

weekend

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PLUS THE HINDU

REDEFINING LUXURY

Moonray has metamorphosed into Chorus, an artsy store in Mumbai's swish Kala Ghoda **P7**



The season of stranger goodbyes

All set for the final season, the creators and stars of *Stranger Things*, a show that evoked '80s nostalgia and gave Netflix one of its first hits, reminisce their decade-long camaraderie and creative milestones

Ayaan Paul Chowdhury
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A few years after *Stranger Things* premiered in the summer of 2016 on Netflix, I joined this publication as a wide-eyed intern with an overgrown fondness for the '80s and a playlist full of synth classics. My first byline was a small essay titled *How Netflix's 'Stranger Things' makes the most of '80s nostalgia*, which was a crude attempt at decoding how a show about Dungeons & Dragons nerds and monsters from another dimension had me so transfixed.

Nearly a decade later, everything has come full circle. Who could have guessed that the giddy-headed intern would one day be speaking with the cast and creators of the series that made the '80s cool again?

November 6, 1983. The night Will Byers vanished from Hawkins, Indiana became the spark for one of the most defining mythologies of modern television. Over its nine-year run, the time capsule of '80s Americana – refracted through adolescent fear, friendship, and the supernatural – has become one of

Netflix's crown jewels. The indie gamble-turned-global phenomenon now returns for its fifth and final season. As the story that served nostalgia to the modern pop cultural lexicon nears its end, its cast and creators reflect on a legacy that has long outgrown the screen, and the bittersweetness of bidding farewell.

Nod to nostalgia

When asked about when the series evolved from an '80s pastiche into something larger, the creators of the series, Matt and Ross Duffer, trace its conception. "Even when we conceived of the show, that was one of the last things we talked about," Ross says. "It was originally inspired by this real-life conspiracy theory in Montauk called the Montauk Project, and it just happened to be set in the '80s. We thought it would be great as a partial love letter to those movies."

Few shows have so thoroughly recorded a decade's cultural residue into global iconography. The Duffer Brothers' sentimental bildungsroman reintroduced an entire generation to the analogue aesthetics of VHS crackle, Dungeons & Dragons, mall arcades and more,

that have always felt distant but strangely evocative.

"For us, even from Season 1, it was the story of our childhood," Ross adds. "Part of that was we consumed a lot of pop culture, but it was about us and our friends growing up. We always just saw it as a coming-of-age story. Season to season, our guiding light was the journey these characters were going through as they headed towards adulthood."

For Millie Bobby Brown, who plays Eleven – the telekinetic lab escapee turned small-town superhero with a soft spot for Eggos – there is an easy familiarity in how she reflects on the decade she spent growing up with her character. "I don't think I was rediscovering Eleven in any new ways," Millie says. "I was chasing closure. I needed answers, and I'm excited for the fans to get those answers too. This season was more like living every day like it's our last, because it is. I savoured every scene and moment I had with everyone because it felt like it was going to be our last. On the last day, I realised it really was."

CONTINUED ON
» PAGE 4



(Clockwise from right) Creators, directors, and executive producers of *Stranger Things* Matt Duffer and Ross Duffer (in black jacket); the Duffer Brothers in conversation with the cast of the show; and a still from the show. NETFLIX



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pick of the week



Festive feasts

This Thanksgiving, gather around for an evening that celebrates food, gratitude, and togetherness at Cappella, The Palomar by Crossway. Enjoy roast turkey from a live carving station, classic sides, and desserts like pecan pie bars and banana pudding, along with festive drinks and a cheerful karaoke session. *On November 27, from 7pm onwards at Cappella, The Palomar by Crossway. Priced at ₹3,499 with taxes. Call 8925847085 for reservations.*



Sonic silhouettes

Delhi-based label Turn Black brings its signature meditative minimalism with *The Invisible Pattern* — inspired by cymatics, the science of how sound takes form. Each piece translates invisible vibrations into design, finding harmony between chaos and calm through fluid silhouettes and a black colour palette. Explore shirts, dresses, skirts, pants, and co-ord sets. *Priced ₹10,000 upwards. Till November 15, Collage, Rutland Gate 4th Street.*



Taste of Karnataka

Embark on a culinary journey through Karnataka as Savva Rasa presents Karunadu Swada — a festival that celebrates the State's rich flavours and traditions. From Coorg's fiery pandi curry to coastal kori gassi and classic Udupi sambar, each dish tells a story of Karnataka's heritage and harmony. *Till November 30, from 11.30am to 3.30pm and 6.30pm to 11pm at Savva Rasa, Gandhi Mandapam Road. Price for two ₹2,200 (approximately).*



Slow indulgence

The best meals are the ones that invite you to slow down. This Saturday, The Farm hosts *The Big Bad Wolves Lunch*, a curated six-course pork experience featuring cuts cooked every which way — roasted, grilled, glazed, stir-fried, slow-cooked, and pulled apart. *On November 16, from 12.30pm to 3pm, at The Farm, Old Mahabalipuram Road. ₹2,000 per person. Call 9176050562 for reservations*



(Clockwise from left) Stills from *Pluto* and *Godzilla: Minus One*. NETFLIX and TOHO

Reckonings and resurrections

Here's why *Pluto* and *Godzilla: Minus One* should be on your watchlist

Ayaan Paul Chowdhury
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This week's picks are for those who have found themselves coughing through Delhi's polluted air, doomscrolling through the footage of Gaza or Sudan, or nervously watching AI think-pieces.

The world seems to have entered a nouveau fresh hell where even breathing feels complicit.

It's a good moment then, to sit with stories that understand the moral fatigue of survival and ask what it means to live among manufactured and moral ruin.

Pluto and *Godzilla: Minus One* (both streaming on Netflix) share that same post-catastrophic vocabulary.

From the drawing board
Pluto is a slow, forensic meditation in the skin of a police procedural. Adapted from



veteran mangaka Naoki Urasawa and Japanese author and manga writer Takashi Nagasaki's reworking of a Osamu Tezuka's *Astro Boy*, the eight-episode series follows Gesicht, an investigator, whose methodical search for a killer peels back a society in which mechanical beings have been folded into and marginalised by civic life.

The procedural scaffolding is familiar, but the series entangles

each reveal in the interior lives of its non-human characters.

Robots remember wars. Robots feel grief.

Those memories ripple outward until isolated outrages feel like a ledger of unresolved harms. The adaptation is deliberate in pace and generous in scope; each episode has room to breathe, and linger on a small gesture that suddenly means everything.

Foreign affairs

Godzilla: Minus One reconnects kaiju cinema to its human wounds. Takashi Yamazaki's Oscar-winner grounds the long-running franchise's later habit of theatrical spectacle without any sense of consequence.

Set in post-Second-World-War Japan, the film follows a small cast of survivors led by a man haunted by his survival of the war.

Their private fragments of guilt and refusal become the emotional core among scenes of widescreen destruction.

Takashi plants the camera inside the ruin and asks how people live with the aftermath of systems that promised protection and delivered catastrophe.

When *Godzilla* shows up, Tokyo crumbles like origami, and the kaiju delivers its survivors — still reeling from the detritus of calamity — a radioactive reckoning that summons wartime memory, the politics of

occupation, and the cost of imperial power plays.

Takashi balances tactile effects with contemporary visual craft so the monster feels ancient and immediate at once.

The atomic imagery and its echoes of mid-century trauma sit in the bones of the story like a bill to be paid for witnessing the spectacle.

But the film's most effective moments linger on its gestures of empathy and the poignant truces people strike to keep going.

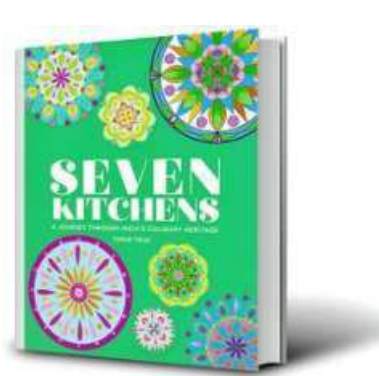
Naoki's cumulative sorrow or Takashi's furious, participatory spectacle could easily sit beside *Chernobyl* or *Oppenheimer* as dispatches from our era of institutional denial; or find kinship with how *Grave of the Fireflies* turns survival into an act of penance.

