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PHOTO: BIKRAMJIT BOSE/*VOGUE* INDIA

September October

'READY FOR LIFTOFF', PAGE 76



AGATA SERGE.

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TORY BURCH.

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KANU PALIWAL.

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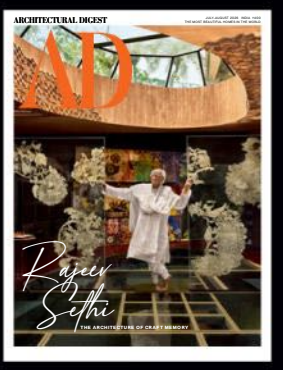
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MEET YOUR HEROES



WORLD OF HER OWN
Off Campus actor Mika Abdalla enjoys a light moment on the set of the cover shoot in Los Angeles; *Moonlit white structured dress,* FALGUNI SHANE PEACOCK.

This may sound like a humblebrag, but it isn't. Over the last three days of participating in the decathlon that is the Vogue Wedding Atelier, I have found myself embroiled in a peculiar phenomenon. Being approached by starry-eyed folk who ask for a photo, offer compliments. Say that the work and comportment inspire them. Which is rather confusing for someone who was a near-permanent fixture in the principal's office for all the wrong reasons.

While perfectly lovely in the moment, I am unaccustomed to and uncomfortable with being put on a pedestal of any kind. It makes me question what we seek out in those we think we admire. Visibly, my job comes with all the gilded trappings of a *Vogue* editor's role—access to dazzling fashion and celebrities, hosting parties, travelling… you know the drill. But it would devastate me if those were the reasons people were paying attention. This stuff is just fairy dust, and when it settles, what really matters is how hard you worked even when no one was watching. How well you used the access and opportunities that came your way—and not just for self-aggrandisement. How fertile an environment you created for collaboration and artistry. And what I believe should be every good leader's goal— building a team so talented and confident that you eventually make yourself redundant.

One of the young women I met asked, "What motto defines *Vogue*?" I truly believe the answer to that is the pursuit of excellence. The pursuit part being critical—as my dad always reminds me, the

AGATA SERGE.





REST LIFE
Left: In 'Country Cousins' (page 84), models Varsha Gopal (pictured) and Antara show us how slow mornings in nature can recharge us in ways that bed rotting in the city simply cannot.

day you think you are the best, someone hungrier will knock you off your high horse.

To that end, we thought we would play this issue out a bit differently. The aim was to create something au courant but also timeless, so that if you were to revisit it many moons later, you would still find something to tickle your brain. Instead of traditional articles, the magazine is filled with essays and conversations, fronted by a delightful potpourri of people the *Vogue* team personally admires, each a progressive in their own field.

From centenarian painter Krishen Khanna, who has outlived many of the friends whose companionship "enlarged my life", we learn that "friendship does not disappear because the person is no longer there. Some conversations continue within you."

Thanks to record-breaking athlete Jyothi Yarraji, we are assured that having fun can actually make you more successful. She admits the act of dressing up provides respite from the intense pressure of competition, saying, "If I keep my mind occupied by thinking about my hair, my makeup or how I look, it gives me something joyful to focus on, and helps to reduce my anxiety before a race."

Raising the next generation of boys doesn't come with an instruction manual, but journalist Faye D'Souza and tennis champ Sania Mirza know a thing or two about forging new paths. "Strength is being able to call out the privilege and patriarchy among your own friends. I want my son to hold two halves at once, like Sania, who has learned to be tough when she needs to and be gentle elsewhere. Men must contain these multitudes too," insists D'Souza.

Joining the artists, reporters and athletes already mentioned are scientists, musicians, actors, activists, designers, authors and more than a few multihyphenates who defy attempts at stricter categorisation. As filmmaker Margaret Zhang puts it, "I have become less interested in stories that explain women than in those that accompany them. To explain someone is to resolve them. To accompany someone is to remain beside them while they hesitate, contradict themselves, disappear for a while or change direction."

Our 19th anniversary edition, similarly, hesitates to resolve itself into a neat little box of what a 'fashion magazine' is meant to be.

This one is for the readers. Long may we prevail.



KANU PALIWAL

What are you discarding this season; what are you anticipating?



TENZING DAKPA.

Meera Syal

Writer, 'Life isn't all ha ha hee hee', page 54

"One thing I want to leave behind: complacency. Complacency is the enemy of change, of curiosity, of hope. No more of that please. One thing I am looking forward to: going on tour with my memoir as autumn rolls in. After the solitude of months of writing, finally meeting readers and audiences is such a joy."

Meera Syal is an award-winning actor, screen writer and novelist. Her first novel, Anita and Me, *is now on the UK school curriculum.*

Christine Webb

Writer, 'Past lives', page 36

"I'd like to leave behind the feeling that I should say yes to everything. I'm learning that every yes is also a no to something else. A wise friend recently told me, 'Saying no opens doors.' I love NYC in the autumn: the leaves turning brilliant colours, crisp mornings and that feeling of settling down into winter."

Dr Christine Webb is an assistant professor in NYU's department of environmental studies. Her debut book, The Arrogant Ape, *was recently named one of the New York Times 100 Notable Books of the Year.*

Priyamvada Natarajan
Writer, 'Chasing stars', page 66

"I would like to leave cardigans behind this autumn. And I'm looking forward to resuming work on my second book and returning to piano lessons."

Priyamvada Natarajan is an astrophysicist and chair of astronomy at Yale University. Her work uncovers the mysteries of dark matter and supermassive black holes. She is the author of Mapping the Heavens: The Radical Scientific Ideas That Reveal the Cosmos.

Justine Rae Mellocastro
Hairstylist, 'Country cousins', page 84

"I'm letting go of the idea of what a career is supposed to look like, and inviting more play into my life. With nature, at work, making art, dancing more, hanging upside down, climbing things."

With over 18 years of experience as a celebrity hairstylist, Justine Rae Mellocastro draws inspiration for her work from observing nature—the lava-tinged ocean at sunset, shapes found on forest floors, a bird preening.



KARAN KHANNA (KAJOLI KHANNA IN FRONT OF HER GRANDFATHER'S ARTWORK—*EMMAUS* (1979) BY KRISHEN KHANNA).

Kajoli Khanna
Writer, 'Eternal student', page 22

"I'm ready to leave behind the need for certainty. Some of the most rewarding moments in life have arrived unexpectedly, and I'm learning to trust that more. This season, I'm looking forward to being surprised—to discovering artists, places and ideas that shift the way I see the world."

Kajoli Khanna is a London-based specialist in South Asian modern and contemporary art. She is a director of Grosvenor Gallery and also curates exhibitions and writes on South Asian art and culture.

Agata Serge
Photographer, 'Ready for liftoff', page 76

"This season, I want to leave behind the idea that quantity defines success. Instead, I'm looking forward to continuing to choose quality over quantity, both professionally and personally. My analogue process reminds me that every frame matters and that the best work takes time. I hope to keep creating with the same care, curiosity, and patience that first made me fall in love with photography."

Agata Serge is a Polish fashion photographer based in New York, working between Europe and the US. She is recognised for her analogue approach to contemporary fashion.



At the famed storage units, some 800 umbrellas routinely sit on floor-to-ceiling shelves. All hail Chanel's roomy handbags, big enough to carry the odd brolly.

Wool blouson, wool cardigan, cashmere shirt, wool skirt, leather mules, leather bags, CHANEL.

LOST & FOUND

Tap into new-season fashion at Transport for London's Lost Property Office in West Ham. These are the pieces worth travelling to the end of the line for. Photographed by ALI FOROUGHI. Styled by HONEY SWEET ELIAS.



TFL staff are the height of discretion, but you'll have no fear of judgement if your suitcase is filled with the season's standout shoes.

Leather and shearling jacket, wool trousers, BRUNELLO CUCINELLI. *Shoes,* MICHAEL KORS COLLECTION. *Woven leather tote,* BOTTEGA VENETA. *White/red polka-dot shoes, ankle boots,* MANOLO BLAHNIK. *Monogrammed bag, white mesh trainers,* LOUIS VUITTON. *Monogrammed notebook cover,* CELINE. *White/black polka-dot shoes,* DIOR. *Metallic trainers,* NIKE. *Pre-loved Balenciaga mules,* EBAY. *Cowboy boots,* POLO RALPH LAUREN. *Patent-leather mules,* CHANEL. Red slingbacks, DOLCE & GABBANA.



The Lost Property Office once reunited an engagement ring with its owner in Australia. Reassuring to know, if we ever became estranged from our handbag's precious cargo.

Silk-faille jacket, pencil skirt, GUCCI. *Gold-plated rings, charm bracelets (on desk), two-toned bangles (on desk),* PANDORA. *Patent-leather bag,* DOLCE & GABBANA. *Galaxy S26 phone, Galaxy Buds4 Pro wireless earphones,* SAMSUNG. *Le Baume Limited Edition, Backstage Rosy Glow, Backstage Eye Palette,* DIOR. *Lazulio eau de parfum,* DIPTYQUE. *Glow Blush, Éternité de Beauté SPF Foundation,* GUCCI. *Ombres d'Hermès Eye Shadows, Rouge Hermès Satin Lipstick Limited Edition,* HERMÈS.



Typically 200 or so teddy bears and soft toys are stowed on the Stephenson Street premises. Find similar comfort in these squish-worthy shoulder bags.

Vintage Dior by John Galliano twinset, EBAY. *Jeans,* M&S. *Tsavorite-set watch,* HUBLOT. *Khaki suede bag,* DIOR. *Monogrammed leather bag,* FENDI. *Black double-flap bag,* CHANEL. *Pink monogrammed bucket bag,* LOUIS VUITTON.



With 400 forgotten books to thumb through, there is plenty of inspiration to turn over a new style chapter in a bucket hat and glasses.

Herringbone coat, cashmere sweater, collar, rollneck, trousers, belt, small leather frame bag, hat, MICHAEL KORS COLLECTION. *Glasses,* BALENCIAGA. *Gold-plated rings,* PANDORA. *Large leather bag,* POLO RALPH LAUREN. *Multi-zip leather case, pink embossed leather diary,* SMYTHSON.



HAIR: KOTA SUIZU. MAKEUP: CLAIRE URQUHART. NAILS: ELLA VIVII. SET DESIGN: GRACE SNELLOCK. MODEL: ACHOL KUR. WITH THANKS TO TFL LOST PROPERTY OFFICE.

Treasure hunt. The most unusual items left behind? A cosmonaut's helmet and a necklace worth six figures.

Fringed suede jacket, wool rugby shirt, cotton rollneck, denim jeans, POLO RALPH LAUREN. *Trainers,* NIKE. *Mongrammed canvas bag,* GUCCI. *Canvas and woven leather tote,* BOTTEGA VENETA. *Pre-loved Gucci black monogrammed bag and pre-loved Dior black saddle bag,* EBAY. *Other bags, as before.*

Kindred spirits

Rajesh Pratap Singh and Aneeth Arora are among India's most nonconforming fashion designers who have consciously resisted the spotlight. Their similarities run far deeper than a shared belief to let their work speak for itself. By ASHWINI ARUN KUMAR.



COMMON GOALS
Rajesh Pratap Singh's and Aneeth Arora's trajectories have had many overlaps—they both hail from Rajasthan, are NIFT graduates and worked under the same designer early in their careers.

Aneeth Arora, founder of Péro, never takes a bow at the end of her runway shows. Rajesh Pratap Singh, founder of his eponymous label, does so rather begrudgingly. If you're struggling to recall their faces but can instantly recognise their clothes, it is by design. Both have spent decades making a deliberate choice to let their work—not themselves—occupy centre stage. At a time when designers have become celebrities themselves, Singh and Arora want to subvert fame in pursuit of creative freedom that lets them "make things," as Singh puts it, without the burden of feeding the machine.

In many ways, Singh's career trajectory foreshadowed Arora's. They're both from Rajasthan, studied at the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) and interned at Abraham & Thakore during the formative years of their careers. After graduating in 1994, Singh began his career with a singular ambition: to perfect garment construction. It is said that he created nearly 3,000 white shirts before zeroing in on the perfect pattern; this could very well be an underestimation. A look at his meticulously constructed clothes can uncover volumes about the label—far more than the self-effacing founder might.

Arora's defining moment came when she was still a student at NIFT Mumbai. Watching classmates fight over the same store-bought fabrics for their final collections convinced her that the first step to creating singular fashion would be designing her own textiles. After graduating, she completed her master's degree at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, in 2007, and launched Péro in 2009. Since then, she has continued to work with craftspeople and women artisans from refugee communities to bring her creations to life, while maintaining the belief that a label's identity can be mutually exclusive of its designer's.

HORMIS ANTONY THARAKAN.



TAILOR MADE
Singh's factory in Neemrana, Rajasthan, consciously produces handloom fabrics in ikat and Banarasi weaves, among others, which are used in making his meticulously tailored clothes.

PRANOY SARKAR.

Though their labels were founded 12 years apart, both have focused on making clothes that feel true to their natures. While Singh's contemporaries went on to become some of the biggest names in bridal wear, he rarely designed wedding garments, choosing instead to focus on precision tailoring and construction. Arora built Péro around handcrafted, one-of-a-kind pieces that celebrated technique over speed. When the two sit down to talk, it quickly becomes clear that their reluctance to occupy the spotlight is only the beginning of their similarities.

***Vogue* India:** When did you first become aware of each other's labels?
Rajesh Pratap Singh: David [Abraham] told me that there is a brand called Péro, which he thought was nice. I remember finding the name very interesting. I met Aneeth much later, and have since loved her clothes and shows.
Aneeth Arora: When I was still a student at National Institute of Design, Aditi Ranjan (a faculty member at NID, Ahmedabad) introduced me to his label. I saw a crisp white shirt with pin tucks from you, Rajesh. I was so fascinated by its simplicity and beauty that I even told my brother about it. When I started earning, I saved up and bought him a shirt from your label.
RPS: Oh, yeah? Okay, wow.
AA: Yes—and he still has it. For the longest time, my family thought that I was going to become a tailor. I wanted to show them [Rajesh's] garment-making to acquaint them with the kind of work I eventually wanted to do.
***Vogue* India:** Fashion designers today are often expected to be public personalities. How have you both navigated that expectation?
RPS: It's probably the other way round now, isn't it? Celebrities are designers. But, to answer your question, I just don't have the energy to engage with people. I find it exhausting. I have very, very close friends who are very, very popular—and they do a beautiful job approaching this—but I couldn't do that. I am at peace with how things are and that is how it has always been.
AA: I understand what you mean when you say that you don't have the energy to engage with people. I am very happy to know that I am not the only one. I will go a step further and tell you that I'd rather utilise my energy elsewhere.

As a student, I was so intrigued by Comme des Garçons and Margiela that, for the longest time, I referred to the designers as 'they', unaware, and more importantly, uninterested in knowing more about them. I did not believe that it was important to put a face to a brand. We are just making clothes. It is just another profession.
RPS: I think I can add to this. We wanted to get into this space because we wanted to do this—create things.
***Vogue* India:** Has staying out of the spotlight made it easier to protect your creative process?
AA: Yes, it really helps. It is very fulfilling to be able to keep doing what you enjoy without having to prove it to people. It lets me focus better.
RPS: I can't deal with too many people. I am happier when I am alone—even at work. I don't like going out; it's not my thing. I have grown up that way. Sometimes Payal (Singh's wife and a designer herself) wants me to go out and meet people. I find that very difficult, but I do it anyway. But as far as my trade is concerned, I don't have to meet anybody or do anything.
***Vogue* India:** How do you maintain a sense of self beyond your brand?
RPS: I hope my clothes are not my only identity. My brand is the only facet of my life that is in the public domain—but I have done so much more. Yes, I love making clothes, my work is important to me and I don't take that for granted. But, it is not my identity. Fashion is so fickle. How could one depend on it?
AA: I used to think that, in fashion, you're only as good as your last season. I took pride in Péro's discipline of never missing a season. But Péro is tied to many people—my team and craftspeople—who felt the pressure of working on our projects season after season. I know I might sound philosophical, but of late, I have learnt not to take my clothes so seriously. The more I work, the more I learn how to take it lightly.
***Vogue* India:** Where do you both stand on fashion shows? Is showcasing at fashion weeks the only way to present your work?
AA: Because India's fashion week is the last on the global calendar, by the time it arrives, stockists have already booked their orders and exhausted their budgets. I want to know Rajesh's opinion on this, but I feel like physical fashion shows in India are always for optics—to display what we have worked on. They're about expressing your ideas, and Covid forced us to experiment with it.
RPS: Shows are a medium for communication. I don't think people are really buying at shows today. Buyers would have already gone to the showrooms and placed the orders before we

"If you don't have anything new to say, it's okay to skip shows. But the mechanism is such that you have to show every season and that puts a strain on the designer—both mentally and commercially"
—RAJESH PRATAP SINGH



HELPING HANDS
Arora collaborates with women artisans from Afghan refugee communities and heritage textile weavers from across India to bring her whimsical creations to life.



arrived on the fashion week calendar. Also, putting together a show is a capital-intensive process—even more so if you are showing outside the country. It is not entertaining for the designer. For me, it was always a tough thing.

The other thing is: if you don't have anything new to say, it is okay to skip shows. But the mechanism is such that you have to show every season and that puts a strain on the designer—both mentally and commercially. Though I feel like the whole system of fashion is falling apart, it works for a lot of people.

AA: Like he said, it is entertaining for people watching the show, not for the people who are showcasing. It takes a lot of effort. Now, we do a show if we feel the need for it; it's not a given every season. I have learned what works for me and what I want for the brand.

RPS: I don't even think about this anymore. If there is something interesting, if there is anything left to say, then go ahead, show it. Otherwise, I think it's just torture.

***Vogue* India:** Do you ever think about the legacy you are leaving behind with your clothes?

RPS: You know, I would be presumptuous to even think that I am leaving a legacy. When we were growing up, there was a gentleman called Yves Saint Laurent in Paris [*laughs*], who was the god of design. Do you think it mattered to him if he left behind a legacy? What we do is enjoy making things that give us satisfaction, and I say this repeatedly: if I can make just one new thing in a day, it is enough for me.

AA: Earlier, I would think about the future of the brand after me, but now I don't take it that seriously. Years later, if our creations are still being passed around, if people talk about them, reminisce that there used to be this brand called Péro… it is enough. We're doing this for memories and stories, and if we are able to leave those behind, I think it is a job well done.

RPS: We make things. That's who we are, but to assume that we are going to leave a legacy? Come on. I don't think we should give ourselves such importance.

FROM TOP: FLYING BOOTS PRODUCTIONS; TARUN CHAWLA.

VOGUE INDIA



PHOTO: SIGNE VILSTRUP/*VOGUE* INDIA

**BEFORE IT'S IN FASHION,
IT'S IN VOGUE!**



Eternal student

On his 101st birthday in July, legendary artist Krishen Khanna spent the afternoon chatting with his granddaughter KAJOLI KHANNA about how his struggle before the canvas keeps him alive, even though his body grows slower.

I grew up around my grandfather's studio, the smell of paint, tubes of colour, the placid concentration of his working day. Back then, I had no idea his paintings would come to mean so many things to so many people. To me, they were simply part of our house, part of my childhood, part of the world I lived inside. I remember watching Dada paint and sometimes painting alongside him, not fully understanding the magnitude of what he was making, only sensing that something important was happening in the room.

In July, when I walked into the living room of our family home in Delhi to surprise him for his 101st birthday, the scene hadn't changed much. Dressed in a crisp white kurta with a black shawl draped around his neck, Dada sat in his favourite chair, sketching away, completely absorbed. My grandmother sat on the other sofa, humming softly to herself as she knitted. It was ordinary—one year after his big centenary—and extraordinary at once: the rhythm of their lives, the tenderness of routine, the understanding that creativity didn't require occasion. Between bites of buttercream cake and brush strokes of vivid colours, we spent the afternoon talking about everything that made him and everything that keeps him going.



WORK-LIFE BALANCE
Krishen Khanna with his wife and granddaughter in 1990. *Opposite page: Bandwallas in Practice* (2002).

Kajoli Khanna: You're turning 101. When you look back at this extraordinary century, what images come to mind first?
Krishen Khanna: At this point, it's mostly fragments: a face, a railway platform, a room filled with afternoon light, a hand raised in farewell. There is childhood, of course. There is Partition, friends now gone. There are studios, laughter, streets, loss. There are rooms I cannot return to, and people whose voices I still hear very clearly. Every morning, on the street in Lyallpur (now Faisalabad in Pakistan) where I grew up, the postman would pass by chanting "Chitthiyaa, chitthiyaa." I can hear him as though he were walking down the street just now. And there are colours, always colours. Greys, browns, sudden reds.

Kajoli: What's surprised you most about reaching this stage of life?
Krishen: That one can still be surprised. At 101, people imagine you must have grown world-weary. But life remains mysterious to the very end. A small thing can still move me—an expression on a face, a child saying something unexpected, a line from a song. The body becomes old, yes. But the eye must not become old. The moment you stop looking is when you truly begin to age, no matter how young you are.
Kajoli: You were first a banker and then an artist. Do you think artists are born observant or do they learn to notice?
Krishen: Both. Some people are born with a habit of looking. But looking is not the same as seeing. Seeing has to be learned. Banking taught me discipline, but art taught me attention. An artist must notice what passes others by: the tiredness in a man's shoulders, the absurdity of a wedding procession, the loneliness inside celebration. These things are all around us. The artist is simply someone who cannot look away.
Kajoli: What are you most grateful for today?
Krishen: For having had work to do. It has meant everything to me. Work has given shape to my days and, fortunately, to my inner life as well. I am grateful for having loved and been loved. For seeing my family grow around me—my wonderful wife and our three children, who are my pillars of support. For friendships that enlarged my life. Many of those friends are gone now, but friendship does not disappear because the person is no longer there. Some conversations continue within you. And I am grateful that painting never left me. It has been a demanding companion, not always kind, but faithful in its own way.
Kajoli: Last year marked your retrospective at NGMA Mumbai, *Krishen Khanna at 100: The Last Progressive*, which I had the privilege of co-curating with Dr Zehra Jumabhoy. Although you weren't able to physically see the show, you saw images and videos of the installation. What did that feel like?
Krishen: I never painted with the expectation of having a retrospective dedicated to my work one day. I painted because something insisted on being painted. That's how it is: you work, you struggle, you continue. Then, suddenly, after many years, people gather the work and call it a retrospective. I wish I could've

COURTESY OF THE COLLECTION OF KAMINI AND KARAN KHANNA (*BANDWALLAS IN PRACTICE*).



ART AS MUSE
Krishen Khanna's *A Far Afternoon* (2014) was the eponymous subject of a 2015 documentary by Sruti Harihara Subramanian, which bagged two National Film Awards.

been there but even seeing the images and the videos—the bandwallas, the trucks, the figures from Partition, the myths, the witnesses brought together in those rooms—was touching. A life looks different when it is arranged on museum walls, even when seen from a distance. But what moved me very deeply was that you were part of it. It made me realise that my work had travelled further than I knew, and then, in a beautiful way, also returned home through family.

Kajoli: If I could spend one ordinary day with you at any age—your 20s, 40s or 80s—which version of you would you want me to meet?

Krishen: Perhaps the young man in his 20s, because he would make you laugh. He was serious but uncertain—full of ambition and doubt. He did not know where life would take him. He did not yet know how much he would lose, or how much he would be given. Although I would also want you to meet me in my 40s, when art had begun to take hold of me more completely. Or in my 80s, when I had less need to prove anything. Each age has its own foolishness and grace, but I'm sure that I would've loved you at all of them.

Kajoli: When I was little, I remember watching you paint and painting alongside you. How did that make you feel?

Krishen: Children in a studio bring a different kind of life. They are not impressed by reputation. They are interested in the colour, the mess, the freedom of it. To have you paint alongside me brought me so much joy. Art shouldn't be placed on a pedestal so high that children cannot touch it. You must be able to sit beside it, smell it and make a mess with it.

Kajoli: What is your favourite memory of me?

Krishen: You looking. Always looking. Sometimes asking too many questions: "What shall I paint?" "Can I copy you?" "Why do the figures in your paintings have such ugly hands and feet?" I see that has continued. Mostly, I remember the ease with which you entered my studio. You did not come in as if it were a sacred place. You came in as a child enters a room in the house. That was the right way to do it.

"The body becomes old, yes. But the eye must not become old. The moment you stop looking is when you truly begin to age"
—KRISHEN KHANNA

Kajoli: What has family given you that art could not?

Krishen: Art has given me intensity, perhaps even a kind of solitude that I crave, but family has returned me to the ordinary rhythms of life—meals, laughter, arguments, children running in and out, someone asking where something has been kept. Those things may seem small, but they are not. As a painter, I spend a great deal of time alone with images, doubt and work. Family brings me back into the world of affection and responsibility.

Kajoli: After 101 years, what do you know about love that you didn't know when you were young?

Krishen: I used to think love was possession, intensity and longing. Later, I learnt that love is also patience and forgiveness. As you grow older, love becomes less dramatic perhaps, but more profound. You understand that love is made of attention. When I was young, my days had a routine. I would have breakfast with your grandmother, then go downstairs to paint. A few hours later, I would come back up to have lunch with her, then go downstairs to work again. At tea time, I would return to her to discuss her day and the book she was currently reading. To remember what someone likes, to sit with them, to forgive, to continue—these are not small things.

Kajoli: What should young artists today protect most fiercely?

Krishen: Their honesty. And their patience. There is too much hurry now. Too much pressure to be seen before one has properly learned to see. Fashion will change. Markets will change. Recognition may or may not come. What remains is whether the work had truth in it.

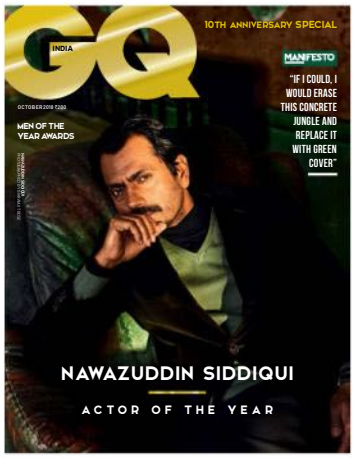
Kajoli: What do you hope I remember about you years from now that has nothing to do with your paintings?

Krishen: That I loved you. That I had humour. That I enjoyed talking to people, reciting poetry by TS Eliot, Alfred Tennyson and Li Po, being mischievous and eating chicken curry. That I was a painter standing before a canvas, but also a man who lived among people.

COURTESY OF THE COLLECTION OF PIRAMAL MUSEUM OF ART, MUMBAI.

GQ

IT'S WHAT'S NEW NOW













PHOTOS: BIKRAMJIT BOSE (OCTOBER 2018); TARUN KHIWAL (SEPTEMBER 2018); R BURMAN (FEBRUARY 2019); PRASAD NAIK (AUGUST 2019); ERRIKOS ANDREOU (OCTOBER 2019); TARUN VISHWA (MARCH 2019); ALL COURTESY OF *GQ* INDIA

HALL OF FAME

Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla have gone where only a handful of Indian designers have—over the 40-year mark. With the opening of their most ambitious flagship store yet, Mubarak Baug, the duo discuss the future of their legacy with ASHWINI ARUN KUMAR.

You think you understand luxury, then your idea is turned on its head as you eat a vada pav on a chikankari napkin at the Mumbai residence of Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla. True luxury, it seems, is normalising a craft you put back on the radar 35 years ago to a point where its expression feels quotidian. Three days before their 40th anniversary—the duo met on August 15, 1986, and have been partners in business and life ever since—we are seated in their living room, which could be mistaken for an art gallery, and talking about their most ambitious flagship store, Mubarak Baug, which really is one. Mumbai locals will remember the Framjee Cawasjee Institute in Dhobi Talao as a dilapidated shopping hub for cheap jeans and export surplus shirts. Witnessing the space's glow-up makes me want to believe in Jani-Khosla's revered Midas touch.

In 2022, after 36 years of operating independently, selling a 51 per cent majority stake in their label to Reliance Brands (RBL) gave Jani and Khosla the impetus and financial wherewithal to launch stores of their maximalist stature. In Mumbai, the choice was between the city's defunct art deco cinema halls or heritage sites. The duo chose the Framjee Cawasjee building because of its iconic location and "ceiling height". Named after the designer's ancestral house Mubarak Manzil in Kapurthala, Punjab, the 20,000-square-foot expanse was designed by A Wonder Room, the duo's interior decor venture, which has previously conceived luxury homes, wedding interiors and their namesake label's extravagant store in Jio World Plaza, Mumbai.

"We wanted to create the utopia that was in our heads," shares Khosla. The result is a larger-than-life treasure chest where art, archival pieces, craft and high jewellery co-exist to jolt the senses. On the ground floor, a fictitious city handmade completely out of brass hangs upside down from the ceiling. The walls are lined with mirrors, antique jharokhas sourced from Gujarat and a tree of cascading shola flowers made by expert artisans in Kolkata. On the first floor, brass repoussé panels depicting their interpretation of Mumbai's skyline share space with massive brass birds suspended amidst three-dimensional clouds. A gallery of key looks created over the last four decades holds pride of place. "Some people may not even like it," admits Khosla, their maximalist aesthetic, after all, is not for everyone. "But it is an experience nobody could imagine. You have entered a world you didn't know existed."

> "A dress is never made with a client in mind. It is made to please us. The muse has always been Abu-Sandeep"
> —SANDEEP KHOSLA

Both Khosla and Jani were born into wealthy families, but their realities changed after they "lost it all". Having money and losing it—something they've admittedly endured throughout their careers, too—has made them uninhibited. Khosla, a Punjabi from Kapurthala, and Jani, a Gujarati Bohri from Mumbai, first met in the studio of costume designer Xerxes Bhathena. The idea of a partnership was conjured up on a car ride, from Bandra to Churchgate, that moonlighted as a first date of sorts. "I was very trusting, but Abu was reserved," shares Khosla. "He knew that there was something here and we could do something with our creativity." That something arrived shortly thereafter in the form of Mata Hari, a boutique in Juhu that the duo opened in 1986 with assistance from a Sindhi financier, Gopi Magnani. For their debut collection—which shared its name with the store—the duo designed 80 individualistic pieces with no overlaps. Three days after the shop opened, Dimple Kapadia walked into the store, followed by Parmeshwar Godrej and Jaya Bachchan. "As our popularity grew, everybody started getting in touch with us directly. And as they say, the rest is history."

