaving behind a deafening din till a security guard comes along. The muzak wafts over the low rumble of customers

chatting, counterpointed by a kid shrieking for his mother to get him a pastry. Still, a participant says: "I like the white noise. In a tournament hall, when it is quiet my mind goes in a 1,000 different directions. But when people are talking, I am able to focus."

After the tournament I catch up with the organiser, Sairam Kolaganti, 25. "I didn't have friends to play with," he says. He was tired of playing faceless opponents and wanted a place to play with people.

Sairam had some chess experience, playing tournaments as a kid. He would often make friends at these tournaments, and after the official game was over, they would just play for fun for a couple of hours, like musicians jamming after a concert.

"We had fun," he says, "friendly games played with good spirit". It is that chapter from his childhood that he wishes to replicate.

What is in it for the cafes? "All we want is a place to play," Sairam explains. "We go to all the new cafes who are looking for a crowd."

Sarita Sarkar, co-owner of Bagh Beans, says she organises regular chess events, and has also won championships as a child in West Bengal. "My mother taught me, and said chess is a game that can teach you about life. As a child, I liked pawns, because they were small but powerful."

When she was approached to organise events at the cafe, Sarita jumped at the idea. "I already had wooden boards set up for casual games. To be frank, we don't do much business as chess attracts students who don't have a lot of spending power. But I still host events because I like to see them use their brains and not their phones."

I talk to the winner, Rahim Lakhani, 35, a businessman who also has a coaching academy. In tournaments, he explains: "I always play by the book. I take a minimum of six months to learn and prepare the theory". Here, however, he can play casually, for the sheer joy of the game.

The prizes are distributed and people drift away. A few still keep playing hunched over the tables. Perhaps this is the beginning of the rebellion against brainrot, against doomscrolling the days away. Chess, after all, represents the ultimate triumph of mind over matter.

Preeti Zachariah

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The idea for Pint of View, a new lecture series being held in pubs and bars across India, originated at Cubbon Reads, run by Harsh Snehantha and Shruti Sah.

During one of their silent reading gatherings, a participant spoke about Lectures on Tap, a series of pub lectures mushrooming across the US.

Then, this year Meghna Chaudhury, the initiative's third co-founder, inspired them to pursue the idea with a firm deadline since she was leaving for London for a Master's in mid-September.

They came up with the name Pint of View using AI and launched the initiative with a talk titled Bats and Booze on August 24 at SOCIAL, Indirangar.

For the first time in its history, the smoky, pine-scented recesses of this popular bar played host to these elusive, flying mammals, thanks to an illustrated talk delivered by Bengaluru-based bat researcher and conservationist, Rohit Chakravarty.

"We posted about the first lecture and tickets immediately got sold," says Harsh, who believes that it did not take long for the tickets to sell out because of the speaker's popularity.

The success of this event made the initiative's founders realise that this was something that could be done regularly.

"We know a bunch of very cool people in Bengaluru, from social researchers to scientists, astrophysicists, beekeepers and carpet collectors," says Harsh, who hopes to bring diverse, interdisciplinary experts to these events.

"We select lecturers based on their experience working within a specific niche; one that they can speak on for about 45 minutes, showing us a different perspective on this topic," adds Shruti.

Such talks also ensure that participants, many of whom are young working professionals, have an opportunity to expand their minds in a fun setting.

Meghna agrees. "One of the prime motivations was that we had all left



(Left) Gathering at the first edition of Pint of View Bengaluru; (below) co-founders Harsh Snehantha, Shruti Sah and Meghna Chaudhury.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

circulating speaker nomination form that has received nearly 50 entries, the co-founders hope to continue growing this movement, both within Bengaluru and beyond. "In our experience, when we open something to a larger audience and also hand over the reins of organising to the community, it continues to sustain itself for a longer time," believes Shruti.

In keeping with this idea, the team aims to establish chapters across the country, each headed by local curators who will independently curate and run this event.

Already, there are Pint of View chapters in Mumbai, Delhi, Hyderabad and Goa, and its founders hope to expand it to Pune, Kolkata, Gurugram and Chennai very soon.

"It is a for-profit community, unlike Cubbon Reads, so you might take home something, after deducting costs," says Harsh.

Anmol Grace and Ayushi Misra, the curators of Pint of View, New Delhi, who have finished their first lecture titled The Lost Art of Looking at Yourself by boudoir photographer, Mozail, are especially excited by the community-building aspect of the initiative.

"When Harsh said that he wanted to start in Delhi, I was more than happy because I live alone so community has a bigger meaning," says Ayushi, who thinks the concept, besides being intellectually stimulating, also brings together diverse people.

"People can think differently, challenge each other's views and build something new, which, for me, was very intriguing," she says, while Anmol adds, "I think people have the appetite for something new, thoughtful and lighthearted. For me, a space where people can come and interact with renowned professionals in a relaxed and approachable setting is transformational."



who were genuinely interested came."

With talks already lined up for the entire month of September and a

A thirst for knowledge

Do you miss attending class? We sign up for a new lecture series, Pint Of View, now being held in Bengaluru's bars, to learn about bats. With beer

college and didn't get a chance to interact with academics in that setting anymore," she says. "The response we have got so far shows that people crave intellectual stimulation even after graduating."

From the speaker's perspective, too, having a lecture in a pub or bar, instead of a lecture hall, enables them to reach out to a broader audience, believes Meghna. "They are happy to have this kind of a setting," she says.

Rohit, who gave the first lecture, agrees. "I've done a lot of public lectures in different spaces, but I especially enjoyed this one because of the setting, which was completely different from what I am used to," he says, adding that he found speaking in a pub way more relaxing than in an educational institution.