You might also hear echoes of *I, Robot* or *Blade Runner 2049*'s weary futurism, or even *Neon Genesis Evangelion*'s mechanical melancholia.

It's a strange season to be human, or even pretend we still know what that means.

If you've kept yourself unavoidably informed about the planet's collective insouciance or the ways your State fails you, both these stories are almost prophetic in scope.

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



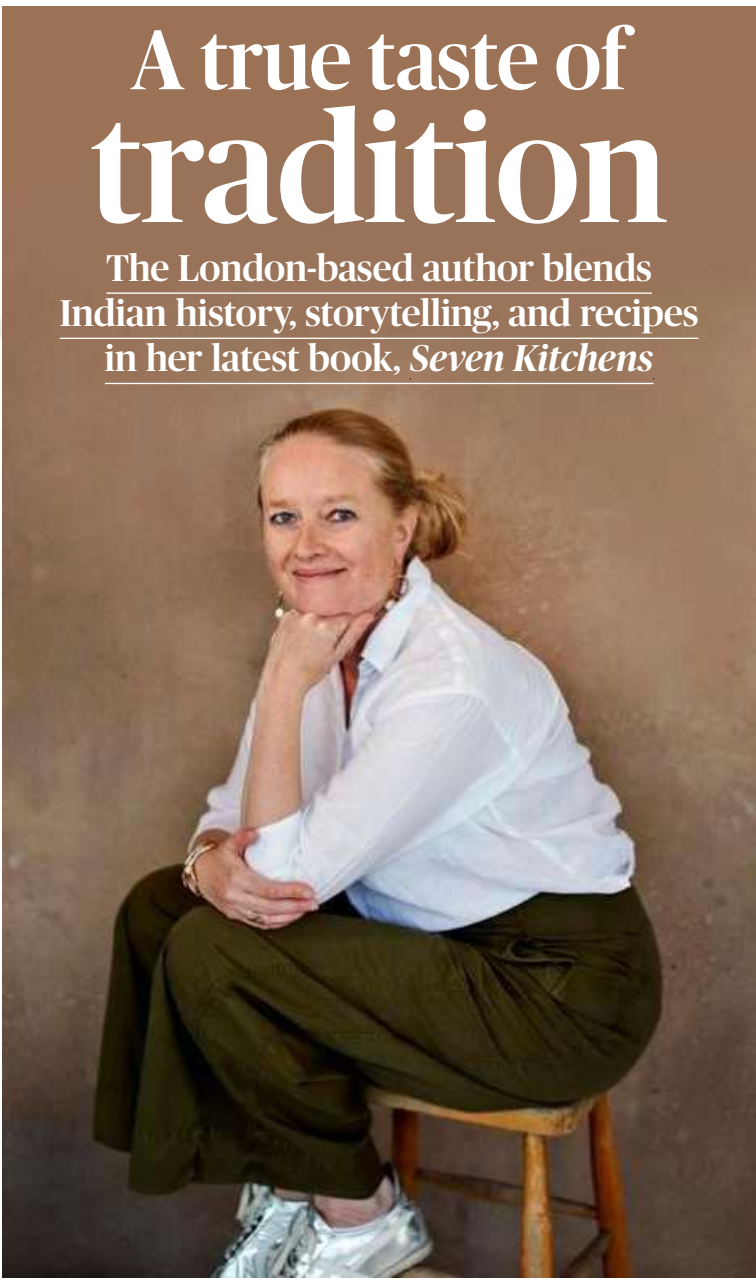
Nidhi Adlakha
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Indian cuisine catching the fancy of international authors and culinary enthusiasts is not new. There have been several cookbooks authored by non-Indians and even Indians living abroad that have spotlighted various facets of the country's diverse culinary heritage. Having said that, most of these books do not have a discovery factor for seasoned cooks of Indian food.

Cutting through this clutter is London-based author Torie True's *Seven Kitchens: A Journey Through India's Culinary Heritage* (Meze Publishing). While her first book *Chilli & Mint: Indian Home Cooking from a British Kitchen* spotlighted Indian staples, Torie has taken a different approach with *Seven Kitchens* by focussing on seven key Indian communities/regions. These include Indo-Chinese, Anglo Indian, Syrian Christian, Tibetan Nepalese, Mughal, Parsi, and Goan Portuguese.

The idea for the book, Torie says, formed a few years ago when she realised that the general understanding of Indian cuisine by those in the West, "was sadly limited to the same old dishes that get served up in local curry houses". "There was a gap in the market to show the wide range of recipes that sat under the umbrella of Indian cuisine and how those who lived and settled in the country bought their own techniques and influences that were absorbed into the broad canvas of Indian food. I wanted to bring a historical overlay to the cookbook," says the self-taught cook married to a British Bengali.

But what does the book bring



A true taste of tradition

The London-based author blends Indian history, storytelling, and recipes in her latest book, *Seven Kitchens*

to the table for seasoned Indian cooks, and Indian residents? Torie says, "Each chapter is on a different community that came and settled in India and charts dishes that that community celebrates. I was never trained formally, and I see myself as the culinary bridge between the East and the West as I grew up with little understanding of Indian food. I learnt from the ground up in my early 20s, initially from Indian relatives. As I have gone through this journey myself, I hope my books give the home cook confidence and clarity," says Torie.

A few dishes from the book include Hakka chilli paneer, chicken momo from the Indo-Chinese section; Anglo-Indian railway lamb curry,



(Clockwise from far left) The book's cover; Torie True; savoury steamed buns; and Hakka chilli paneer. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



kedgerie from the Syrian Christian recipes; Goan Portuguese favourites like the arroz pulao, chana ros; Tibetan-Nepalese thukpa; Parsi staples such as the jaldaloo salli boti; and the haleem masala from the Mughal chapter.

Research entailed travelling to India, and collaborating with local experts. "Highlights include a trip to Goa where I developed an understanding about what the Portuguese brought to the table. I went to Tamil Nadu for the culinary course at The Bangala, where I learnt more about Chettinad, Butler cuisine," says Torie who also spent hours at the British Library in London.

Torie explains how the book has taken two years to come together, and the photographs — featuring lovely vintage cutlery and props — were all taken in her kitchen over the course of nine days. "Cooking between 12-14 dishes in a day, and styling them, and shooting them with Tim Green was challenging and exhausting, but thankfully we are a great team, so the shoot was fun and efficient," she shares. As for the cutlery, Torie says some are from her own collection "which I have sourced over the years, and some belong to Tim. A few were also loaned from UK's Indigo Antiques and M3Tiss in Paris."

Priced at ₹2,877, the book is available online.

Stories come alive

The Little Lit Fest turns the Goethe-Institut into a creative playground with storytelling, theatre, and a lively book exhibition



A snapshot from last year's Little Lit Fest. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

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The Little Lit Fest 2025, the international children's literature festival, returns to Chennai for its second edition this weekend, transforming the Goethe-Institut into a creative world of words and music for young bibliophiles and their families. Organised by the Goethe-Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan, the festival seeks to instill a love for reading and storytelling. The three-day event is designed as a creative playground with musical storytelling sessions, film screenings, theatre performances, and a book exhibition.

The celebrations began on November 14, with the lighting of the lamp followed by a screening of *Goopi Gawaiyaa Bagha Bajaiyaa*, the award-winning animated film directed by Shilpa Ranade.

The event's lineup includes *Tale and Tunes*, a musical by actor and storyteller Janaki Sabesh, Just Drums Murali aka S Muralikrishnan and Varun, followed by the screening of

Lassie - Ein neues Abendteuer — a German children's movie, a book quiz by Abijit Hariharan from Quiz Master Foundation, and a theatrical show of *Tulika's Stories* by Chhotu Theatrewalas. There is also a reading by author Zai Whitaker, and a painting session with Vishnavi Giri.

Sunday highlights include a new Gajapati Kulapati adventure with creator Ashok Rajagopalan, a panel on writing for children, a singalong led by Krishnaa, Jeeva Raghunath and team, and a puppet show called Obedient Tommy by Vincent MCM.

Geetha Vedaraman, cultural coordinator, Goethe-Institut, says, "This year, we have also introduced special sessions that explore empathy and accessibility, like braille and tactile imagery workshops and an exhibition of books, opening up new ways of experiencing stories," she further added.