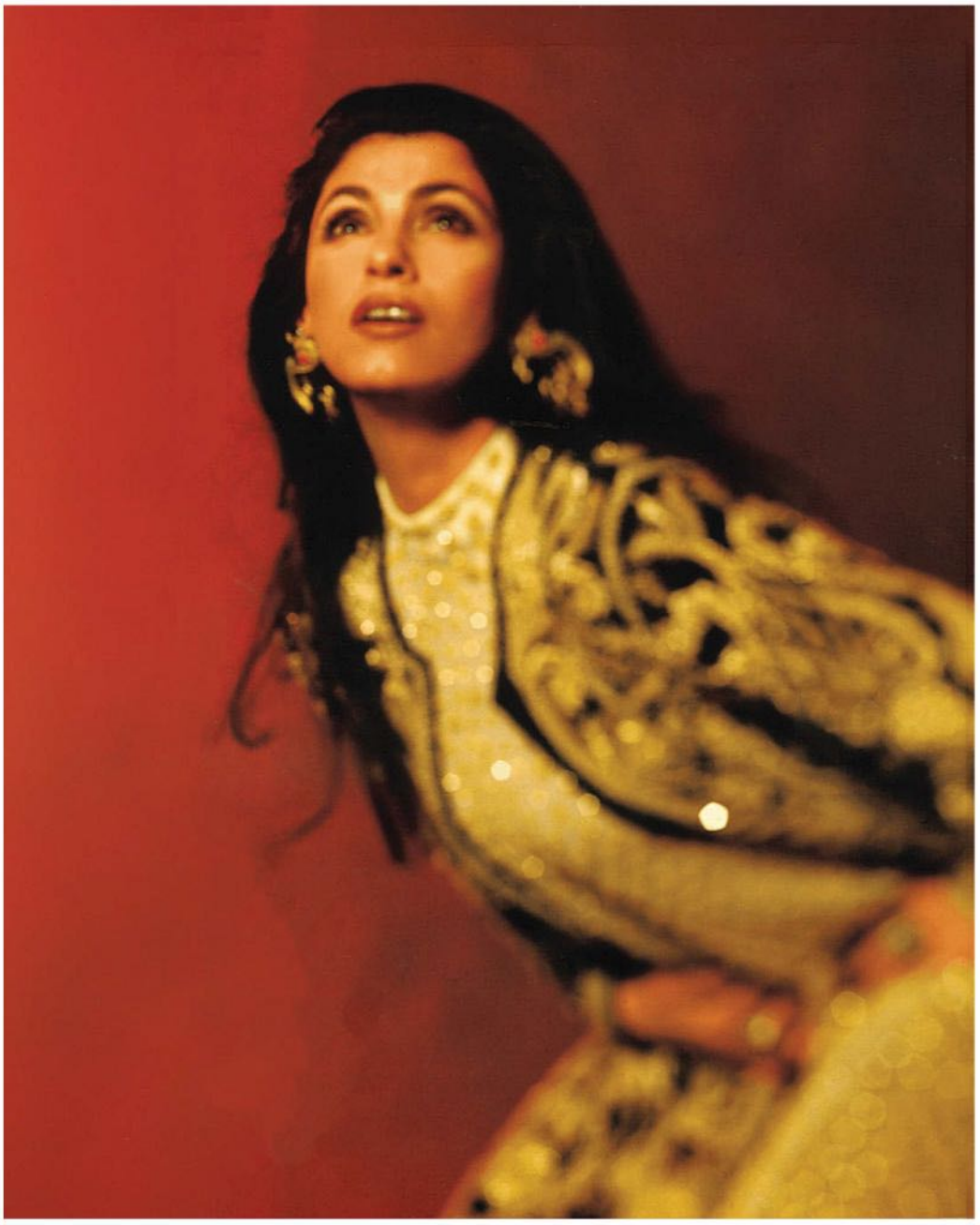
In 1991, the Indian government introduced the economic liberalisation policy. Under these reforms, a cocktail of slashed import tariffs, an uptick in foreign investments and creation of new jobs in the IT and telecommunication sectors pushed India towards a consumer-led economy. The wealth boom created a new vanguard of bold shoppers who became their patrons. Khosla refers to this group somewhat politically incorrectly as 'new money'. "Our biggest advantage was that money had changed hands. Old money—whether it had personal style or not—had become snooty," he recalls, adding how those with ancestral wealth had also developed a purist attitude towards fashion. "They would say, 'I know the best weaver, so I'll only buy my saris from them', 'I only wear a certain type of marodi embroidery' or 'I am only buying my ghaghra from Pyaremiyan [Zariwala & Sons, Mumbai].' But the new crop was open-minded. People like us could flourish."

Today, Khosla and Jani pay it forward by betting on young talents, typecast as unconventional or even misfits. Take Urfi Javed for example, the television actor first cast by them in the label's fashion musical 'Mera Noor Hai Mashhoor' in 2023—when she was considered somewhat of a



ALL THAT GLITTERS
Over the last 40 years, Jani and Khosla have given heritage embroideries a new lease on life. Chikankari, gota and mirror work, vasli and zardozi are just some of the craft forms the duo has revived as their brand's signature techniques. Mubarak Baug is a repository of many such archival designs that showcase the full vocabulary of their work.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY AMITAVA SAHA. STYLED BY DIVYA BALAKRISHNAN. MODEL: SHALINI MENON/PURPLE THOUGHTS.



ETERNAL INSPIRATION
Actor Dimple Kapadia has remained a loyal muse to the designers since 1986, when she first walked into their boutique, Mata Hari, in Juhu—just three days after it opened.

ASHOK SALIAN. NICO.

pariah. The duo that dresses fashion royalty like Dimple Kapadia, Sonam Kapoor and Shweta and Jaya Bachchan among others also opens its wardrobes for lesser-known models and TV personalities. "Very early on in our careers, we had people who believed in us and gave us opportunities," shares Khosla. "Today, we have to give that back." In the Mumbai flagship, walls on the ground floor turned into a canvas for up-and-coming artist Shine Shivan's folkloric murals.

Even in Jani and Khosla's Mata Hari days, their designs never sold for less than ₹4,000. For context: in 1990, gold prices hovered around ₹3,200 for 10 grams, putting their garments above the most-coveted precious metal in the country. "It was unheard of to spend that kind of money on clothes," says Khosla. A particular Abu Jani Sandeep Khosla (AJSK) look on display at Tarun and Tina Tahiliani's multi-designer store Ensemble in Mumbai cost upwards of ₹15,000; the scandal brought on by its price tag was free. "But it sold," exclaims Khosla. "There are enough people in the world and there are buyers for everything. But you have to believe in what you're doing. And you cannot hold back." It is this confidence that their creations will eventually find an audience that has kept the duo going.

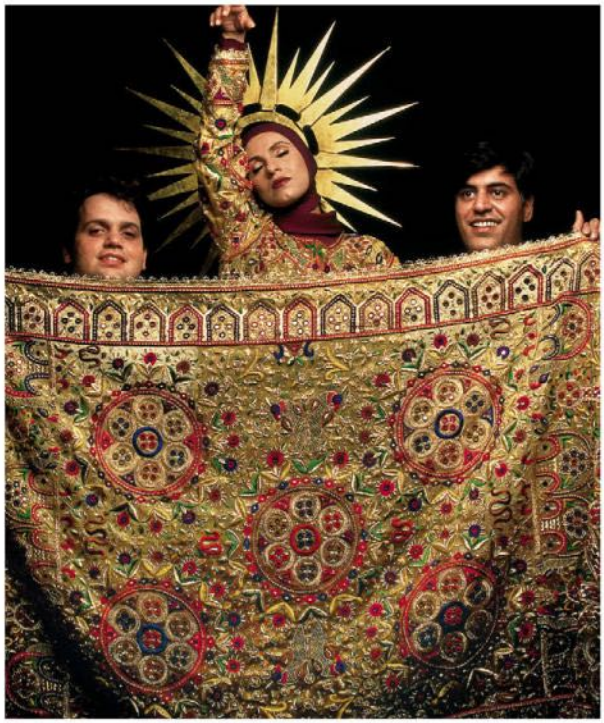
Only two Indian designer labels preceded AJSK—Ritu Kumar, launched in 1969, and Neeta Lulla in 1985. In the late '80s and early '90s, the industry as a

whole was still in its infancy, as was the design vocabulary. Maximalism was predated by "too loud", shares Khosla. "Our clothes were looked down upon for a long time. But at the same time, one could not deny that they were beautiful. We have had an audacity in our design that shocked people." He is still perplexed that we Indians, who want variety and excess even in our daily meals, second-guess ourselves when it comes to fashion and self-expression. Forty years ago, when he first met Jani, this became a conversation starter between the duo—to reinvent their design language and give it the "Abu-Sandeep touch".

The same economic reforms that gave the fashion industry a new clientele also took away from its artisans. The rising demand for Indian embroideries overseas, influx of fast fashion brands into the country and disruption brought by the entry of power looms threatened the slow-paced nature of fragile craft clusters, leaving the already unorganised handicraft sector in shambles. Chikankari was especially vulnerable since its royal patronage had also waned.

"Growing up, we watched our mothers wear the most beautiful chikankari saris. But when we started working with the craft over 35 years ago, it had hit rock bottom," says Khosla, remembering how the needlework had become coarser, its heritage stitches had disappeared and the khakas (detailed embroidery patterns) were printed on cheap fabrics like terrycot—a steep step-down from mulmul that was historically used as the base fabric. In the early '90s, the duo travelled to Lucknow, where they met Khosla's aunt Sita Sondhi and her friend Shahnaz Kidwai, who set the duo off on the chikankari trail. Then began the capital-intensive process of reinventing the craft with master artisans who were hesitant to work with chiffon—hitherto considered impossible—using vintage blocks and traditional stitches, but modern placements.

Chikan work had also served as a steady stream of income for many women homemakers who would embroider in their free time. Jani and Khosla focused on mentoring younger women—some of whom had never picked up a needle before. "This work is so fine and painstaking that it carries the essence of the maker," shares Jani. "Back then, we'd receive finished embroidered panels with smudges of alta from the artisans' feet, specks of sindoor and oil from their temples or drops of blood from occasional needle pricks on their fingers—a reminder that craft will always be human." Till date, Khosla and Jani work with over 170 women specialising in unique chikan stitches in their setup in Kakori, Lucknow.



A CABINET OF CURIOSITIES
The large hand-embroidered dupatta seen in this picture, with the designers and their muse, forms a part of the wall decor at Mubarak Baug.

In 1995, their big chikankari revival project culminated in a collection of anarkali kurtas, churidars, salwar kameezes, saris and long jackets—familiar silhouettes but viewed with a fresh lens. After receiving a request from Jani's mother for help with finishing the garments, several women from Surat's Bohri community stepped in to add handmade crochet and silver-lace detailing to the hems. When the duo exhibited their clothes to a roomful of society women in New Delhi's Oberoi hotel, they were "pulling the garments off each other's backs". Needless to say, the collection sold out.

Inspired by this success, their revivalist journey extended to a bevy of crafts from across the country. If you jog your memory, you'll remember that some of their career-defining creations have also featured bandhani, mirror and gota work. Think Madhuri Dixit's ghaghra from *Devdas* (2002)—featuring real mirrors and weighing over 30 kilograms—that won the duo a National Film Award for best costume design in 2003. It took 50 karigars over 9,000 hours to embroider the look by hand. "Abu and I are just used to things that are larger than life," says Khosla. "So, when we decided to take up aari work, we made the mirrors much bigger and swapped the multicolour stitch with gold and silver zari. That was our interpretation." When the duo could not find authentic bandhani in Mumbai's most famous Gujarati craft market in the Tisra Bhoiwada neighbourhood, they began embroidering fabric in the bandhani style—making the craft more complex and layered. Their obsession with bringing back real silver and gold gota work took them to the bylanes of Surat, where the craft was once thriving before the synthetic versions took over. They then went on to create a rose-pink wedding lehenga inundated with pure silver gota and phulkari work without worrying whether it would sell. "A dress is never made with a client in mind. It is made to please us. The muse has always been Abu-Sandeep."

With RBL bankrolling their business, Jani and Khosla are locked in on opening international stores across the world in London, Paris, New York—a feat that they felt would have been impossible to pull off on their own. This notion feels paradoxical coming from the duo whose label was among the first to stock overseas in retail stores like Harrods and Harvey Nichols in London and Neiman Marcus and Bergdorf Goodman in the United States, as early as 1989. "We did that, but we did it ahead of time," says Khosla, calling it a first mover disadvantage. "Today, there's a new generation with new wealth, who does not know our accomplishments. We want to acquaint them with our world on our terms."

ASHOK SALIAN.

SPORTY CHIC
Decorating ears this time of the year are Y2K-inspired wired earphones and the most exquisite chandelier earrings. Whether you're going for a run or running to a party, this will do.

Slim-fit henley-neck top, GAP. *Vanilla shirt,* TWENTY FUTURE. *Tie-dye tank top,* ONITSUKA TIGER. *Rib-knit silk micro shorts,* COS. *Lumière earrings,* SANJAY GUPTA HYDERABAD.



HIGH

HEAVY METAL
Wrist weights are great, but have you tried swapping them with your biggest, most opulent bangle? Worth its weight in gold, silver or the precious metal of your choice, a hand ornament will do all the heavy lifting for you.

Feylora palm bracelet, RANIWALA 1881.



LOW

Our affinity for unlikely pairings hit a fever pitch when we teamed this season's best haute joaillerie with street-style staples. Photographed by MEGHA SINGHA. Styled by MANGLIEN GANGTE.

HIGH SHINE
Mixing metal has a new meaning. Wearable hardware—think eyelets, zips, rivets and studs—meets its match in stacked high jewellery necklaces for a look that is equal parts punk- and princess-coded.

Hardware scoop vest, DUJA. *Scintillating classic diamond polki necklace, Chic radiance necklace,* RANIWALA 1881. *Floater necklaces,* RAJ MAHTANI.





HAIR: HAUKE KRAUSE/ANIMA CREATIVES. MAKEUP: ELENI CHATZINIKOLIDOU/ANIMA CREATIVES. MODEL: BHAKTI PATEL/ANIMA CREATIVES. BOOKINGS EDITOR: ALIZA FATMA. ASSISTED BY: NYASA THAKKAR (STYLING); TAPASYA SAWANT (BOOKINGS).

WATCH AND LEARN
Diminutive statement earrings hold the key to looking stylish round the clock. It's no wonder, then, that the biggest jewellery houses spend the most time perfecting their designs.

Emerald Lotus stud,
SHREE JEE JAIPUR.



Game face

In a sport where performance is measured with a stopwatch, Jyothi Yarraji makes time for self-expression on the track. By RUSHMIKA BANERJEE.

When Indian hurdler Jyothi Yarraji sprints on a track, the focus is on her speed and clean finishes. But then, the camera zooms in and you notice the 26-year-old's braided hair, the pearls on her ears and acrylic nails. The glam is subtle, but it feels almost instinctive—like this is who she is, both on and off the field. "Athletics is not only about performing; it's also about expressing yourself and enjoying the track," says Yarraji; she has been backed by the Reliance Foundation since 2019, training under British coach James Hillier at the foundation's high-performance centre in Bhubaneswar. As someone who won the 100m hurdles in 12.99 seconds at the 65th National Inter-State Senior Athletics Championships in July this year and looked like she was having fun, you best believe her.

There is a formula that elite athletes are expected to follow through their career: train relentlessly, do away with distractions, keep your eye on the stopwatch and aim for gold. We have seen this narrative play out in movies for decades. Remember the scene in *Dangal*, when Aamir Khan's character chops off his daughters' hair so that they can focus on the game? It is a moment meant to show the audience that, in order to achieve greatness, an athlete has to do away with frivolities.

But sports—aside from performance—has been a platform where a few women have chosen to present their most authentic selves. In the 1980s, track athlete Florence Griffith Joyner, also known as Flo-Jo, sprinted in one-legged leotards and manicured six-inch nails to boost her confidence. In the 2000s, tennis player Serena Williams wore catsuits and tutus to reclaim the narrative around the female body. More recently, at the Paris 2024 Olympics, track-and-field star Sha'Carri Richardson made long nails part of her athletic persona. And the internet is already rife with instances of Grand Slam–winner Naomi Osaka using fashion to assert her cultural identity.

Yarraji's first brush with personal style began at home in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh. Watching her mother get dressed every day—adorn herself with bangles, flowers, a bindi and sindoor—encouraged Yarraji to do the same. "Watching my mother made me love getting ready." Before she became the national record holder in 100m hurdles and a two-time Asian champion, she spent her afternoons as a child folding freshly washed saris, draping them on herself and asking her mother how she looked. She still wears them when she goes home for festivals. "I like her pattu saris," she says, reminiscing about her favourite green silk one from her mother's wardrobe.

In her paper published in 2023, researcher Soljana Çili states that personal objects, including dresses, can act as an "anchor of the self", a way to reinforce our sense of identity through everyday rituals. Looking back at Yarraji's childhood, it's easy to see that it was never about the flowers or bindis alone, but about the confidence that came from taking a moment each day to become yourself before stepping out into the world.

For a long time, that love for personal style was kept away from the track. "I was scared," she admits. "I feared wearing makeup or stylish clothing, concerned that if I did not perform well on the field, people would judge me." This changed after she began competing internationally. "I saw how other athletes would dress up and prioritise their own personalities over the opinions of others." It made her realise that she shouldn't apologise for being herself. She hasn't looked back since. Now, teammates even ask her how she creates certain looks. "When I started getting appreciated for my choices, it gave me the confidence to experiment more." Today, braids are designed as carefully as warm-ups. Eyeliner has become part of her routine, as have acrylic nails. She even hopes to wear eye makeup for the upcoming Asian Games, scheduled to take place in Japan in this month.

There is something deeply liberating about stepping onto the track in the same uniform as everyone else and still finding ways to hold on to the part that makes you 'you'. Studies have found that women who dress to express their individuality report greater body confidence and autonomy, affirming their identity on their own terms.

Yarraji's perception changed after she began competing internationally. "I saw how other athletes would dress up and prioritise their own personalities over the opinions of others"

That confidence has become an appendage that she carries onto the track. She is acutely aware of how difficult it is for sportswomen out there. Some coaches still believe that athletes should cut their hair short because a longer mane can release histamines in your body, which causes itching and hives. There is also the assumption that paying attention to one's appearance somehow signals a lack of commitment to the sport.

For Yarraji, style doesn't compete with her performance, "When I feel comfortable, I feel confident," she explains. Thinking about her look before the race offsets the intensity of elite competition. "If I keep my mind occupied by thinking about my hair, my makeup or how I look, it gives me something joyful to focus on, and helps to reduce my anxiety before a race."

Everything else about Yarraji is wonderfully quotidian. She admires Samantha Ruth Prabhu's effortless style, and like any Gen Z'er, likes shopping for trousers, crop tops, skirts and footwear. She even likes heels. "I don't wear them often because I am already so tall," she jokes—at five nine, she really is. But of everything in her wardrobe, she is most proud of the two jerseys that are now framed and hang on her wall—one from her first Commonwealth Games in 2022 and another one from the 2024 Asian Indoor Athletics Championships. "The Indian jersey is the most precious piece that I own," she says.

When asked if she aspires to be a fashion icon, she brushes it off—"I am just being myself"—which, for now, means refusing to edit parts of her personality to fit the idea of what an athlete should look like. Maybe that's why her style is so endearing.

At a time when athletes are expected to build personal brands, Yarraji is building up her authentic self. In the future, she hopes young girls won't have to feel they have to choose between ambition and individuality. To them, she says: "Dream big. If you don't dream, it's not going to happen."

FLEX APPEAL
At Vogue Values: Women of Excellence in February this year, Yarraji wore a black, sequinned dress by designer Sharnita Nandwana, showing us that strength and style aren't mutually exclusive.

AASTHA MANCHANDA.

Past lives

How can we do more than just exist? Primatologist and bestselling author CHRISTINE WEBB argues that the clues may lie beyond our species.

When we are each searching for answers to some of humanity's greatest challenges—from ecological collapse to social fragmentation and the rapid transformation of our technological world—whom can we turn to for wisdom? In *The Arrogant Ape: The Myth of Human Exceptionalism and Why It Matters* (published by Little, Brown), I argue that the answer lies all around us: in the millions of other species with whom we share this planet. But to truly learn from the living world, we must first let go of one of our most deeply ingrained assumptions: that humans are separate from, and superior to, all other forms of life.

As a primatologist, I have spent my career learning from other animals, and I have come to see human exceptionalism as one of the most powerful unspoken stories shaping our world. It is embedded in our language, laws, religions, politics, media and even our sciences. We call ourselves Homo sapiens—the wise man—and often assume that human intelligence and innovation will save us from the crises we have created. Yet, many of the challenges we face are products of precisely this mindset: the belief that we can control, engineer and dominate our way out of every problem.

The natural world offers another possibility. Across the tree of life and through the stories of social media sensations like Emmanuel, the endlessly curious and wilful



BEGIN AGAIN
As we try and fail to navigate the world we've inherited, there is endless conversation on how to live better in an ever-changing environment.



LUIS MONTERO

emu from Florida; Tahlequah, the orca who carried her dead calf for 17 days and over 1,000 miles; and the unchristened black seadevil anglerfish who rose to the surface of the ocean, we find extraordinary examples of adaptation, resilience and ingenuity. But to learn from the flora and fauna around us, we must first open ourselves to the lessons they teach us simply by virtue of being alive.

Chimpanzees: Conflict management
Our closest living relatives alongside bonobos, chimpanzees remind us that conflict is not the opposite of social harmony but a part of social life. My own research shows that, after disagreements, chimpanzees often actively repair damaged relationships through grooming, embraces and other gestures of reconciliation. They also console distressed companions, revealing forms of empathy and care once thought to be uniquely human. Chimpanzees teach us that strong communities are not those without strife, but those with the capacity to acknowledge and mend it.

Honeybees: Collective intelligence
Watching honeybees drift from one flower to another in my garden, it's easy to imagine they're acting independently. But when a honeybee colony chooses a new home, thousands of individuals work together to make one of nature's most remarkable collective decisions. Scout bees search for options, share information through intricate dances, evaluate alternatives and gradually converge on the best choice—all without deferring to centralised leadership. Their societies demonstrate that complex problems are often solved not through a single brilliant mind but through communication, coordination and combined wisdom. Nature contains far fewer lone geniuses than our culture imagines.

Mosses: Reciprocity and resilience
Frequently overlooked beneath our feet, mosses are among the earth's great survivors. With more than 12,000 species worldwide, these ancient plants have persisted through dramatic environmental upheavals for hundreds of millions of years (by comparison, humans have been around for a mere several hundred thousand). They have endured not by growing large or dominating their neighbours but through intimate relationships with other species. Mosses hold water, help build soils, recycle nutrients and provide shelter for countless micro-organisms and small creatures. As indigenous botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer has explored, mosses offer a different model of evolutionary success: one based on reciprocity rather than dominance.

Elephants: Ancestral wisdom
Living in close-knit family groups, elephants maintain lifelong social bonds and rely on experienced matriarchs whose memories of landscapes, resources and past challenges guide their families through changing conditions. My colleagues' research has shown that elephant societies are shaped by knowledge accumulated and transmitted across generations, revealing complex forms of cultural learning. Elephants teach us that wisdom is not simply found in novelty or innovation, but also in experience, history and the knowledge carried by those who came before us.

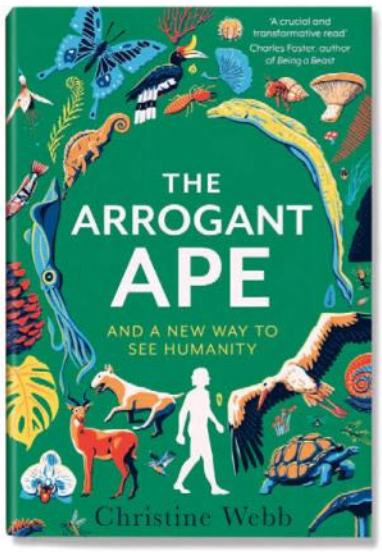
Octopuses: Radical alterity
The first time I watched an octopus investigate a diver, I was invited into an entirely different way of imagining intelligence. Octopuses explore and manipulate their surroundings with curiosity and creativity—solving problems, playing and responding flexibly to new situations. Yet, their minds evolved along a radically different path from our own: much of their nervous system is distributed throughout their eight arms, allowing them to sense and interact with the world in unusual ways. They prove that intelligence does not have a single blueprint, nor does consciousness need to resemble our own. Sometimes, the greatest lesson comes not from seeking similarities but from embracing profound differences.

Arctic terns: Deep attention to our surroundings
Each year, Arctic terns undertake the longest migration known to the animal kingdom, flying between the Arctic and Antarctic and back again. Navigating across oceans and continents, they rely on the sun, stars, earth's magnetic field and subtle environmental cues. Their journeys reveal an intimate relationship with the living world—one built on attention, memory and connection to place. During fieldwork (not to mention walking through urban landscapes like New York City), I often find myself relying on GPS to navigate unfamiliar terrain, when I would do better to slow down and orient myself using landmarks and other features of my environment.

Beavers: Regenerative design
Among nature's greatest engineers, beavers transform landscapes through dams, ponds and wetlands. But unlike much human engineering, they don't impose order on nature. Instead, they work with natural processes. Their dams slow water rather than fight it, creating wetlands that reduce flooding, improve water quality and increase biodiversity, from fish and amphibians to birds and plants. As climate change worsens, beavers are even being reintroduced to restore degraded landscapes and make ecosystems more resilient. These semiaquatic rodents invite us to see that the most successful architecture is not about controlling or mastering nature but working with it.

Sequoias: Long-term thinking
Standing beneath a giant sequoia—as I do whenever I have the chance while visiting California—has a way of recalibrating your sense of time. Among the oldest living trees on earth, they can survive for thousands of years, witnessing generations of change while slowly growing larger and stronger. Sequoias teach us the value of patience and investing in futures we may never see. Their existence challenges our culture of immediacy and constant acceleration. They remind us that meaningful transformation often happens over timescales beyond a single lifetime, and that caring for the future means nurturing something whose benefits may belong to generations yet to come.

THE JUNGLE BOOK
Through her work, Webb challenges the superiority complex taught to humans from an early age.



COURTESY OF LITTLE, BROWN.

Never back down



BIKRAMJIT BOSE.

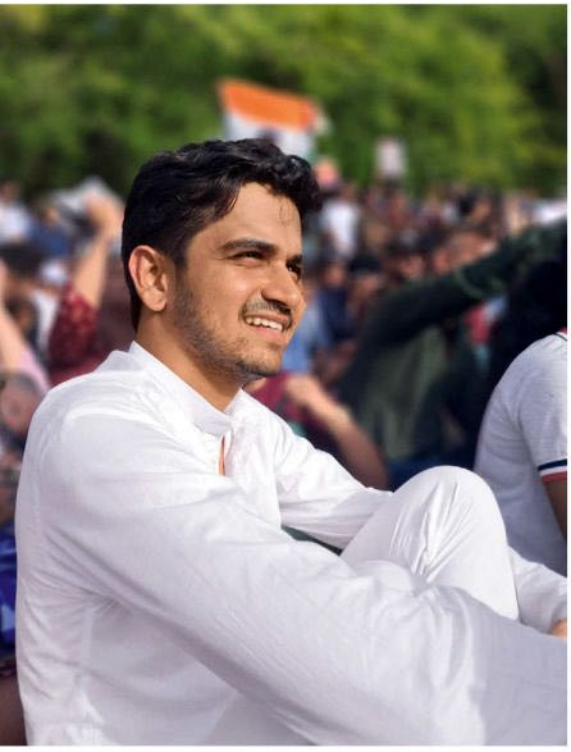
Anish Gawande, one of India's few openly gay politicians, and Radhikaraje Gaekwad, maharani of Baroda and a longtime ally to the queer community, will never stop trying to bring queer conversations into heteronormative spaces. By ARMAN KHAN.

To be queer in India is to ride a roller-coaster of acceptance and rejection in an endless loop. On May 31, you could be targeted for your gender identity, and on June 1, every corporation will change their logo to the rainbow flag. So much of it can seem too tokenistic. But when has quitting ever been an option? For as long as it has existed, the queer community has had to wake up every day and brave the odds. Anish Gawande, the first openly gay man to be appointed as a national spokesperson of a majority political party in India, confesses that he doesn't have the option of cancelling people just because they are homophobic. As a man of the people, he must face the bigots and have a dialogue, yet keep them from bringing him down. Then, he must do it all over again the next day.

Like Gawande, Radhikaraje Gaekwad, the titular maharani of Baroda and the founder of Gazra, Gujarat's first cafe run by LGBTQIA+ people, upholds centuries of royal tradition while sailing against the current. Over a two-hour conversation, Gawande and Gaekwad find that they are, in different ways, doing the same work: carrying queer conversations into rooms not built to hold them.

***Vogue* India:** Inclusion has become a buzzword rather than a call for meaningful action. What has been your approach to it?

Radhikaraje Gaekwad: My first learning came while running Shri Maharani Chimnabai Stree Udyogalaya, a vocational training centre and one of the earliest women's self-governing organisations, founded in 1914. It was very frustrating because I'd start something, trans people would come for a few days, then drop out. I finally had to say, "Alright, I'm opening my regular classes to you, and if you wish to join in any form, we support that." That's when they started coming in—as teachers and administrative staff. If I had tried to create a classroom or space entirely for them, I would only have segregated them further.



TALK TO ME
Gawande, one of India's few openly gay politicians, believes that striving towards inclusion also involves being open to having conversations with people who aren't at the same level of allyship.

Anish Gawande: There are moments when you're faced with overt homophobia, which is driven partly by ignorance but also by condescension. Those, you have to brush off. But at other times, it can be such a wonderful way to start conversations. Understanding that people are at different stages of comprehension is very important. If somebody doesn't have the privilege of knowing the correct vocabulary or terms, chiding or berating them for not knowing better is not a useful way forward. It might just make them more resistant to learning and being better.

RG: I have seen people change. When I first started Gazra in August 2023, we had to do the FSSAI-mandated medical test for everyone. Two people tested positive for HIV. I didn't know what to do because they were in the kitchen. I told them not to come to work for two days while I figured out how to take them out of the kitchen and employ them elsewhere. Later, the kitchen staff—a mix of cisgender and LGBTQIA+ people—came to me and said, "We want to work with them. We have no problem. Just give us the tools to make sure we are safe." That kind of compassion and humanity can be tapped if you bring trans people into neutral spaces where everyone is equal.

***Vogue* India:** Has there been an evolution in our understanding and acceptance of queerness?

AG: The vocabulary for acceptance that we've developed is a Western one, which is not a bad thing. Some people identify as gay. That's an English word. I would not identify as kothi (a biological male who exhibits feminine traits), and that's fine. But the pushback against acceptance is also taking on a very Western shape. People are watching Andrew Tate and all sorts of ridiculous content online, and saying trans people don't exist, when 15 years ago, however transphobic you might have been, you would have never said trans people didn't exist, because you would have seen them around you since you were a child. Whether you were discriminatory towards them is a different question. But saying they don't exist at all is a new regression.

> "If somebody doesn't have the privilege of knowing the correct vocabulary or terms, chiding or berating them for not knowing better is not a useful way forward" —ANISH GAWANDE

***Vogue* India:** I'm curious about this resistance because both of you occupy spaces where, traditionally speaking, queerness in any form wasn't let in. Do you think the odds are stacked against you even now?