"We select lecturers based on their experience working within a specific niche; one that they can speak on for about 45 minutes, showing us a different perspective on this topic," adds Shruti.

Such talks also ensure that participants, many of whom are young working professionals, have an opportunity to expand their minds in a fun setting.

Meghna agrees. "One of the prime motivations was that we had all left

Wok the talk

The menu of Madam Chow at The Oberoi, Gurgaon, spans eight regions of China



(Above) Peking duck; (below) Chef Wong Kwai Wah and Chef Mark Lin.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

For all its corporate sheen, Gurugram has dependable pan-Asian staples, but little that captures the layered depth of China's regional cuisines. Into this gap steps 86-seater Madam Chow at The Oberoi, Gurgaon.

It spans eight regions of China. The fiery, numbing spices of Sichuan find balance in Guangdong dim sums, giving a sense of both heat and refinement. This duality is guided by chefs Wong Kwai Wah (Sam) and Mark Lin. The commitment to authenticity is backed by meticulous sourcing. The duck comes from Malaysia, seafood from Hong Kong, and Asian greens from Gurugram.

Bonfire at the table sets the tone for the meal. The Volcano Bao with barbecue chicken was a tad too chewy for me but other dishes more than redeemed this. Even the vegetarian offerings held their own. The Philadelphia cheese and edamame buns were soft and indulgent.

My personal favourite



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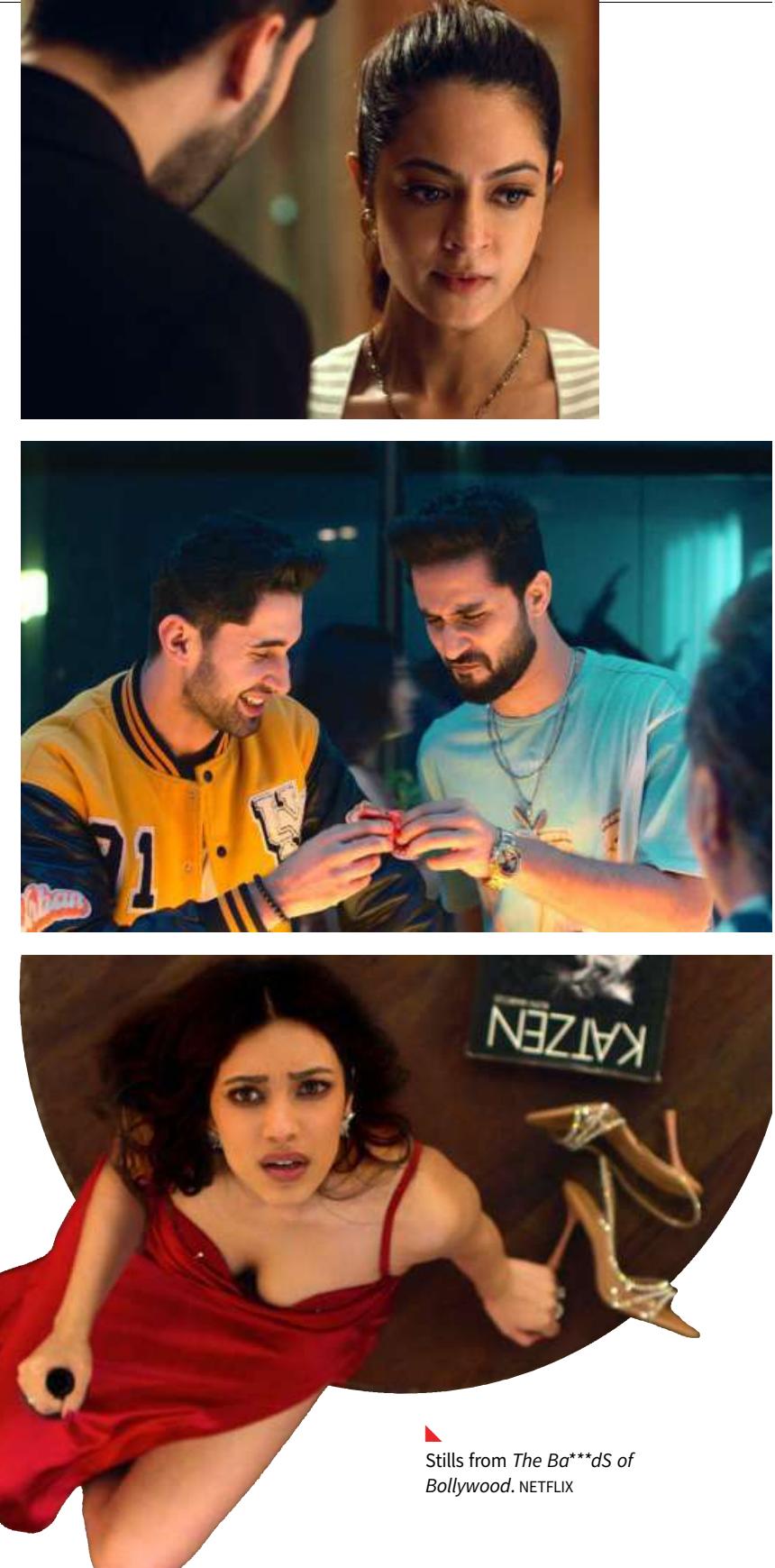
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Sudhish Kamath

Lakshya, Raghav Juyal, Sahher Bambba and Anya Singh – the young leads of *The Ba**ds of Bollywood* – are industry outsiders who have all struggled for close to a decade before getting to do Aaryan Khan's much awaited directorial debut for Netflix.

Ahead of the release, I spoke to the titular *Ba**ds* over Zoom about a decade of hustle in Bollywood and one key lesson they all took from their director Aaryan – who, during the launch of the movie, said he prefers to let the show do the talking for him.