The Little Lit Fest 2025 will be on till November 16 at Goethe-Institut, 4 Rutland Gate, 5th Street. For more information and the programme schedule follow goethe.de website. Entry free.



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(Clockwise from above) A snapshot of The Gratitude Forest; and Sunil Kaushik. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

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A few years ago, Sunil Kaushik, an Indian innovation consultant, along with Japanese artist-writer Yuka Yokozawa, undertook an ambitious 500-day cycling journey from Thailand to Portugal. As they travelled across 17 countries and 38 borders, the duo faced numerous challenges, including getting lost in an Iranian desert, experiencing a terrorist incident in Mačka, Turkey. However, the duo kept at it, and Yuka documented their travels in a memoir, *Golden Hearts On The Road*, published by HSRA Publications.

"After completing our cross-continental journey we settled in the forested region of Wayanad, Kerala. We found a small plot of land with a waterfall and over 300 trees, and we were seeking a simpler, sustainable lifestyle close to Nature," says Sunil. This site is now home to the Augmented Reality (AR)-powered The Gratitude Forest. Sunil explains that they were inspired by the generosity and kindness they had encountered from over 200 families during their cycling journey. "We then set out to create an art

installation in their forest as a tribute to these 'golden hearts'. The initial vision was to set up a Golden Hearts Museum that involved physically displaying portraits and stories of our hosts, on trees throughout their property."

However, the unique environment of Wayanad – that is prone to eight months of heavy rainfall and regular visits from local wildlife, especially monkeys – proved challenging. "When we first began setting up physical displays that included hanging laminated photographs, small frames, or written stories from the trees, monkeys saw these as curious new toys. The installations were frequently damaged or destroyed, and we were reluctant to use paper or plastic. These practical and environmental obstacles led us to reconsider our approach and look for a sustainable alternative," says Sunil, who decided to turn to AI, and started brainstorming with generative AI tools in 2023. "As we discussed our limitations with ChatGPT and Copilot, we realised that a digital, non-invasive solution could let us share all the stories without leaving a trace in the forest. AR seemed like the perfect fit: the technology allowed us to create a museum where visitors could use their phones to 'see' virtual pages, illustrations,

Discover The Gratitude Forest, an AR-powered storytelling installation in Wayanad, Kerala, created by Sunil Kaushik and Yuka Yokozawa

Into the woods



and motifs hanging from the trees, while leaving the real landscape completely untouched."

The financials this project required pushed the duo to learn all about AR using "open-source resources, free online tutorials, and lots of trial and error". Sunil adds that this process was daunting at first as neither of them "had written a line of code before this project. But in the end, it allowed us to keep the spirit of the museum personal, flexible, and true to our original vision," says Sunil, adding that The Gratitude Forest was built at zero cost. "The whole process took close to six months, and

went through multiple changes. In the end, we had generated approximately 10,000 lines of code," says Sunil, who focussed on the project's technical development, while Yuka was on the artistic and cultural side. "She selected the Japanese kanji motifs (drawing from Shinto traditions that honour Nature) and matched each kanji character to specific trees, considering the environment and meaning. She also ensured that the calligraphy and motif placement contributed to a harmonious and reflective forest experience," adds Sunil. Since The Gratitude Forest

is a private installation, Sunil says it is invite-only at present. "We regularly receive requests on social media from people interested in experiencing the project, and we're always happy to arrange a personal tour for those who reach out. Over the last year, we've welcomed several dozen guests including local residents, travellers, artists, and technologists who have experienced the installation first-hand," he adds.

While the remoteness and wildness are part of what make the experience unique, Sunil says they are actively looking at ways to make the installation more accessible and user-friendly. "Our goal is to install clones of the art, each customised for the place and story it comes from. We're currently in discussion with contemporary museums, open spaces, community centres, and art galleries across several countries where our stories originated."

This list includes Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam, China, Iran, Turkey, Armenia, Georgia, Greece, Italy, Spain, and Portugal. "We're hopeful that by the end of this year, visitors in several of these countries will be able to experience the installations in their own local contexts," says Sunil, who says the project is still in its early stages of public rollout in India.

Going forward, the couple hopes to expand The Gratitude Forest beyond their own story. "We hope to invite authors, artists, and eco-conscious landowners to create their own storytelling spaces, rooted in their unique cultures and experiences. Ultimately, we imagine these immersive installations appearing in public parks and open spaces, making stories of generosity and shared history accessible to everyone," concludes Sunil.



Tailored for the road

Mercedes-Benz's Studio Odeonsplatz in Munich redefines bespoke luxury for the modern driver

Riaan Jacob George

This new luxe address at the heart of Munich might pique the interest of auto enthusiasts, especially those who love luxury wheels. On the subject of sheer indulgence, those drivers who like to ditch the 'off-the-rack' format for a bespoke car will find something to drool about at Munich's Studio Odeonsplatz. In the wake of the recently concluded IAA Mobility, Munich Motor Show, Mercedes-Benz has set up a popup bespoke studio at the heart of the city's heritage quarter. At the very top of Brienner Strasse, one of the city's most architecturally stunning thoroughfares, Odeonsplatz, welcomes luxe consumers – and car enthusiasts alike – until December 31.

Studio Odeonsplatz is dedicated entirely to Mercedes-Benz's Manufaktur, a bespoke service where a small set of high-spending customers can entirely personalise their Mercedes vehicle.

As I step into Studio Odeonsplatz, there is a 'finished piece' a Mercedes-AMG S 63 E Performance. The colour of this car, beautifully christened Snow White with matching white brake callipers is a result of an entire personalisation process, resulting in this one unique car for a customer. Other sought after colour palettes

include Cardinal Red, South Seas Blue Magno, Night Black Magno, Platinum Magno, and Opalite White Bright.

The Studio is an extremely design forward space with large needle and thread installations suspended on the facade, signifying the element of craftsmanship that goes into a made-to-measure car.

Plush pastel carpets, a chic bar dispensing coffee and Champagne and multiple customisation areas characterise the studio. The design specialists mention that every detail can be personalised. Customers can, in principle, create a unique colour for themselves, or choose from 20,000 body colours, embroidery details, colours on the cabin, 40 leather seat colours, and stitching options as well as multiple cabin finishes, right down to adding a monogram. If you want your family's logo or crest to feature on the headrest, you can – pure indulgence.

Throughout the studio, there are multiple counters and immersive experiences where you are taken through the different stages of personalisation. All this, while enjoying a couple of drinks, in a very chic setting.

If you are in Munich this festive season, Studio Odeonsplatz is a must-do, for luxury car lovers.

The popup is on till December 31.



CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

Noah Schnapp has lived a similar evolution through his on-screen character Will Byers – the role where it all began. "It was definitely a challenge this season," he says. "I wanted to stay true to Will's quiet intensity, but I also wanted to bring out a stronger, more direct side of him. Staying true to the character while expanding him was a challenge, but exciting."

Millie reminisces the memories they had cultivated over the years. "Saying goodbye made me realise how I want to be present in everything I do from now on. As much as it has felt like the longest 10 years, it also feels like yesterday. If I could live through it all again, I think I would." She adds, "When my grandma was alive, we showed her Season 3. She had Alzheimer's, so she didn't really understand it, but she kept yelling at the TV, 'That's my baby!' Those moments... I'd love to relive them." Most memories of the *Stranger Things* years are rooted in revived pop curiosity about the era it celebrated.

The playlist
Kate Bush's 'Running Up That Hill' surged to the top of global charts after Season 4, while Eggo waffles saw a real-world sales bump post-Season 1. The Duffers' pastiche of Steven Spielberg's wonder, David Lynch's suburbia and Stephen King's terrors, quickly became a vivid echo chamber for both past and present. The nostalgia that once defined the show now feels almost self-referential, and the cast has become part of the very decade they helped reimagine.



The season of stranger goodbyes

Finn Wolfhard and Caleb McLaughlin – who play Mike Wheeler, the earnest dungeon-master-turned-leader of the Hawkins gang, and Lucas Sinclair, the sharp-witted realist of the party – describe what it is like to have grown up in the glare of that mythology.