RG: A few years ago, I wanted to put on a fashion show with the trans community in Ahmedabad. It was the first time for us in the palace, and the trans people were wearing saris made by us. I was inside a five-star hotel organising the makeup and clothes, feeling really happy with myself that we were doing something this amazing. The trans people called me from the gate because the hotel authorities weren't letting the van carrying them through. When you ally yourself with them, you realise the pushback we face is just a deflection, but it's what they face every single day.

AG: When I was appointed the national spokesperson of the Nationalist Congress Party

RUSHIKESH ARUN PATIL.

(Sharadchandra Pawar faction) two years ago, I didn't realise it made me the country's first openly gay national spokesperson. The news made headlines. Later, a senior party functionary told me to tone down what I said on LGBTQIA+ rights, and I told him that wasn't his place to decide. So, it is something I live with constantly. If I'm out, I'm always calculating how much to talk about queer issues, because if that's all I talk about, my voice gets reduced to only being the 'gay' politician. I have to talk about other sociocultural issues, demonetisation, the Ranveer Allahbadia controversy and current events. It's a balancing act. But when someone tells you to tone it down assertively, it creates a visceral unease that is hard to manage.

***Vogue* India:** Radhika, what was the environment at Lukshmi Vilas Palace like when the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Act, 2026—which essentially walks back the 2019 act recognising self-perceived identity—was passed?

RG: I remember we were assisting someone with gender-affirmation surgery. The 2026 Act shook her so badly that she stopped taking her hormones for the surgery. She didn't want to go ahead with the surgery anymore because she felt like there was no hope. She thought she might do something illegal by showing up at the doctor's door or buying medicines for hormone therapy. The dissemination of information to the different levels of society is so warped that the correct information never reaches the people who are affected. We're trying to create awareness through jan sunwais (public hearings). We counselled her too.

***Vogue* India:** How do we keep up the fight when everything seems to be against us?

AG: The push to hope comes from knowing that the fight was never short or easy to begin with. When Dadabhai Naoroji was fighting for independence, he didn't think he would see it in his lifetime, and he did not. So it is too idealistic to expect that we will see the change we want in the world right now. We're one small part of the machine. You have a right to perform your prescribed duties, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions, to quote the Bhagavad Gita.

RG: Recently, a high-ranking diplomat from Belgium visited us in Vadodara. He wanted to know about our work here. I sensed that he was from the community, so I asked him about having come out. He said that he has in Delhi's diplomatic circles, as part of a robust group of queer community members, but he is still not out to his family. That was such a shock to me. The man is in his 50s. He spoke so proudly about how advanced Belgium is in terms of queer rights, but he hasn't been able to come out to his own mother. His father passed away. He has had one partner all these years, which also took him a long time to find. So these struggles are global. Judgments like the Trans Act 2026 only make me want to dig my heels in deeper. They remind me how much work still needs to be done, and that just makes me more determined. I believe there is a basic level of goodness in most of us—it's simply about creating the awareness that taps into that compassion. Once you bring people into the same space as equals, that shift in the human mind is incredible to witness.



HELPING HANDS
Gaekwad is the founder of Gazra, Gujarat's first cafe run by LGBTQIA+ people. She uses her access to spread awareness and acceptance of India's queer community.

HORMIS ANTONY THARAKAN.

PRESSURE POINT

Tennis prodigy Srishti Kiran and taekwondo champion Amini Laa speak to SIYA BHAMBWANI about coming of age under the pressures of competition and public attention.

WE ADMIRE YOUNG champions for their talent and promise. Less visible are the pressures they learn to shoulder early—fear, disappointment and scrutiny. When I speak to Amini Laa, 16, she is at a training camp in Pune, far from the Kamle district in Arunachal Pradesh where she grew up. Her thoughts keep returning home: her mother ironing her clothes and the small acts of care that seem ordinary until you have lived without them. Srishti Kiran joins from sunny Florida while her hometown of Mumbai is being lashed by monsoon rain. The 13-year-old is brisk and direct. A loss is not devastation; it is, in her words, "a bad day at the office". An opponent is not older, stronger or taller. They are simply a ball that must be played.

I came away with deep respect for both of them—not just for the dreams they're chasing, but for the honesty with which they spoke about the mental strain behind them. Beyond the medals and milestones are two teenagers learning, much earlier than most, what ambition can demand.

***Vogue* India:** You both started very young. Before the medals, rankings and pressure, what made you fall in love with your sport?
Amini Laa: I was seven when I first started taekwondo. I was very introverted, but now, I've met so many people and learnt something completely different. That energy made me happy.
Srishti Kiran: I started tennis when I was four and a half. At first, the joy was just in hitting the ball over the net. Around age five, I started playing tournaments and was doing well. From a young age, I enjoyed winning the most.
***Vogue* India:** Talent can take over your calendar, body and, sometimes, your childhood. What are the parts of this life that people don't see?
AL: They don't see the sleep I sacrifice, the injuries, recovery and consistency it takes. Before stepping onto the mat, there's always fear. No matter how good a player is, there's anxiety, pressure and expectation.
SK: For me, the toughest part is making an unforced error because that is one thing I can and should control. Before the serve or changeover, I have to try my best to stay calm.
***Vogue* India:** You've spent so much time away from what most teenagers would call an ordinary life. What do you miss most?
AL: I've missed many things in school: sports week, girls' dance team, extracurricular activities. I miss interacting with friends, going to birthday parties and dancing at functions. After competitions, the first thing I remember is home-cooked food. When I get tired or sick, I miss my mother the most. I think about those little things.
SK: My dad has always prepared me with the idea that to achieve something great, sacrifices will have to be made. One such sacrifice is staying away from my mother and home.
***Vogue* India:** What helps you remember why you started?
SK: My coaches keep reminding me how important a person's mindset is. When I feel my stability missing on court, I remember the tips they and my dad have given me.
AL: My parents—they're my biggest inspiration. They've sacrificed so much for me and have even taken loans to support me in this game at the cost of their own happiness.

By the end of our conversation, it's clear that Amini Laa and Srishti Kiran are learning to manage a kind of pressure that would test many adults. Their dreams are not small and neither is the weight of carrying them so young. That is the part of the story trophies cannot tell.



GETTY IMAGES.

Love at first note

Are we overdiagnosing romance? Singer-songwriter Prateek Kuhad talks to SIYA BHAMBWANI about how the oldest feeling in the world is simpler than we make it out to be.





A decade ago, dating anxiety mostly meant wondering whether someone would text back. Now, before a first date has even happened, the group chat has already convened: the friend who checks the profile, another who interprets the red flags and the one who says, with alarming confidence, that it sounds like love bombing. The vocabulary of dating has expanded, but so has the suspicion around it.

Dating apps did not invent uncertainty or mixed signals, but they have made them easier to organise. There are prompts, labels, preferences and debriefs. Romance, once allowed to remain vague for a while, is now expected to explain itself early. Where is this going? Is this a situationship? Am I seeing a pattern? The questions are useful, but sometimes I wonder if we've become so good at naming the behaviour that we have lost the patience for the feeling.

Prateek Kuhad has built much of his songwriting around the very opposite impulse. His songs rarely sound like conclusions. They speak to longing, hesitation and the parts of love that do not immediately become clear. His lyrics—'Do you have a 100 words for me? / 'Cause I have only three' ('100 words'); 'Kho jaane ki zid na karo / Khwaaish hai yeh dil ki' ('Tum Jab Paas'); 'I wish I could leave you my love but my heart is a mess' ('Cold/Mess')—have, for years, given listeners a language for crushes, break-ups, almost-relationships and emotions they haven't been able to say out loud. Today, Kuhad is one of India's most recognisable indie voices: tender, self-aware and full of feelings that are easier to sing along to than say plainly.

With his new album *Full Moon Chamber*, however, the mood feels slightly different. Kuhad is still writing about love, but there is a sense of distance in the way he speaks about it now. As always, he submits to the loss of identity that can follow a break-up, but also makes a case against surrendering too much of yourself to another. "You are your own person," he tells me as I sit across from him, and I get the feeling that he's saying this more to himself than to me. "If you accept that and embrace that identity, then nothing else can faze you that much." Kuhad considers my questions

PERFECT STRANGERS
Even as modern dating tries to dissect every connection, mystery remains part of the attraction.

about modern dating carefully, pauses often and answers with the same unhurried quality that runs through his music. He does not rush to condemn apps or defend old-school romance. Instead, he stands somewhere in the middle, which is also where most of his best songs live: between knowing and not knowing, wanting and letting go, saying too much and not saying enough.

Love is as simple as how someone looks at you. If you think about it, it's very distinctive from how anybody else looks at you and is really where it all starts. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder—so is love.

The issue is not that people meet online, but scrolling through endless profiles day after day can be excessive. Dating apps work for some people and not for others. For type A people who like things neatly bracketed, the specificity of a dating app may help. Maybe it's good to actually have everything you want to know about a person up front. But for those who believe in magic, destiny and the universe, it can be a bit of a turn-off.

The grandest gesture I've made for love is flying from Delhi to Texas and back in the same week, just to spend a couple of days with someone. I don't know if it was grand in the cinematic sense, but logistically, it was quite ridiculous. At the time, it felt completely normal to me.

There's an excitement in not knowing everything about a person. There is romance in the unknown. It's your choice to provide that information, but you can also keep it pretty minimal and still be on dating apps. The said and the unsaid both interest me. They're both quite poetic and beautiful and can be heartbreaking in their own ways. Or the opposite—romantic.

I've heard people argue that a little dishonesty keeps a relationship stable. I don't agree. I think there should be transparency and honesty, no matter what. Complete honesty still matters to me. What I have let go of are expectations. When you're younger, you have a very romanticised idea of what love is. With time, that changes; it becomes more about groundedness than excitement.

Modern dating is freer but also more fleeting. I see a society that is more cosmopolitan and accepting, that allows two people to be spontaneous in love without worrying as much about what everyone else will think. That can make it romantic, but that excitement can be quite transient.

I don't think love has really changed anything about me. It's just always been there in my life, and in me, as far back as I can remember. So I don't look at it as something that transformed me as much as something that has always made me who I am.



HEART STRINGS Kuhad traces the fragile line between devotion and dependence in his new album.

The music I've always liked is usually writing that's slightly vague, for lack of a better word. I like songs that leave room for imagination. If it's too on the nose, then I find it boring. I feel the same way about love.

When you're too attached to someone, breaking up can feel like losing a part of yourself. It's why in 'If I Cannot Be Yours', a song from *Full Moon Chamber*, I repeatedly sing, 'Who should I be? Who should I be? Who should I be?' Loving someone is beautiful but there is a line between devotion and dependence. It's crucial that we do not cross it.

When you write about love, write honestly. With love, it's very easy to become performative or sentimental, so the most important thing is to stay as close as possible to what you actually feel. I can write about love forever because it is quite an infinite well in that sense. There's so much to pull out. And it has provided consistently for me. I hope it never runs dry or cuts me off.

COURTESY OF @PRATEEKKUHAD.



Nerd mentality

The internet has given us access to an unlimited well of knowledge—now it is up to us to drink from it. Insatiable guzzler and bestselling author RF Kuang tells ASMA SIDDIQUI how she keeps her brain sharp and her nib sharper.

Most days, after she has been tucked into bed by our mother, my nine-year-old sister's eyes fly open, sparkling with mischief. She immediately starts pleading with me to let her stay up late and "do time-spend" with her. This "time-spend" usually means talking, playing games on Roblox or watching short films on YouTube. Some nights, she asks me to tell her stories with specific instructions to "do the voices, please". So I can't help but smile when RF Kuang tells me that she, too, is an elder sister who first began coming up with stories to tell her little sister at bedtime. "My first experiences with world-building were late at night," says the bestselling author. "My sister and I shared a bedroom, and it was my job to help put her to sleep. I've always loved coming up with fictional worlds, characters and imaginary friends. The coolest part is that I now get to do it as a profession."

Kuang is what Gen Z likes to refer to as 'disgustingly educated': a Marshall Scholar who has studied at Oxford, is currently finishing her PhD at Yale and is an award-winning author, having published six books in her 20s, with more on the way. And she's only 30. When we chat over Zoom, she is loquacious about her experiences reading Le Guin and Goethe and curious about my recent undertakings of Márquez and Dostoevsky. Kuang tells me how she spends hours researching Brahms, Beethoven and Wagner for her next book and also finds time to tend to her obsessions: Warrior Cats and Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey*, which she mentions is her current Roman Empire. "It's great that so many classicists are writing accessible pop-culture pieces because laypersons like me, who don't have a background in classics, can join in the fun."

Over our hour-long conversation, I realise that the Chinese American author's definition of fun differs from most people's. Kuang's eyes light up whenever a niche subject is broached. Her new novel, *Taipei Story* (HarperCollins Publishers India), is not yet out, but she is already working on her next, spanning five different historical periods that send her down various research rabbit holes. Kuang is only too happy to burrow. "I'm reading military manuals and diaries from the front line, and just trying to get my hands on every monograph that might be related so I can paint as rich and interesting a picture of that environment as possible."

When she's not writing her multi-timeline novel, she's teaching, which Kuang declares is her most necessary and fulfilling work. "I love teaching, that's my main identity right now. No matter where I reach in my writing career, I'm going to keep teaching my classes," says the *Yellowface* author, currently a professor of creative writing at the College of the Holy Cross in Massachusetts. "The topics I teach—literature, the humanities, creative writing—are important, not just to help somebody lead a fulfilling existence but also participate in a democracy and be somebody who can care about others."

It makes sense that Kuang is passionate about being a teacher because it just so happens that it was a teacher who changed her life. After emigrating from China at the age of four, Kuang, an irredeemably shy child, struggled with English. She credits her favourite teacher, debate coach Aaron Timmons, with helping her find her voice. The two have since

DEEP DIVE
From left: Covers of Kuang's *Yellowface* (2023), *Taipei Story* (2026), *The Poppy War* (2018) and *Katabasis* (2025).

stayed in touch—naturally, Timmons is a big supporter of his former student's work. "I just had dinner with him a few weeks ago, but the best part of this story," Kuang narrates, breaking into a grin, "is that when I was a senior in high school, there was an incoming student who was looking to transfer. We met in Mr Timmons's office for the first time, and ten years later, we got married. Mr Timmons officiated the wedding."

In Kuang's 2025 novel *Katabasis*, her husband Bennett Eckert-Kuang appears in the form of Peter Murdoch, a mysterious but noble academic rival to the protagonist, Alice Law. The author tells me how Peter, who has Crohn's disease, is a manifestation of her own complicated feelings about Bennett's battle with the same chronic condition. "Every time I go through a major life upheaval, and especially when I'm working through difficult changes like loss, grief or illness, I cope with it by writing it into a story." Her latest novel, similarly, draws from the grief of losing her grandfather. In *Taipei Story*, Lily Chen, a Chinese American college freshman, visits the Taiwanese capital to learn Mandarin so she can understand the culture she inherited, only to receive news that her grandfather has passed away. "I lost my gong gong, my grandfather, three years ago. There was a lot to reckon with—family secrets, guilt, so many missed opportunities. I took those feelings and invested them into a much younger character."

She may draw from universal experiences, but the different worlds that Kuang constructs in her books can be quite complex and layered. "I can't stand the quick-paced, bite-sized form of online entertainment culture. At one point, I had to delete my TikTok account because I realised I was forgetting stuff too easily and couldn't pay sustained attention to anything." She is also concerned that contemporary pop culture is leading modern society towards a monolithic state of mind by pushing "everything simple and easily digestible" to the top of our algorithms. Kuang sees us swipe away before we've finished a 15-second Instagram reel and gives us the *Poppy War* trilogy, *Babel* and *Katabasis*, all dense volumes written and structured like modern-day classics. Readers and fellow nerds have even gone so far as to prescribe syllabi to fully enjoy *Katabasis*: Dante's *Inferno*, Homer's *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid* and Euripides's *Alcestis*. Kuang tells me she finds this passion "very cute", but she writes for all, and her books can be read in whichever way people want to read them. There are no delusions of genius—she is aware that her prose is nowhere near the level of the classics she loves, but she considers it a worthy challenge. "That's what I'm writing towards and what I will always be striving for." For now, she hopes simply that reading her books feels like "your nerdy best friend saying, 'I want to tell you about something that I think is awesome.'"

Although her writing is loved by many, it's no secret that Kuang is a divisive author. Readers criticise and defend her



with equal ferocity, arguing that her books are brilliant, overhyped, overexplained and life-changing under the same Reddit post. Kuang confesses that she doesn't follow conversations about her work. In fact, she thinks no author should. "That can't be helpful to my writing process, right? Given the volume of discussion, there's no way for me to sort through what's useful feedback to take into my next project and what's just an indication that this is not the right reader for my work. I will say this: I never write to show off or to be unnecessarily academic."

Almost any author you look up to will tell you that to write well, you must write every day. Mary Oliver woke up early and took long walks in nature with her journal. EB White said, "A writer who waits for ideal conditions under which to work will die without putting a word on paper." Stephen King writes 2,000 words a day. For her part, Kuang has published a book every year or two: *The Poppy War* in 2018, *The Dragon Republic* in 2019, *The Burning God* in 2020, *Babel* in 2022, *Yellowface* in 2023, *Katabasis* in 2025 and the upcoming *Taipei Story*, most of them over 500 pages. She has been preternaturally prolific—something she wants to change going forward. "It was easy for me to pump out so many novels in the last decade because they'd just been bubbling up inside me," she reflects. "But now, I'm in this period of growth where I want to take my time and write bigger, more complex and more heavily researched works, for which one or two years aren't enough. It's actually a fairly ridiculous and unsustainable output. The authors I admire take five, six, seven years, sometimes a decade between works, and as I'm transitioning from being a young novelist, I want to change the type of stories I write to be more considered and mature." As an aspiring young writer and hopeful novelist, I selfishly ask Kuang for a tip on how to read and write better. She gives me three: put your phone away, don't just read what you can easily process and, most importantly, do not DNF a book at first blush. "It took me five tries to enjoy *Faust*," she admits. "I kept putting it down and didn't understand what the hype was until I finally picked up a translation by David Constantine. It was magical. Every single line was singing to me."

We live in a time where being an academic, a reader, even a nerd is cool once again. Many of us want to adopt such intellectual pursuits but barely end up skimming the surface before longing to return to our zombie-like doomscrolling. Kuang urges us not to scratch the itch. "There is so much joy in slowly working through a very long paragraph of Proust just to see him make a point about what it feels like to walk through a park. It's the particular combination of words chosen to express a feeling, the structure, the imagery, how the words sound when you read them out loud." She smiles like she is working through a sentence in her mind at that very moment, then shakes her head and snaps back to the present. "The joy is in the process. It's all about the process."



PHOTO: ATHUL PRASAD/*CONDÉ NAST TRAVELLER* INDIA



CLICK BEHAVIOUR
Ashish Shah trains a loving lens on his hometown of Dehradun.
Opposite page: An image from a shoot for *Tatler* Hong Kong in 2019.



Ways of seeing

As someone who grew up outside the hallowed halls of image-making, photographer ASHISH SHAH writes about why it should be our collective mission to take India's visual potential beyond colour and chaos.



When I was 14, I borrowed a neighbour's film camera to photograph a bridge over the Bhagirathi River in Uttarakhand that had been under construction for years. I believed that if enough people saw the pictures, someone might finally do something about it. I was too shy to ever show those photographs to anyone, but the urge to make a difference through an image stayed with me.

Four years later, I left Dehradun hoping to meet new people and have exciting conversations. I didn't leave home to become a photographer. I just wanted to get out of there. When I look back now, I don't think I taught myself photography as much as others taught me kindness. People from different walks of life lent me expensive equipment without really knowing me. Someone liked my eyebrow piercings enough to help me when I was broke. Someone else bought me a memory card in appreciation of how I dressed. Someone invited me home for dinner when I had nowhere to go. When I landed in New York in 2016 with just ₹7,000 in my pocket, almost all of it disappeared in a taxi from the airport. I survived on production lunches and sparkling water in the office. It sounds tragic now, but those years taught me something I still carry with me: I'm a people's product.

When I entered fashion photography in 2014, everyone in India was photographing white or Eastern European models. Even the technical education around photography—the references, the lighting, the beauty standards—was built around white skin. Gradually, without even noticing it, I began to believe that beauty had to look a certain way. I developed what I now understand was an identity crisis. I often say I felt ugly in my own industry. Every time someone clicked a picture of me, I would hide my face. I was making a great living and constantly on assignment, but I never really felt at home in my own work.



EYE SPY
Above: Model Lakshmi Menon poses for *Vogue* India's 2022 cover shoot on a beach in Mandrem, Goa. *Opposite page*: Shah shot Alexander McQueen's pre-spring/summer 2021 campaign.

The answers didn't come from buying better equipment. They came from travelling, talking to professionals and observing how photographers around the world approached their craft. More importantly, I realised that, in India, many of us were simply applying Western recipes to Indian realities. People often talk about representation as though it's only about who's standing in front of the camera. For me, it also became about how inaccurately brown skin had been photographed for decades. I was fixated on understanding what our skin actually looked like in photographs because if we couldn't represent ourselves truthfully, how could we expect others to do it?

The challenge was that every international brief demanded the same thing: colourful India, rhapsodic Jaipur, crowded flower markets. I live in Mumbai. The city is grey. When I travel to Delhi for work, the sky there is grey too. Most of our lives happen in ordinary colours. I began to wonder why everyday India was so absent from global fashion imagery. When Alexander McQueen asked me to photograph their pre-spring/summer 2021 collection, we had every opportunity to shoot in spectacular locations. Instead, I asked them to come to the hometown I had once longed to escape. It was important to me that global audiences see and accept a mundane India. We photographed theatrical gowns and structured suits on Dehradun's rooftops, surrounded by hills and textured walls.

The more I questioned pre-existing ideas of homogeneity, the more I realised I also had to question myself. I get bored very quickly, which has probably saved me as a photographer. The moment I become comfortable with a process, I start distrusting it. If natural light becomes my comfort zone, I'll force myself to work with flash. I'll take on projects that remove every inch of control. I photographed a friend's wedding in Delhi last year for that very reason. Weddings don't wait for photographers. You can't ask someone to repeat an embrace or recreate a laugh. Everything happens once, and you're constantly catching up. I wanted to remind myself what it felt like to work without certainty, because certainty can become dangerous for a creative person.

Even after 15 years, I've not forgotten that when someone stands in front of my camera, they're in an incredibly vulnerable position. Some days I feel like their therapist; other days, they feel like mine. It's an exchange. If I don't open up, there's every chance they won't either. One of my favourite memories is from the Byredo shoot in 2021 with two young, incredibly shy boys. They were standing shirtless on the streets of Mumbai in leather trousers, uncomfortable in their own bodies, unsure of what was expected of them. We stopped trying to make pictures. We just spoke. I gave them each a mask to put on. Once that happened, they forgot the camera was there and became free.

That's one of the reasons why I enjoy mentoring younger creatives now. Most people come to me asking what they should photograph, but that's rarely the real question. Usually, they're asking if their own way of seeing is enough. The air of mystery around fashion photography needs to dissipate. Fashion is simply what you saw around you growing up; it lies in what you notice when you travel. It's important to humanise it.

Unfortunately, the Indian fashion photographer still doesn't exist in the global imagination. There's an assumption that fashion photography belongs somewhere else, that India exists only as a location, a backdrop, a source of colour. We have a responsibility towards a nation that has lived through so much. It is far too diverse and alive to be compressed into someone's portfolio.

—As told to Aliza Fatma.





Life isn't all ha ha hee hee

In an exclusive essay, comedian, actor and writer MEERA SYAL writes about how she began throwing punches long before women stopped being the punchline.

I may have been a British-born kid, growing up in a rural village in the UK's West Midlands, but our social life was ruled entirely by a big gang of my parents' friends, all of them newly arrived immigrants from India. My parents, Surendra and Surinder, landed in London in the winter of 1959, and, far from home and homesick, these friends became their family—and therefore mine too. Like family, they felt that they had the right to tell me off whenever the hell they wanted, much of which seemed to have been specifically tailored to repress young women or stop them from ever having The Fun™: "Hai, don't sit with your legs apart. What are you, a boy?"; "Put down that laddu! You can only get fat after you are married"; "Divorce? Call it 'die-vorce', because better you die than do that to your family." One of the many warnings flung at me as a child by the mafia of aunties surrounding me was, "Enough jokes now, Meera. Time to be serious. Life isn't all ha ha hee

AMY BRAMMALL.

When I started in comedy 40 years ago, brown female comedians were almost unheard of. But women have always been life's comedians; our mothers and grandmothers knew that given what we put up with, we had to laugh or we would cry.

hee"—the last part of which became the title of the novel I wrote in 1999. Naturally, I recycled many of these quips for comedy material later on—a couple of them are actually chapter titles in my forthcoming memoir, *Vigilauntie*. But growing up with these rules wasn't so amusing. I got their hidden subtext loud and clear: nice girls don't take up space. They stay thin, presentable and quiet, and don't even think about leaving an unhappy marriage. Even if you didn't actually die, you would wish you had.

Now, as an adult and after a lot of expensive therapy, I can understand where this desperate need to confine and silence young girls began. Women grow up wearing the family honour like a wobbly crown. It doesn't matter who knocks it off your head; it will always be the woman's fault that she just didn't hold onto it tight enough. Imagine growing up with this constant fear that saying or doing the wrong thing could soil your family's reputation and get you thrown into the 'unmarriageable dustbin'. So I now realise my aunties weren't scary, they were scared. For me. Their controlling behaviour was the only way they knew how to offer protection.

It became clear to me early on that one of the most unladylike things to do was to be funny. Cracking jokes in public was strictly for the men. I would watch my uncles trade what were undoubtedly dodgy jokes, guffawing and backslapping one another, shouting over each other to repeat the punchline. Yes, I'm Punjabi, we are a noisy bunch. But if the women happened to be in the room, they had to pretend they hadn't heard the naughty bits, or if they had, giggle politely behind their hands, eyes down—anything except actually be in on the joke. Not only did it seem unfair to me that the guys got to have all the fun, but I also knew that my aunties were pretty hilarious themselves. I had listened to them in our tiny kitchen, swapping stories about their annoying husbands, their English neighbours, their own bodies, saying things like, "I married a man with a big aubergine, and now it's the size of a green chilli." They were just as funny and filthy as the men. But they were only ever like this with each other. If any man popped his head around the door, the laughter would stop and the blender would roar back to life. I began to understand that being a funny man was admired, but being a funny woman was an act of subversion.

This was unfortunate because I saw humour all around me. The pretensions of the uncles who wanted to be more British than the British, changing their names from Bhupinder to Bob and eating their samosas with a knife and fork. The competitive tiger mothers who showed off their cubs at any opportunity: "My Bitoo wants to be a surgeon, so now he will perform open heart surgery on Mr Malhotra using just a crayon." The spoiled sons, the raja betas, the lazy lumps who were showered with praise for managing to tie their shoelaces, while their sisters, who were straight-A students, would be in the kitchen doing the washing up. I found these quirks of British Asian behaviour both disturbing and hilarious. These observations would later become sketches in Britain's first-ever Asian comedy sketch show, *Goodness Gracious Me*, which I wrote and performed. It turned out to be a ground-breaking hit. No one thought Asians could be funny, and before this show, brown people were always the butt of the jokes, never the ones making them. The show's success proved what I already suspected: that humour was a powerful weapon, that it could both expose the uncomfortable truth like a sword and bring people together like a balm. But even then, I noticed the difference in reactions from men and women to our comedy gang of four. When we toured *Goodness Gracious Me* around the country, there were always hordes of women waiting to meet Sanjeev [Bhaskar] and Kulvinder [Ghir] after the show, wanting pictures, flirting madly. When any of the men saw Nina [Wadia] and me exit the same stage door, they would clamp a protective hand around their genitals and run away. What is it about funny women that frightens men so much?

I think the answer to that question lies in a line Margaret Atwood wrote in *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose*. "Men are afraid that women will laugh at them. Women are afraid that men will kill them." A woman who is confident enough to think of a joke and say it out loud is both intelligent and powerful. A woman who throws her head back and laughs loudly from her belly is claiming her space proudly. She is telling the world, 'I am here, I love my body and my sharp wit. I own my joy to exist.' Any man who is frightened of that isn't any man worth being with. How lucky that I married Sanjeev, my former colleague and one of the few South Asian men who see my humour as a superpower rather than a threat.

When I started in comedy 40 years ago, brown female comedians were almost unheard of. Now, I can look around and see the sisters I always longed to have—Aditi Mittal, Neeti Palta, Sindhu Vee—women who are funny, strong and unafraid, changing the world one joke at a time. We have always been life's comedians; our mothers and grandmothers knew that given what we put up with, we had to laugh or we would cry. I say no more crying, behen, we have done too much of that. Go on, crack that joke—it may just save your life. I know it did mine.

The questions we choose

What does it mean to stay curious in a world that rewards certainty? In this intimate essay, MARGARET ZHANG reflects on identity, motherhood and the questions that come to define a life.

THERE IS A particular kind of certainty that belongs only to the young.

Not the certainty that life will unfold according to plan—most of us are fortunate enough to lose that illusion early—but that certainty itself can be earned.

My 20s were animated by that certainty. Looking back, people often describe my career as a succession of reinventions. The Pianist. The Dancer. The Student. The Photographer. The Writer. The Consultant. The Editor. The Filmmaker. I have never recognised myself in that narrative. It assumes a neatness in life that I find repulsive.

We rarely see people in their entirety. We meet them during a particular chapter and promptly mistake it for the whole book. The version of someone we first understand becomes the version we hope they remain. We like origin stories, redemption arcs, overnight successes that secretly took 20 years. We like narratives that resolve because resolution reassures us that the world is orderly. We say we admire reinvention, but more often we admire it retrospectively, once all the uncertainty has been edited out.

Perhaps that is why we like identities that stand still long enough to be named.

Mine never really did. Every few years, my curiosity wandered into a different medium. My early agents bemoaned my lack of focus. The Pianist learnt that pauses sometimes carry more weight than the notes they punctuate. The Photographer learnt that a frame is, in fact, an act of exclusion. The Writer learnt that the audience becomes immersed only once the dialogue stops explaining itself. I tended to my disciplines like pets, borrowing from their lessons on emotional architecture, movement, endurance and restraint. They became available to one another. From the inside, they obeyed the same logic. I was always chasing that moment when preparation dissolved into intuition—or better still, knowledge became fluency.

For a long time, I mistook fluency for certainty. I could bottle the feeling. In a ninth-grade science exam, I had studied with such obsessive discipline that every answer arrived before I consciously reached for it. *This must be what they call flow state*, I marvelled at the time. Practice, I concluded, erased doubt.