Q: How did the almost decade-long hustle in the city of dreams – Bollywood – shape your roles in the show?

R Lakshya: *The Ba**ds of Bollywood* came at the right time for me. I have been at it for almost 10 years, picking up life experiences in what they call the “circus of Bollywood”. That line from the trailer – “There are many stars but just one *Aasman*” – was also my audition scene, a longer monologue. While shooting *Kill*, I realised I had lived it all: the Nos, the struggle, watching privileged kids land roles. I used all that. Like life, this business has good days and bad days – you

Bollywood games

The young actors of the Netflix series *The Ba**ds of Bollywood*, directed by Aaryan Khan, talk about their decade-long struggles in Bollywood as industry outsiders

just go with the flow.

Raghav Juyal: My biggest struggle is articulating thoughts in English. I was zero when I came here. Bombay and the sea gave me everything. The day I got off at VT station, I found work – dancing in the background. I told myself: even from the corner, I will shine. I choreographed, hosted shows, then took a break when TV became monotonous. I needed growth. Shah Rukh was my role model – he too came from TV. For me, the struggle was an adventure. I've met only good people here. No complaints.

Sahher Bambba: I play Karishma Talwar, a superstar's daughter – very

different from who I am. So it wasn't easy. There is a struggle. In this industry, the highs are high, the lows really low. But we love our job, so we push every day. I'm not from the industry; whatever I have, I have built brick by brick.

Anya Singh: I think all our journeys have been similar. When you come to Bombay, you don't know anyone. Beyond the professional, there is also a personal struggle because you have no support system. But that's life – it taught me patience. Everyone's journey is different. We are lucky to be working with such a strong setup; everyone here is

superb at their craft.

Q: What is that one thing you learnt from Aaryan Khan?

R Anya Singh: He's extremely passionate, disciplined and hardworking. Despite the high stakes, I never saw him lose his cool. Things went wrong, but he stayed calm, not indifferent, and that helped all of us stay calm too.

Sahher Bambba: I even asked him once: how are you so unfazed? My biggest takeaway is that once he decides to do something, he gives it his all. Recently he picked up Padel, got obsessed, and wanted to win every game. Whatever he does, he

dives in completely.

Raghav Juyal: Watching him, I realised I can't be a director – I am too impatient. He handled really tough situations calmly, with clarity and depth. He always knew what he wanted and got it done.

Lakshya: For me, it was how he used his privilege. He could have sat back, but instead he came to the battlefield, fought alongside us, and

Stills from *The Ba**ds of Bollywood*. NETFLIX

led calmly. Having resources is one thing, but knowing how to use them sincerely and truthfully is what he taught me.

Q: Can we expect something like The Studio or Entourage given all the meta +

All: No. Nothing like this has been made before.

*The Ba**ds of Bollywood* is currently streaming on Netflix.

S Poorvaja

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Have you ever felt a burst of motivation to make a beeline for the gym, or head out for a run simply because of a cute new T-shirt, or a pair of brightly patterned leggings? With luxury athleisure having a moment the world over, your cute leggings or that chic tennis skirt are now workout motivators, and a lot more.

Joining the fray is luxury athleisure brand Athletifreak, which recently threw open the doors to its first store in India, in Delhi. Founded by entrepreneurs Mo and Noor Wadhwani in the US in 2021, Athletifreak is being backed in India by actor Shahid Kapoor and his wife and entrepreneur Mira Kapoor as strategic investors and brand ambassadors.

“The brand was born nearly five years ago when my husband was training for the Ironman triathlon. I have a background in fashion and was excited to celebrate fashion and fitness together,” says Noor. Mo recalls how he was able to dig deeper and identify opportunities for improvement in the clothes he was training in. “We kept asking ourselves how we could make something that has the right fabric, performance, functionality and fit. We also wanted to develop a brand that had to be a persona; where someone could say ‘I am an athletic freak,’ he says, of what he calls their ‘freakish passion for movement’.

Training shorts, skirts, joggers, wayfarer shorts, classic polos, tanks, hoodies and sweatshirts, all in solid colours from deep blue and espresso brown to rose make up Athletifreak’s collection. A lot of time and research, Noor and Mo say, went behind the development of their different fabric technologies used across the



Founded by entrepreneurs Mo and Noor Wadhwani in the US in 2021, Athletifreak is being backed in India by actor Shahid Kapoor and his wife and entrepreneur, Mira Kapoor. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Move with me

Founded in the US by Noor and Mo Wadhwani, Athletifreak opens its first store in India in Delhi, and has Shahid Kapoor and Mira Kapoor as strategic investors and brand ambassadors

garments, to make it lightweight, breathable, stretchable, anti-microbial and moisture wicking. “As a fabric geek, I realised it has to be functional, feel good and look good to bring fashion and functionality together in the best way possible. We are also very conscious about the materials used and 60% of our product is sustainable fabric,” Mo says.

Five years on, with India’s rapidly evolving fitness culture, the duo believes the timing could not have been better, for them to bring the brand here. Their brand story and vision to cater to people of all

ages and all kinds of movement based on their individual journeys is something that Mira Kapoor says she resonated with. “Being a strategic investor and partner came very naturally to both Shahid and I. Shahid’s primary form of movement apart from exercise is dance, and for me, I love pilates, walking and mindfulness. We were keen on being involved in a brand that is rooted in India but has global appeal,” she says.

The luxury athleisure brand’s choice to open its first store in Delhi comes close on the heels of the London-based brand Cos opening

its first store in the city as well. While both Mira and Noor speak about their close ties to the city having grown up there, Noor further says that the city has an affinity for luxury, and is very conscious of luxury fashion.