"Specifically this time," Finn says, "I feel like everyone was savouring everything. I could feel that everyone just wanted to be around

each other. It was more deliberate – like, 'okay, it's the last season, you better get your hangs in now'. And it's never enough time, but we have our whole lives together too."

Caleb reflects on how that connection spilled beyond Hawkins. "Sometimes you don't realise the impact it makes," he says. "As a kid, you're just doing what you love. Over time, people come up and tell you you've changed their lives, or that your show brought their

families back to the couch. It's a very grateful, humbling feeling."

The Duffers credit much of the show's atmosphere to composers Kyle Dixon and Michael Stein, whose score became synonymous with the series. Matt says, "They're so integral to what the show is. One of our earliest ideas was to go against what you might expect and use a synth score. We thought, we're never going to be able to compete with a John Williams-style orchestra, so let's lean into something

Stills from *Stranger Things*. NETFLIX



different. We even tested it by putting a synth score over images from *E.T.* – it completely transformed the tone."

The show's signature needle-drops of '80s hits have also been essential to its identity. Asked about their favourite songs that never made it into the show, Noah is quick with: "Forever Young" by Alphaville." Caleb adds 'Everybody Wants to Rule the World' by Tears for Fears, and Finn mentions 'Thriller' by Michael Jackson. Millie chuckles. "In Season 2, 'Runaway' by Bon Jovi was actually in the show, and the fact that I actually married Jake [Bongiovi] (son of Jon Bon Jovi) is unbelievable."

Test run
When *Stranger Things* debuted, streaming television was still untested ground and its runaway success redefined how global audiences consume serialised stories. A decade later, as Netflix faces contraction and recalibration, the show's final season feels like a farewell to that early optimism.

"We just feel lucky that we came to

TV at this very specific point in time," Ross explains. "It was a great period, especially for creatives, because new companies needed shows produced. We had no success prior, and the idea was definitely outside the box. Traditional networks told us no one cared about the '80s, that we couldn't centre kids in a show that wasn't made for kids. But Netflix took the risk."

He adds, "Our only hope now is that people keep getting shots like that – that bold ideas keep being made, instead of playing it safe and relying on the algorithm. That's when you get great stuff."

The brothers have since channelled that belief into Upside Down Pictures, their new banner for nurturing original voices beyond Hawkins.

Stranger Things 5 premieres on Netflix on November 26, with the first four episodes dropping that day, three more arriving on Christmas, and the finale landing on New Year's Eve.

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Divya Dugar's *Chaos in a Coupe* chronicles the travels of three adopted indies travelling first class with the intention of altering our perception about street dogs in India



(Clockwise from right) Divya Dugar's indies aboard a train; the author; and snapshots from her travels. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Furries in first class

Shailaja Tripathi

The train pulled out of Old Delhi. On the narrow wooden berth, tucked under a blanket and two travel bags, a lean indie dog lay so still that ticket-checkers walked past without noticing. It had been the same trick 55 times. “She hid for 55 train journeys,” Divya Dugar says with a chuckle. “She was never caught. She knew when to lie absolutely still and when to get up, indies are so intelligent and loving,” says the freelance journalist and documentary producer. The first-class coupe of the Indian Railways allows you to travel with two dogs, which requires you to get a parcel office receipt. “If they find out I have a third dog,

then I would need to pay a hefty fine,” adds Divya, whose latest book, *Chaos in a Coupe: Travelling across India with Three Dogs* (published by Harper Collins), is a love letter to India’s ‘desi’ dogs. For a decade, Divya and her three adopted indies – Tigress, Marco Polo and Pari – travelled across India by train, hitchhiked in Uttarakhand, spent months in quaint village houses in Goa and Rajasthan, and even flew to Paris and Normandy. Their outings were never flamboyant. They were meticulously researched and planned to be immersive and exploratory. They also turned out to be lessons to her followers on Instagram (@chaosinacoupe) on how to travel with their dogs, particularly on Indian trains. To date, Divya, her husband Olivier, two kids and three dogs

have undertaken 75 train journeys and 40 road trips. “I started travelling with my dogs in 2016. It was never supposed to be a book. It was for myself and them. We had no itinerary and to-do lists to tick off, and we would zone in on a place to stay.” That off-the-map approach meant she found old houses, and established deep bonds with the locals. Their dogs and they would become part of the neighbourhood. “We knew the local vegetable sellers, barbers, and neighbours and their pets and the community dogs. The dogs knew which train had the pantry and knew the pantry staff well as they had travelled by the same train several times. They would follow the staff to see if they have a chicken cutlet on the menu. They had a special affinity for trains like Duronto and Rajdhani. They even knew which hotels put out



Travel tips

- Always book two first-class tickets and select ‘Coupe’ as your seat preference. If you are traveling with friends or family, you can book four seats with a cabin preference instead.
- Don’t forget to send a handwritten letter to the Chief Commercial Officer Reservation requesting a coupe or cabin.
- Pick a train that originates from your boarding station. This increases your chances of getting a coupe. Avoid peak season and weekends, when first-class seats are in high demand.
- If your co-passenger agrees to share the space, the Ticket Examiner cannot force you to deboard. They may fine you, but they cannot deny travel. Remember, the Parcel Office books dogs only if you have secured a full coupe or cabin.
- Carry a small medicine kit for emergencies, and bring a blanket or shawl; the AC can get quite cold.
- If your pet gets anxious, double-leash them with a collar and harness for added security.

relish the ordinary things.” Her practical anecdotes are instructive and charming in equal measure. Train travel with dogs, she explains, is not impossible. “The trick is to find a train that originates at your boarding station and to write a letter to the Chief Commercial Officer of Reservations two days before departure.” Divya also writes candidly about loss. Tigress, who had been with her for 16 years, passed on two years ago. “There was a lot of heartbreak, a lot of tears. Writing the book forced me to relive those moments. You come face-to-face with your grief every single day when you write a book like this.” Divya adds that the book is not a mere travelogue, but carries an urgent message about how we see and treat indies. In cities across India, street dogs are increasingly being misunderstood, seen as a nuisance, a danger, and an inconvenience. Divya’s experience refutes that narrative. “They are not security guards or stray nuisances,” she says. “They are companions, each with a personality. They deserve patience and dignity.” Divya wants more people to consider adoption and to understand how hard indies’ lives are on the streets. “Their aggression and behaviour stem from deep-rooted experiences of fear, abuse, intolerance and hunger endured on the streets.” Ultimately, it’s an ordinary story of three extraordinary travellers with the Indian Railways playing the role of a big enabler. “Because it has these three wonderful docs teaching us life lessons, it just becomes extraordinary. I think this story is much bigger than Marco Polo, Tigress, and Paris. They represent all the street dogs of India.”

Priced at ₹499, the book is available online



Check-in, level up

Zostel, the popular hostel chain from India, now expands its portfolio with private villas

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Hostel culture and budget travel are relatively new concepts for India. They have been around only for a decade or so, but fit right into India’s appetite for getting their money’s worth. At the cusp of the boom in the travel industry in 2013, in the Blue City of India, Jodhpur, a small hostel opened that set the benchmark for travel hostels nationwide. Zostel, which is now India’s largest chain of hostels, began as a way to help the youth of the country travel wider and farther on a tight budget. Over the years, Zostel has evolved far beyond its hostel roots, expanding into new formats to cater to different types of travellers. From Zostel Plus, their premium hostels with upgraded experiences, to Zostel



Homes, curated homestays that bring guests closer to local culture, and Zo Trips, designed to offer seamless travel experiences, the brand has steadily built a full-service ecosystem. “Rather than trying to fill the gap, the goal is to be everyone’s trip partner for life. Zostel wants to be a part of your entire journey and anything that you do related to travel or an extension of it, through lifestyle

design,” says Aviral Gupta, CEO, Zostel. He wants travellers to be able to design their own travel personalities based on what suits them best. Now in 2025, with the launch of Zostel Villas, the brand mirrors the evolution of the Indian traveller. “When people first started coming to Zostel, they were mostly youngsters, 22 or 23-years-old,” says Aviral. “Now those same people are 32 or 33,