Law school unsettled that belief first. Business school complicated it further. Knowledge alone was no longer enough. Instead, several contradictory positions could all be defended with conviction, and something morally indefensible could become etched into history as precedent if repeated often enough. This sat uneasily alongside the logic I had inherited as a child of immigrants that excellence was never an aspiration so much as insurance. If you were young, if you were a girl, if you were Chinese (or god forbid, not Chinese *enough*), you had to be twice as good simply to arrive at the same start line. I convinced myself that if I could become indisputably excellent—if I became fluent in every room I entered—prejudice would eventually concede.

It was an elegant theory. It was not how the world worked. It took me longer than I care to admit to realise that I was still measuring my life against timelines designed by people whose definitions of success bore almost no resemblance to my own. The irony was that, by then, I had become remarkably fluent.



MATERNAL INSTINCTS
As she reveals her second pregnancy, Zhang reflects on her belief that children don't just inherit values but "inherit the questions we choose to keep asking".

Before my 30th birthday, I flew from New York to Los Angeles and drove to Palm Springs with my oldest friend and my newest friend. (I would go on to fall in love with the latter—my now partner and the father of my children.) The rest of my truest witnesses flew in from all corners of the world and from every chapter of my life. The one who had first met The Pianist. The one who had danced with The Dancer. The one who had hired The Photographer. The Writer. The Filmmaker. Many of them had never met one another, yet all knew the same person. Some time between dinner and cake, my newest friend asked the congregation to tell everyone How They Had Met Margaret. As we went around the table, The Editor was scarcely mentioned. Each remembered my curiosities, not my competencies. They had remained my truest witnesses—some for two decades—precisely because they had never perceived me as a sum of my milestones.

By the time we said our goodbyes, it was the Monday after the first Monday in May. I was well into my third year of living in Beijing and, by certain measures that mattered to certain insiders and outsiders alike, had become alarmingly fluent. Our team had found a rhythm that, years earlier, I wouldn't have believed possible. We had pushed through what felt like a sonic barrier in culture, building a community that wasn't simply reflecting the creative landscape, but participating in shaping it. Decisions that had once required enormous effort had become both instinctive and somehow procedural.

The seed planted in Palm Springs lay dormant until one jet-lagged 3am the following Lunar New Year—sitting cross-legged on the bathroom floor, looking at two unmistakable lines on a pregnancy test. This remains the clearest moment of my life. I had to leave Beijing.

How could I ask my unborn child to pursue their own curiosity if I no longer trusted mine? I had mistaken competence for clarity, momentum for direction, legibility and predictability for success. Our children do not simply inherit our values. They inherit the questions we choose to keep asking.

It would take the majority of my pregnancy to disentangle myself from Beijing and move back across the planet—my latest pet, The Editor, in tow. No sooner had I given birth to our son (closely followed by the placenta and my film production company) did questions emerge about when I planned to return.

Return is a revealing verb. Return to work. Return to your body. Return to the public. Return to yourself. Return to normal. But where, exactly, are we imagined to have gone? Do we wait in the wings to resume as though pregnancy and childbirth and motherhood are mere interruptions to regular programming? For the first time in my career, there was no return to my chapters and pet disciplines in the way I'd known them. Hell, I tried. Work was still the language I spoke most fluently. On Zoom, the visible part of me looked composed. Out of frame, my body was swollen beyond recognition. Both were true, but a need to explain persisted—why the screenplay was taking longer; why my son cried during meetings; why I'd become quiet in public; why film, why now. I grew fascinated by the amount of narration women are expected to provide for their own lives. Not because the questions themselves matter, but because they presume that every absence or deviation from expectation should be announced and accounted for.

I have become less interested in stories that explain women than in those that accompany them. To explain someone is to resolve them. To accompany someone is to remain beside them while they hesitate, contradict themselves, disappear for a while or change direction. The women I make films about do not exist as symbols of strength or sacrifice. They are allowed opacity. Their lives are not diminished by the fact that they cannot yet explain where they are going.

My son has shown me how early we confuse measurement with meaning. Before we have learned who a child is, we begin measuring who they are becoming: the hours they sleep, the weight they gain, the words they know.

Yet he has never once measured me. He knows only whether I am present enough to match his curiosity as he experiences the world for the first time.

Perhaps *this* is the certainty that belongs only to the young.

MARGARET ZHANG.









(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) *A LIFE IN FRAGMENTS 11*, *A LIFE IN FRAGMENTS 9*, *A LIFE IN FRAGMENTS 8*, *A LIFE IN FRAGMENTS 6*: COURTESY OF JAYEETA CHATTERJEE AND CHEMOULD COLAB.

A marriage of equals

A husband who does not feel diminished by his wife's success is still a rare thing. Social entrepreneur CHETNA GALA SINHA reflects on partnership, power and public work.

I UNDERSTOOD WHO Vijay was when I saw him through the women who trusted him. It was the middle of summer in drought-prone Mhaswad, Maharashtra, and more than 15,000 women had gathered for a public meeting with him about higher wages and access to water. Men often migrated, and their wives were left to run households on wages that seldom came on time. I did not yet think of Vijay as someone I might marry. But at that meeting, I noticed how women spoke around him. They argued, made demands and spoke without fear of being reprimanded, while he listened seriously.

One woman stood up and said that her husband, who worked in the police department, had locked her inside their

house to stop her from attending. She had broken the door and come anyway. At home, she said, she might have to defer to him. But outside, she would listen to Vijay and the movement.

As someone who wanted to work towards women's equality in public and private life, I was struck by the force with which she spoke, and by the way Vijay took it all in without taking over her moment.

I had known of Vijay through Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini, the Gandhian organisation founded by Jayaprakash Narayan, which I joined as an undergraduate at Mumbai University after its leaders came to campus urging young city folk to work in rural India. Vijay was a leader in the farmers' movement in Mhaswad and our paths had crossed when he travelled to Mumbai for work. I sometimes helped with writ petitions and gathering support, but we rarely spoke directly. Born into a business family in Mumbai, I came from a world of books and feminist conversations. Vijay was from a farming family, and had not studied beyond the 9th standard. He began sending postcards to our organisation's Mumbai office, explaining that because most of the participants in the movement were women, it was important to have women activists in the village too. I agreed to go.



Over the following year, as I travelled more often to Mhaswad, we came to know each other beyond these encounters. Once, after we had completed a padayatra, walking through villages, holding meetings and speaking to people, Vijay said that he was thinking of marriage and asked me, point blank, whether I would consider becoming his life partner.

I didn't have an answer, requested time to think and returned to Mumbai. I knew there was chemistry, but I needed a moment to find answers. I had spent my young life speaking about equality in public, and I wondered whether that equality could also be lived inside a marriage. My father knew of my plans to study further, and he worried that a man with limited exposure to the world might not understand the pursuit of women's rights and equality that had become central to my life.

When Vijay and I spoke about women's issues, we spoke different languages. I used the vocabulary of feminism; he spoke about humanity and how one person should treat another. I asked what equal property rights would mean in practice. The land was of no interest to me, but how could I get others to fight for it without practising it myself? So once we were wed, my name was added to his inherited land. I told him I did not believe in wearing symbols of marriage simply because marriage required them, and he did not argue. It was my choice, and was treated as such.

In the early years of our marriage, our days often began in different directions. Vijay would leave on his motorcycle to meet people in the community while I cycled to meetings with women. He knew the region and its people in a way I was still learning. He taught me never to assume that women in a village needed someone from the big city to instruct them. In the evenings, we would return home and speak about what each of us had done.

Before founding the Mann Deshi Mahila Sanskari Bank, India's first bank for rural women, we started a credit cooperative society. Some people wanted Vijay to take charge; they trusted him. He said I should lead it because my education and discipline would help build the institution. One man on the committee tried to get mischievous with the funds, but I refused to allow it. He complained to my husband, assuming he could persuade me to change course. Vijay believed I should listen to them more closely, yet never presented his opinion as an instruction. When I held to my mandate of turning the loss-making society profitable in my way, he simply told them, "She is not listening to me." We disagreed openly; one person did not disappear into the other's beliefs. In a marriage so close to public work, what mattered more than agreement itself was to remain independent while still standing together.

As Mann Deshi grew, my work demanded more of my time, and my name began appearing in newspapers. Slowly, the public identity that Vijay had occupied before me began to shift.

One day, an officer at the revenue office told me that Vijay had visited earlier and gone unrecognised until a senior colleague identified him as Chetna Gala Sinha's husband. Before I came to Mhaswad, Vijay had been a formidable leader in the community. Someone once told me that I had married a lion. Now, people were beginning to know him through me.

When I asked Vijay about it, he smiled.

"I am Mr Vijay Chetna."

Sacrificing money is easier than sacrificing power. I have seen leaders mourn the loss of a position more than the loss of someone close to them. Even inside a loving marriage, a wife's growing public identity can disturb the order the world has taught both people to expect.

By this point, I was travelling internationally, and Vijay accompanied me often. In 2002, I moved to the United States with him and our children for Yale's World Fellows Program. In Mhaswad, Vijay held what you could call a daily durbar, where people would come to seek his advice. At Yale, I was the one whose days were claimed. In the evenings, he began cooking dinner, though he had never cooked before. A student who often came home for dinner knew Vijay only as the man who stood at the stove while I was busy with the programme. Months later, when he visited India and saw Vijay address a large public meeting, he was astonished. "You never told me your husband is a leader here," he said. I smiled. "You never asked."

In one place, Vijay's authority was visible. In another, he could stand at a stove in a country whose language he did not speak and learn what the day required of him. Neither version of him diminished the other.

He listened to people who interrupted him, disagreed without humiliation and acknowledged that my decisions were my own. Even before marrying him, this is what I trusted.

—As told to Sara Hussain.

HEART TIME

Vijay and Chetna are a study in how two headstrong people can keep their work and sense of self intact.



Hype queens

Ratna Pathak Shah and Supriya Pathak Kapur agree they have little in common. But when the sisters sit down for a morning of banter at Ratna's Bandra home, poking fun at and praising each other in equal parts, it becomes clear their differences hardly matter. By SAACHI GUPTA.

"Can someone please check if my sari looks okay? Do I look like a teacherji?" Ratna Pathak Shah asks nervously. She makes no secret of the fact that she is uncomfortable posing for pictures. "We are actors. We're not used to standing silently; we're used to speaking," she complains to the photographer, before mischievously suggesting they exchange places. Behind her, Supriya Pathak Kapur glances up from her phone with a smile, then comes forward to smooth her didi's sari. "She's always had this fear of looking like a teacher," she tells us with an affectionate eyeroll. "I don't know why, when she acts so much like one." Ratna retorts with a chuckle: "That's exactly why."

At first glance, it is hard to believe the two veteran actors are related. They do not resemble each other in appearance, as Ratna herself has pointed out in previous interviews, comparing her sharp features to Supriya's doe eyes. On the small screen, they have carved out separate niches for themselves: Ratna is best known for playing the scathing, sarcastic and sophisticated matriarch Maya in the 2000s cult-classic comedy *Sarabhai vs Sarabhai*, while Supriya's role as the endearingly naive and cheerful Hansa in *Khichdi* made her a household name. Even in the two-part crossover of these shows (*Khichdi with Sarabhai*), which aired in 2005, they seemed to be polar opposites.

"We're very different, as you might have noticed," Ratna confirms between shots. She is always in motion, bursting with energy as she fixes a sofa cushion

PAST LIFE
Long before she played the lovable Hansa in *Khichdi*, Supriya Pathak Kapur starred opposite English actor Hugh Grant in the controversial romance drama *The Bengali Night* (1988).

GETTY IMAGES.

or circles around the living room of her home, asking crew members if they'd like some chai. In contrast, Supriya is blissfully serene, seated on an armchair by the window with all her attention focused on me. "There's so little in common," she agrees with her elder sister. "Except our love for Gujarati food," Ratna adds. And of course, acting.

It is impossible to imagine the two doing anything else but this. In 2013, when Supriya bagged the Filmfare Award for best supporting actress in *Goliyon ki Rasleela Ram-Leela*, she gushed in her acceptance speech, "I love this industry so much, I love being a part of this place. And I hope that when I go, I go from here." Over a decade later, her sentiments have persisted, her passion for acting untouched by the exasperating politics and pomposity of the film industry. "I have a lot of problems with the people, the set-ups, the attitude," she concedes. "But put me on a set of any kind, and I can take to it like a duck to water." The 65-year-old speaks softly, with a pleasant half-smile reaching her eyes at all times. A far cry from some of the loud, screen-dominating characters that have made her popular.

To this day, many of Supriya's diverse roles remain underrated: in *Bazaar* (1982), it is near-impossible not to tear up watching her as Shabnam, a wide-eyed teenage girl sold into a forced marriage. Every few years, stills from *The Bengali Night* (1988), a controversial romance drama in which she starred opposite English actor Hugh Grant, go viral on Instagram and are met with renewed surprise. "Luckily, I never got bracketed into a single kind of part, not even in the olden days when they used to put you into a slot immediately," Supriya recalls. "Somehow, I didn't get stuck with Hansa either. *Sarkar*, *Wake Up Sid* and then *Ram-Leela* were all so varied despite happening around the same time."

It is Ratna who beams and nods impassionedly when I recall how flabbergasted my schoolmates were upon realising that Dhankor, the terrifying matriarch who cuts off Deepika Padukone's finger in *Ram-Leela*, is the same woman who had once played their comfort character on *Khichdi*. The two sisters almost seem more excited to discuss each other's work than their own. If, at any point, one says something slightly self-deprecating, the other sternly shuts her down. "She's fishing," Ratna rolls her eyes when Supriya declares she used to be an incompetent actor when younger. "Supriya, you've never been incompetent." "Oh, yes?" her sister challenges. "You remember me in *Dharm Aur Qanoon*? I can name so many parts like that, so don't tell me." Ratna turns away, feigning annoyance but visibly holding in laughter. "Okay, now ask some other question," she nudges me.

Despite completing nearly 50 years as actors, the siblings have only shared screen space in *Idhar Udhar*, a 1985 sitcom in which Ratna played the airheaded flight attendant to Supriya's pragmatic advertising executive. The show is relatable to this day as the two young women sharing a rented flat in Mumbai are repeatedly tested by the City of Dreams—struggling to cook eggs, waking up one morning to their apartment filled with water. Hell-bent on making someone else do their chores, they publish a newspaper ad seeking a male paying guest with a "dashing appearance and good sense of humour", only to regret it when the men who start living with them meet neither of these criteria. To Ratna, *Idhar Udhar* was a milestone, not only because she got to work with her sister but also because it introduced her to comedy, saving her from a fate she deemed "worse than death": that of a tragic heroine.

> "I have a lot of problems with [the film industry]—the people, the set-ups, the attitude, but put me on a set of any kind, and I can take to it like a duck to water"
> —SUPRIYA PATHAK KAPUR

When I ask Supriya what she considers her elder sister's best role, her answer is instant, even though she knows it's what the kids would call 'basic'. "I still feel that what she created with Maya was amazing. And it's not simple. Everybody thinks it's easy to be…" "A snooty bitch," Ratna takes over when her little sister hesitates out of respect. "Call me what I am."

The banter between the siblings flows constantly, yet never at the other's expense. Gone are the days when a young Ratna would emotionally blackmail her little sister by threatening to jump out of the window if she didn't cater to her every whim. Now, the two are more protective of each other's feelings. "We got done with our fighting as kids. Now we're behaving like adults," Ratna says. But this closeness is new-found. "I would never have imagined it could be this way 10 years ago. Earlier, we didn't have much of a relationship," Supriya confesses. "But now I meet her because I want to meet her, not because I have to."

Both sisters have their answer ready when I probe if there are any traits they'd like to steal from the other. "I can tell you," Supriya says, but Ratna cuts in. "I want to go first," she announces, transforming from a teacherji into an eager school kid. "Her ability to be cheerful in all kinds of circumstances. I don't know where she finds it." They are sitting by the piano in the hall as the camera clicks away. Supriya doesn't pause to take a breath: "The way she cares for people, how she keeps everyone together," she enthuses. "She would look after my aunts when they were sick. She still has all her friends from childhood. She takes the whole gamut of people with her." Ratna's flustered smile is big enough to make her cheeks ache. "What a lovely compliment, no?" she asks me.

Even when she is posing for pictures, Ratna's eyes occasionally flit here and there. When a crew member returns a harmonium to its place, she tells them, not unkindly, "The other way, please." Animatedly, she turns to Supriya to remind her that the instrument belonged to their kaka. From bird figurines to a miniature bust of poet Mirza Ghalib—the same I've seen in Gulzar's study—and framed photographs on every wall, the apartment is scattered with whimsical objects that clearly have sentimental significance. Books line an entire wall; I note, with interest, Arundhati Roy's *Mother Mary Comes to Me*. There is a caricature of Ratna, Naseeruddin Shah and their children grinning. A pink hand towel lies on the back of a chair. With its brown-red walls and colourful tchotchkes, the home feels warm and lived-in, a far cry from the highbrow sensibilities of Maya Sarabhai. It has been over two decades since the first episode of *Sarabhai vs Sarabhai* released, but Maya—with a vocabulary to rival Moira Rose's—has remained a cultural cornerstone of Indian television, crossing over into camp. Gen Z fans have proclaimed her "TV's OG baddie", flooding the comments section of Ratna's first



GOT YOUR BACK
There were times when a young Ratna Pathak Shah would emotionally blackmail Supriya by threatening to jump out of the window if her little sister didn't cater to her every whim. Today, the siblings are fiercely protective of each other.

Instagram post from September 2025 with quotes like "Monisha, this is so categorically middle-class." They swoon over Maya's angular bob and sleeveless designer blouses, and chop up fancams of her witty comebacks. She has even become something of a gay icon.

Ratna looks back on the character just as fondly. She has but one disappointment, she admits, scrunching her nose: unlike her sister, she does tend to get typecast since Maya's success. "I get offered similar parts, unfortunately. The sort that go"—she counts on her fingers—"modern, cigarette-smoking, foul-mouthed, mind of her own, bossy, strict. It's boring to keep doing the same thing again and again. So I try to avoid taking roles that feel stereotyped."

Years later, social media detectives have discovered that Savitri Rathore, Ratna's character in *Jaane Tu… Ya Jaane Na* (2008) was reading Naomi Wolf's feminist text *The Beauty Myth*. This has made her cool-mom performance even more authentic. In *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016), she played the uptight matriarch Usha Buaji, who secretly reads erotic pulp fiction and has her sexual awakening upon meeting a swim instructor. In between, there was *Golmaal 3* (2010), which transformed her into a wide-eyed rich girl dressed in flashy purple, melodramatically racing up the stairs and falling onto her bed in tears. And there is theatre, always. Ratna lights up at its mere mention: "Theatre gives me the work I really feel like doing."

> "We got done with our fighting as kids. Now we're behaving like adults"
> —RATNA PATHAK SHAH

At Prithvi Theatre, I've often been impressed by her ability to disappear. One second, she is on stage as the vivacious, chattering protagonist of *Old World*, a romantic drama in which she stars with Naseeruddin. The next moment, she has merged with the crowds, then vanished. This is definitely in character for both sisters, who never wanted to be famous actors, despite—or perhaps due to—their mother, the legendary Dina Pathak, being one. "In school, I was always asked, 'What about you, your mother's an actress, will you become one too?' I'd say, 'Hello? I've got ideas of my own'," Ratna reveals, then laughs. "Frankly, I didn't have too many ideas of my own. But this was my way of rebelling."

Today, when being a performer involves posing for photos as much as actually acting, it is almost refreshing to see two experienced celebrities feel awkward in front of a camera. By the end of the shoot, the sisters are impatient, itching to change out of their saris. "You're sure we're done? Do you want to add anything to what we've said so far?" Ratna checks with her younger sister cautiously. "You won't call to fight with me tomorrow?" "No, I'm sure, one hundred per cent positive," Supriya assures her, then grins roguishly, "But you never know…" Ratna whips around to look at me, wide-eyed and indignant: "You see that? Fauran palti."

VIKAS GOTRA.

OUR PLEASURE



BIKRAMJIT BOSE.

She may have hung up her gloves as Dr Jean Milburn on *Sex Education* but Gillian Anderson, who is about to publish her second book containing anonymous women's fantasies, is determined to make that role last a lifetime. By SADAF SHAIKH.

It's fair to posit that the title of Gillian Anderson's upcoming book, *More*, is the extension of a demand made in the prequel, *Want*. When placed side by side, the two volumes of sexual fantasies anonymously submitted by women from around the world say, 'Want. More.' I imagine a cave-dwelling creature starved of sunlight, emerging from hibernation, too ravenous to string a full sentence together. Which is perhaps how most women feel in the bedroom, unable to extract pleasure from sex despite guiding their partner towards it. Except in 2017, there was also *We*, a practical guide to self-improvement for women, which Anderson co-wrote with journalist and friend Jennifer Nadel in 2017. When stacked together, the three titles—'We. Want. More.'—are more proclamation than plea. "Very clever," the actor beams over

Zoom at my theories, and before I can help it, the first bencher in me is already plotting how to get more 'very clevers'.

Anderson is behind some of our favourite TV characters: the wildly popular investigator Dana Scully (*The X Files*), sex therapist Jean Milburn (*Sex Education*) and the more niche Dr Bedelia Du Maurier (a psychiatrist on *Hannibal*) and Media (one of the New Gods on *American Gods*). She carries the air of a mysterious, cool aunt who arrives at the family pot luck with nary a dish but plenty to dish. Her classmates in school probably felt it too, voting her 'class clown', 'most bizarre girl' and 'most likely to be arrested', their predictions turning out to be right on the money when Anderson was arrested on graduation night for trying to glue the locks of her high school shut. In 2016, when her *X Files* co-star, David Duchovny, received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, she sent him a eulogy in lieu of congratulations because she found the commemoration akin to a gravestone. And my personal favourite: A replica of the Gabriela Hearst gown embroidered with vulvas that she wore to the Golden Globes in 2024 is now worn by her wax statue at Madame Tussauds. I just know Jean Milburn fist-pumped the air so hard when that happened.

On the day we speak, she's in sunny Los Angeles doing press for her slasher film *Teenage Sex and Death at Camp Miasma*, in which she plays Billy Presley, the final girl of a fictitious movie franchise who now lives a life of seclusion. Although the movie is yet to be released in India—if at all—Anderson excitedly tells me about the blood, gore, self-discovery, queerness and, of course, the camp of it all; director Jane Schoenbrun describes the film as "*Portrait of a Lady on Fire* set in a *Friday the 13th* sequel". In the film's third act, Billy and Kris's (played by Hannah Einbinder) sexual encounter intersects with the serial killer's violence at the camp, and the duo emerge covered in blood, unfazed, buying snacks at a convenience store. The blood feels like a metaphor for other bodily fluids as the women gaze at each other in the chips aisle. Come to think of it, it very much sounds like a fantasy that might appear within the pages of *More* (published by Bloomsbury), which Anderson confesses felt a lot bolder than the prequel. *Want* has lascivious stories about a woman in a relationship who practises lucid dreaming and guides herself towards having sex with Pedro Pascal every night. A Wattpad-esque entry about a successful writer/lawyer being desired by Harry Styles. A young woman who escapes to the forest to fornicate with a faun. Almost all of them are desperate to be touched, to be seen, to be known. *More* has all of that, but you see the tentativeness of *Want* beginning to slip. "Initially, it felt like women who were submitting the essays were testing the waters," Anderson confirms. "It was a new idea, and perhaps they wondered if, in this age of tech, their letters would actually be secure. So many women started their letters and pushed send without even completing them." The success of *Want* convinced them that their erotica was in safe hands. *More*, therefore, features a woman whose mind takes her to a land where men have found a way to procreate without female genitalia, but stir at the sight of her. Another dreams of being suspended in a vat of spaghetti meatballs and tomato sauce, allowing her to feel "filled in every way". There's a moving story about a woman who has undergone a double mastectomy and longs for someone to "learn this new body with me". "With the second book, it was almost like the women were grabbing the bull by its horns and riding it through to the end," Anderson smiles, and I know she clocks the wordplay. Then, she gets serious. "It was vital that we got it right because there are so many regions around the world where it wouldn't be safe for women's internal thoughts and desires to be exposed in their communities."

My mind immediately returns to India. To my friends, most of whom are too bashful to talk about their sex lives, the remaining gushing about their partners' prowess in bed so giddily that I'm certain these men have read the *Kama Sutra* cover to cover. Often, there's a stony silence when I tell them about studies which prove that only 25 per cent of women reach orgasm consistently through vaginal intercourse. Each of my friends wants to believe they don't fall in the 75 per cent, not out of concern for their own pleasure but in defence of their man's virility. I have a galley of *More* open on one of my tabs, and I thumb through the five entries from India to verify a doubt my brain has just thrown at me. Lines like "I just want to be able to ask for sex, affectionate sex, when I want", "To be desired by the man I'm with", "What I crave is actual, true, everlasting love", "I'm not sure I know what it feels like to be wanted" and "I've always felt that white Australian men don't want to date the Indian girl" jump off the pages. I could've told you this without reading those submissions: Before anything else, Indian women want to be perceived as sexual beings. Put aside the sanskaar; we're hoping to climax in your (age-appropriate) son's car. "There's so much shame in cultures, religion and communities that it becomes very difficult for women to ask for what they want," Anderson cuts in. "A lot of *More* is about eradicating that shame. Whenever people are not allowed to express themselves and their desires," she continues, "you end up with shadow communities, sexual assault and frustrated humans who try and get it other ways. Even when I got the chance to speak to Kareena Kapoor Khan about *Want* last year, it became clear during our conversation that the discomfort around sex is just built into the culture."

> "Women have approached me and said, 'I submitted a letter that ended up in the book.' I feel such a kinship with them and am so grateful that they were brave enough not only to write, but to come up and tell me that they had"

I get my second "very clever" from Anderson when I point out that her author attribution on the covers of both *Want* and *More* reads 'collected by' instead of the more traditional 'compiled by', suggesting a fiercer sense of stewardship. "On a few occasions, women have approached me and said, 'I submitted a letter that ended up in the book.' I feel such a kinship with them and am so grateful that they were brave enough not only to write, but to come up and tell me that they had." At a fundraising event in London last year, famous personalities and friends read out letters from *Want*. Afterwards, an audience member approached Anderson to admit that one of the 13 letters belonged to her. "She proceeded to outline her fantasy about being in a heterosexual marriage, but desiring a woman who lived in her neighbourhood," the actor recalls. "She actually had the courage to go up to that woman and talk to her. That woman is now her

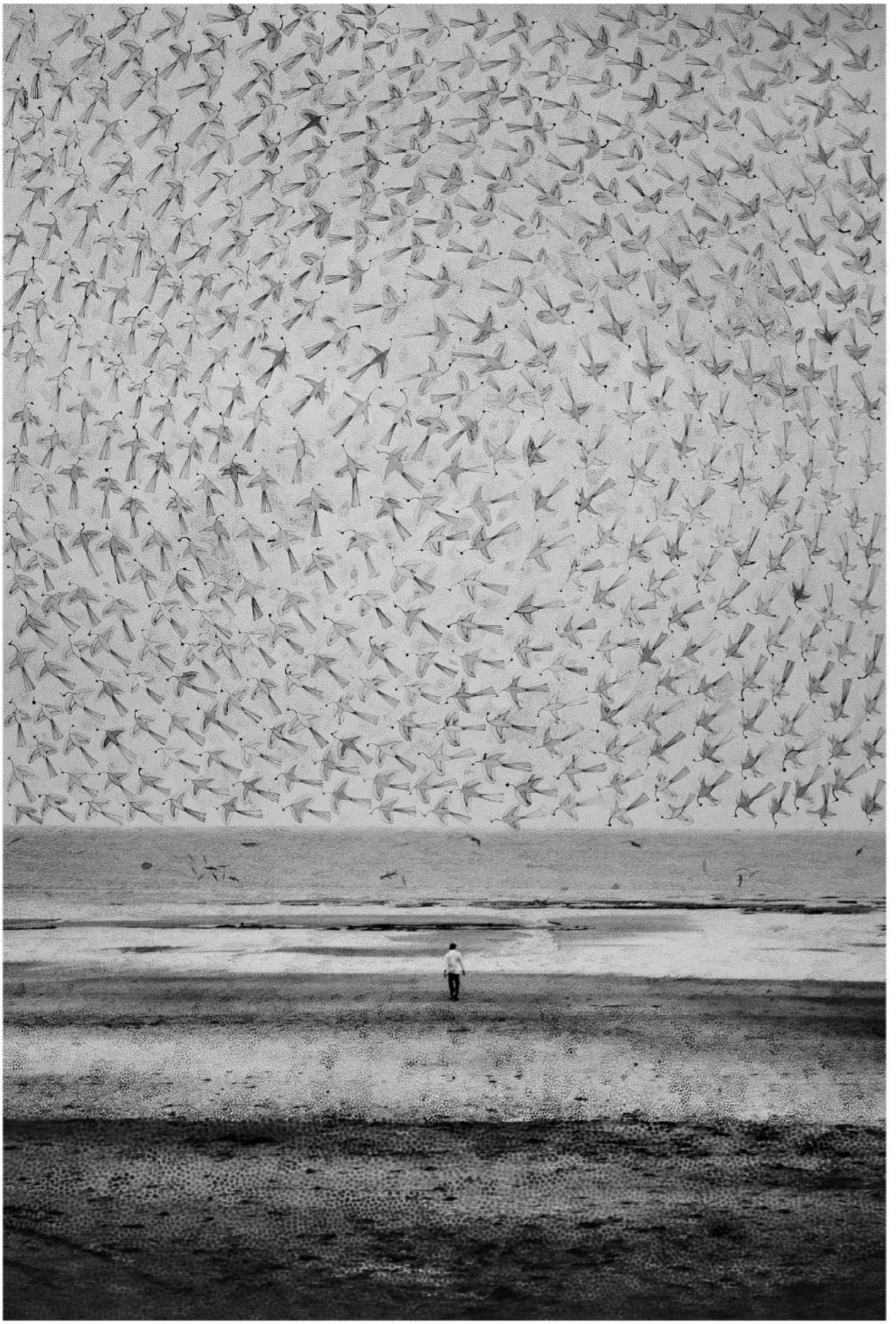


LIFE IMITATES ART
On *Sex Education*, Anderson plays the compassionate and confident Dr Jean Milburn, who helps others understand intimacy while navigating her own complicated emotions.

partner." Anderson clarifies that her books are not advocates for ending marriages and relationships. "But they do champion women who want to ask for more. I want, I need, I deserve more. And isn't that what's coming out of the protests in India right now too, with Gen Z saying, 'We won't stand for this, we won't be treated like this, we need agency in our lives?' It's all part of the same narrative."