“For us, it was more about entering India with a bang, not just about Delhi or Mumbai. We will be everywhere, and have a significant presence online as well. I think the tail winds behind fitness and wellness as an industry are very strong here at present,” Mira says.

“Athleisure has evolved because now, you can wear the same pair of

leggings to the gym, you can travel in it with an oversized T-shirt or you can lounge at home. You can even go out at night wearing an interesting top or a blazer and a pair of heels, with your black leggings,” Mira says. Athletifreak’s core black leggings for instance, she says, can be dressed up or down with the brand’s interesting jackets in different pop colours.

Having already partnered with Ironman in the US, the team behind Athletifreak is hoping to engage with India’s growing fitness communities in the coming months. “A court, a class, or a run club is now becoming a place of discovery for friendship and connection. This, I feel, aligns with Athletifreak’s core philosophy, which is to find and engage with other people who share that same passion and that same drive,” Mira signs off.

Athletifreak is at Nexus Select CityWalk, New Delhi. Prices start from ₹3,999 onwards



As a fabric geek, I realised it has to be functional, feel good and look good to bring fashion and functionality together in the best way possible. We are also very conscious about the materials used and 60% of our product is sustainable fabric

MO WADHWANI



(From right) Ritu Dalmia; the restaurant; and bhapa doi.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



No confusion about fusion

The pop-up menu that celebrates 25 years of Diva will present Cittamani's dishes in a thali format

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A feast of a conversation, garnished with lucid declarations about fusion food, sparks one's appetite for chef and entrepreneur Ritu Dalmia's four-day pop-up in Delhi. She brings some of the choicest dishes from her Milan-based Indian restaurant Cittamani to her Italian restaurant, Diva. The exclusive menu celebrates 25 years of Diva.

Starters include club kachori, burrata with tomato and kairi launji; and basera me sayala, a Sindhi-style fish. For the main course, expect lamb chops served with adraki gravy; shyam saviera featuring torai and apricot kofta with lehsuni palak and tamatar kaju; and Kayasth-style chicken pasande in badami sauce. The two desserts are baked boondi with rabdi and bhapa doi paired with berries.

To a naïve mind, this interactive culinary dialogue between India and Italy is suggestive of an exchange or a fusion of sorts. But Ritu says, "I am actually quite a purist. Also, the word fusion has been misused. So, kachori with burrata is not fusion, for me, because I am not messing around with the taste and flavour. I am just substituting some ingredients."

Ritu claims that a simplistic, community-driven approach towards Indian food sets her restaurant, Cittamani, apart from the rest. "Cittamani's food is all about community meals. It's all about home food. When we opened in Italy, people thought Indian food was all about butter chicken and dal. Italians go out to eat their home food," she says.

Ritu's cooking prowess pivots on using traditional recipes with local ingredients. She elaborates her technique with examples of several dishes at her Italian restaurant, like a chaat made with Jerusalem artichoke. "This is basically a lauki chaat which my grandmother used to make, and it was the only way she could get us to have vegetables like lauki. So, instead of importing lauki there, we substitute it with Jerusalem artichoke," she explains.

The selection of dishes on this menu stands dictated by Ritu's personal favourites at Cittamani. The silver jubilee celebrations of Diva, of course, will continue with more pop-ups (including the one with Michelin-starred chef Viviana Varese, who has partnered with Cittamani), menu revivals (Diva's menu from 2005-2012) and the launch of a new menu early October.

Cittamani menu will be available till September 21, 12.30pm to 11.30pm, at Diva, M-8A, M Block Market, Greater Kailash II, New Delhi. A meal for two is priced upwards of ₹2,900. For reservations, call 011-41637858, +917827934131

From Punjabi rajma to Chettinad chicken curry, Karan Gokani hopes to make the cuisine accessible and a staple in kitchens across the world with *Indian 101*

Nidhi Adlakha
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When Hoppers opened in London a decade ago, it was known as a Sri Lankan and South Indian restaurant. However, it quickly became popular for the former. "I adore the country; I visit it almost every year, and it is where I proposed to my wife. And for some reason people started seeing me as a Sri Lankan chef," says Chef Karan Gokani, the restaurant's co-founder.

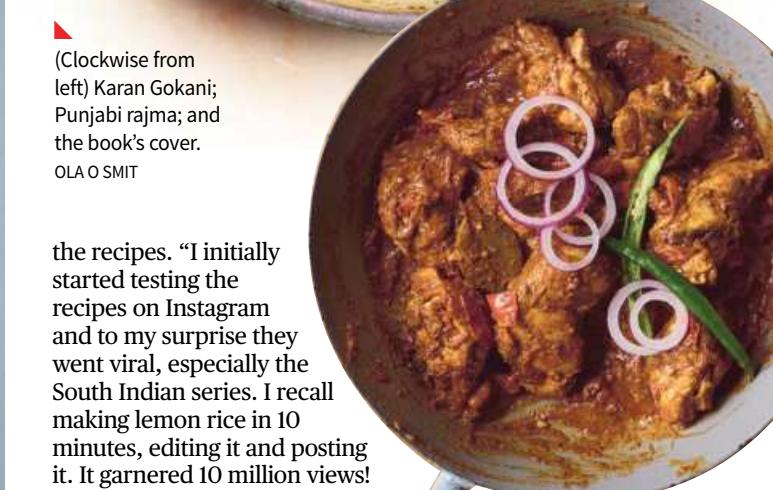
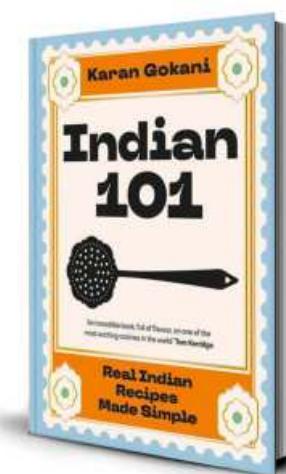
So penning his first cookbook in 2022 titled *Hoppers*, dedicated to recipes and stories from the country, was a no-brainer. "This was a personal project of sorts that I worked on during the lockdown years, and I wanted to share my recipes. But, what I learnt from the book was that many people couldn't adapt it as much in their kitchens as it is not a widely popular cuisine." And with that in mind, he created *Indian 101* (published by Bluebird), his recently-launched cookbook that focusses on accessible Indian recipes. "The book is neither introductory nor a masterclass, but somewhere in between," says London-based Karan, who is in Chennai next week promoting the book.