(Clockwise from left) Zostel villa Wayanad, Kerala; Zostel villa Bhor, Maharashtra; Zostel villa Wayanad. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



with families, partners, and better incomes. They still want to travel with Zostel, but in more premium, private settings.” As India’s middle class matures, travel has moved from budget adventure to personalised comfort. The backpackers who once bunked in Zostel dorms now seek something private where they can unwind with their friends or families without losing that sense of authenticity and community that first drew them in. But unlike other players in the villa-rental space like Airbnb, Zostel is banking on something it is always done well – local connection. “All the hostels and homes are powered by the local community, and locals who want to host guests in their different homes and their villas,” says Aviral. Some of their most popular yet off-beat destinations are Bhor, Panchgani, Stok, Kalpa, Wayanad and Kolad. Each villa will be curated to reflect its surroundings rather than conform to a template. “Standardisation would be only to the extent of the basics. Every hostel is different from the other in terms of how they bring out the original vibe and culture of that place,” he adds. It is an extension of the Zostel

philosophy – authentic, rooted, and built on real people and places, even as it gets more premium. The rise of Zostel Villas also reflects a broader shift in how Indians travel. As digital access deepens and disposable incomes rise, travellers are increasingly seeking experiences that go beyond accommodation. “A larger shift has come along as a natural result of digitisation,” says Aviral. “People are now looking for more on-the-go experiences and want information in real time.” In many ways, Zostel Villas bring the brand back to where it started: with people at the centre of the journey. “The only difference is that we need different products to serve people from different demographics now,” says Aviral. As Indian travellers continue to evolve, so too does the brand that helped shape their wanderlust – from dorm beds to private pools, without ever losing sight of what made people choose Zostel in the first place.

Zostel Villas will launch in the first quarter of 2026 with its first villa in Wayanad. Cost per night will be tentatively ₹12,999.



Swinging with time

At the DLF Golf and Country Club in Gurugram, the morning sun caught the glint of golf clubs and polished steel watches alike. The fourth edition of the Omega Trophy teed off on November 7 with the quiet confidence of an event that has found its rhythm – part competition, part reunion for India’s growing golf community. For Omega, precision is more than a promise; it is a legacy. The Swiss watchmaker, famed for its role as the official timekeeper of the Olympics and even for measuring time on the moon, has long been associated with sports that reward focus and finesse. Golf, with its poise and patience, fits seamlessly into that tradition. This year’s tournament drew accomplished golfers from across the country, celebrating skill and sportsmanship on one of India’s most respected courses. The evening brought together familiar faces, including friend of the brand, actor Abhishek Bachchan and Mandira Bedi, who joined the post-tournament gathering. As the day drew to a close, the trophy once again reminded players and spectators alike that excellence, whether in watchmaking or on the greens, is always a matter of timing.



Moonray, which made its debut in 2021 as a free-spirited offshoot of heritage atelier Chanakya International, has evolved into Chorus, a brand that offers everything from couture to wellness, home, and a café



Join the chorus

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On India's evolving luxury landscape, Moonray made its debut in 2021 as a free-spirited offshoot of Chanakya International, the heritage atelier founded in 1984, best known for its embroidery collaborations with global houses such as Dior. Co-founded by Karishma Swali and her daughter Avantika Swali, Moonray channelled Gen Z's creative energy into Chanakya's artisanal mastery. The vision was to democratise couture by blending sustainability with accessibility. The brand made upcycled denim desirable, reimaged traditional embroidery in relaxed silhouettes, and introduced vegan accessories crafted from organic cotton and natural indigo dyes. It spoke to a new generation that valued style and responsibility in equal measure. "Moonray was always about ease and freedom," Karishma recalls. "We wanted to preserve the soul of craft, but without the stiffness that often comes with couture. It was about

joy, movement, and a more human connection to what we wear." That philosophy resonated. Moonray became known for its ability to bridge couture's grandeur with everyday elegance, transforming high-end techniques into wardrobe staples. But even as it established its voice, the Swalis were already thinking bigger.

Tradition meets contemporary Cut to 2025, and Moonray has now evolved into Chorus, a multidisciplinary atelier. Under the Swali family banner, the transition marked what Karishma calls "a new chapter – one that invites more voices while safeguarding craft and consciousness". While Moonray's upcycled denim remains a signature, Chorus expands the canvas, folding that youthful spirit into a wider universe that now includes couture, ready-to-wear, wellness, home, and even a café. At the heart of this vision is the brand's new flagship in Mumbai's Kala Ghoda – a three-storey space designed by Karishma and the Chorus Design Collective. The



gallery-like interior blends natural stone, warm woods, and monumental embroidered artworks to create what she calls "a dialogue between earth, air, light, and water". The ground floor hosts Chorus Ready-to-Wear, where architectural silhouettes meet sustainable materials. Blue marble interiors evoke the sky, while ochre stone details bring warmth. A curved cove showcases pieces from Chorus Concept – including woven raffia, ceramic objects, and handmade jewellery that blur the line between art and design. Upstairs, Chorus Wellness extends the brand's tactile philosophy to self-care. "For us, it's about expanding the idea of craft," says Karishma. "We wanted to take that sensitivity into daily rituals – through candles, soaps, and oils that celebrate natural processes." On the top floor sits Chorus Café,

envisioned as a community space where design, dialogue, and creativity meet. There is also Chorus Edition, a couture sanctum that draws on Chanakya's 40-year savoir-faire. Here, 13th-generation artisans reinterpret traditional needlework and weaving into modern forms. "Through Chorus, we realised that the voice of craft transcends disciplines," Karishma explains. "We've always looked at craft not only through fashion but also through culture and the arts – it's a fertile platform that lets us collaborate, to move beyond boundaries." **Modern luxury** This cross-disciplinary spirit finds form in the Autumn-Winter 2025 collection, titled Other Worlds. The line marks a quiet shift – deliberate,



(Clockwise from below) Products from Chorus Wellness; one of the pieces from Chorus Concept; tablescape at Chorus Café; interiors at Chorus flagship store; and designs from the brand's Ready To Wear vertical. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



curious, and rooted in feeling. Chorus draws from the infinite possibilities of craft but refracts them through a contemporary lens: proportions shift, surfaces disrupt expectations, and familiar silhouettes take on new dimensions. Floral motifs recur throughout, embroidered, sculpted, or imagined in the weave. "They're not literal blooms," Karishma notes. "They're like memories – flowers with too many petals, leaves that hold stories." In some pieces, petals unfold across hems or shoulders; in others, 3D crystal brooches gather into delicate, wearable bouquets. The brand's signature organic denim remains central – handwoven from rain-fed kala cotton and dyed with natural indigo. Chorus also collaborates with heritage looms in Tamil Nadu and the weaving communities of Maheshwar, weaving old-world precision into new-world design. "Our ready-to-wear is advanced contemporary," Karishma says. "It's everyday, but elevated by the quiet intelligence of handcraft. With Edition, we explore rarer textile histories through a modern lens. And with Concept, we let curiosity lead – creating objects of beauty and meaning. Each vertical is a voice, and together they form a conversation led by courage, curiosity, and freedom of expression." And perhaps that is what defines this new phase best. Chorus is not just a label – it is an ecosystem, one that honours legacy while creating space for discovery. In Karishma's words, "It's not about being old or new, couture or contemporary. It's about creating something that feels alive".



Mitrajit Bhattacharya

Georges Kern is a man on a mission. Ever since he took over the reins of Breitling in 2017, he has transformed the brand that was once known for hard-nosed tool watches into one that balances heritage, elegance, performance and contemporary cool. After the successful relaunches Chronomat, Superocean and Navitimer and the addition of the Lady Premier, a new range of watches designed only for women, Georges – who was in India late October for the launch of Breitling's first boutique in Mumbai – spoke about Breitling's evolution. On the cards is the plan to launch two new sister brands – Gallet and Universal Genève – under what he calls his "House of Brands".

Excerpts from the interview:

Q: Do you intend to claim the woman's watch category with the Lady Premier?
A: A brand's essence does not change. Some are naturally masculine, others feminine – Cartier is more feminine, Breitling more masculine, and perhaps only Rolex appeals to both genders in equal measure. But that does not mean a masculine brand can't make



The big loud pilot watch rebrand

In Mumbai, Georges Kern, CEO of Breitling, talks about Lady Premier, a new range of watches designed for women, and the Swiss watchmaker's two new sister brands, Gallet and Universal Genève

watches for women. Models designed for women account for about 17% of our turnover; we think that can reach 25%. Over the past few years, we have built that segment step by step – first,

sports pieces such as the Superocean and Chronomat range for women, then Navitimer, and now the Lady Premier. Eight years ago, Breitling's image was "big, loud pilot watches" – like a Hummer. Today, we are more like an Aston Martin SUV: powerful, but elegant. The Lady Premier completes our presence in the female segment with a refined, smaller-sized option that works beautifully in markets like India and Asia.