In a scene from the 2018 action comedy *The Spy Who Dumped Me*, Kate McKinnon's character is being interrogated by two Secret Service agents when the MI6 boss, played by Anderson, walks in. I don't remember much of the movie, but a line from McKinnon's bumbling monologue after she encounters Anderson, whom she calls "the Beyoncé of the government", goes: "I have so much respect for you that it has circled around into objectification." Not an unreasonable reaction, even if it's a fictional one. At 58, Anderson's beauty has less to do with grooming and more to do with her geniality. It's 8am in LA, and although her team has requested that we turn off our videos since it's too early for her to be in hair and makeup, Anderson shows up fresh-faced, save for a smattering of eyeliner, flyaways framing her face like a dandelion. There's an AirPod in one ear, which she affectionately refers to as her emotional support AirPod. When she laughs, she does so generously, crow's feet be damned. To put it plainly, she is captivating. "I've been very lucky with genes," she brushes me off. "Shamefully, I am quite lazy about my beauty routine and tend to sleep with my makeup on after a shoot. I'm trying hard to do that less." What really makes her glow, the actor insists, is connecting to the better part of herself. "I love talking to women about empowerment—that lights a fire under me. Any time I tap into that grounded, altruistic part of myself, it's like a form of being of service. I think, more than anything, that is what is perceived as beauty." In response to Anderson's misplaced modesty, I hold up my phone to show her an Instagram carousel containing 18 photos of her clicked over the years, captioned: "We don't talk about Gillian Anderson enough." Almost every comment under that post—which includes a picture of her wearing glasses and a backpack to the Fox Upfront Party in 1996, a photo of her at the 2001 Vanity Fair Oscar Party in a thong-baring Eduardo Lucero dress, a candid from the *Bond Girls Are Forever* London book launch in 2003—is some version of: "Speak for yourself, I talk about Gillian Anderson at least once a day." There's that Duchenne smile again. She may be humble about how she looks, but even she can't deny that these images would look great on a fashion moodboard. "Fine, you win," she grin-sighs. Not quite a 'very clever', but I'm logging it as a hat-trick.

THOMAS WOOD/NETFLIX.



THE SWEET AND SALTY SEA, 2015, FROM THE 'FIELDS OF SIGHT' SERIES, 2013–ONGOING. COPYRIGHT GAURI GILL AND RAJESH VANGAD.

CHASING STARS

Most of us, when we ask a question, expect an answer in seconds. Award-winning astrophysicist PRIYAMVADA NATARAJAN writes about the patience of working in a field that replies years later, if at all.

My career in science did not begin in a classroom. I wasn't lured by the siren call of a dissected frog, an explosive classroom experiment or microbial life scuttling on a glass slide. Well before that, when my parents bought me a telescope at the age of seven, it was the night sky that lit up my mental console. One of my earliest sentient memories is my father pointing out the North Star, the Dhruv Tara, and marvelling at its fixity in the firmament when everything else seemed to be in flux. I acquired the vocabulary of astrophysics later in life. Before that, it was a feeling. Wonder.

That wonder was directed through books, my teachers at Delhi Public School RK Puram, and eventually, my first taste of research under the guidance of Dr Nirupama Raghavan, a trailblazing astronomer and the director of Nehru Planetarium, New Delhi. Given my obsession with maps, the first research problem she assigned to me was to chart the sky over Delhi. With the help of a bulky Commodore 64 computer, I created my first map of the night sky—one that could be used by stargazers. In 1986, I went to MIT on a full scholarship. After graduating with multiple degrees, including physics and mathematics, and a brief detour to study the history and philosophy of science, I was offered the Isaac Newton Fellowship to pursue a PhD in astrophysics at the Institute of Astronomy in Cambridge.

I entered astrophysics at a moment when the field was being revolutionised. The Hubble Space Telescope and the Chandra X-ray Observatory were beginning to elucidate mysteries surrounding once-inscrutable cosmic entities like dark matter and black holes. I was drawn to precisely these shadowed domains. Gravitational lensing became one of my great scientific loves. Predicted by Albert Einstein in 1915 and confirmed by astronomers in 1919, it is a phenomenon of almost cinematic beauty: massive objects bend light, turning galaxies and clusters into natural telescopes. Space itself becomes glass. Through the arcs, distortions and magnifications of distant galaxies, we can map the matter we cannot see. Light, in this sense, becomes a silk thread tracing the contours of the dark.

Another major theme of my scientific life has been black holes, particularly the origin of massive black holes that formed when the universe was still young. How could such enormous objects have grown so quickly? I proposed and developed models in which some of the earliest black holes were born not from the deaths of ordinary stars, but as massive 'seeds' formed by the direct collapse of gas in the early universe.

When it comes to science, the tiniest step forward is the outcome of years of patience. I've had to train myself to be detached from the outcome while working on a hard, seemingly intractable problem and simply savour the joy of figuring things out. There have been frustrations and disappointments. A calculation that once took me nearly a year of work turned out to be a dead end. But there is always something valuable I've learnt from every attempt. More of us need to open our eyes to the pleasure of the process.

Theorists like me send ideas forward like messages in bottles, trusting that future instruments may one day retrieve them. To see observations start to illuminate possibilities I had worked on tirelessly has been one of the great intellectual pleasures of my career. Recognition has come along the way, and I have received it with gratitude, humility and a certain sense of awe. I have been fortunate to spend much of my academic life at Yale, to be elected to scientific societies and academies, to receive fellowships and prizes and to have my work acknowledged internationally. These accolades have been a sign that fundamental science—abstract, demanding, beautiful science—can still capture the public imagination. It's the same reason why *Project Hail Mary* stirred such deep emotion in viewers this year and why *Interstellar* pulls crowds to theatres upon each re-release.

Theorists like me send ideas forward like messages in bottles, trusting that future instruments may one day retrieve them

But any true account of a life in science must also admit its frictions. The path has not been effortless. As an Indian woman in theoretical astrophysics, I have often found myself in rooms where authority was presumed to look different from me. Even today, children who are given a Draw-a-Scientist-Test visualise a white man in a lab coat with spectacles—few can conceive of a brown woman who enjoys skirts, salons and science. The bias I dealt with was subtle, but I clocked every interrupted sentence, overlooked idea and cocked eyebrow. Through it all, I refused to be redefined.

At the end of the day, I like to believe that I've marched to the beat of my own drum. Big science is the result of large collaboration—sizable peer groups that rely on investment from public resources. Choosing to, instead, work in smaller groups has given me the creative freedom to take intellectual risks. Years later, I've managed to remain wholly me: passionate about science but also interested in art, literature, fashion and design. Science never demands the abandonment of these pursuits or the many textures of one's identity. It's humans who create those boxes and force each other into them. Joan Miró is one of my favourite artists, and I see his comprehension and rendering of abstraction as no different from how a scientist manipulates concepts, just using a different visual idiom: the language of mathematics.

Ultimately, the universe, like art, is not simple. Neither is life. All three are layered, luminous and resistant to easy explanation. But I remain animated by the same wonder that first drew my eyes upward. Even if we are now separated by a thick layer of smog.

Reporting for duty

Tennis star Sania Mirza and award-winning journalist Faye D'Souza talk to JYOTI KUMARI about a job neither of them trained for: raising boys in a world that is still deciding what it wants its men to be.







COURTESY OF @MIRZASANIAR.

My twin boys turned one in April. They have since learned to walk, exclusively in opposite directions, so every room now requires army-level defence. I have babyproofed the house twice, and they still find dangers that I am certain did not exist before they arrived. "Welcome," a friend messaged me recently, "to the life of a boy mum."

Somewhere between the hazards and the hullabaloo, a reel keeps finding me on Instagram. It says angry, independent women were given boys to raise, so they could bring up the kind of men they never got the chance to meet. It's a gag, mostly. But it touches something real: my generation of mothers is raising sons with an agenda. We want them kinder and softer, yet courageous enough to stand up for themselves and others. But none of us are entirely sure how, because nobody has done it this way before.

So I sat down with two women who would know. One spends her days sifting through the country's harshest news. The other spent her tennis career at the receiving end of some of the harshest comments about how she looked, what she wore and whom she married. Their paths first intersected almost a decade ago. In 2017, when Faye D'Souza suggested that men and women should enjoy equal freedom during a debate, one of the panellists, a cleric, told her, "Underwear pehenke [aap debate mein] aaiye. Mard aur aurat barabar ho jayege, na." Unruffled, the award-winning journalist clapped back, "...All you men think that if you rattle Sania Mirza when she's doing her job, if you rattle all women when they're doing their jobs, they will run back into their kitchens, cover themselves up and leave the world again for you to conquer. I have news for you, we are not going anywhere." D'Souza interviewed the tennis player not long after, about motherhood among other things, before going on to have a child of her own in 2022. Reconvening for a conversation with *Vogue* India, the journalist and Grand Slam champion discuss changing the way we raise boys, so they grow into men who challenge the way we treat women.

***Vogue* India:** Faye, your son is four; Sania, yours is eight. What were your first couple of years of bringing them up like?
Faye D'Souza: I feel like I was given a boy so that I'd learn to empathise with the other team as well, because I was batting so hard for ours. When Neil was less than a year old, I bought

him a lot of gender-neutral toys and exposed him to everything, but in the world's oldest cliché, he gravitated towards dinosaurs and trucks. I suppose it goes the other way too. On holiday, I went snorkelling and diving while my husband, who doesn't enjoy any of it, stayed on the boat with my son. When we got back, Neil told everybody in his class that girls dive and boys stay on the boat because that's the safe place for boys to be. He also says girls go to the gym to become strong because he sees me going to the gym. He's processing all of this into a gender construct right now, and our job is to sieve out anything that would get filed the wrong way.

Sania Mirza: When Izhaan was born, people treated me the way they treat any mother who has just given birth, which is to say everybody had an opinion about what I should do, what I should feed him, how many times he should be woken up. I didn't show Izhaan an iPad until he was 14 months old. I would have loved to wait until he was two, but I had to start travelling to play again. I couldn't sleep on the flight and I had practice the next day—I didn't have much of a choice. Some people I know didn't show their kids a screen until they were three. Does that make me a bad mother? No. It just makes my life different.

***Vogue* India:** As boy mums, we spend so much of our day worrying about teaching our sons what's right. How do you control what they pick up outside the house?

SM: They pick up habits. I wouldn't even call them bad habits—they just replicate behaviours. Sometimes, Izhaan will use a word that isn't allowed at home after returning from a playdate where an older kid was also present. I make it a point not to reprimand him. You must leave a channel of trust open so your child feels comfortable talking to you about things that happened in your absence. Faye and I come from a generation taught to be scared of their parents; that's exactly how you start trusting people outside instead.

> "I feel like I was given a boy so that I'd learn to empathise with the other team as well, because I was batting so hard for ours" —FAYE D'SOUZA

A few years ago, when many things were changing in my life, I had to have open conversations with my son and I didn't know how, so I asked a child psychologist. One thing he said has stayed with me: a child feels more shame if he finds out things from others rather than from his own family. My son was four then. So I told him myself, in a way that a child would understand. I will not let him learn things about his home from those who don't live in it.

FD: Everything arrives from outside, even the small things. My son was in a play, and the teacher wrote in asking us to put blush on his cheeks. It confused him because he associates makeup with girls. I told him, "Makeup is a matter of choice. It makes no difference whether you're a boy or a girl; some people like it and others don't." He understood instantly, but then said, "Okay, so if I don't like it, do I still have to wear it for my school play?" There's always a loophole.

***Vogue* India:** We talk about how boys should be gentle, but the world, unfortunately, is not. How do we handle that?

FD: My son is extremely gentle, to the point where he never pushes on the playground. Other children push him, but he never responds. I've been teaching him to turn around and say, 'I don't like this, and if you do it again, I'm telling the teacher.' My husband says, "You're going to have to teach him to push back at some point." I don't know how to solve that one.

SM: I went through exactly this when Izhaan was four and began playing football. The older kids shoved him, but he wouldn't retaliate. His father and I talked it through, and we told him that he was never to be the first to push, never to be the first to start anything. But if there was no adult around and no other way out, he was going to have to fight back.

***Vogue* India:** So what does 'strong' look like in the boys you're raising?

FD: Strong is being able to call out the privilege and patriarchy among your own friends. When they speak badly about a classmate or make dirty jokes, saying "This is not okay" takes guts. And it comes from believing that female reporters and sportswomen are equal entities, not oddities. Nobody should have to call Sania an amazing 'woman' achiever. I want Neil to hold two halves at once, like Sania, who has learned to be tough when she needs to and be gentle elsewhere. Men must contain these multitudes too. For us '90s girls, that man was Shah Rukh Khan.

***Vogue* India:** You can both give your sons the life neither of you was born into. How do you find the balance between providing and coddling?

SM: It's so tricky. Do I sit in business class and put Izhaan in economy so he understands he has to earn it? Maybe when he's 17. For now, it's the small stuff. He doesn't go to Hamleys anymore, but when he did, I would let him pick only two things. One day, he asked me how much money I have. I said I have enough. He said, "But how much is enough?" He'd had a conversation at school and come home to ask why he can't pick up more than two toys if I have the money for it. It's toys now; it's going to be cars and watches later.

FD: I was flying back from Singapore with Neil, and we walked past business class, then premium economy and finally into economy. I was carrying him and he pointed to business class and said, "Mama, I want to sit here." I said, "You and me both, love, but right now we're walking to the end of this plane." At some point, I'll have to tell him that he will have to work very hard if he wants to sit up front.

***Vogue* India:** They'll google you eventually. How do you want them to perceive you before that happens?

SM: When Izhaan was four, he was playing mini cricket with my cousin and her husband in our hallway. My cousin picked up the bat, and her husband, just messing around, said, "No, no, she can't play, she's a girl." Izhaan turned around and said, "Why are you saying that? My mom is a girl, and she was a world champion."

We lead by example. When Faye says things on television, our boys watch. They google. Our sons should be proud of us; they should be able to say, "That's who brought me up to be the man I am and I love her" without feeling that their masculinity has been threatened.

FD: Neil tells people that his mom is like a bear, but a kissy bear—like I'll protect him from everything, but I'll be kissing him the entire time. It's a Machiavellian world with billionaires for heroes rather than scientists or poets. But if somebody asked Neil about me one day and he says, "My mom worked really hard every day", that would be enough for me.

Hope springs eternal

For four decades, P Sainath has documented some of India's most difficult histories, and somehow, has the spirit to keep going. What can one of the most decorated journalists of our times teach us about the audacity of optimism? By ROCHELLE PINTO.



I marvel at the capacity of people not to be bitter with their enemies when they have fought and achieved something," declares P Sainath. He is recounting a story from his childhood in Chennai, when a Scottish man arrived unannounced to meet his grandfather, Varahagiri Venkata Giri, a freedom fighter and the fourth president of India. When Giri could not recognise the man, he handed him a strip of cloth with some numbers on it. "My grandad took one look at it and burst out laughing."

The cloth carried Giri's convict number from his time in prison during the freedom struggle. And the Scottish man? Turned out to be the prison governor. "My grandfather asked why he'd kept it. He replied, 'There were about a dozen of you [political prisoners], but I had a feeling you would amount to something.'"

For a preteen Palagummi Sainath, that sequence of events must have helped shape a fundamental philosophy. One that saves the soul from bitterness. That makes space for hilarity despite a four-decade-long career covering heart-wrenching stories about rural India, much of which he has traversed himself using "16 different forms of transport", including the one time his fellow travellers convinced him to accompany them to "AC first class". "They meant the roof of the train. That's Bihari humour," he informs me wryly. "And people climb up there with their chickens, goats… Everything is on top of the train. I could not take one decent photograph because it was such a mass of human beings, and each time I stood up, it swayed like hell."

On the day I meet the award-winning journalist, author and founder of the People's Archive of Rural India (PARI) in his Bandra home, Gen Z is organising itself into a powerful movement that will dominate headlines for weeks. The serendipitous choice of interview date is not lost on me—I hope to imbibe something of Sainath's ability to press on even when the price of staying true to your purpose is exorbitant. Luckily, he's never been one to hold back.

***Vogue* India:** For someone who has followed your work and PARI's journalism for a while, it seems like an exercise in optimism. That can often feel greatly at odds with the world we see every day and what you've personally experienced over the last 45 years. How does one continue to have hope in what appear to be exceedingly bleak times?

P Sainath: Well, our history gives you hope. It was a bunch of very ordinary Indians, not lawyers returned from Oxbridge, who liberated our country from colonial rule. The people in this book (points to his book, *The Last Heroes: Foot Soldiers of Indian*



M PALANI KUMAR.

HOT WHEELS
J Adaikalaselvi, a farmer in Ramanathapuram, Tamil Nadu's top chilli-producing district, on her way to her field (from 'In red hot pursuit: Tamil Nadu's chilli farmers').

Freedom) are cooks, couriers, farmers, labourers, tailors—and every one of them played an extremely important role, including women whom you don't normally get to read about. These women took up arms and fought the British physically, while the elites prayed in public for the success of the British troops over their fellow countrymen. When bands of Indians rose up against the mightiest empire in the world, how hopeless it must have seemed. But they brought it down.

When I give lectures, someone in the audience will ask, "Can you say something optimistic?" But if you don't recognise the gravity of the problem, you don't have a chance of resolving it. Fake optimism and cynical pessimism are two sides of the same coin. What do they achieve? The fake optimist says, "Growth will solve everything." The cynical pessimist says, "Kuch sudhrega nahi." They both absolve themselves of personal responsibility. But between fake optimism and cynical pessimism, there is a territory called hope.

***Vogue* India:** You live there, a citizen of Hope.

PS: That's where I live.

***Vogue* India:** If you've seen the memes and reels going around, everyone admires how Gen Z is injecting humour into a difficult situation. They live with a certain levity because they think, the world is burning anyway, so might as well laugh. The



generation that everybody accused of living life passively through a phone screen is the one physically putting itself in harm's way.
PS: Idealism is the default mode of youth. But now they're exposed to more and more about less and less. Ask them to name 10 freedom fighters, and they will struggle beyond Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose. Many of them don't see Ambedkar as a freedom fighter; they see him as the father of the Constitution. But he launched the greatest struggle for human dignity on earth.

Every one of the individuals I focused on in *Foot Soldiers* had one point to make and one of them put it powerfully: "We fought for two things, independence and freedom. We achieved independence." Independence was an event. Freedom is a process, maybe never to be achieved in our lifetime.
***Vogue* India:** I watched a recent interview where you spoke about the time you spent reporting on the scale of the farmer suicides and how that destroyed you.
PS: It was the only thing in 25 years of reporting that I couldn't take. As long as I see people in struggle, I'm inspired, I'm enthused, I'm not miserable, I'm happy. Suicide is the surrender of struggle. Between 2000 and 2016-17, I visited more than 900 households where people had taken their lives. I was consumed by rage that someone took that step when it was in our power as a society to tame the factors that led to it.
***Vogue* India:** Sometimes, rage can be a great motivator to help you stay on track. Does the rage still keep you going?
PS: It did. I was a very healthy guy without any illness. The person who realised something was wrong was my dentist. He asked, "Are you stressed out?" I replied, "Yeah, I've been under a bit of stress." He said, "You've chewed off your enamel."
***Vogue* India:** Just like your rage guides you, you also tend to throw yourself wholly into the things you enjoy. You describe yourself as a 'cricket fanatic', a 'music buff'. The choice of words makes me think that, just like with documenting rural India, you're passionate about what you love.

> "If hard work makes you a billionaire, every woman in rural India has to be a billionaire. Since they are not, what do we conclude about capitalism?"

PS: I listen to music in different languages; my phone has around 1,438 songs on it. Throughout my travels, music accompanied me everywhere. Once, I was at a bus stop on the border of Pudukkottai (Tamil Nadu), where there was a little tea shop. At the time, I carried a four-kilo Brother typewriter with me wherever I went. As I waited for my coffee, I took a nap using the typewriter as a pillow and covering my face with a newspaper. Suddenly, five young men entered, all dressed in white, which in Tamil Nadu meant they were going for an exam. They began to sing so beautifully, drumming on the table, five songs in a row. I felt very emotional without meaning to; there were tears running down my cheeks. Then, one guy shouted and everyone ran for the bus.

Everywhere I went, I heard people sing. At a place in Gwalior, a man was performing Kishore Kumar songs so



beautifully. You are always looking inside yourself for music, and it's nice to find that others like those songs too.

***Vogue* India:** Perhaps your most enduring project has been *Visible Work: Invisible Women*. Every story accompanying the images is so heavy that I had to take breaks in between when viewing it. But my perspective is that of a privileged outsider—an English-speaking daughter of feminist parents. I always wonder, for these women who did not choose this life of backbreaking work, what are their moments of joy?

PS: They're not different from you in that sense. People need to laugh, to cry. One of the photos captures the women of Pudukkottai doing something that brought them more joy than anything they had done in their lives: cycling. The government had started a literacy programme called Arivoli Iyakkam, light of knowledge, but noticed that women were not coming to the classes. Then, Kannamal, an activist leading the programme, suggested that the collector train the activists to cycle so they could go to the women in the villages rather than ask them to come into town. This was met with enthusiasm by the women, not so much for literacy but for cycling. Cycling was officially included as a component of the programme and around 180,000 women came to learn in a very short time.

Until then, these women used to take their produce by bus to the market. They needed to ask their sons, brothers or husbands to load the produce on the top of the bus. Now, they could carry the produce in the basket at the back of the cycle and their babies in the front basket. They no longer had to worry about running home for the child. That was the joy.

***Vogue* India:** It's so interesting how important autonomy is at every level. Sometimes, we make the mistake of assuming that people who are struggling for daily sustenance might not think of ideas like freedom and autonomy. But you're saying it's a basic need.

PS: It's also an assertion: I am capable, I know myself. There is nobody more capable than rural women. The promise of capitalism is that if you work hard, you can be rich. If hard work makes you a billionaire, every woman in rural India has to be a billionaire. Since they are not, what do we conclude about that principle?

***Vogue* India:** You have this particular sensitivity to women, an ability to see the layers to their struggles. Where do you think that comes from?

PS: I was born in a family of 36 grandchildren. My mother was the sixth of seven sisters, and there were four brothers. The women had really strong personalities and character. And the men were singularly unimpressive. This is sadly the truth in many households. I have three siblings—two brothers and one sister—and my mother made it very clear that if there is any privileged one amongst us, it's my sister. Today, she is the anchor of the family. Then, I had teachers

CHANGING CLIMATES

Above: Rupali Pegu of Bordubi Maluwal, a village in flood-affected Assam, carries drinking water on her canoe back home (from 'Surviving a flood of problems in Assam'). *Opposite page:* The prospective learners at Arivoli Iyakkam's 'cycling training camp' dressed in their Sunday best (from 'Where there is a wheel').

ASHWINI KUMAR SHUKLA, P SAINATH (OPPOSITE PAGE).

like Romila [Thapar]. And my wife, Sonya [Gill], is a very strong person.

***Vogue* India:** I was going to ask you about the role of love in your journey. Sometimes, good work just doesn't move the needle, but the next day, you have to go out and do it all over again. It means something to have a companion who supports and believes in you. How did you get together?

PS: I was a Delhi journalist, and in those days, Mumbai was considered a punishment posting. My salary was a magnificent ₹735. Imagine coming with that to a city in its first gigantic real estate boom. I opted for the Mumbai posting because I was chasing the woman who is now my wife of 40 years. She'd got a job as a lecturer at Sophia College for Women, so I thought it would be easier for me to get a transfer because nobody would opt for Mumbai.

***Vogue* India:** That's quite a grand, romantic gesture.

PS: I don't know—I think it was an act of desperation. I didn't want to lose her. When I was reporting on the work that would lead to *Everybody Loves a Good Drought*, I was broke. I had sold my cameras, taken out my gratuity and provident funds, but it still wasn't enough. Everything that I did was because Sonya was working in the Foundation for Research in Community Health. On a grand salary of ₹3,000 in the mid '90s, she ran the home and kept body and soul together.

***Vogue* India:** There are many great men who say, "I wake up at 5am and go for a run, then sit and write for six hours." And the labour of the partner or the wife who keeps everything else going so that these great men can wake up at 5am, go for a run and write for hours is never acknowledged.

PS: Well, I do my share of housework. And I designed all these bookshelves. But my contribution stops there. I'm a slob; the neatness and beauty of the home is entirely Sonya. Today, the office is cleaner than it has been in recent times in your honour. I have been well-trained.

[*Editor's note: Sonya Gill sadly passed away on August 25, a month after this interview took place.*]



LOOK TWICE
Women agricultural workers on their way to their worksite in Vizianagaram district, Andhra Pradesh (from 'Visible Work, Invisible Women: Mud, mothers, 'man hours' (Panel 4)').



P SAINATH


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Dress, FENDI.


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READY FOR LIFTOFF

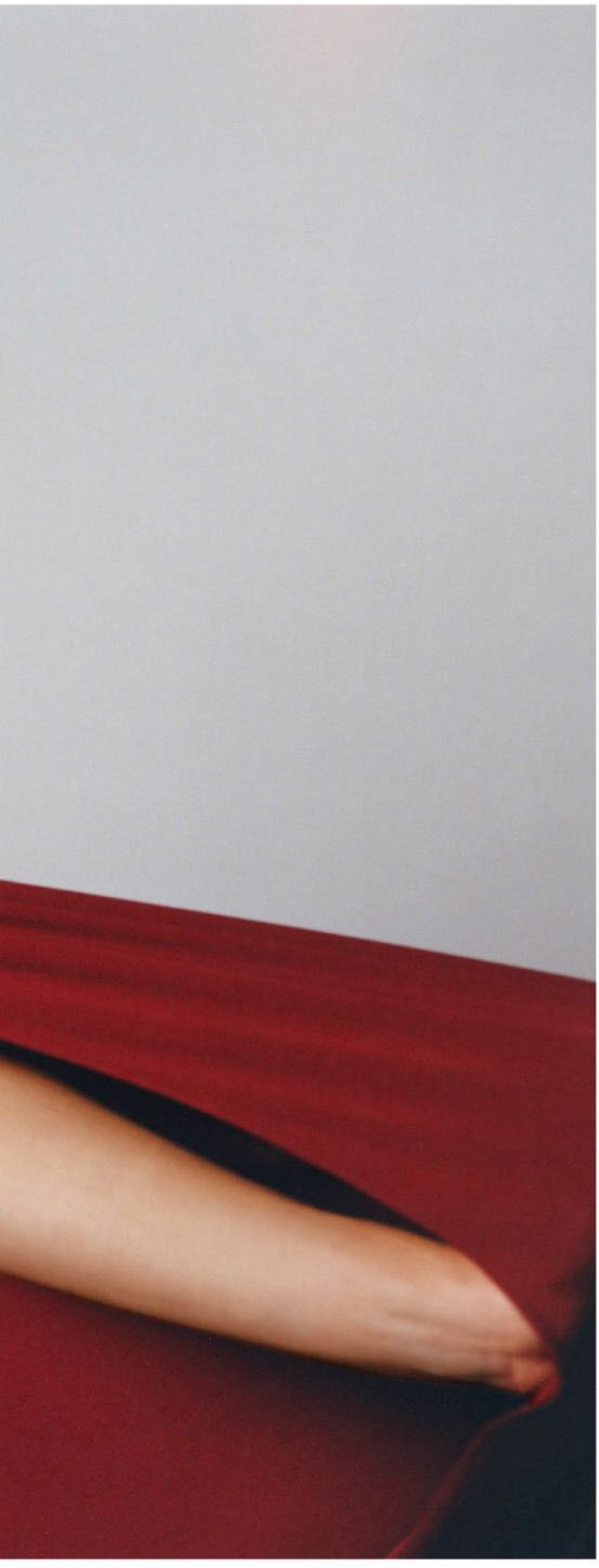
Nearly two decades after her onscreen debut, Mika Abdalla's role as Allie Hayes in *Off Campus* has catapulted her into the spotlight. It's been a long road, but the actor knows to stop and smell the roses growing alongside it.

By THEA MULCHANDANI. Photographed by AGATA SERGE. Styled by CAROLINA ORICCO.





Dress, BALENCIAGA.



David Lynch, one of cinema's most experimental auteurs, had a peculiar audition process. Instead of a traditional cold read, he would interview the actor. Lynch famously cast Naomi Watts in *Mulholland Drive* after a 35-minute interview based on a headshot taken by her brother. At 19, Mika Abdalla was under consideration for one such chat—a daunting prospect, at any age, but a story for one's grandkids all the same. It felt providential as her career had been at a standstill. "It got me out of this trench of despair," Abdalla recalls. "I felt like everything was lining up. I sent in a video; there was no script, I just spoke about myself. And then immediately after, Covid happened." The project fell apart, and she never got to meet Lynch. "I was not doing well, mentally. But I had learnt to deal with rejection at a very early age. As an actor, you're typically auditioning for two, three things a week. Eventually, you realise there's no way you book even half of those. There are so many moving parts that 99 per cent of whether or not you get the role has nothing to do with you."

That perspective was hard-earned. Abdalla first stepped into the industry at the age of six, modelling for a local parenting magazine in Dallas, her hometown. In 2008, she made her onscreen debut on *Barney & Friends*.

"I was quite anxious as a kid," reveals the actor, now 26. We are talking over Zoom, and while I'm in Mumbai, looking forward to a good night's sleep, she's sipping on her morning coffee in Vancouver, where the cast and crew of *Off Campus* are currently filming the second season. She's dressed comfortably—grey hoodie, sweatpants, matching baseball cap. "I do wonder," Abdalla continues, "whether that anxiety comes from being an only child. I was always hanging around adults, so I was aware of the world and the way that people are at such a young age. I never had any childlike wonder." Between early-morning call times and after-school shoots, the actor would wind down by riding horses at a barn down the road from her house. She lights up when she tells me how horses are incredibly intuitive and sense your fear, feel your joy and feed off your energy. "If you get nervous when you're about to jump, the horse can get spooked," Abdalla warns. "So it really helped me learn how to control my body's response to stress."



Jacket, trousers, shoes,
PROENZA SCHOULER.



Coat, socks, pumps, PRADA.

The same instincts kick in on set. Right before the director yells "Action", the actor focuses on grounding herself. Abdalla reaches for another equestrian analogy. "If you freak out on a horse, your knees scrunch up and you start pointing your toes, trying to hold on, which freaks the horse out, so you need to remind yourself to put your heels down. Often, I think about sinking my heels into the floor, and focus on what my feet feel like before we start filming." She still goes riding when she can; her manager owns a horse, and her aunt is a show-jumper turned trainer. "Are you a horse girl?" I ask, wondering whether I'm intruding, but she laughs. "Girl, leave me alone. Yes, I am."

With season two of *Off Campus* set to wrap filming in September, it won't be long before Abdalla can be on horseback in Dallas again. When season one released earlier this year, it became a roaring success for many reasons. One, a fiercely loyal viewership thanks to Elle Kennedy's bestselling books. Two, emotionally articulate characters (a rarity in the college romance genre). Three, a cast with impeccable chemistry. And four, Allie Hayes's haircut. I haven't let my hair grow past my shoulders since I was 16, nor have I been tempted to, but watching Allie dance to Jennifer Lopez's 'On The Floor', her hands running through her fluffed-up locks, was not good for my bob's ego. Long, messy, with heavy layers and wispy bangs, few Pinterest moodboards have been spared the 'Allie shag'. Abdalla clarifies that she has been sporting it for nearly a decade. "It's just my haircut," she insists. "I've had it since I moved to LA, and it was so sweet that Louisa [Levy] and Gina [Fattore] liked it enough to let me keep it. Although," she adds, "it does not look the way it does on Allie, even 20 per cent of the time."