Karan, who grew up in Mumbai, and is Gujarati by heritage, believes that Indian cooking is often oversimplified, or misunderstood. "Something he wanted to change with *Indian 101*. "Indian cuisine is not just dal tadka or butter chicken; it is so varied with a regional angle to it. People think cooking Indian food requires 100 ingredients and loads of time, but it doesn't need to be elaborate. Even Westerners look at making Indian food as a weekend project to be done once a year, but it doesn't have to be that way. I have boxes of rajma in my freezer that I have with just rice and cucumber slices," says Karan.

The book begins with a section on light bites (including potato chaat, chicken 65), moves on to vegetables and pulses (aloo matar, corn kees, etc.), eggs and diary (with Parsi eggs on potatoes, Gujarati kadhi), a section on fish and shellfish (semolina fish fry, Goan fish curry), meat and poultry (butter chicken, keema matar), sides (okra pachadi, potato masala, pickles, and chutneys), rice (tamarind and peanut rice, chicken biryani), breads (masala theplas to Malabar porotta), before culminating in the sweets section that has carrot halwa, Indian bread pudding, and more.

For the book, Karan was sure about not wanting to simplify or dumb down any of

Taste the 'real' India



(Clockwise from left) Karan Gokani; Punjabi rajma; and the book's cover.
OLA O SMIT

the recipes. "I initially started testing the recipes on Instagram and to my surprise they went viral, especially the South Indian series. I recall making lemon rice in 10 minutes, editing it and posting it. It garnered 10 million views! And do note, my following is mainly America, the UK, Canada, and Australia. Only 10% is from India."

When creating the book, Karan says the question on his mind was 'how do you make every recipe real and accessible?' "These are real dishes people eat in India; not fusion or quick recipes. The recipe selection was aimed at balancing new and familiar flavours, like a restaurant menu. It took me a year to put them all together," says Karan, who noted down measurements for each of the recipes along the way. "I also sent them to a chef at Hoppers. He cooked every single dish and I tasted them. This gave me good insights and helped me tweak the recipes."

But it was during the photoshoot that Karan got a

front-row seat at understanding how people would read and interpret his recipes. "I was with the food stylist who would cook eight-10 recipes a day. It was a very intense, professional experience. I would only plate the food. For the most part, all the images you see in the book are of dishes made by the stylist!" says Karan. "When my wife saw the shot of the Punjabi rajma, she said it didn't look as smooth as it does when I make it. But I did not want to tweak the image; it's how a first timer made it and is accessible to a reader."

Priced at ₹1,699, the book is available online.

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Tamil

This drama fails to build on its potential



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The first act of *Bomb* bears many hallmarks of a novel social satire. There's a town divided due to sectarianism, and the burden falls on a corpse to make the townsmen see sense. The film begins with a voiceover narrating how Kaalakammaipatti bloomed in prosperity, widely believed to be due to their local deity, at least until an incident that sowed hatred in the hearts of the people. A huge sacred rock split, leaving the town divided into two sects – into Kaalapatti and Kammaipatti – a cut that grew deeper and deeper, as they blamed each other for why the 'real deity' stopped blessing them.

In the present day, the townsmen simply cannot put their differences aside, even for the betterment of all – until an alcoholic atheist (Kaali Venkat, as Kathiravan), who abhors all the customs, dies, and his body, which occasionally farts, is believed to fulfil a prophecy signalling the return of the deity. The two communities end up fighting over who the deity belongs to.

Stuck in the middle between the two groups are Kathiravan's friend Manimuthu (Arjun Das), and Prabha (Shivathmika Rajashekhar), Kathiravan's sister. *Bomb* doesn't hold back in taking digs at the many superstitions and stigmas we find in our world. The very introduction to this world takes a dig at how castes are formed and how futile the differences between men of caste can be.

The heart is in the right place, and *Bomb* has the right characters voicing the right things – like a girl child whose protest against her parents' hypocrisy garners all the applause. However, what *Bomb* misses out on right from the beginning is a deftness in mixing nuanced social commentary with satire. It doesn't help that many subplots exist only to sell sentimentality, such as one revolving around an elderly woman and a couple, which strains for emotion only to deliver shallow melodrama.

The biggest issue is how the film fails to properly establish the individuals from the two sects, which is why you need a few moments to understand a young man's problem with a childless couple. Many interpersonal dynamics are left ambiguous. We are repeatedly told of a tragedy that Mani and Kathiravan suffered in their pasts, but we don't get to know more about it.

Bomb is a great showcase of how writing an intriguing premise and setting up a world aren't enough. The text must organically build on the ideas, and the filmmaking needs finesse to translate promising ideas onto the screen. Above all, not every emotion needs to be spoon-fed. Maybe all we need is some faith in the audience.

Bomb is currently running in theatres



Exploration of human hubris

Perched somewhere between magic and realism, filmmaker Raam Reddy spins an evocative cautionary tale of ecological and social decay in his sophomore film *Jugnuma: The Fable*

Hindi

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Coming at a time when the debate about the original inhabitant and the migrant/trespasser is raging across the world, young filmmaker Raam Reddy mounts a fable that fascinates with its subversive tone and veritable voice.