Q: Since you took over, Breitling has become more elegant and less about instruments. What does that change mean for the brand?
A: Transformations are always tricky. The real breakthrough was the Chronomat. We launched it right before the pandemic, investing heavily when everyone else paused. When markets reopened, demand exploded. The Chronomat captured our modern-retro philosophy and showed people that Breitling could be cool, elegant and versatile. Then came the Navitimer. Social media confirmed the shift. Other Swiss brands can be conservative; our advertising, boutique design and the Lady Premier film show that we're approachable and daring.

Q: You are expanding despite the tariffs and geopolitical turmoil. How do you sustain momentum?
A: We just announced a major partnership with the The National Football League, a professional American football league. The US sales are 25% of our turnover. To offset tariffs, we raised prices four per cent in the US and two per cent elsewhere. Europe is weak, but Latin America is strong, as are parts of the Middle East. Japan cooled slightly after a great year, and India is rising fast.

Q: You are visiting India for the second consecutive year. How do you see this market?
A: We had three boutiques 18 months ago; now we have seven and plan 10. The limitation is not demand but the lack of luxury malls. More are coming, hopefully. Encouragingly, more Indians are buying locally rather than in Dubai or London. What's missing is the full experience: the Rue Saint-Honoré or Avenue Montaigne feel. Once that retail infrastructure is ready, every luxury brand will follow.

Q: How will Gallet and Universal Genève flank Breitling?
A: In November, at the Dubai Watch Week, we will present our House of Brands – three complementary marques. Gallet will cover the CHF 2,500-4,500 range. Breitling will remain our core, CHF 3,500-50,000 and Universal Genève will start around CHF 15,000 and go up. Gallet will be a sister brand, clearly marked Manufactured by Breitling, but with its own history and design. It was used by the Wright Brothers, worn by President Truman; it produced the first GMT, the Flying Officer. When we aimed to reposition Breitling as a 100% manufacture brand, we left behind entry-level pieces like the Colt. Gallet fills that gap with authenticity and accessibility. Universal Genève is a different story – if Gallet is smart, Universal is brilliant. It occupies the high-luxury space, with an average price near CHF 30,000. It's about everyday wearability and design, not complications. We'll offer micro-rotor automatics and chronographs – because people expect that at this level – and a steel automatic micro-rotor will start around CHF 15,000. But the real focus is aesthetic excellence and effortless luxury.



(Clockwise from left) A watch from Breitling's Lady Premier range; CEO of Breitling, Georges Kern; interiors of the boutique; and a model sporting a timepiece from the collection. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT.



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Malayalam

Deeply-felt conversational drama



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All that two people who were eons ago the world to each other get, when they meet years later, is just a little while (‘Ithiri Neram’) to spend together. Each word uttered between them carries with it the weight of their past and the mystery of each other’s present and the paths their lives have taken in the intervening years. In Prasanth Vijay’s third film *Ithiri Neram*, much has changed in the lives of Anjana (Zarin Shihab) and Anish (Roshan Mathew) from the last time they talked, yet when they meet, it is as if they never stopped talking.

It being the kind of film in which the flow of conversations dictate the flow of the film, the gentle manner in which the narrative progresses is a testimony to the dialogue writing as well as the sheer naturalness of the lead performers. It does take a bit of time for us to get into the groove of their exchanges, which turns more natural as they drop their initial reticence with every passing minute. Right from the point we are pulled into the world of this estranged couple with a lot of unresolved baggage crying out for closure, we are provided only a slight trickle of memories from their past.

The city remains pulsating in the background, as a carrier of their past memories and a witness to their present.

The conversations play out deceptively in the initial half, making us wonder where the writer Vishak Shakti is intending to take this. At each turn, the film throws at us glimpses and possibilities of some familiar pathways through which the narrative could have progressed, be it the inevitable intervention of moral goons in the kind of situation they are caught in or that of a staid, melodramatic relationship drama. Or it could even just go on with the conversation, as some of the classic films of the genre have done. But to Prasanth’s credit, he does not take any of these familiar paths and takes us on a ride filled with tension and humour in equal measure, though the unexpected and quirky turn of the screenplay puts an end to the engrossing conversation.

Although ‘Ithiri Neram’ is a bit more mainstream in its treatment compared to his previous films *Athishayangalude Venal* and *Daayam*, those elements inject some charm into the kind of story that this is. The songs by Basil C.J., especially the opening song reminiscent of Baburaj which ushers us into the film, go a long way in setting the mood. Parallel to the couple’s conversations happens the banter between Chanchal (Anand Manmadhan) and Rajan (Nandhu), who both are an important presence in Anish’s life as in the narrative. Without these four capable actors holding together the narrative, the film might have fallen apart.

With *Ithiri Neram*, Prasanth Vijay crafts a deeply felt conversational drama with an uncommon turn.

Ithiri Neram is currently running in theatres



Brave take on stifling relationships

At a time when alpha-male narratives dominate mainstream cinema, writer-director Rahul Ravindran’s Telugu film turns the gaze to offer a more nuanced perspective

Telugu

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The *Girlfriend* is a film for the ages. Its layered exploration of men, women, and the childhood experiences that shape their adult relationships is timeless. Writer and director Rahul Ravindran crafts a slow-burn drama that cuts close enough to make us pause and reflect on our emotional maturity and approach to love.

Headlined by Rashmika Mandanna, the film is a refreshing counterpoint to the larger-than-life, alpha-male-driven narratives that have dominated mainstream cinema of late. Its courage lies not only in addressing suffocating relationships but also in the smaller, quieter details often considered too niche for box-office appeal.

Bhooma Devi (Rashmika), a postgraduate student of English Literature, introduces us to one such detail. When her professor, Sudhir (Rahul Ravindran), enters class and wryly admits he sometimes wonders whether his course will still have takers it is a sharp comment on a world increasingly skewed towards degrees that guarantee high-paying careers.

When Bhooma says that books and stories allow her to escape into another world, and that one day she hopes to write for young readers, we glimpse the contours of her inner life. The film peels back her layers slowly, revealing her vulnerabilities and convictions with care. Literary references, including Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, appear organically within the narrative, adding texture without alienating audiences who might not share her literary inclinations.

Now for the bigger picture. The charming college heartthrob Vikram (Dheekshith Shetty) falls for the studious Bhooma (Rashmika Mandanna). On the surface, it is a familiar mainstream trope, but *The Girlfriend* gives it a sharper, more honest edge.

Rahul Ravindran examines the

The Girlfriend

Director: Rahul Ravindran

Cast: Rashmika Mandanna, Dheekshith Shetty, Rao Ramesh, Rohini, Anu Emmanuel

Duration: 138 minutes

Storyline: What happens when a woman, caught in a stifling relationship, decides to break free?



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psychology behind why someone like Vikram gravitates towards a woman like Bhooma instead of a bolder, more self-assured one – embodied by Durga (Anu Emmanuel). The film does not romanticise his choices or demonise confident women as less deserving of affection; instead, it presents the uncomfortable truth with refreshing candour.

Within the broader arc of a stifling relationship – where a woman is emotionally moulded into the ideal future wife – Rahul Ravindran addresses an uncomfortable truth, both in society and cinema: a man’s desire for a partner who resembles his mother. At times, this stems from affection and admiration for nurturing qualities; more often, it comes from a deep-seated sense of entitlement – the expectation that every aspect of a man’s life must be cared for.

The scenes in which Bhooma nearly becomes a house help – cleaning Vikram’s hostel room or fetching his lunch in the canteen – may feel dramatic, but they are also painfully revealing. The relationship unfolds in a world of impressionable 20-somethings still learning to define themselves.

Shorn of glamour and walking with a restrained grace that mirrors her guarded nature, Rashmika Mandanna delivers one of her most measured performances. She internalises Bhooma’s confusion, restraint, and vulnerability in love with an honesty that lingers long after the film ends.