The cultural impact of the show can be traced through its soundtrack too. Abdalla met Jennifer Lopez to recreate her viral "Oh my God! Wait—this is me! Now!" moment; Belmont Cameli, who plays lead Garrett Graham, has been spotted doing his little pelvic thrusts to The Kid Laroi's 'Girls' over everyone's Instagram feed; and 'Edge of the Earth' by The Beaches, which played as Garrett began to yearn for Hannah Wells (played by Ella Bright), climbed music charts three years after its release. Somewhere along the playlist, *Off Campus* made me unexpectedly nostalgic for my own university years. Granted, I didn't fake-date any athletes with perfect hair, brooding eyes and washboard abs, but I did make friendships that I never had to question, with people who knew when to show up and when to call me out. If you grew up watching 2000s Bollywood as I did, a college romance brings to mind films like *Ishq Vishk* (2003), *Main Hoon Na* (2004), *Student of the Year* (2012) and *2 States* (2014), where small misunderstandings snowballed into melodrama. But *Off Campus* draws back the curtain on what the girls have been asking for: healthy masculinity and honest communication.

In episode four, Garrett asks Dean Di Laurentis—who later becomes Allie's paramour—for advice on making Hannah feel comfortable and satisfied in bed. Dean is a playboy. He's rich, charming, always accompanied by a different girl; the sort of character you'd expect to be an incorrigible douchebag. But his response is earnest: trust, consent and plenty of foreplay. Three things that prioritise female pleasure and, frankly, take some men a lifetime to learn. After years of looking for and not finding sensitive men, it's no surprise women of all ages have embraced *Off Campus* wholeheartedly.

In the upcoming season, Allie and Dean's situationship evolves, giving Abdalla the chance to dive deeper into her character. "It's a lot more emotionally turbulent, so you lose some of that fun, best-friend energy," she says. "I check in to ensure I'm hitting important character beats, but still incorporating the parts of Allie that people love."

'Allie Cat', Dean's affectionate nickname for Abdalla's character, is fitting off-screen too. It turns out, she is quite the curious cat. When she's not in front of the camera, she is usually peering over the shoulder of a director, producer or cinematographer. "I don't fully understand everything they're doing," she laughs sheepishly, "but I'm always looking at the buttons they're pressing, the decisions they're making." The artist in her is perpetually alert, even after pack-up. "I'm always people-watching. Maybe not for a character that I'm playing, but my Notes app is full of characters that I want to write about at some point." Recently, Abdalla finished her first screenplay—an abandoned, 45-page endeavour that she found her way back to last year. "It was such a time capsule to look back at the writing that I was doing when I was 20." Set in rural Texas, the story follows a young woman rebelling against her parents for the first time—a horror comedy loosely inspired by Abdalla's own upbringing.

These days, her off-duty hours belong to Mabel, a 10-month-old rescue puppy, the latest in a long line of animals Abdalla has taken in. The first was Janet, a black-and-white tuxedo cat in 2011. "I was doing a self-tape in Dallas just after my 11th birthday, and the person who was supposed to be filming me had found an injured cat in his AC unit. It turned out she was pregnant, and she gave birth right before I came over. I fell in love with Janet as soon as she was born. I even have her name tattooed on my arm." After Janet came Frank, a bicolour cat from a shelter ("I adopted him to give Janet company, but she hated the man, so he went to live with my parents") and a pair of calico twins ("My friend's Persian got knocked up by a street cat and had four kittens, so I took two"). "I also have these two tiny tattoos here," Abdalla gestures to a pomegranate tree and a perfume bottle that sit side by side on her forearm; tributes to her Lebanese grandfather and Bulgarian grandmother. "Pappou ('grandfather' in Greek) had a pomegranate tree in his backyard. Growing up, we'd pick pomegranates, and he'd teach me how to peel them. And then whenever grandma would go to Bulgaria, she would bring me back these perfume bottles. I still have one of them." For all the big moments that are happening to her—signing autographs, being papped with the cast of *Off Campus*, starring in major brand campaigns—it seems like Abdalla appreciates the smaller ones just as much. When her grandmother developed dementia, she gradually lost her ability to speak English. Abdalla doesn't speak Bulgarian, so she found another language: food. "Pappou taught me to make the dishes grandma would cook and I'd make them for her," she recalls.

To the outsider, it may look like playing Allie Hayes changed Abdalla's career overnight, but she has been building up to this for 20 years. When I ask her where she hopes the next 20 will take her, she has her answer ready: "To more behind-the-scenes work. Whether it's through producing, writing or directing, I want to get back into film; that's always been my passion." Abdalla will never get a chance to work with Lynch, but I have a feeling he would have enjoyed interviewing her.

> "I'm always people-watching. Maybe not for a character that I'm playing, but my Notes app is full of characters that I want to write about at some point"

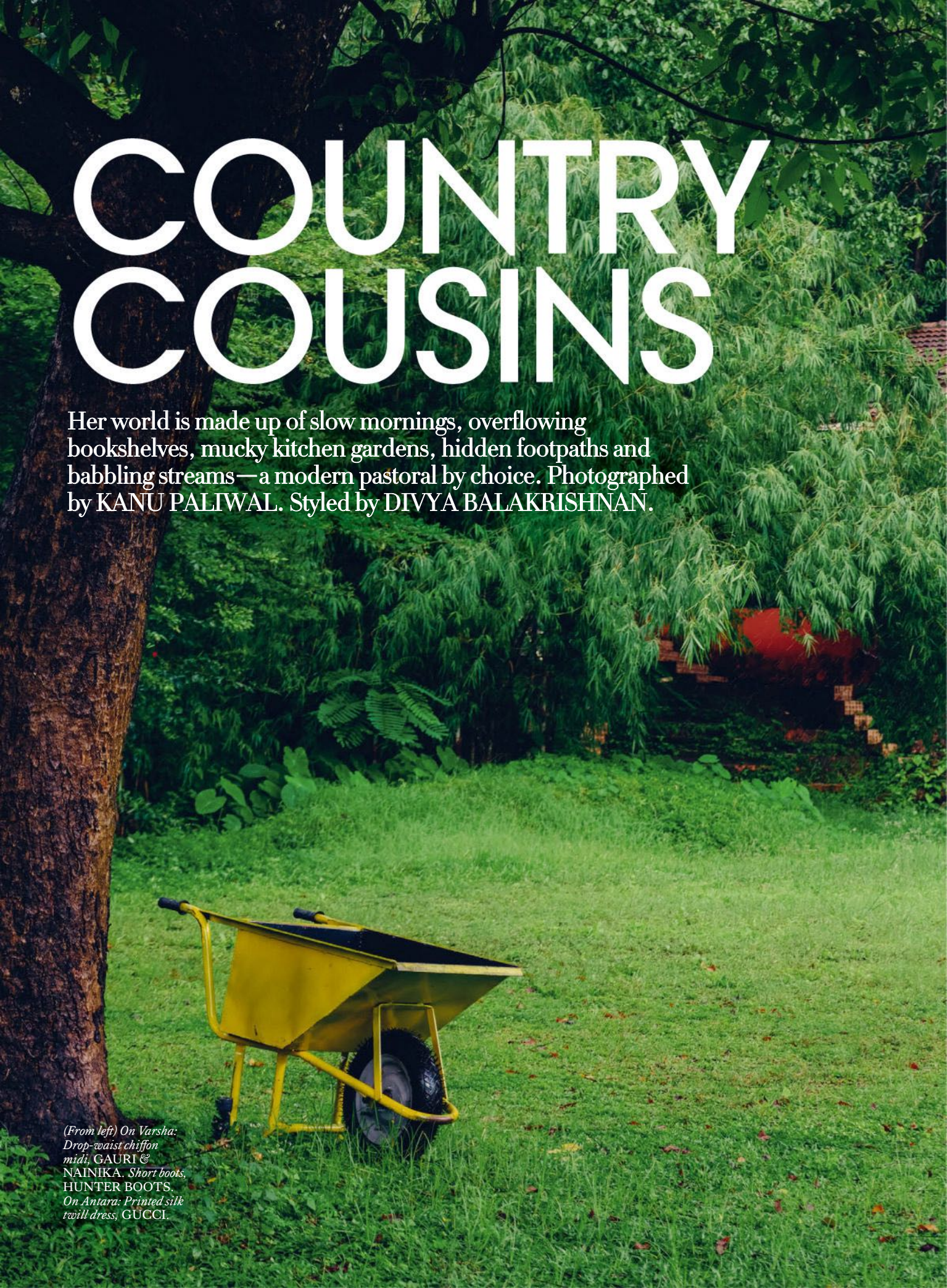
HAIR: KIKI HEITKOTTER/THE WALL GROUP. MAKEUP: YUKARI OBAYASHI BUSH. MANICURIST: KLEOPATRA TSOMPANI/HOME AGENCY. BOOKINGS EDITOR: ALIZA FATMA. SET DESIGN: JAMES RENE/JONES MGMT. CREATIVE PRODUCTION: CHANTELLE-SHAKILA TIAGI/TIAGI. ASSISTED BY: COREY HACKBARTH, DJ DOHAR, LUIS RAMIREZ, TOMASZ ORLOWSKI/ARTLAB (PHOTOGRAPHY); IRINA TSHARTARYAN, NATALIE ZAMUDIO (STYLING); KAI ŽELEZNIK (ART); ARZU KOÇMAN, QUINN FRANCIS, VICTOR (PRODUCTION). LOCATION: SUNBEAM STUDIOS.

Dress, ANITA DONGRE.



COUNTRY COUSINS

Her world is made up of slow mornings, overflowing bookshelves, mucky kitchen gardens, hidden footpaths and babbling streams—a modern pastoral by choice. Photographed by KANU PALIWAL. Styled by DIVYA BALAKRISHNAN.



(From left) On Varsha: Drop-waist chiffon midi, GAURI & NAINIKA. *Short boots,* HUNTER BOOTS. *On Antara: Printed silk twill dress,* GUCCI.





Top, skirt,
DIOR.



Heirloom coat, SWGT. *Ivory tulle skirt,* ROSEROOM BY ISHA JAJODIA.
Chelsea boots, HUNTER BOOTS.



Teal blue trench, TIL BY AV. *Organza panel midi with lace,* SHRIYA SOM. *Mini Lady Dior bag,* DIOR. *Beaubourg platform derbies,* LOUIS VUITTON.



Shitora woven Banarasi silk top, Lunaris woven Banarasi silk shorts, ANITA DONGRE. *Chelsea boots,* HUNTER BOOTS. *Monica hat,* HERMÈS.





(From left) On Antara: Rosewin hooded trench jacket in saltmarsh beige, quilted horseshoe bucket hat in teacup pink, BURBERRY. *Denim blouson,* ONITSUKA TIGER. *High-waisted shorts,* PANKAJ AND NIDHI. *On Varsha: Organza panel midi with lace,* SHRIYA SOM. *Tillydrine Short gabardine trench coat in saltmarsh beige,* BURBERRY. *Beaubourg platform derbies,* LOUIS VUITTON.



Hand-woven silk flower motif printed slip dress, PÈRO.



Drop-waisted chiffon midi, GAURI & NAINIKA.
Short boots, HUNTER BOOTS.

HAIR: JUSTINE RAE MELLOCASTRO. MAKEUP: BANSARI CHAWADA. MODELS: VARSHA GOPAL, ANTARA/FEAT ARTISTS. BOOKINGS EDITOR: ALIZA FATMA. ASSISTED BY: JYOTSNA FERNANDES, NYASA THAKKAR, SHINI THOMAS (STYLING); APARNA GUNARANJAN (BOOKINGS). HOSPITALITY PARTNER: MANSAO CURTORIM, CGH EARTH SAHA.



Inside Demna's GUCCIVERSE

In a mere dozen or so years, the Georgia-born designer has gone from Vetements' wild child to the top of Gucci. NATHAN HELLER revisits fashion's restless disrupter as he sets about reinvigorating a global mega-brand. Portrait by RINEKE DIJKSTRA.

On a bright, crisp February morning in Milan, a day before a make-or-break show, Demna, once the leading iconoclast of French fashion and now the artistic director of Gucci, tours his offices with a curious air of calm.

"Obviously, I'm a bit stressed—but I feel good," he says, raking his eyes around a studio trimmed in a style unmistakably his own. A pair of leather sofas rest near full-length windows. Patchwork curtains by the artist Pia Camil trace the wall. A decade ago, when Gucci moved into this sleek array of buildings on the industrial Via Mecenate, the brand managed to reassert its reputation as something like the Italian sports car of fashion—a streamlined, leather-bound vehicle with a brisk, outlandish kick—an image that has since become ensconced in popular culture. "My cousin, who is 16 and spends her life on Roblox, heard that I was going to Gucci and was like, 'Do you know Gucci is a word we use a lot to describe a certain state of mind? If you 'feel Gucci', it means you want to be crazy and meet people and be out there'," Demna says. He smiles and adds, "I want to make people feel Gucci tomorrow."

Demna Gvasalia, as he was born in Georgia (he doffed his surname at the peak of his ascent at Balenciaga, five years ago), is now 45, an age when designers often arrive at the mature version of themselves. Yet his voice seemed fully formed a fashion eon ago, in 2014, the year he co-founded Vetements, and mere months before he was named Balenciaga's artistic director, further widening his reach. "It made him the most influential designer of the decade," Alexandre Samson, the fashion historian and a curator at Palais Galliera, in Paris, says. "He created characters that were very clear and reflective of an Eastern, post-USSR youth culture with no money, which looked to, admired and despised the Western world." Demna saw that this ambivalence, covetous and critical, could speak to the social-media-ruled capitals of the West too. "It was a very strong take, mixing logo mania with deconstructive pattern-making skills and sportswear," Samson says. It was intensely personal, too, and has remained so through years of reimagining since then.

In the studio, Demna wears loose black Adidas trousers, a black T-shirt bearing the logo of the heavy metal band Slipknot, and black Gucci mules—an example of the flowing baggy silhouette that he defined. When he was young, in bourgeois Europe, his personal style was often taken as provocation: He was chased from restaurants and had foodstuffs thrown at him. Since then, it has become a key template for mainstream luxury taste.

When Demna took the helm of Gucci last summer, after a decade leading Balenciaga, the move was received much in the spirit of Long John Silver winning control of the *Hispaniola*. The brand had spent a couple of years adrift; his arrival promised to make it rollick on the waves again. "He has this complete I-don't-give-a-f***-ness about what he does, and he knows how to garner attention, how to make a moment. He has a very good tap on the cultural conscience," the model and influencer Vivian Wilson tells me. "He designs what he wants," Kim Kardashian, a longtime friend and muse of Demna's, says. "He's just so unapologetically himself."

What was less certain was whether Demna's style of attention could suit so large and mainstream a brand. Gucci is the crown jewel of Kering, the luxury conglomerate, and in a year of industry downturns, it has become a charged bellwether too. (The company's fate is so twined with Gucci's success that the brand's CEO tells me she weaned herself off checking hour-by-hour global sales figures in bed.) "The team have a big responsibility, because they are handling a mega brand," Luca de Meo, Kering's CEO, says. "Handle with care!" Demna, who trained in the Antwerp school of conceptualism, was known as an arch, biting ironist with a taste for provocation. (An early Vetements collection included what looked like yellow dishwashing gloves.) There was a risk of this restless style straining under Gucci-scale success. At least that was the anxiety: In the studio, Demna surprises me by saying that, since arriving, he has sloughed off his conceptualism for a more immediate, sensual approach.

"Gucci is a very pragmatic brand, and it's about product. It's liberating not to have to conceptualise a dress just to make a dress that you love," he says. "This is how fashion should be: more intuitive and emotional… either 'I hate it' or 'I love it'." For his first Gucci showing, he presented a capsule collection (La Famiglia) in the form of a film, exploring what he describes as the brand's essential characters based on its looks of the 1970s. His pre-fall collection was a tribute to the sexy, soigne looks that defined the house in the '90s, under Tom Ford.

HAT TRICK
"There's something daring about it," Demna says of his vision for Gucci. "It's flamboyant. It's confident. You know who you are."



Fashion Photographs by Alessio Bolzoni.



TAKING SHAPE
Models Sheila Bawar and Kayako Higuchi *(opposite)* in Demna's reimagined proportions. "My vision of Gucci is creating this FOMO," Demna says. "The chic, the elegance, the Italian-ness of it."

Fashion Editor: Luca Galasso.









On this particular day, the collection he's about to show is an account of Gucci in the present: his own vision, joining him to a generation of Belgian conceptualists, including Matthieu Blazy and Pieter Mulier, that discovered a new sensuality at large heritage brands. (So far, the moves have registered: While it is by most measures too early to see major sales effects, store traffic rose from the release of the first capsule collection.) From a rack hung with a few pieces that will appear on the runway the next day, Demna extracts coats that look like fur but are actually the more ubiquitous agricultural by-product, shearling, trimmed on a bias and stitched with muslin for an effect as light as a windcheater in the hand.

Lightness is everything, Demna now thinks—lightness and speed. On arriving at Gucci, he discovered that all the studio's prototypes were sewn off-site. One of the first changes he made was to create a Gucci atelier on-site, so that garments could be made more quickly—more industrially—and edited not on paper but in the round, with pins and scissors.

Demna takes up a couple of classic handbags that he also made lighter and more supple, and he shows off two exquisite dresses on mannequins—one purple, with a classic Gucci pattern; the other in shimmering gold sequins. Beyond these displays, his studio is curiously empty, as if it, too, has been subjected to a lightness regime. Demna seems suddenly aware of the absence.

"I don't want to show you too many things," he says with a playful smile. "I want the show to be a surprise."

Many people trace Demna's touch—if not his sensibility—to four spirited years he spent working at Maison Martin Margiela early in his career, overseeing the women's ready-to-wear collections. "He absolutely understood the process and the way of thinking behind the whole brand: the idea of repurposing"—Margiela, like Demna, was known for using vintage pieces as a starting point—"and the idea, also, of playing with society," Samson says. At Vetements, Demna applied these processes to his own style. There were hoodies with raised or pointed shoulders, oversized jackets. As a self-conscious young man, he had taken to wearing oversized clothes as a form of self-concealment; now, he began reshaping the normative body into new and unusual forms, to thrilling effects. "At the time, there was really nothing else happening in Paris," Julien Charrier, who started work as an intern at Vetements in 2016 and is now Demna's chief of staff, tells me. "He was bringing something that was completely out of the box, very fresh, very young, very street-culture." Within a year, the label was being worn—or imitated—by Jared Leto and Ye, then known as Kanye West. "He was always just so cool," says Kardashian, who met Demna shortly after Vetements launched, before there was a storefront, and spent hours simply trying on pieces at a holding warehouse in Paris in the middle of the night.

In 2016, Demna gave his first show at Balenciaga. (He continued designing for both labels for years.) He had hits like the chunky Triple S sneaker and the wide-collar Swing shirt, but he also reached for geopolitical themes. In March 2022, after the Russia-Ukraine war broke out, his show featured models trudging through a snowstorm in yellow and blue. Within three years, the house had doubled in size and had crossed a billion dollars in sales. *The Washington Post*, in 2019, celebrated Demna for "changing what we consider fashion".

When I met Demna for the first time, late that year, he was living in the woods, in Switzerland, with his husband, the musician Loïk Gomez. Paris had become too distracting, he told me, too claustrophobic, too much. In Switzerland he saw almost no one, but every day before work, donning high boots and an overcoat, he went tramping into nature like a figure out of Caspar David Friedrich. He was planning to relaunch Balenciaga's long-dormant couture operations. He had begun to think about the body in new and poetic ways. "I'm no longer on the dark side of the world," he told me at the time.

It couldn't last. A few months later, the whole world went dark for the Covid-19 pandemic. The remote woods of Switzerland proved an oddly perfect place to endure the lockdown, but Demna's couture debut got pushed back a year. Meanwhile, the brand's apparent provocations seemed to compound. In 2022, Balenciaga severed its ties with Ye, who had been one of its most prominent and stalwart public supporters, after Ye made what was widely taken to be antisemitic posts on social media. (In January of this year, Ye apologised in a full-page advertisement in *The Wall Street Journal*.) Only weeks later, the brand—and Demna—faced public opprobrium after releasing an ad campaign that included children, dressed in its kids line, holding teddy bear bags previously shown on the runway. To many, the bears appeared to be dressed in BDSM gear. Eagle-eyed viewers noted that another ad, for a spring 2023 collection, which included a desk messed with papers, appeared to include a page of the opinion in the Supreme Court case *United States v Williams*, which concerned child pornography.

The fallout was severe. Close celebrity affiliates of Balenciaga, including Kardashian, re-evaluated their relationships with the brand. ("That was never an issue with him," Kardashian tells me. "Once we did an investigation and we saw where things happened, we were comfortable moving forward.") Soon Demna himself issued a public apology. "It was inappropriate to have kids promote objects that had nothing to do with them," he wrote. "As much as I would sometimes like to provoke a thought through my work, I would NEVER have an intention to do that with such an awful subject as child abuse that I condemn."

"Provocation is like humour, and humour cannot be stupid," he tells me now, when I ask whether the experience compelled him to reassess the role of provocation in his life and work. "It involves a kind of nuance. Provocation is stupid when you're the only person laughing."

Demna had resolved to exit the Swiss woods. "After a while, I got so bored there," he tells me. "Boredom is such a scary and tricky thing for a creative person—I always want to discover new things." He and Gomez moved into Geneva but eventually found themselves back in Paris, stimulated but restless as ever. "I love Paris, but it only works as a long-distance relationship for me," Demna tells me. "I lived there for 15 years, which is the longest I've been in one place in my life. But I didn't like what fashion started to become while I was living in Paris full-time: safe, boring, beige, wannabe bourgeois, flat, superficial—all the things fashion shouldn't be." With the thought that a part-time life in Paris was the best kind of Paris life, he and Gomez continued looking for a second perch.

They landed in LA: the city where Demna had proposed to Gomez and a place where he had always dreamed of living. They bought a 1950s bungalow and started moving in the local

LET IT FLOW
Clockwise from top left: Model Amelia Gray, musician The Dare, Higuchi and Gray in Gucci. "I want to do something I haven't done before, which"—Demna smiles—"limits the possibilities."

mix. To this day, Demna told me, he has a much more active social life in California than in Europe.

"It's radically different, culturally speaking," he tells me. "Modernity is there. It's not for no reason that Silicon Valley happened in California; there's something about feeling more free in your head about how we do stuff, how we dress, how we express ourselves. In Europe it's much more conservative."

On taking the job at Gucci, he moved from Paris to Milan ("Also Europe, but a very different mentality, and so industrial in terms of fashion—I love it") but kept Los Angeles as his second base. "People always say, 'Oh, I get why you're there—you want to be far from fashion'," he says. "I'm like, 'Actually, no—there I'm really in the epicentre of thinking behind how we *use* fashion.' Whereas in Italy, what I have is the product, the heritage, the history, the manufacturing—all those things that don't exist in LA."

"It's a pretty good balance," he adds. "Gucci needs both."

Backstage at his first show, Demna squeezes up and down the model line-up, which curls along a hallway thick with hairdressers and security personnel. "The feeling when someone falls in love with someone? I have it now," he tells me. "I'm also worried about one million things—the shoes, the sweat—but we can't control these things, so worrying is useless, apparently." He grins. "I read that somewhere."

The show will be held in the Palazzo delle Scintille, a large hall in Milan that Demna refashioned as a venue for Gucci. He had been inspired by the Uffizi Galleries in Florence, the house's historical and spiritual home, and, with the Uffizi's permission, had some classical statues there replicated. They line the periphery of the Palazzo's inner hall, which proceeds down coliseum-like steps to a long central corridor that will serve as the runway. "We built a museum for the show, basically," Demna says. "My idea was to put Gucci back into the spotlight of the Italian Renaissance." There were, of course, other objectives too. As guests take their seats in the Palazzo delle Scintille, someone whispers, "There are *so many* supermodels here."

True enough. The cast includes Kate Moss, Karlie Kloss and Gabbriette, but also figures unaccustomed to the runway, such as the rappers Fakemink and Nettspend. ("I invited, in the cast, people that I always wanted to meet," Demna explains to me.)

As the house lights go down, a bright shaft appears down the runway. The model Charlie Jones steps into it, wearing a high-collar sleeveless white dress and carrying a classic black Gucci bag. The dress is tight and revealing enough to display a tattoo on the upper thigh. ("It's the most body-conscious I've ever been," Demna says. "I've had a really good therapist for 10 years and, finally, I've started to like myself.") Jones, a trans man, cross-steps briskly, followed by a gym-built man in white pants and a similar shirt. The show, like all of Demna's at Gucci, mixes men's and women's looks. "I think the idea of splitting fashion by gender is very old—I think there's a systemic glitch in this," he says. When the muscleman walks past, somebody cries, "Wow."

Uncharacteristically for Demna, who at Balenciaga was known for his raucous, intensifying presentations, the show blooms into poetic sequinned dresses and male models who walk barefoot. "It's very romantic, very like Botticelli, almost like they came off the painting in a way," he explains. "It's a different type of beauty than I've ever touched on—more classic beauty, but pushed, exaggerated." When Moss appears to end the show, in a black backless sequinned dress, a cheer breaks out; an old vision is made new again.

In 1993, Demna's family fled their hometown of Sukhumi, Georgia, under threat of ethnic cleansing, and landed in Tbilisi. One of his first jobs, at 17, was translating Reuters copy for Georgian TV, and, since then, he has rarely succeeded in outrunning the news. (On September 11, 2001, as horrific reports streamed in New York, it was the young Demna who did the simultaneous translation for the Georgian audience.) Nor has he long settled in one place.

That restlessness, paradoxically, has helped to root him in his new professional home. The unimprovably named Guccio Gucci, the brand's founder and the son of a straw-hat maker, opened a shop in Florence's Via della Vigna Nuova in 1921; by the late '30s, he was making handbags. From the start, the brand offered sly winks to its self-invention: Gucci's crest did not include a soldier, as an aristocratic crest would have, but a figure carrying aloft two luggage bags. Guccio's son Aldo helped push the company into belts, shoes and gloves and excelled at industrial improvisation. Faced with wartime scarcities, the house made handbags with bamboo handles. By 1960, it had opened a shop in New York; soon it was in London, Paris, and LA. It took on ready-to-wear fashion and jetted into the 1970s alongside celebrities such as Grace Kelly and Jackie Kennedy. In 1974, Elton John, writing of his transatlantic travels in British Vogue, could refer to passengers on the SS *France* as "Gucci-Pucci" and be understood.

There followed, for two decades, enough intrigue, subterfuge, betrayal and assassination for a Jacobean play: A series of struggles between members of the Gucci family formed the basis of the 2021 movie *House of Gucci*, culminating in the murder of Maurizio Gucci and the overtaking of the brand by what subsequently became Kering. Tom Ford, then unknown, was named creative director in 1994 and within a year was credited with creating the brand's first extraordinary renaissance, moving away from bourgeois-brown fashion for a sexy, shocking new hue. A second renaissance came in 2015, with the winsomely androgynous flair of Alessandro Michele.

With Michele's departure, in 2022, the house fell back into disorder. Revenue tumbled 21 per cent in 2024; in just the first half of the following year, it fell 25 per cent further. Sabato De Sarno, the creative director, parted ways with the brand in 2025, and Gucci had three CEOs over two years. Last fall, Kering appointed one of its most powerful leaders, Francesca Bellettini, as Gucci's president and CEO. Her mandate, she tells me one afternoon over coffee in the Milan Four Seasons, was immediately clear: "I know that a lot of people say Gucci is like the phoenix, going up and down and re-emerging from the ashes," she says. "No." She shakes her head. "We need to go up with normal growth—and stay up."

Demna was Bellettini's first big notion. "I knew him from Balenciaga, which he had already decided to leave," she says. She saw a fit and put the prospect to him over dinner. "He was like, 'I can do it'," she recalls. Just one thing: He wanted to study first.

"I didn't know so much about Gucci—I knew the movie, you know?" Demna tells me. "I knew Alessandro, and I knew Tom Ford from fashion TV when I was, like, 13…but to understand the brand, I had to know what Gucci stood for outside of those three things." Over the weeks that followed, he made visits to the Gucci archive, in Florence, with espionage-like cover. "I saw the whole world," he says. "Homeware. Chairs. Umbrellas. A roulette wheel. And on top of that, the most incredible collections." He shrugs. "I was seduced."

Demna proposed to Bellettini that he compile a presentation in which to assemble his thoughts. "I need to convince you and

myself that we can do this," she recalls him saying. It was the holidays, and he and Gomez were in Los Angeles. "On the day I finished," Demna says, "I showed it to my husband." (Demna sometimes refers to Gomez as his "fashion therapist".)

"My husband looked and was like, 'It gives me a FOMO feeling—I want to be that or I want to have it'," Demna recalls. That frame clicked. "I was like, *that's* what my vision of Gucci is—creating this FOMO," he says. "The chic, the elegance, the Italian-ness of it. The dolce vita, but in a nonchalant way. There's a bit of humour to it, but it's not sarcastic. It's a fun thing, quite punk, in a way—like, 'I like myself, and I don't care what other people think.' There's something daring about it—it's flamboyant. It's confident. You know who you are."

The Los Angeles fires started that night. Demna left with nothing but his passport and his laptop: He had not backed up his presentation. "I sent it to Kering, and I was like: This is my vision… And if they don't like it, I might as well know that now."

But Bellettini understood what he put forward: a freedom possible only in a house whose history was rich in product. "What he was explaining as a liberation was the fact that the brand doesn't come from a couture maison," she recalls. "There isn't a Cristóbal Balenciaga, an Yves Saint Laurent, a Christian Dior, to whom you're always going to be compared." When Demna presented his plan to François-Henri Pinault, the chairman of Kering, he was pelted with questions. "François-Henri wanted to be sure," Bellettini says. "And Demna was so precise in his answers that he was like, 'Okay, done.'"



In general, Demna's creative day starts slowly—a self-protective nest of discipline that he says he learned from Marc Jacobs, for whom he worked at Louis Vuitton more than a decade ago. In Milan, he takes the morning for himself. He has coffee and a smoothie with his husband. He meditates. He cuddles his two Chihuahuas and takes them walking with Gomez. "We talk about stuff that isn't fashion," he says. "I want to have this moment which is about my family, my husband, and me. And us as a couple. And our life."

At noon, he reports for work at the office, from which point he is usually scheduled straight through to 8pm. He rarely takes more than a 15-minute break. "It's intense, but I love it, because when I'm in the flow of working, I'm quite fast in making decisions," he says. "We manage a lot for a brand this size in one day." In the evening, he returns home and cooks dinner with Gomez—or, rather, alongside Gomez, who maintains a different diet. ("He's gluten-free. I'm vegan," Demna says. "Sometimes it overlaps, but"—he smiles—"it's hard to be gluten-free in Italy.") In Los Angeles they go out for dinner most nights, but in Milan this "ritual", as Demna calls it, is their life.