The atmospheric visuals and magic realism remind one of Marquez and Manoj Nigh Shyamalan, but Raam sets up his own *leela* in the hills of the Himalayas. In *Jugnuma*, Dev (Manoj Bajpayee) lords over the orchards that once belonged to the British masters. He has inherited the colonial privilege that he delegates to the locals to nurture his sprawling estate. Mundane meets the magical, as Raam opens a window to the Dev's introspective nature. Suggesting the misplaced pride of being self-made, the genial master makes his own wings and glides over the hills to keep a check on the locals who work on his estate, look for possible trespassers, and perhaps test his boundaries.

As Sunil Borkar's painterly camera, dressed up by Nithin Lukose's evocative sound design, follows Dev before the jump, the heart skips a beat as Raam draws you into his canvas. Within the four walls of Dev's heritage bungalow, there is a nurturing wife, Nandini (Priyanka Bose), who sings of Lord Shiva, the destroyer, a

Jugnuma

Director: Raam Reddy

Cast: Manoj Bajpayee, Priyanka Bose, Deepak Dobriyal, Tillotama Shome

Storyline: When a mysterious fire engulfs his sprawling estate of Dev, he doubts the integrity of his local work force and uses violence to find the source.

teenage daughter, Vanya (Hiral Sidhu), who is grappling with questions of sexuality and freedom, a precocious son, Juju, and two dogs. Together, they look for stars in the clear sky but miss the fireflies (the source of the Hindi title) in their garden that have been uprooted from their natural habitat because of pesticide use.

The poetry goes discordant when the cherry blossom trees in the estate start catching fire mysteriously. Doubts crop up in Dev's mind as the fire engulfs large tracts of the estate. He feels the locals have challenged his authority. After the death of a worker, the local women allege a possible role of the pesticides. Dev's devoted manager, Mohan (Deepak Dobriyal) and Keshav, the trusted leader of the workers, look for the clues, but Dev's patience wanes. A vicious government official adds fuel to the fire.

Meanwhile, Keshav's wife (Tillotama Shome) tells a bedtime story to her children about the fairies that descend from the ether to reclaim creatures of their ilk. As Dev's fear behind the frown becomes apparent and he calls in the police to find the source of the fire, the cracks in the social contract surface, and the barriers of class and privilege unravel for the discerning. Do the lands truly belong to Dev? Like the cold fire of the uprooted fireflies heats the orchard in the realm of magic realism, the locals become agitated when they are put under suspicion. Raam doesn't underline his intent; he whispers his point of view in the mountain air.

Shot in 16mm, the visuals work like

weather-beaten memories stashed in a corner of the conscience that generate moments of guilt and introspection.

On the surface, it is told with a 'once-upon-a-time' flourish for an audience who don't measure their cinematic experience in terms of slow or fast, parallel or crossover, the groggy voiceover conveys the tumult of the late 1980s when the old order gave way to the new, but 35 years later, the concerns remain the same. Vanya, the teenage daughter of Dev, gets hooked on one of the spiritual lamas roaming in the jungle. Curious to know the secrets of the jungle and his father's wings, Vanya becomes a symbol of change. While Dev is busy looking at the bird's-eye view of his property, the fire threatens to burn his courtyard. As the film progresses, Dev's wings lose their magic, and the outsider/insider, the safe and the hazardous narrative, grips you.

Manoj relishes roles that are rooted in moral ambivalence. Here again, he is absolutely convincing as Dev, a seemingly mild-mannered man at the top of the social hierarchy. He doesn't have to shout to command respect. When the mysterious fire rages in his territory, the fear of losing his wings of superiority starts appearing on his face and body language, a space tailor-made for Manoj. Priyanka and Deepak merge into the narrative, but as I said, they are all puppets in Raam's play.

Jugnuma: The Fable is currently running in theatres



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Visually slick but emotionally distant in storytelling

Telugu

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While watching *Mirai*, I was occasionally reminded of actor Teja Sajja's earlier film *Hanu-Man*. That superhero fantasy by director Prasanth Varma, set in a fictional world, drew on devotional texts while borrowing familiar tropes from the genre. Its engaging characters and emotional depth made audiences root for the underdog hero.

This time, the canvas is wider, with a larger budget. Cinematographer-director Karthik Gattamneni, who co-wrote *Mirai* with Manibabu Karaman, crafts a striking visual aesthetic with production designer Nagender Tangala, art director Dasireddy Srinivas, and a skilled visual effects team. Yet beneath the spectacle lies a story that finds its footing in parts, and that makes all the difference. Indian epics are rich with fantasy



steeped in devotional fervour – gods, demons, worlds on the brink of darkness, and the triumph of good over evil. What matters, however, is translating such tales into emotionally resonant storytelling for the screen.

Mirai begins with promise, using animation, to establish its world. The story traces back to emperor Ashoka, distraught after the Kalinga war. Legend speaks of a secret society guarding nine granths – books of immense power – that

could destroy the world if seized by evil forces. The clique succeeds until a dark power rises, threatening the world's equilibrium.

On paper, the tale has intrigue: sage Agasthya, a circle of *sadhus* who know the truth, a mother with visions of destruction, and her son, destined to be the chosen one. Yet as multiple characters appear in disparate settings, *Mirai* falters for more than an hour. Much is said about the looming threat to the granths, but the urgency is never

convincingly built. The chosen one must be found, told of his destiny, and dispatched on an epic quest, but the narrative skims the surface.