In a standout scene, a theatre rehearsal becomes a tool for self-discovery – a moment of liberation followed by heartbreak that lays bare the fault lines in the relationship. Several smaller episodes, too, gradually heighten the tension.

A striking mirror scene featuring Rohini in a near-silent but powerful appearance delivers one of the film’s most potent moments. A visual echo from *Animal* is also woven in, subtle yet deliberate.

Composers Hesham Abdul Wahab and Prashanth R Vihari, and cinematographer Krishnan Vasant heighten the emotional intensity of these moments, their work perfectly attuned to the film’s mood without ever drawing attention away from it.

The film also benefits from Dheekshith Shetty’s finely calibrated performance. He brings charm to Vikram, revealing his manipulative streak gradually, never tipping into caricature. It is a role designed to evoke discomfort, and Dheekshith plays it with an unnerving precision.

For boys and men who wonder what could possibly be wrong in expecting a woman to simply be a “good, caring wife” in return for having her needs met, *The Girlfriend* holds up a mirror. Crucially, it does not do so by turning the story into a men-versus-women battle. Bhooma’s voice of reason comes from Rahul himself, and it feels almost as if he is playing an extension of his off-screen self – thoughtful, empathetic, and self-aware. Those familiar with his public persona and the sensitivity with which he speaks about gender and relationships will recognise the parallels.

Anu Emmanuel, too, leaves a quiet mark, her performance natural and assured, lending the story an added layer of nuance.

As the film gathers momentum, we find ourselves rooting for Bhooma – for her to reclaim her agency and make decisions for herself. The narrative also confronts the guilt, shame, and emotional wreckage that often follow a toxic breakup. Small, symbolic choices drive these moments home – like the scene in which a transformed Bhooma steps out without instinctively reaching for her dupatta.

At some level, Bhooma becomes every woman burdened by fear and guilt, torn between love and self-worth. The film asks a difficult but necessary question: is a relationship worth preserving if it doesn’t give equal space to both partners?

And then there is the cultural echo. Remember the viral song “*Why This Kolaveri Di?*” and the countless “soup boy” narratives glorified in cinema since? *The Girlfriend* urges its male viewers to look past the humour of such tropes – to look inward, to reflect, and to understand.

The Girlfriend is an important, brave film that asks uncomfortable questions and tells both girls and boys that relationships should not be claustrophobic.

The Girlfriend is currently runing in theatres

Unflinching take on the casual cruelty of tradition

Hindi

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Those who remember the tumultuous Eighties would attest that the landmark Shah Bano case reshaped Indian secularism and the fault lines of identity politics for decades. But beyond the courtrooms, objections from clerics and political outrage, a story of faith, human dignity, and a woman’s rights unfolded within the four walls.

Cast within the realm of fiction and point of view, director Suparn Varma reimagines the story of a devoted wife abandoned post-remarriage, her husband’s instant triple talaq, a brutal severance of support, and a fierce battle for maintenance that ripples a domestic dispute into a national debate, with deep socio-political ramifications.

Hailing from traditional Muslim families, Abbas Khan (Emraan Hashmi) and Shazia Bano (Yami



Gautam) make for a winsome couple. He is a hotshot lawyer while she is a homemaker with an opinion.

Her God fearing, progressive father (Danish Husain) provides the cover she needs in a society that doesn’t practice what it preaches. One day, Shazia discovers that Abbas doesn’t like to mend things in his life. He prefers to change them. Soon, she finds that the habit is not limited to a pressure cooker; he brings a second wife to the household. After the initial shock and pain, Shazia settles for her fate.

Unwilling to pay the monthly maintenance ordered by the court, Abbas divorces her and argues that, as the talaq ended their relationship, he didn’t need to pay her maintenance. When courts say there is no variance between Muslim Personal Law and Section 125 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, Abbas and the clerics turn the domestic dispute into an encroachment on the personal space of minorities, bringing persecution complex and victimhood of a section to the fore. Varma sees the complex space

with an even-handed gaze, refusing to vilify faith itself but probing its interpretation. He ensures that the film is not reduced to a Muslim social that either romanticises or pities women, but asks bigger questions on gender parity, education, and minority rights.

The film’s strength is in its restraint. It does not hammer the message that women’s rights or *Haq* is not granted; it is seized. It does not use education as a feel-good subplot but as the silent source of Shazia Bano’s rebellion.

At the same time, writer Reshu Nath confronts patriarchy head-on as the film’s emotional and intellectual core, portraying it not as a villainous caricature but as an insidious web of misinterpreted faith, legal loopholes, and societal norms that systematically silence women like Shazia.

Haq not only speaks of women’s rights but also interrogates their costs. It critiques judges who hide behind personal laws and so-called custodians of faith who use religion for vote bank politics. More importantly, the movie discusses the

tendency of a section of the Muslim elite who consider the demand for Muslim women’s rights as a tool to humiliate the minorities and trample on their personal laws.

As the resilient Shazia, Yami delivers a career-defining performance. Combining emotional depth and dignity, she masterfully brings the character to life. Hashmi layers charm with quiet cruelty, humanising a potentially unlikeable

Haq

Director: Suparn Varma

Cast: Yami Gautam, Emraan Hashmi, Sheeba Chaddha, S.M. Zaheer, Danish Husain

Storyline: Shazia Bano seeks justice when her husband stops maintenance after remarrying. His attempt to silence her with instant triple talaq sparks a national debate on women’s and minority rights.

character without seeking sympathy. Backed by powerful writing, Abbas’ ideological clashes with the system in the court feel authentic and intellectually charged.

However, those who could read between the lines would remember that the Shah Bano case brought Bharatiya Janata Party from the margins to the mainstream politics on the agenda of Muslim appeasement. Without reflecting on the roles of political parties and legislation that followed the Supreme Court judgment, Varma, using creative licence, takes the film away from the facts of the Shah Bano case, to tie it to the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, 2019 or the Triple Talaq law which the current dispensation celebrates while many find problematic and piecemeal at best. The end note leaves one with a feeling of sitting through a well-mounted piece of surrogate advertising, but then, in a sense, all art is propaganda.

Haq is currently running in theatres

Frankenstein

Director: Guillermo del Toro

Cast: Oscar Isaac, Jacob Elordi, Mia Goth, Christoph Waltz

Storyline: A brilliant scientist pushes the boundaries of the possible and has to face the consequences



English

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In the making-of documentary, *Frankenstein: The Anatomy Lesson*, director Guillermo del Toro says he is closest to the stories of *Pinocchio* and *Frankenstein*. “Both are stories of ‘abnormal kids,’ whose fathers are disappointed in some way.” Thus, del Toro’s adaptation of Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel, rather than being a cautionary tale about unbridled scientific ambition, is a story of fathers, sons, love, rage, terror, and disappointment. The symphonic approach, del Toro says, “fuses everything – the cinematography, the wardrobe, and the set design.” Kate Hawley’s costumes, which have Victor Frankenstein

(Oscar Isaac) more Mick Jagger than mad scientist, and Mia Goth’s Elizabeth’s costumes, which reveal her love of Nature, propel the story forward. *Frankenstein* opens with a prelude. It is 1857 and on an expedition to the North Pole, a Royal Danish ship, the *Horisont*, is trapped in ice. As the crew try to free the ship, they see an injured man being chased by another. The crew manage to sink the Creature under the ice and bring the injured man, Frankenstein, on board. Frankenstein tells the ship’s captain, Anderson (Lars Mikkelsen), that the Creature will not leave until it has him. Frankenstein goes on to tell his story in Part 1: Victor’s Story. Frankenstein’s father, Baron Leopold, (Charles Dance), is a brilliant surgeon but aloof and abusive. After his mother (also played by Goth) dies giving birth to his brother, William, Frankenstein decides to find a

way to conquer death. Frankenstein’s studies take him to Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, from where he is expelled following his experiments with reanimating corpses. Frankenstein meets a wealthy arms dealer, Henrich Harlander (Christoph Waltz) who is willing to bankroll his experiments, with a shady reason for his generosity. Shocked and disappointed with the lack of development in the Creature (Jacob Elordi) he made from the body parts of soldiers from the Crimean War, Frankenstein sets his lab on fire. The Creature comes aboard the *Horisont* and in the Wraparound says, “My maker told his tale? Then I will tell you mine.” Part 2: The Creature’s Tale tells of the Creature’s escape from the burning lab, his stay at the hunter’s cottage where he is shown love and learning by the Blind Man (David Bradley). Though when the family do

not see him, they thank him for his many kindnesses, calling him the Spirit of the Forest. When they set eyes on him, they attack, causing the Creature to realise, “this was the way of the world. It would hunt you and kill you just for being who you are.” The finale sees Frankenstein and the Creature move towards forgiveness and hope. While all the cast are excellent – from Dance’s cold ferocity to Waltz’s sinister silkiness and Isaac’s fatal pride, Elordi’s gentle, tragic monster is the beating heart of the film. Apart from the physical cost of the role, including 10 hours in makeup, Elordi’s personification of childlike curiosity, gentleness, hurt, and anger is breathtaking. Now we can wait with bated breath for his Heathcliff, in *Wuthering Heights*. Frankenstein is currently streaming on Netflix