"We cook, we watch stand-up comedy on YouTube, listen to music," he says. They go out for dinner once a week at most, and usually on the weekend, after walking through the city. "I don't really have a lot of social life in Milan," he says. "I'm always going to be this rebellious person, but now I live this Gucci life professionally." His rebellion, in the Gucci way, has taken on bourgeois hues.

We are drinking ginger-lemon kombucha at a banquette table in the Campbell Bar in New York's Grand Central Station. Demna is in the middle of a two-week stay in New York; after preparing two looks for the Met Gala, he is now preparing for his larger errand in town. In a few days' time, Gucci will show its cruise collection in the centre of Times Square, and Demna has been roaming the city for research and inspiration.

"I'll go to vintage stores, bookstores. See some art, get some cultural impact," he says. The process is about both gathering images as references for his collections and buying vintage pieces to use as physical canvases, "raw material" that he can cut and pin. "It's very hard sometimes to start making a jacket from scratch, especially when it comes to tailoring and shapes," he explains. "I need to have material that has good details and good proportions that I can cut and Frankenstein into the shapes I want to get to."

Shape has been extensively on Demna's mind as he works on his September collection. After taking his deliberate process of understanding Gucci stage by stage—starting with the fundamentals of La Famiglia and progressing to the sexy Fordian club style of his first Milan show—he feels that he is ready to present a Gucci that draws on the history of the house but is his. In fashion terms, this means coming out with new silhouettes: particular configurations of form, proportion, and mood, which, like the boxy Chanel jacket or the Dior hourglass of a dress, will be recognisable as the signature of his vision for the brand.

"Personally, I'm in *need* of a defined Gucci silhouette, and in September I will dare myself to show it," he says, and signals for a second kombucha. "It's about centimetres, it really is," he says. "It's about proportion. And I want to do something that also I haven't done before, which"—he smiles—"limits the possibilities."

He started with the mood: "What is the feeling I want to

THE CAT'S MEOW
Model Valerie Scherzinger's cheetah-print dress—replete with an angular shoulder and a pussy bow—is a prime example of Demna's character studies.

give so a person can be like, 'I feel Gucci'?" In consultation with Gomez, acting as his fashion therapist, he began listing all the qualities that he wanted his new Gucci silhouette to project. Facing the blank page on his laptop one day, with his deadlines for the September runway drawing ever nearer, he wrote:

Sharp, Confident, Chic, Bold, Rich, Eccentric, Hot, Sexy, Cool.

"*Sharp* as in not wobbly, not round: There is no cocoon shape at Gucci," he explains. "Sexy and hot: They're not the same. You can be completely covered and feel hot, but you can't be sexy. For sexy, you need to show some body. Gucci needs to have both."

One by one, he worked through his words, using them to define what the silhouette was and wasn't. In the spring, he went to one of his favourite vintage men's tailoring shops, in Rome. "It has the most meticulous selection of jackets and coats in Italian men's tailoring—I half-emptied the store," he says. "We're using those pieces when I work the silhouette, in defining the shoulder line and the sleeve shape."

A few days later, I meet Demna in the 23rd Street studio where he is holding fittings for the New York show. The show's fashion concept expresses his mercantile turn. "I call it GucciCore," he tells me. "Like hard-core, but also the essence, the base, of the aesthetic"—in other words, 'staples' that customers can reliably find in a Gucci shop.

"For example, this is a very important piece for me," he says, pulling from the rack a red women's double-breasted jacket, his version of the classic peacoat. "I was afraid to work on it, because I don't like peacoats: How could I make one that I really liked?" The answer to the question became a kind of key: If he could make a Gucci peacoat that he loved ("It's the fit, the proportions of the collar, the size and positioning of the buttons, the length"), then he could extend his point of view across worlds of merchandise.

The other key—and perhaps his greatest, if quietest, innovation at Gucci to date—concerned sizing. Traditionally, fashion is tailored to tall runway models and then graded up or down into standard sizes, often losing the proportional relationships crucial to a fit. "It doesn't consider the body type," Demna says. "If someone is shorter and more muscled, he's going to look like a dork." At Gucci, he is developing a wholly new sizing system so that the integrity of a look will hold whether you're tall and lean or short and thick. In the meantime, many cruise collection pieces exist in three different fits: a small, a medium and what might be called a Demna fit—the baggy proportions that he himself would buy.

During fittings, Demna perches at a table at one end of the studio. An assistant brings him an energy bar and a bowl of nuts. A tall male model appears in a jacket, sunglasses, and flowing black pants.

"I'm not sure about this one," Demna says. He takes off the sunglasses, then walks over to a rack of pieces, assessing alternatives, and eventually emerges on a long coat. The problem with the jacket, he explains, was that it looked somehow implausible. "That's my big thing—to find the authenticity."

The night of the show is clear and cool: a New York City spring caught in the hourglass of Times Square. Smoke is piped in from the street corners, giving the Midtown canyons an eerie feel. By 8.10pm, guests have begun to arrive on Gucci's walled-off grey carpet. "Being at Gucci, he can dream as big as he wants, right?" Kardashian tells me. "He can say 'I want a show in Times Square' and pull it off."

Demna is with Gomez in a sushi restaurant on 47th Street that has been commandeered as the show's backstage. In one hand, he holds a Starbucks cup; in the other, a big red apple, as if in a nod to the city. The floor is marked with line-up tape for the models, and large screens near the entrance track street footage from cameras and drones. Demna draws close and peers at the footage in wonder for a moment and then, with Gomez, heads out into the cool air of the square.

Imaginary Gucci advertisements are playing across nearly 50 billboard-size screens and more than two dozen more at sidewalk level. Every celebrity arrival—from Mariah Carey in a crisp white Gucci coat to Lindsay Lohan in a black leather ensemble, Playboi Carti in shiny python trousers to EsDeeKid in a shimmering black jacket and baggy silver jeans (and his signature balaclava)—garners cheers from onlookers gathered on sidewalks and street corners. At a few minutes past nine, the screens all dim. Charlie Jones, again in the first look—this time bearing an apple in a deceptively simple black suit—traces a path through the crowd.

In the wee hours of the previous night, when Times Square was as quiet and as empty as it would ever be, the Gucci crew had assembled for their only rehearsal. Everybody wore earphones so as not to project the music, curated by Gomez, through the square. Now, with full sound and all 50 big screens tracing the runway movement with nervy panoptic attention, the effect is haunting. Suits of various power hues come down the runway. The red peacoat appears paired with black pants. There are bikers in leather, Venuses in shearling. Tom Brady swaggers in an asymmetric black jacket and matching trousers in leather. (For all the show's diversity in age and aspect, it continues to centre on slender or gym-built bodies.) When Paris Hilton appears with a black fur-like coat slung over the shoulder of a sunflower yellow Gucci-patterned summer dress with a high lavalier neck—hot, not sexy—every phone in the audience seems to lift up.

For much of his career, Demna was known for shows that built towards an unsettled climax, but the effect here is the opposite. The sequence culminates as Cindy Crawford, at 60, dressed in a high shoulder-less dress of long black feathers, takes the final walk, as slowly and as grandly as la passeggiata. For a long, dilated moment, the entirety of Times Square is silent, as if holding its breath.

Later that night, the party reconvenes at the Gucci Mansion, a property with a courtyard on Madison Avenue reimagined as a centre of the Gucci life across time. A jazz singer and quartet on the first floor scat-sings "It's De-Lovely". In a private karaoke room upstairs, guests are trying their luck at 50 Cent's "PIMP". The basement is a billiards lounge in red—red carpet, red curtains, red walls. A fortune teller in a hideaway reads the future by lamplight.

Demna arrives after midnight and settles into the courtyard, dense with smokers and guests taking the night air. He is surrounded by well-wishers and in an expansive mood. "I'm relieved that this is done, because it was very complex," he says, still clutching his Starbucks cup—as if the evening, carried by its Gucci momentum, has borne him ceaselessly along. "But a lot of people told me that it was 12 minutes of forgetting about whatever they were thinking before." He smiles. "I love that."

FLOWER POWER
"He designs what he wants," says
Kim Kardashian, Demna's longtime friend and muse.
"He's just so unapologetically himself."



HAIR: ESTHER LANGHAM. MAKEUP: AARON DE MEY. FASHION PHOTOGRAPHS:
PRODUCED BY STARKMAN & ASSOCIATES. MANICURIST: RAPHAEL PARK CHARLES.



Bejewelled yellow cape, FALGUNI SHANE PEACOCK.

Terms of engagement

Growing up under scrutiny has made Sara Tendulkar more exacting about what she will accept from public life and from love. By SARA HUSSAIN. Photographed by SARANG GUPTA. Styled by DIVYA BALAKRISHNAN.

The sky is the colour of wet concrete when I reach the Tendulkar mansion in Bandra. It has been threatening to rain all morning, and the living room, furnished in soft neutral tones, is washed in the dullness of a typical Mumbai monsoon. A few minutes later, Sara Tendulkar walks in wearing an orange dress that cuts through the grey outside.

We settle into the sofa and begin as she laughs recalling a moment in childhood when her family's public significance required some explanation for her. At school, the morning show-and-tell occasionally doubled as a cricket bulletin, with classmates announcing that Sachin Tendulkar had scored another century. A "very, very young" Sara once raised her hand and said, "My father has the same name."

Her parents, Sachin and Anjali, made sure their daughter and younger son Arjun understood that the family name came with responsibility. By adolescence, she had learnt that a remark could leave the room in which she made it and acquire a more convenient meaning elsewhere.

Born in 1997, Sara places herself on the millennial–Gen Z border, familiar with the older advice to say nothing and let a cruel comment pass, yet admiring of a younger generation less willing to make silence the price of being well-behaved. She followed that advice for most of her life and still ignores plenty, having decided that most comments do not deserve the extended life bestowed by a response.

As the attention began to include her appearance, Sara treated each remark as a character reference for its author—a return-to-sender policy that kept another person's ugliness from becoming her own self-assessment. "If somebody says something negative, it reveals more about them than me," she explains.

Public opinions require her to be "200 per cent sure" before sharing a take, a figure mathematics cannot accommodate but her life online apparently requires. When a photograph of Sara and her sister-in-law, Saaniya Chandhok, was used to pass commentary on their bodies, she decided it had cleared that impossible threshold. "There is a very fine line between journalism and trying to make things sensational and commenting on people's bodies," she says. "When that happened, I thought, I don't care, I'm going to say something." The response came after years of following the opposite advice. "When I was younger, I would just let things pass," she says. "Maybe I was too naive. Now that's shifting, and I'm like, OK, it's time to push back." Peers and colleagues subsequently told her the same person had treated them similarly, suggesting that silence had protected the paparazzi's habit better than it had protected any of them.

She joined Instagram as many of us did, on a private account where the audience was made up of people she knew and a fresh manicure would become the day's newsworthy post. Now it's a part of her professional life, and a large following means that the same photograph can be treated as inspiration, advertising or an invitation for inspection. She thinks through what she

LOVE LANGUAGE
Sara Tendulkar has known her closest friends since childhood, which explains why she refuses to reserve the word "soulmate" for romance alone.

posts and is deliberate about the brands attached to her name, though she does not make the work sound joyless. "It's still fun," she says. "It's just a lot more 'strategic' fun." The social media algorithm receives a generous character reference from Sara, who sees its ability to gather like-minded people as part of building Gen Z's confidence.

When our conversation turns to marriage, it begins with Arjun's March wedding to Saaniya. She shared her growing pains with her brother, even as his cricket career took him far away from home for long stretches. His nuptials brought Sara closer than ever to the machinery of a wedding celebration.

She labels her brother a "cricket boy" who was content to leave the details to the family. It's hard to imagine the quiet, pristine room we're currently sitting in was once the hub of all the wedding planning. Sara and Saaniya, accompanied by both their mothers, became the nucleus, moving from food tastings to decor meetings as they pieced together the wedding that would take place in Mumbai, drawing on both their Maharashtrian and Punjabi traditions.

Sara got me thinking about the everyday changes marriage brings. My sister and I have lived together for over a decade, away from our home city. The prospect of no longer sharing the same life as our own marriage plans hit the calendar has started to feel a little like watching the co-lead who has shared my set for years get written into another household's storyline—new location, a new co-star and fewer scenes in the same living room. Sara had less cause for such melodrama. Cricket had already accustomed their sibling relationship to some distance, and Saaniya had been her friend for eight years before becoming her sister-in-law. In this new season, nobody had been written out and the new cast member was already family.

"I feel like that was a great trial round for me," she says. "Now I know what I want and what I don't want." So what does Sara want? When she was younger, she imagined a large wedding and spent the pastel-bride years convinced that was the look for her. Now she is leaning towards a smaller celebration, perhaps a red bridal look. "I'm a Libra, very indecisive. Who knows," she shrugs. "Maybe I'll go with green."

The fashion may change on a whim, but Sara is more exacting about the conditions under which she will marry. For all the hand-wringing over Gen Z's supposed lack of interest in commitment, she sees a generation that takes marriage seriously enough to leave a relationship when it's no longer serving them. "I've seen people get engaged and, during the run-up to the wedding, realise they're seeing the true colours of their partner or family and think, 'I can't do this anymore.'"

Planning a wedding can reveal how a partner behaves once two families begin making demands of the same future. "I think walking away before you're married is a great step. Previous generations were more afraid to take a stand for themselves, whereas Gen Z feels more confident and empowered to do so when things are going wrong."

She credits her mother's advice to always look for someone caring—attraction can fluctuate and a person's looks do too.

"My parents are very good friends before anything else," Sara reveals. "They have this really fun banter at home, and that's definitely something I would want in my future partner." Even their disagreements, she says, contain no struggle for authority. "There's never any power dynamic playing out between them, which is amazing."

Their careers gave that friendship plenty to contend with. Her mother Anjali is a paediatrician, and her daughter's memories place her at the centre of the home's daily organisation too, drawing up study timetables for the children and deciding what they would cover each day. Sachin spent much of the year travelling for cricket. "When I was younger, I thought this was what all relationships were like," Sara says. "As I grew up, I started thinking about how they managed this long-distance marriage. We didn't have FaceTime or WhatsApp 20 years ago, and even international calls were expensive."

"So," I ask, unable to resist my filminess, "Pyaar dosti hai?"

She laughs. "Exactly."

Romantic partners once held near-exclusive rights to the word soulmate. Lately, the title has expanded to include the friends who know every former version of you and can recount your worst decisions with forensic accuracy. Sara has known her closest friends since they were aged three and five, which gives her good reason to resist narrowing the word to one relationship.

"I'd like to believe that romantic soulmates exist, but my best friends are definitely, one hundred per cent, my soulmates," she says.

> "There is a fine line between journalism and trying to make things sensational and commenting on people's bodies. When I was younger, I would just let things pass—maybe I was too naive. Now that's shifting, and I'm like, OK, it's time to push back"

After the interview, we head downstairs to where the *Vogue* India fashion team has turned one of the rooms into a trial suite in preparation for her cover shoot the next day. Bouncy, her golden retriever, spots her through sliding glass doors and shows us exactly how he got that name. "He'll eat up all the shoes," she warns, pointing at the several pairs lined up inside. She slips outside for a quick cuddle, introduces the dogs to the team and hurries back before Bouncy can prove her right.

Trying on clothes is the part of a shoot she enjoys most. It's a chance to play dress-up, slipping into outfits she might never otherwise have an occasion to wear. She moves between racks and closed doors to change, and my questions give way to pins and adjustments.

The next day, we reconvene at Mehboob Studios. Dark clouds hang ominously in the sky but Diljit Dosanjh is going full tilt on the speakers, keeping spirits up. In the softer bridal looks, we see a more spirited side of her, leaning into the fantasy of it; the more elaborate pieces draw out a steadier, more ceremonial presence. For someone whose surname came with a world-famous origin story, fashion offers a temporary escape to personas unexplored. The Abhinav Mishra mirror-work lehenga catches the studio lights as she twirls to a new beat, and soon the set is being prepared for whoever she will be next.



Falak handcrafted mirror-work lehenga, ABHINAV MISHRA. *Headband, brooch (worn as necklace), rings,* GOLUBHAI BADALIA DIAMOND.

HAIR: DAKSH NIDHI/TAP. MAKEUP: RIDDHIMA SHARMA/ENTOURAGE TALENTS. BOOKINGS EDITOR: ALIZA FATMA. ART DIRECTION: PURNIMA NATH. PRODUCTION: CUTLOOSE PRODUCTIONS. ASSISTED BY: MITRAJ KHARA (HAIR); VEDICA VORA, SHINI THOMAS (STYLING); PARI SHAH (ART); APARNA GUNARANJAN (BOOKINGS).

RAW MATERIAL



Grunge is alive and well in 2026—but instead of oversized flannels and ditzy florals, its new era is defined by gauzy layers, distressed denim and a minimal, undone sense of ease. Photographed by COLLIER SCHORR.



HIGH CONTRAST
It's all about balance—just ask Gigi Hadid, who wears a sumptuous, buttery silk Givenchy by Sarah Burton top with rough-and-tumble distressed Levi's from Mothfood Shop. *Opposite page:* In a lacy Tom Ford dress, model Vittoria Ceretti nods to a '90s take on lingerie dressing. Vintage tank top from Mothfood Shop. Vintage jeans from eBay.

Fashion Editor: Camilla Nickerson.





LAYER IT ON ME
Model Liu Wen goes more-is-more with an Hermès jacket, Brooks Brothers blazer, Michael Kors Collection shirt and sweater from Jake's. *Opposite page:* Model Anok Yai keeps it easy breezy in airy Miu Miu.



FINDING NIRVANA
What better way to bring an ethereal dress back down to earth than with a pair of well-worn jeans and clunky boots? Ceretti styles a multipatterned Chanel dress with paint-splattered jeans from eBay and vintage military boots from The Quality Mending Co.



FINE LINES
Yai grounds a buoyant lace Dior dress with stone-washed Dior jeans.





STATE OF THE ART
Top: Model Noor Khan gets down to essentials in a Michael Kors Collection bodysuit and Calvin Klein Collection trousers. *Bottom:* A Tom Ford leather shirt worn over a delicate slip also does the trick. *Opposite page:* Model Alex Consani—in Prada—makes a state of disarray look well-considered.





THE MORE THE MERRIER
Model Selena Forrest's embellished mesh Prada dress adds intrigue to an otherwise minimal look—Prada tank top; Courrèges jeans; Phoebe Philo shoes.

HAIR: JIMMY PAUL. MAKEUP: YUMI LEE. PRODUCED BY HEN'S TOOTH PRODUCTION. SET DESIGN: JAVIER IRIGOYEN. MANICURIST: JIN SOON CHOI. TAILOR: FRANCISCO CHAYDEZ. ILLUSTRATIONS AND COLLAGES: COLLIER SCHORR.



OFF THE WALL
Hadid in a formfitting Gucci jacket and trousers, and Araks bralette.

BEAUTY NOTE
Hold, please. Safe for sensitive skin, hydrating niacinamide in Maybelline Grippy Serum plumps and preps as a first step to help makeup last.



Miller resin salad bowl,
₹15,778, SOHO HOME.

HORO SCOPE FIRE

ARIES

You've learnt a lesson or two about boundaries. You love offering your best to people, but you also know you feel lit when you do things that spark a fire within you as well. Infuse more fun and less stress, reclaim your power and get ready to incorporate the changes the recent eclipse season has brought forward for you, Aries. Move towards your calling, stand out so your tribe can see you and let life surprise you. Your existence is layered like a good tiramisu, and you are learning to enjoy it one bite at a time.

LEO

You may be in the midst of a conflict, but really, Leo, do you know the true reason for the battle you are waging? Be it familial challenges, inheritances, redundant traditions or anything else—you are walking a path that is uniquely yours. There is little point in trying to emulate someone else's formula for life. Instead, simply try to tackle the role and responsibilities you have taken on for yourself or that has been passed on to you—at work or personally. Prioritise your most important goals before getting mired in other people's drama and game plans. You've risen before. You will rise again.

SAGITTARIUS

You may see reflections of your mind drifting through the wind and may not really know whether these are figments of your imagination or fragments of your manifestations, Sagittarius. Whatever is conspiring, rest assured that it's a fresh wind that's blowing, and although you may feel the pressure to release your grip on something, it will be for the better. In what ways can you continue to show up, you ask? Exactly as you already are. Spread your arms wide and embrace all of life with love.

Text by SNEHAA KHANNA SAHGAL.

HORO SCOPE WATER

CANCER

You long to be home, but you know, you're also creating a safe space for yourself right here, Cancer. You owe it to the world to show up—through your work, your purpose, your calling. But you also owe it to your loved ones. And lastly, but equally importantly, you owe it to yourself to show up for you. Your guides will be there for you in several ways, and you will find out exactly which direction to move towards. But until then, remember that the parts of your life where you feel you don't fit in are the very parts you are meant to share with the world—so that true change can take place.

SCORPIO

Life may feel like a mirror maze for you—especially around this time. Venus and Mercury are both in retrograde for your sign in October, Scorpio, and while you may want to fast-forward through this window at 10x speed, you must realise that taking it all in more mindfully might actually do the trick better. You have been sitting on some ideas, thoughts, inspirations and the like and are raring to go. However, there is no need to channel your warrior energy where it is not needed anymore. Think, act and lead with vision, not impulse, to craft your winning move.

PISCES

When your inner guidance says yes, it means yes. There may be many layers to it, but the answer remains the same. You are one with the cosmos through your innate spiritual connection, and very often, it is felt as a strong urge or feeling first, rather than a fact or something tangible. A great deal of cosmic intervention and activity is underway for you, and big plans are unfolding—in a good way. Go with your gut and intuition to let your dreams unfurl.



Ice vase, ₹17,416, POLSPOTTEN.



Spring Bouquet flower ornaments (set of 5), ₹8,090, VESTA.

HORO SCOPE EARTH

TAURUS

There are two ways to approach the mundane and your responsibilities, Taurus: with cynicism or devotion. If you really peel away the layers of your circumstances, you will realise that a lot that has your focus and fancy may be unnecessary. At the core, what every one of us needs is love, kindness, recognition, appreciation and gratitude. We each go to varied lengths to seek and receive these, disguised as various emotions and actions, even goals. So take deep breaths, tune into the portal of your heart and listen for where you have been cutting yourself short.

VIRGO

You may feel raw and cut wide open, Virgo, but also very alive. This is your time to return to your innocence, your very authentic nature—not in a bizarre way, but in a very tangible, structured and planned manner. There is deep healing underway for you around this time. Some of you may be recovering your health and some of you may be undergoing transformations or both. It does not matter what repair work is being done; what matters is that you remember that you are levelling up and this healing is therefore necessary.

CAPRICORN

Take it nice and slow. You may have either returned from a holiday or may be contemplating escaping into the clouds for a break from the world. But what will really help you at this point is to remember to not view yourself or your life in bits and pieces, Capricorn. Instead, view it from a vantage point; look at the bigger picture. What is not aligned must leave, what feels heavy must be untethered, what feels lost must vanish. Close your eyes to the world around you and look inward. You are protected. Now, what do you choose?

HORO SCOPE AIR

GEMINI

Move over black and white, the full spectrum of colour is back—only make it soft and pastel this time. Your personality is big and it always has been, Gemini. This time around, it's this very trait that is changing the game for you. Whatever you do, you do with a big heart—thinking too. So while you may feel your work and commitment go unnoticed, they are actually influencing and impacting the world in many direct and indirect ways. You've been training for this for a long, long while. You've waited with bated breath and your time is here. Finally.

LIBRA

The yellow brick road may line the way for the world, but you? You aren't going where the crowd is. You are exploring and discovering your own path, Libra, and it feels truly liberating. There are many takers for this sparkly fresh vibe of yours and your cosmic helpers advise you to draw those lines in the sand, retract when it gets too much, gauge intentions before giving in and let go of the idea that you are indebted or bound by blood or promises. Whatever keeps you feeling stuck in a rut or an unfortunate karmic loop, release it. Gently, but surely. Sometimes a pause, a delayed response or a simple no is all it takes to safeguard your energy.

AQUARIUS

It may not always be about you, and take this as a sign to let out a sigh of relief. This is not a time for your ego to take a beating, but for your heart to take the lead compassionately. Not every projection, response or trigger needs you to hold onto it personally. Sometimes, it is about things that may not even concern you. So with this in mind, Aquarius, breathe and release any pent-up energy and fears you hold. You are here to show up as yourself, and whoever is meant to be part of your tribe will find you. There are many layers unfolding for you simultaneously, so take it as it comes and always keep your inner voice the loudest, at least for you.



Bird-shaped salad servers, ₹*31,601,* GOHAR WORLD.



WORKS LIKE A CHARM

Luxury jewellery brand Moi introduces the Emir Mini Charm Necklace. The piece features a variety of charms: gold granules, a natural brilliant-cut diamond bow, a green enamel centre disc with natural rose-cut diamonds and a bezel-set emerald, a pearl and blue sapphire kite unit, and a green onyx cabochon. Each charm lends its own distinct character to the piece, and is strung on a 14K gold chain. Whether styled with sharp eveningwear or smart business casuals, the necklace adds a pop of colour to every look.

For more information, visit www.vibewithmoi.com



SECOND NATURE

Created for Indian skin and climate, Plenaire's range of products brings together clinically proven actives with botanical and marine ingredients through its proprietary Éclat Botanique complex. Designed to simplify everyday routines, the formulations deliver gentle efficacy while embracing a contemporary approach to skincare. Developed for sensitive skin, the range reflects a considered balance of innovation, simplicity and ingredient transparency.

For more information, visit www.plenaire.in or follow @plenaire_india on Instagram



SKIN DEEP

Luxury skincare brand FutureMe introduces the Arayani Regenerating Serum, a lightweight formula powered by the brand's proprietary FutureBlend botanical complex and BeautyFrequency sound therapy technology. The serum is designed to support hydration, cellular renewal, and antioxidant protection. Easy to layer with other products and suitable for all skin types, the Arayani Regenerating Serum fits seamlessly into any skincare regimen.

For more information, visit www.futuremeworld.com

Vogue DIARY

We bring you the best in luxury and fashion



HAPPILY EVER AFTER

For couples seeking a wedding destination beyond the usual, Cinnamon Life Resort at City of Dreams Sri Lanka offers a compelling new address. Just a short flight from India, the integrated resort brings together luxury accommodation, exceptional dining, and expansive event venues under one roof. From the pillarless Lumina Ballroom to ocean-facing outdoor spaces, the property has a venue for every kind of celebration. Designed for events of all scales, it brings together every element of a destination wedding under one roof.

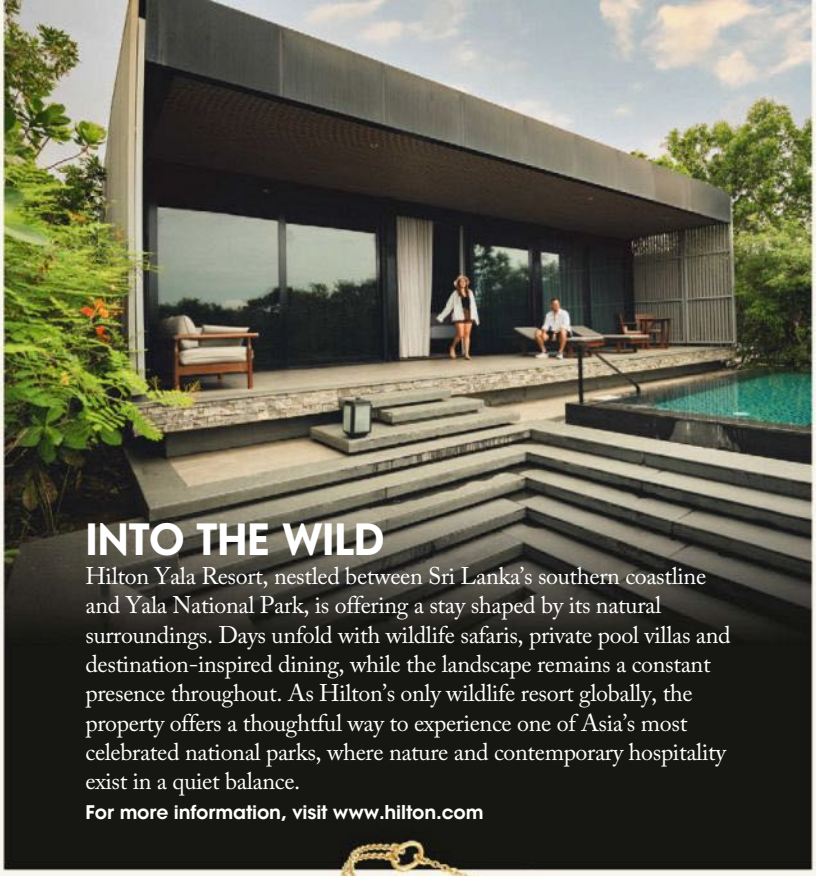
For more information, visit www.cinnamonlife.com



A TIMELESS CLASSIC

Coach introduces its latest watch, the Sammy. Designed with a modern minimalist aesthetic, the timepiece adds a hint of refinement to your everyday wardrobe. The rose gold tone bracelet watch features a light chalk dial detailed with polished dome markers. With a fold over clasp and water-resistance to 99 feet, the Sammy becomes the ideal watch for everyday use.

Available at all leading watch stores



INTO THE WILD

Hilton Yala Resort, nestled between Sri Lanka's southern coastline and Yala National Park, is offering a stay shaped by its natural surroundings. Days unfold with wildlife safaris, private pool villas and destination-inspired dining, while the landscape remains a constant presence throughout. As Hilton's only wildlife resort globally, the property offers a thoughtful way to experience one of Asia's most celebrated national parks, where nature and contemporary hospitality exist in a quiet balance.

For more information, visit www.hilton.com

TIME WELL SPENT



Michael Kors refreshes its Lexington collection for Fall '26 with high-shine ceramic finishes in mink, brown and soft pink. Larger silhouettes, glossy textures and rose gold accents bring renewed character to the iconic chronograph, while tonal detailing lends each design a refined, contemporary appeal. The result is a collection that seamlessly transitions for any occasion from AM to PM.

For more information, visit www.watchstationindia.com

A PERFECT PAIR



Forevermark celebrates modern friendship with the Love, from Bestie bracelet collection by De Beers Group. Crafted with natural diamonds and designed to be worn as pairs, the collection features four distinctive styles that reflect the wearer's individuality while symbolising the enduring bond between two best friends. From interlocking motifs to playful split designs, each bracelet tells a story of shared memories, becoming a timeless keepsake.

For more information, visit www.adiamondisforever.in

GOOD HAIR DAY

Intelligent engineering meets effortless styling with Dyson's range of haircare products for the modern bride. The Dyson Airwrap i.d. multi-styler creates curls, waves, and smooth hairstyles with no heat damage, while the Dyson Supersonic Nural hair dryer is designed for fast drying and a polished finish. With beauty technology tailored around the science of hair, Dyson brings precision and ease to every bride's special day.