When several guardians fall swiftly to the evil force (Manchu Manoj, wielding a cursed black sword), the impact is oddly detached. Aside from Jagapathi Babu's gravitas as the elder, the rest hardly feel like worthy protectors. Vibha (Ritika Nayak), a young *sadhi*, tracks down Veda (Teja Sajja) with implausible ease, stumbling from Varanasi to Kolkata to Hyderabad as though the film were racing towards its climactic clash.

Veda lives in a scrapyard modelled on the dystopian Kashi of *Kalki 2898 AD*. The thrill of superhero films lies in imaginative world-building – Gotham of *Batman*, Anjanadri of *Hanu-Man*, Lokah's alternative Bengaluru, and Kashi-Shambala of *Kalki*. But here, the "paradise scrapyard" feels more like a set than a lived-in universe. The interactions between Vibha and Veda are perfunctory: her mind-reading, his banter with friends, and bumbling cops witnessing the supernatural never

ground the story.

Veda's Himalayan quest for the mystical staff, the *mirai*, unfolds too easily. His meeting with sage Agasthya (Jayaram) and initiation into the staff's power are hurried, not underwritten by depth. Only later, when the dark force's backstory and the mother-son arc fully emerge, does the film find its footing.

Teja Sajja, with his everyman appeal, balances strength and vulnerability, excelling in the

action. Manoj has the physical menace for the antagonist. Shriya Saran is the revelation, embodying the conflicted mother with emotional weight especially in the later portions.

Scattered through *Mirai* are flashes of invention – the animatronic bird Sampati from the *Ramayana* and sage Agasthya's notion of "spiritual physics" add wonder and spectacle, complemented by Gowra Hari's music. The climactic clash delivers visual grandeur, though the journey there feels thin.

Telugu cinema has long mined mythology with sincerity, crafting layered characters and strong arcs. Even the recent *Kalki 2898 AD* blended the *Mahabharata* with science fiction inventively. *Mirai*, though ambitious in reframing an Indian superhero saga, struggles to anchor its spectacle in compelling storytelling. The stage is set for a sequel, but it will require a more engaging narrative.

Mirai

Director: Karthik Gattamneni

Cast: Teja Sajja, Manchu Manoj, Ritika Nayak

Storyline: A superhero has to rise to protect the ninth granth, and the world, from being taken over by a dark force.

Mirai is currently running in theatres



Downton Abbey: The Grand Finale**Director:** Simon Curtis**Starring:** Hugh Bonneville, Jim Carter, Michelle Dockery, Paul Giamatti, Elizabeth McGovern, Penelope Wilton**Storyline:** Scandal in the form of Lady Mary's divorce and money troubles have to be overcome as the Crawleys step into the 1930s**Snippets****Chloé Zhao's Hamnet wins People's Choice Award**

The Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) closed its 2025 edition with the announcement of its audience-voted awards, led by Chloé Zhao's *Hamnet*, which earned the prestigious People's Choice Award. The win makes Zhao the first filmmaker to claim the honor twice, following her 2020 victory for *Nomadland*, which went on to secure the Academy Award for Best Picture.

TIFF's People's Choice Award is considered one of the most significant precursors to the Oscars. Over the past 15 years, 12 winners of the prize have gone on to receive Best Picture nominations, with four — including *12 Years a Slave*, *Green Book*, and Zhao's own *Nomadland* — ultimately claiming the top Oscar.

**Kamal Haasan's next, directed by Anbariv, launched**

In an unexpected announcement, Kamal Haasan's production banner Raaj Kamal Films International on September 12 said that the veteran actor's next film, *KH 237*, has gone on floors. With a script written by acclaimed Malayalam screenwriter Syam Pushkaran, the film marks the directorial debut of popular stunt choreographers Anbariv.

KH 237 was announced in December last year, but the recent development comes as a surprise since Kamal had recently confirmed that he will be teaming up with superstar Rajinikanth in their next, an on screen reunion after 46 years.

**Netflix forays into animated mythology in India with new series**

Netflix on September 10 announced a new epic mythological animated series, *Kurukshetra*, a retelling of the globally renowned Indian epic Mahabharata. Conceptualised and created by Anu Sikka, the series is set to premiere on the platform on October 10.

The streamer announced the news with a motion poster of the series, offering a glimpse into the looks of Lord Krishna, the Pandavas and other legendary characters from the epic.

Written and directed by Ujaan Ganguly, *Kurukshetra* has lyrics written by legendary poet Gulzar. Alok Jain, Anu Sikka, and Ajit Andhare produced the series.

A loving farewell to the Crawleys**English****Mini Anthikad Chhibber**

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There is Ascot, a Noël Coward musical, a divorce, a confidence trickster, a country fair, and a passing mention of the Depression. *Downton Abbey*, Julian Fellowes' historical drama series following the fortunes of the upstairs and downstairs folks of the eponymous Yorkshire country estate, aired from 2010 to 2015 over six seasons and 52 episodes, covering the time period between 1912 and 1926.

Then came the movies—*Downton Abbey* (2019), set in 1927 and *Downton Abbey: A New Era* (2022), set in 1928. And now we have the possible final chapter in *Downton Abbey: The Grand Finale*. It is 1930, and there is shame and scandal for the Crawleys as Lady Mary (Michelle Dockery) is getting divorced from her racing car enthusiast husband.

The Crawleys, including Lord and Lady Grantham (Hugh Bonneville and Elizabeth McGovern) and their daughters, Mary and Edith (Laura Carmichael), are in London for the season. With the deaths of both the grandmothers, the formidable Dowager Countess Violet (Maggie Smith) and Lady Grantham's mother, there is much settling of estates in the offing.

The Depression has caused some money troubles, and Lady Grantham's brother, Harold (Paul Giamatti), who was handling the estate, has come to England with a progress report. He brings along Gus Sambrook (Alessandro Nivola), a financial manager who seems to have saved a large portion of the money from the crash.