Snippets



Bramayugam to be screened at the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures

Malayalam period-folk-horror-thriller *Bramayugam*, directed by Rahul Sadasivan and starring Mammootty, will be screened at the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures in Los Angeles on February 12, 2026, as part of the “Where the Forest Meets the Sea: Folklore from Around the World” film series. The film series takes place from January 10 to February 12. The movie, produced by Night Shift Studios and YNOT studios, also stars Arjun Asokan and Siddharth Bharathan. *Bramayugam* deals with Thevan (Arjun), who escapes slavery and enters Kodumon Potty’s (Mammootty) mansion. Soon, he realises he is stuck in the mansion with Potti and his cook, played by Siddharth.



Vilayath Buddha set to release on November 21

Vilayath Buddha, headlined by Prithviraj Sukumaran, is set to release worldwide on November 21. The movie, directed by debutant Jayan Nambiar, is produced by Sandeep Senan under the banner of Urvashi Theatres. The film, starring Priyamvada Krishnan as the female lead, is based on the eponymous novel written by GR Indugopan. Prithviraj plays a sandalwood smuggler named Double Mohan in the thriller set in Marayoor, Idukki, known for high-quality sandalwood. The film features Shammi Thilakan, Anu Mohan, Rajashri Nair, and TJ Arunachalam in prominent roles.



Martin Scorsese hosts New York screening of Homebound

Filmmaker Martin Scorsese hosted a special screening of Neeraj Ghaywan’s *Homebound* — India’s official entry for the 2025 Academy Awards in the Best International Feature Film category. The exclusive event, followed by a Q&A between Scorsese and Ghaywan, drew an audience of film enthusiasts, critics, and industry veterans. Produced by Dharma Productions, *Homebound* has been steadily gaining international acclaim since its world premiere at the Cannes Film Festival earlier this year. The screening comes as *Homebound* begins its official Oscar campaign, with critics hailing it as one of the most introspective Indian films of the year.



A blood-soaked bildungsroman

Yautja-revivalist Dan Trachtenberg turns the Predator’s ritualised ultraviolence into a gorgeously unhinged space western about learning to feel without losing your edge

English

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Dan Trachtenberg has always read the pulpy mythos of the *Predator*-verse through a distinctly anthropological lens. The premise this time is as primal as any in the franchise, but Trachtenberg uses it to dig for commentaries on the violence of masculine expectation. By folding the franchise’s blood-slick mythology of the hunt and hierarchy, inward, the Yautja-revivalist – behind *Prey* (2022) and this year’s animated anthology *Predator: Killer of Killers* – has done something few modern blockbuster directors can do, by turning one of cinema’s most brutish creatures into a misunderstood softie. A young Yautja, Dek (played with surprising nuance by Dimitrius Schuster-Koloamatangi), is exiled from his clan for being “too small” and “too weak.” His father – also played by Schuster-Koloamatangi – would rather see him culled for being the runt of the litter. When his elder brother Kwei, sacrifices himself to save his life, Dek is condemned to the hellscape of Genna to reclaim honour through ritualised slaughter of the strongest. His mission: slay the Kalisk, a creature so vicious that even the apex hunters of the galaxy refuse to face it. Genna feels like an ecosystem in revolt. Everything – flora, fauna, and otherwise – seems to be plotting its own creative form of homicide. Trachtenberg captures the planet’s lush chaos with a biologist’s curiosity, finding wonder in grotesquerie that glistens with appetite. Genna dismantles Dek’s arrogance one cut at a time until instinct replaces ritual, and the hunter becomes just another organism trying not to die. Here on, the film’s first act resembles a fevered nature documentary, and Trachtenberg directs it

Predator: Badlands

Director: Dan Trachtenberg

Cast: Elle Fanning, Dimitrius Schuster-Koloamatangi

Storyline: Cast out from its clan, a Yautja and an unlikely ally, embark on a treacherous journey in search of the ultimate adversary

like a gory, existential space-western that’s reminiscent of HBO’s *Scavengers Reign* in its morphing visceral aesthetics, and recalls the survival-of-the-fittest style encounters of *Monster Hunter*. Dek’s exile brings him to Thia, a bisected synthetic marooned from some forgotten Weyland-Yutani mission (yup, that Weyland-Yutani). Elle Fanning plays her with disarming brightness. Still smiling after being torn in half, Thia talks like a precocious child and thinks like a philosopher. Though half a body she still feels more human than anyone else in the film. The interspecies screwball comedy between Dek and Thia carries the rhythm of discovery, as the machine teaches the monster to feel. *Badlands* has an elemental visual clarity. The film is less painterly than *Prey* or the animated delirium of *Killer of Killers*, but it compensates with density and texture. Cinematographer Jeff Cutter treats light as something tactile. Shadows feel almost wet and sticky, and every frame feels touched by something living. The saturations shift with mood rather than geography as Dek’s perception widens. The practical effects have considerable weight, and the digital textures never smother the world’s physicality. Sarah Schachner and Benjamin Wallfisch’s score thrums like a war chant from another dimension, fusing *The Hu*-style throat-sung ferocity of (something-like?) distorted Mongolian death metal, filtered through droning Travis Scott auto-tune electronica that make the film’s violence feel epic and earned. And the snarling blend of guttural clicks that makes up the Yautja tongue is fascinating on its own, but Trachtenberg’s smartest move was using Thia’s synthetic cognition as a meta universal translator. The choreography balances pulp and poetry with near-perfect precision. Trachtenberg has a gift for absurdity that never feels indulgent, and the propulsive action is laced with comic ingenuity (one brilliant set piece involves Thia’s detached legs kung-fu fighting an ambush of synths

in tandem with her torso). Even the studio-mandated inclusion of a silly token sidekick – the big-eyed, gremlin-like “Bud” – avoids any saccharine Disneyfication, and instead serves as a living echo of Dek’s emotional evolution (among other Chekhovian reveals). The film’s hyperviolence also pauses to make room for observation. The unlikely companionship develops through small exchanges of trust. There’s also sly humour in Thia’s attempts to “train” Dek in empathy, and a melancholy in the way she studies his vulnerability. Thia’s remark – “I could survive on my own, but why would I want to?” – becomes the film’s thesis. What Trachtenberg understands (and what most of his predecessors didn’t) is that while the Yautja worship strength, their greatest weakness is their inability to see that cooperation is its truest form. The franchise has rarely allowed space for tenderness, but *Badlands* does. It’s desperately trying to unlearn the idea of learned empathy as some sort of evolutionary liability. There’s a kind of moral archaeology at work here. The original *Predator* revelled in the Reagan-era machismo of muscles, guns, and one-liners as proof of worth; and this film dismantles that code from within. Trachtenberg recasts the Yautja’s initiation rites as a primer in emotional literacy, and Dek’s exile strips away codified masculinity. There’s something almost queer in Dek’s coming-of-age. He has evolved in ways his species never intended, and so has the franchise. But Trachtenberg doesn’t make the gnarly, gorgeous carnage of the Predator feel any less lethal. Cinema’s most enthusiastic murder tourist still rips, bleeds, and flexes with the swagger of a classic Yautja bloodfest, but *Badlands* turns the galaxy’s most macho pastime into a strangely moving study of empathy in armour. Predator: Badlands is currently running in theatres