Many of the cast from the show and the previous films make their appearance and it is nice to see the characters walk off into their

beautiful, collective sunsets. Daisy (Sophie McShera), who started off as an assistant to the cook Mrs Patmore (Lesley Nicol), grows in confidence and takes over the kitchen when Mrs Patmore retires. Her husband, Andy (Michael Fox), is promoted to butler, as Mr Carson (Jim Carter) reluctantly hands over the reins.

The Bateses, John (Brendan Coyle), valet to Lord Grantham, and Anna (Joanne Froggatt), lady's maid to Mary, have another baby. Barrow (Robert James-Collier) has finally found happiness in service with the actor Guy (Dominic West), while Molesley (Kevin Doyle) is pursuing his screenwriter dreams.

The troubles are little ones and are graciously overcome with a stern talking-to, causing the evildoer, be they confidence tricksters or snobs, to skulk away with their tails between their legs. Just like last week's *The Conjuring: Last Rites*, *Downton Abbey: The Grand Finale* is a different kind of impeccably dressed comfort food – the gowns and jewellery are truly marvellous.

Downton Abbey: The Grand Finale is currently running in theatres

**Camaraderie goes the distance**

Francis Lawrence's Stephen King adaptation is a punishing death march made poignantly human by its two powerhouse leads

English**Ayaan Paul Chowdhury**

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Francis Lawrence's *The Long Walk* is a grim, unrelenting experience, and at times so bare-bones in its execution that it risks monotony. Yet, it carries something hypnotic in its excruciating, inevitable march toward oblivion. Adapted from Stephen King's early work under the sobriquet Richard Bachman, the film belongs to that rare breed of studio releases that seem determined to test our endurance as much as its characters'. The premise is merciless in its simplicity: fifty boys, conscripted by lottery, must keep walking at no less than three miles an hour until only one remains. Drop below the pace too often, and the rifles flanking the road will blow your brains out. The winner is showered in riches and the promise of wishing for anything he wants.

The burden of carrying such a rigorously static idea falls almost entirely on the cast, and Lawrence knows it. There is a watchful decency to Cooper Hoffman as Ray Garraty. He is an everyman figure whose small gestures of kindness quickly mark him as the moral centre. Opposite him is a brilliant, mercurial David Jonsson's Peter McVries, possessed of a roguish wit that keeps despair at bay for as long as possible. Their companionship is the film's anchor, and the flicker of human connection in this dystopia designed to extinguish it. Around them gather a band of sharply

The Long Walk**Director:** Francis Lawrence**Cast:** Cooper Hoffman, David Jonsson, Garrett Wareing, Tüt Nyuot, Charlie Plummer, Ben Wang, Roman Griffin Davis, Jordan Gonzalez, Josh Hamilton, Judy Greer and Mark Hamill.**Storyline:** 50 boys participate in a grueling dystopian contest where they must continuously walk or be shot by a member of their military escort

sketched figures, including Charlie Plummer's venomous Barkovitch, Ben Wang's quick-talking Olson, Joshua Odjick's taciturn Collie, and more. Each is offered just enough shading to register before the inevitable bullet finds them.

This is familiar battle royale territory for Lawrence. But where his *Hunger Games* films were ornate and grandstanding, here, the choice is austerity. Lawrence makes his dystopia feel almost antique. Cinematographer Jo Willems captures the walkers against a rural America devoid of life, with faded towns, hollow churches, and lone figures on porches who watch the parade of death shuffle past. The imagery feels drained of hope; even the landscape appears resigned. The effect is claustrophobic despite the open road, since there's nowhere to go but forward and nothing to look at but the people trudging beside you.

This inevitably makes the violence stand out in brutal relief. The gunfire is abrupt and matter-of-fact, and the executions are staged without fanfare, but with enough gore to shock. One boy staggers from exhaustion, another panics and makes a run for it, a third literally shits himself to death – each time, the rifles correct the error, and the repetition is deliberately numbing. King wrote the novel in the shadow of Vietnam, and the film does little to soften its allegory of young men reduced to expendable bodies, sacrificed for a spectacle that offers no escape.

What rescues the film from total despair are the interludes of poignant conversation. The boys swap stories, trade insults, and muse on fathers, mothers, love, and death. There's an easy rhythm to these exchanges, with a tender touch of *Stand by Me* transported into this

death march. Lawrence and screenwriter JT Mollner (best known for his fantastic *Strange Darling*) resist the temptation to open up the story with cutaways or elaborate flashbacks. The walk is the story, and the dialogue is the only reprieve. If this choice sometimes leaves the film feeling thin, it also lends it an odd purity. It's the sense that we, too, are trapped on this road, unable to look away.

The Major, played with a scenery-chewing drawl by Mark Hamill, feels like the film's sole misstep. He acts out a caricature of militaristic bluster whose sunglasses never leave his face, and is at once too broad for the film's somberness. Against the stripped-down performances of the boys, Hamill's bark feels irritatingly out of tune, but thankfully, the error isn't fatal. The real authority is the road itself, which swallows the walkers one by one with a slow-burn erosion.

By the film's last miles, the march has shed any illusion of competition, and the test of endurance has become existential. Bodies wear down, minds fray, and the conversations turn inward. Once dangled as salvation, the promised reward recedes into abstraction. Finally, only the tether between Garraty and McVries remains. Their stubborn camaraderie, holding fast in a world bent on annihilating any semblance of solidarity, is crushing in its finality.

The Long Walk is not a flattering watch. It's repetitive, punishing, and deliberately blunt in its politics, but it carries something uncompromisingly organic. The road goes ever on, but companionship always endures. You'll never walk alone.

The Long Walk is currently running in theatres