For more information, visit www.dyson.in



EVERYDAY LUXURY

Forest Essentials is expanding its everyday essentials with its new Hand Care Duo, featuring an Ayurvedic Hand Wash and Hand Cream in two signature fragrances: Basil & Tangerine and Lavender & Neem. Drawing from Ayurveda, the collection gently cleanses and nourishes your hands, turning your daily skincare into a mindful ritual.

For more information, visit www.forestessentialsindia.com or Forest Essentials stores



TWILIGHT HOUR

Qbik's Offstage cocktail couture collection draws inspiration from the changing skies, translating hues of dawn, dusk and midnight into occasion wear. Defined by hand-embroidered crystals, rivets and glass beads, the collection features sculpted gowns, tailored tuxedos and contemporary Indo-Western silhouettes. The selection celebrates refined craftsmanship and modern glamour to craft ensembles for memorable evenings.

For more information, visit www.qbik.in or their stores





ELEVATE YOUR ENSEMBLE

UBAA reimagines fine jewellery for a new generation, where everyday dressing is elevated through thoughtful design and versatility. Crafted in hallmarked gold and silver with natural polki diamonds and gemstones, each piece is designed to be layered, mixed and made entirely your own. With its flagship at UNCUT House in Ahmedabad, the brand brings a fresh perspective to modern heirlooms that can transition seamlessly from work to evening galas and every occasion in between.

For more information,
visit www.uncutjewelry.com
or follow @uncut_byaditiamin on Instagram

A LASTING LEGACY

Porte Bonheur Genéve brings together Swiss precision and symbolism through watches designed to be cherished for years to come. Featuring IGI certified natural diamonds, sculptural geometric forms and the house's signature horseshoe emblem, each timepiece reflects a thoughtful approach to craftsmanship and design. Rooted in the idea that every moment carries meaning, the collection transforms everyday watchmaking into something deeply personal.

For more information,
visit www.portebonheurworld.com



MONSOON ADVENTURES

Fairmont Jaipur welcomes the rainy season with The Grand Monsoon Escape, an experience designed for travellers to slow down and enjoy the rains against the hotel's palatial backdrop. The package includes leisurely breakfasts and curated dining experiences at Zoya, their restaurant. As part of the offer, guests can also avail restorative spa sessions, discounts, room upgrades and late check-outs (subject to availability)—and explore a quieter, undiscovered side of Rajasthan along the way.

For more information,
email reservations.jaipur@fairmont.com



Vogue DIARY



DIPPED IN BLACK

Range Rover SV Black celebrates the enduring appeal of a monochromatic palette through a design language shaped by precision and uncompromising craftsmanship. Finished in an all-black aesthetic with refined detailing, the latest edition explores how a single colour can create depth and confidence simultaneously. Blending sculptural surfaces with a commanding presence, it offers a contemporary interpretation of luxury that feels synonymous with timeless appeal, modern and sophisticated luxury.

For more information, visit www.rangerover.com



HIDDEN GEMS

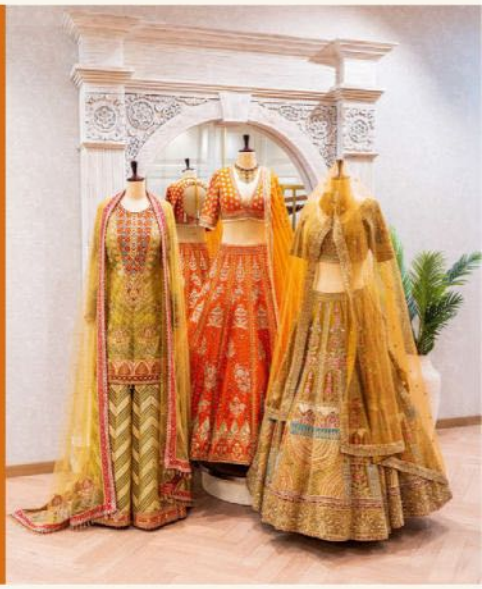
Conceived by Rhea Poddar Loyalka, Deshya approaches fine jewellery through the lens of colour, rarity, and craftsmanship. The brand sources exceptional gemstones from around the world, pairing them in unexpected and unusual combinations. Each Deshya creation reflects a couture sensibility, balancing artistry with meticulous craftsmanship to offer a fresh take on gemstone jewellery.

For more information, visit https://deshyaofficial.com

WEDDING BELLS

Aza Fashions brings together a curated edit of designer occasionwear in its latest edit, Wedding Stories by Aza. Whether it's an intimate celebration or a grand gathering, the collection offers fashionable silhouettes for every event on the calendar.

For more information, visit www.azafashions.com or visit their stores





AN ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

Harkaran Boparai Studio approaches interiors through the language of classical architecture, where proportion, craftsmanship and materiality shape every space. In this bedroom, coffered ceilings, fluted detailing and panelled walls create a sense of rhythm, while marble, timber and natural light soften the architectural framework. Rather than drawing attention through excess, the design relies on composition and restraint, revealing how traditional forms can be reinterpreted for contemporary living without losing their sense of place.

For more information, visit https://hbs.studio/



MODERN HEIRLOOMS

Indian Heirloom Company reimagines gifting through handcrafted creations in precious metals. The collection, which is designed for contemporary homes, is brought to life with intricate hand-painted artistry and rooted in Indian heritage. Each piece is conceived as a keepsake that celebrates life's milestones and becomes an heirloom for generations to come. From intimate gestures to thoughtfully curated wedding gifting programmes, the range reflects a considered approach to craftsmanship, celebrating meaningful moments that can be treasured in the future.

For more information, call +91 88824 04903, +91 98217 20386 or email info@indianheirloomcompany.com

DESIGN MEETS INNOVATION



Titan elevates everyday watchmaking with the Aion Conceal Automatic, where mechanical precision meets understated design. The timepiece features a 24-hour display for everyday ease, along with a 40-hour power reserve. A scratch-resistant sapphire crystal, stainless steel construction, and an option between a bracelet or a leather strap complete a design that balances technical finesse with style.

For more information, visit www.titan.co.in or Titan World stores

Shoplist

FASHION
Abhinav Mishra
(www.abhinavmishraofficial.com)
Anita Dongre (www.anitadongre.com)
Araks (www.araks.com)
Balenciaga (www.balenciaga.com)
Bottega Veneta
(www.bottegaveneta.com)
Brunello Cucinelli
(www.brunellocucinelli.com)
Burberry (www.burberry.com)
Calvin Klein Collection
(www.calvinklein.us)
Celine (www.celine.com)
Chanel (www.chanel.com)
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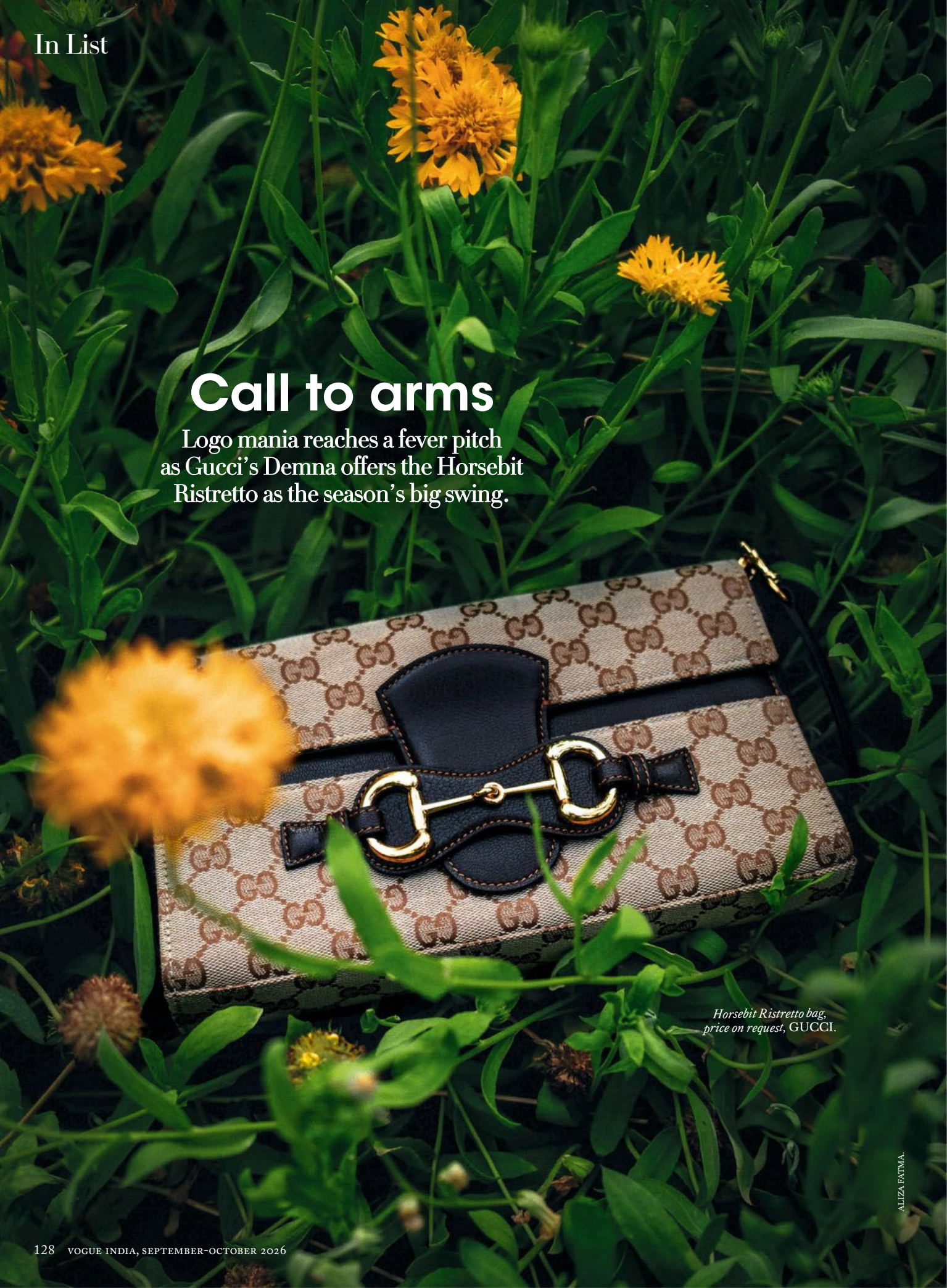
AGATA SERGE.



Top, pants, belt, GUCCI.

Call to arms

Logo mania reaches a fever pitch as Gucci's Demna offers the Horsebit Ristretto as the season's big swing.



Horsebit Ristretto bag, price on request, GUCCI.

ALIZA FATMA.



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PHOTO: SIGNE VILSTRUP/*VOGUE* INDIA

**BEFORE IT'S IN FASHION,
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Vogue Wedding Book

'SLOW AND STEADY', PAGE 98



TARUN KALYANI.

COVER LOOK
Suzanne feathered drapery sari, FALGUNI SHANE PEACOCK. *Stackable tennis bracelets, casual wear earrings and blue stone statement ring; all* POPLEY ETERNAL.

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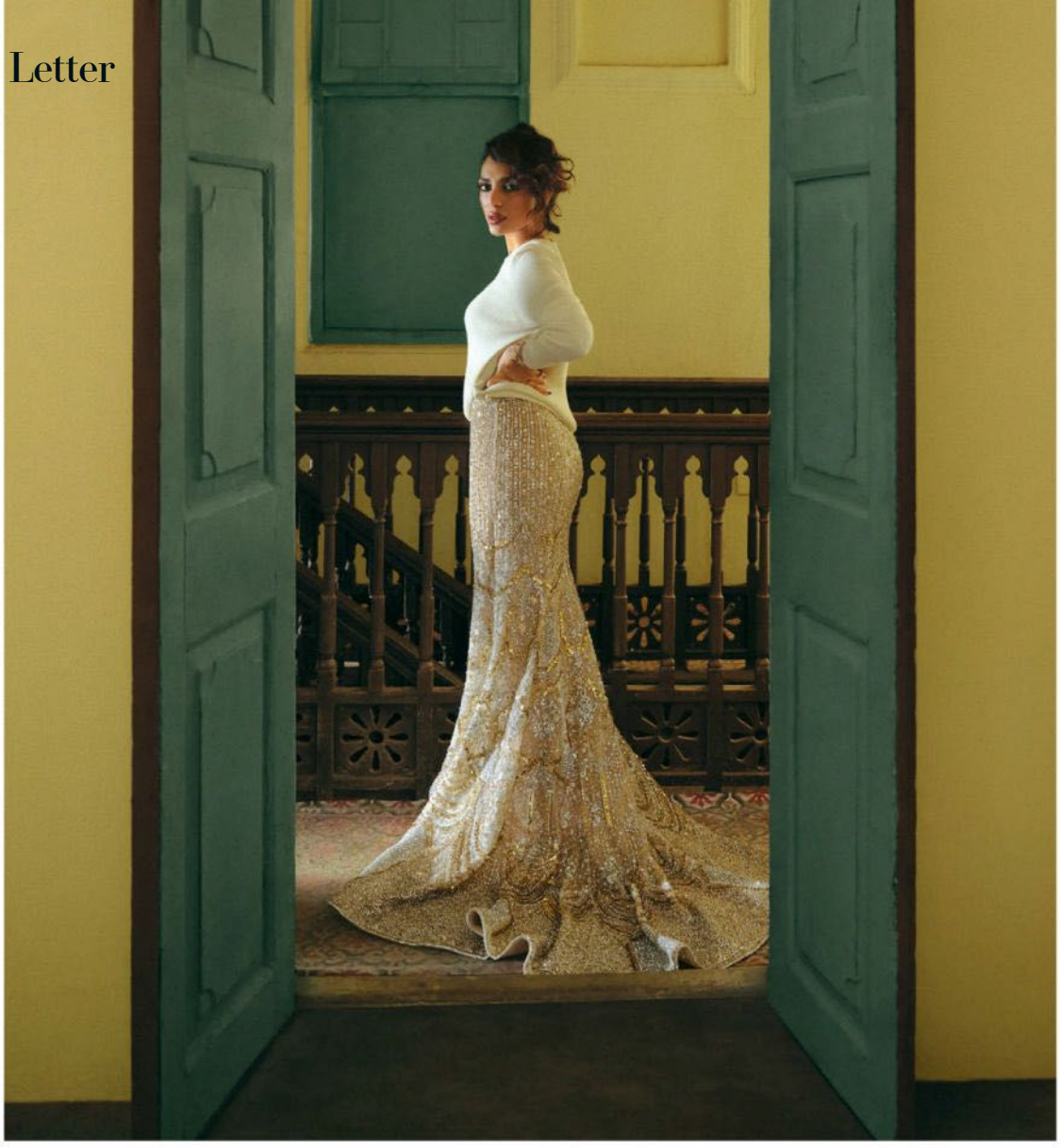
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GO WITH THE FLOW
Sobhita Dhulipala is the first to model the new Falguni Shane Peacock couture collection.

BRAVING THE ODDS

In the 1950s, when Goa was still ruled by the Portuguese, a young teacher from Kerala arrived in the village of Aldona to teach math and science in the local school. There, he fell in love with a landlord's daughter, a fellow educator. As you may have guessed, her family wasn't exactly thrilled. The prospect of a poor son-in-law with a thick Malayali accent and the wrong caste background did not inspire fireworks and feasting. Despite the opposition (including her older brother's threat of violence), the couple decided to marry by going to India. They crossed the border into Castle Rock, a village in Karnataka, where they tied the knot in the presence of a priest and a few colleagues from the school.

This is my family's lore, the story of how my maternal grandfather wooed my grandmother. It's hard to believe: the people I grew up with were tough as nails, pious and law-abiding. I could not imagine the imposing six-foot-tall man with dark skin and light brown eyes secretly leaving flowers on his beloved's desk. Even less that our strict matriarch—who could melt steel with one look—tucked those flowers into her hair.

And lore it would have remained if not for one afternoon, when my grandmother handed me a black-and-white photograph. There, captured as proof, were a couple, a priest and seven others I did not recognise standing together, a grand total of 10 people bearing witness to this momentous occasion.

TARUN KALYANI.



AASTHA MANCHANDA.



COLA-CHROME
Right: Explore the season's most delicious high jewellery in 'A moveable feast', page 106 (*Tutti Frutti bracelet,* RAJ MAHTANI COUTURE JEWELS).

I digested the photo while my grandmother silently watched, her expression indecipherable, offering no further details. Two decades have passed since that afternoon, but what spurred her to unearth the photo and share it with me remains a mystery. She wasn't exactly the cute and cuddly type. I got on her nerves more than any of her other grandchildren. But thanks to that rare moment of outward vulnerability, I was first introduced to the idea of a chosen family.

A young couple's brave decision to defy convention and social safety is certainly inspiring. So much so that each of their four children did the same, much to my grandparents' frustration. This fact always makes me laugh, which, no doubt, would have annoyed my grandmother, had she been alive today. But my entire family owes her a massive debt. She was the first in my bloodline to fight for love—and that kind of courage is contagious.

Many of the stories in this edition of the *Vogue Wedding Book* follow similar themes. Like Christianez Ratna Kiruba who married Mohammad Aslam Ali with only her friends in attendance because her family tried to break them up. Those friends refused reimbursement for flights, lent her jewellery, even taught her how to plan a wedding. "Because of them, I never felt my family was not there," she says.

Or Shallot Rego who was "probably the first bride who went to therapy with [her] parents-in-law before even getting married", after differences of opinion over finances and spending habits threatened to derail proceedings. The unconventional move was successful. They were able to find a happy middle ground and a happily ever after.

Weddings are dramatic enough without the extra masala of warring families and opposing traditions. We plan and prepare for the best possible outcome with the help of the experts and the advice of couples featured in this book. And hopefully, it will be mostly smooth sailing.

But if you ever find yourself facing a difficult choice, just like the original baddie, Mrs Afra Lopez, I hope you choose love.



What part of a wedding do you look forward to the most?

Ankita Shah
Writer, 'To have and to hold', page 61

"The part where we get to the food. I fondly remember a sadhya lunch after a morning wedding in Mysore. Since marrying into a family from Jammu, I've attended weddings where I had a closer relationship with the tabak maas than the bride or the groom. Recently, a friend who had a court marriage held his dinner party at Seefah Mumbai, whose grilled pork I love."

Shah writes poetry and essays dissecting her life.

Ekta Rajani
Stylist, 'Slow and steady', page 98

"I love hearing the couple and their closest ones share their feelings, which reveals their intention and future path. I am moved when two people view this commitment as sacred, which opens up possibilities that expand their own perspective. And I do love the dancing and the crying. Give me the full spectrum."

Rajani is a Mumbai-based creative with expertise in styling, creative direction, curation, collaborations and design consultancy. She champions handmade, artisanal and conscious design.

Eshwar Log
Makeup artist, 'The inner circle', page 114

"One of the most enchanting moments of the wedding is when the sari is draped, the jewellery is all in place and the bride finally sees herself completely ready for her big day. After months of planning, there's this beautiful shift in her energy from nervous excitement to a magical, regal confidence. I love witnessing that transformation up close."

Log is a Mumbai-based makeup artist with over 13 years of experience, working with celebrities, editorial, fashion and luxury weddings.



VANSH VIRMANI.

Tarun Kalyani
Photographer, 'Slow and steady', page 98

"For me, weddings have always been about family coming together. I come from a Marwadi family with roots in Bikaner. With almost 20 cousins, weddings are the rare occasions when everyone comes together; there is always a lot of laughter, food, sweets, colour and chaos."

Kalyani is a Delhi-based photographer whose work explores culture and human connection.



PHOTO: BIKRAMJIT BOSE/*VOGUE* INDIA





Olorra necklace and earrings, from Le Chœur des Pierres high jewellery collection; both CARTIER. *Striped knit polo shirt,* TORY BURCH.

Precious love

Nothing says 'always and forever' like gemstones in nature's most vivacious colours, embedded in timeless silhouettes. Photographed by KIM SINAE. Styled by YANG YI.



Rosalba necklace and ring, from Le Chœur des Pierres high jewellery collection; both CARTIER. *Silk and lace camisole,* CHLOÉ.



Panthère Kentia necklace, bracelet, ring and earrings, from Le Chœur des Pierres high jewellery collection; all CARTIER. *Dress with bow-detail straps,* GIVENCHY BY SARAH BURTON.



Haryma necklace, bracelet, ring and earrings, from Le Chœur des Pierres high jewellery collection; *all* CARTIER. *Long-sleeved dress,* JACQUEMUS.



Pyra earrings and ring, from Le Chœur des Pierres high jewellery collection; both CARTIER. *Sheer draped top, skirt with piercing-style embellishments; both* SCHIAPARELLI.



Tillan necklace and earrings, from Le Chœur des Pierres high jewellery collection; both CARTIER. *Silk cape dress,* DRIES VAN NOTEN.

MODEL: QI HAOJIE HAOJIE QI; CHOOSE CHARACTER: GABRIELLE SEO; MAKEUP: LILI CHOI; HAIRSTYLE: JOSEPHINE BRIGNON; MANICURE: ANNABELLE CASSAN; PRODUCED BY: GUO YUENV SUMMER GUO; EXECUTIVE PRODUCER: BOUNDLESS PARIS; PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT: KIM MINKYUM; LIGHTING ASSISTANT: THOMAS DRAGO; FASHION COORDINATOR: SHAODONG LIANG; STYLING ASSISTANT: MA YUNHAN MA.



Tetraya ring, Keona ring, Tesselia ring, from Le Chœur des Pierres high jewellery collection; all CARTIER. *Printed silk shirt,* CELINE.



SILK ROUTE
You'd reach for a Banarasi or a Kanchipuram for occasion-wear, but it can also be adapted for a casual evening out with a contemporary style of draping or an interesting blouse.

ADIL HASAN/EKAYA x ASHDEEN.

The whole six yards

A wedding often marks the beginning of a sari collection for a bride—some inherited, others discovered along the way. RUSHMIKA BANERJEE finds out the key to building a trove that lasts a lifetime.

FOR MY WEDDING gift, my mother has undertaken a rather ambitious project, one she has been working on for the last five years. Inspired by the hand-woven saris she received around her own wedding 40 years ago—including a Baluchari and a kantha—she is building me a trousseau with at least one sari from every Indian state: a Banarasi from Uttar Pradesh, a Kanchipuram from Tamil Nadu, a patola from Gujarat, a jamdani from West Bengal.

My mother believes that craft never feels dated and always retains a sense of novelty. She's not alone—for generations, Indian families have lovingly, painstakingly assembled trousseaux that reflected geography, tradition and occasion. A well-preserved sari collection can be a valuable heirloom. And yet, today, the idea of what completes a sari wardrobe is evolving.

Alongside heirloom weaves and regional crafts, contemporary designers are imagining saris for modern lifestyles—for work, leisure and everyday wear, not just occasions—shifting the conversation from what every woman should own to what every woman will actually want to wear. "They want to wear what genuinely feels like them, while still honouring where they come from," says Palak B Shah of Ekaya Banaras.

So where does one begin? "Anyone who's starting to collect saris must move towards them through instinct," says Ekta Rajani. The Mumbai-based stylist is drawn to thoughtful innovation and the way a fabric feels in her hands. She credits designer Anavila Misra for making "handloom linen mainstream" and Raw Mango's Sanjay Garg whose "way of communicating and presenting has such an edge to it that automatically this product becomes as much of the present and the future as it was of the past".

Sari stylist and drape artist Ashwini Narayan's advice is to resist buying before you've experimented. She compares building a sari wardrobe to approaching a lavish Sunday brunch buffet: try a little bit of everything before deciding what deserves a second helping. Borrow your mother's Chanderi, your aunt's linen or a friend's Banarasi. "You instantly know whether a particular kind of aesthetic is for you once you actually wear it and spend some time in it."

Designer Anavila Misra believes your first investment should be led by material, and not just occasions. "Linen, khadi silk, fine khadi cotton, muga silk and occasion silks are crafted through different weaving techniques because all of them offer a different experience. Once you begin wearing them, you naturally discover the materials that speak to you, and that is how a sari wardrobe finds its own character," she says.

A decade of documenting women through the digital anthology *The Sari Series* has given Malika Verma a front-row seat to how younger women have adopted the sari. "Previously the lens was largely textile-based. Today, there is far more confidence in experimentation, and a unique self-expression that has become much more common to see," she says. For Verma, the most meaningful collections are those that reflect a wearer's personality. "Buy something you love. Most often, saris carry personal memories or stories. Sometimes that is a good place to start," she says.

A few months ago, I handed my mother a copy of historian Malvika Singh's *Saris of Memory*—an excellent repository of India's regional weaves—to help with her gargantuan task. We discovered old-time favourites like the Chettinad cotton worn by Indira Gandhi and less mainstream weaves like tangaliya and telia rumal, reminding us just how much there is to discover. "Beyond aesthetics, there is a renewed appreciation for handloom, handicrafts and natural materials. These are textiles that soften with time, evolve with the wearer and gather memories through years of use," says Misra.

Perhaps that is what building a sari collection means today. Not owning every famous weave or ticking off every craft, but creating a wardrobe that reflects who you are. I dream of owning a collection built around my own life and sensibilities, one I can wear to brunches, gallery openings, dates, cocktails—even to staycations. Anavila's effortless linen saris, Studio Medium's hands-free shibori drapes, Raw Mango's vibrant Chanderis and 431-88's liquid-metal sari with one leg peeking through. But will these saris have the same longevity as the heirlooms my mother has cherished for decades? "A sari is fluid, forgiving and inherently sensual without needing to reveal much. It works with the wearer and I think that's what makes it timeless," says designer Shweta Kapur of 431-88.





ALL SEASON
From a light Chanderi or jamdani to a gossamer tissue and a plush, warm pashmina, there's a sari for every event, mood and weather out there.

TITO/RAW MANGO (TOP); ANAVILA.

> "Once you begin wearing them, you naturally discover the materials that speak to you, and that is how a sari wardrobe finds its own character"

BANARASI

The Banarasi tradition includes a range of weaving techniques with metallic threads that lend a subtle glow to the textile. Influenced by centuries of movement along the ancient Silk Route, it features Persian, Indian and, at times, Tibetan design influences, making it particularly rich for connoisseurs. Often reserved for special occasions, contemporary brands are finding fresh ways to style this icon. "A classic Banarasi, perhaps a kadhwa or cutwork, is timeless and can be styled in so many different ways, like the Ekaya drape, where the pallu wraps around the shoulders and is secured with a belt, similar to a kimono. Then there's the twisted or knotted shoulder drape, which is such a simple styling trick but changes the entire silhouette. That's what I love about the sari: it never feels like you're wearing it the same way twice," says Shah.

TISSUE

A tissue sari is translucent and has a signature lustre, which comes from weaving fine silk with zari. The sheerness gives it a contemporary look, while metallic yarn connects it to India's rich textile heritage. The gossamer fabric is also part of what makes it so precious, calling for a little more gentleness when draping and storing. Tissue saris can range from unembellished ones that let the weave and soft sheen take centre stage, to more ornate versions with embroidered borders and woven motifs. "If I were building a collection today, my first pick would be a beautiful textile sari, preferably in tissue," says Mehta. "I'd choose it in a classic metallic tone like gold, rose gold or old rose. It's incredibly versatile and can be worn for everything from a daytime celebration to an evening reception."

MANGALAGIRI

The Mangalagiri sari is woven on a traditional pit loom. It comes from the temple town in Andhra Pradesh of the same name, which translates to "auspicious hill". Weavers historically created them as offerings, which devotees would take home as mementos of their pilgrimage. With its association to new beginnings, the sari's understated design—a plain body and narrow zari border—makes it a meaningful choice. "For me, the beauty of the Mangalagiri lies in its proportions, crisp weave and clean borders rather than elaborate motifs. You need pieces in your wardrobe that you can reach for often, not just for occasions. Mangalagiri is one such for me," says Dutta.

KANCHIPURAM

A Kanchipuram sari is high on everyone's wishlist for a reason. It combines centuries of weaving heritage, exceptional craftsmanship, a distinct visual language and the kind of durability that makes it an heirloom. In a Kanchipuram's construction, separately woven sections are joined by hand, creating bold contrasts and a structure that can last for generations. While its dense weave often relegates it to ceremonial dressing, adding contemporary touches—like introducing new material blends such as linen and silk tissue—has given it a new identity. When investing in one, look for the purity of both the base and zari as, contrary to popular belief, weight alone is not a marker of authenticity. "If it feels too traditional for you, find your own way of wearing it. Play with the blouse and styling until it feels like you," says Shah.

PATAN PATOLA

Using a complex double-ikat technique, Patan patola saris have identical patterns and colour intensity on both sides. The process demands immense precision as the motifs emerge only when the dyed threads align during weaving. What gives Patan patola its heirloom status is the rarity of its craft knowledge. A handful of families in Patan, Gujarat, closely guard, practice and pass down this valuable tradition. "I usually look for the sharpness and precision of motifs, along with colour harmony, though minor variations are natural in a handwoven piece," says Lopamudra Dutta, founder of multi-designer lifestyle and fashion boutique AltaRasa. "Jewel tones usually create a rich contrast, highlighting both the intricate ikat motifs and the silk's natural lustre."

KHADI

According to the Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) Act of 1956, khadi is officially defined as any cloth which is handspun, handwoven and made with natural fibres like cotton, silk or wool. Rooted in the principle of simplicity, the beauty of a khadi sari lies in its restraint, allowing the texture of the artisan-woven fabric to come through. When choosing one, look for a similar restraint and subtlety in the motif language, one that doesn't overshadow the weave. "I would make sure to include a few khadi saris from Taanbaan. [Textile scholar and sari historian] Rta Kapur Chisti's integrity with khadi weaving is unparalleled. These saris get softer as they age in a way that must be experienced by wearing," says Verma.





HUMAN TOUCH
Hand-woven or handspun saris—such as linen or khadi—are versatile essentials in a beginner's wardrobe for their wearability and longevity.

ANAVA

JAMDANI

These delicate saris, which can take up to a year to create, were recognised in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2013. Crafted in fine muslin, they are so light that the motifs appear to float on the surface, inspiring evocative names such as shabnam (evening dew) and baft hawa (woven air). Traditionally, jamdani motifs have had a distinctly geometric character, though contemporary labels like Suparna Som have explored softer floral forms that mimic the curves of nature. "Find one woven by a master craftsperson, the finesse would be extraordinary," advises Rajani.

CHIKANKARI

Defined by delicate white-on-white needlepoint embroidery, chikankari work uses over 30 kinds of stitches including bakhiya (shadow work), tepchi (running stitch), jali (a net-like effect) and zanzeera (chain stitch). Unlike the weaves mentioned in this list, chikankari embroidery looks beautiful when it retains its original characteristics. "I'd pay attention to the neatness of the work, the bariki—the fineness—of the embroidery and an assortment of stitches," says Rajani. "Since chikankari is done on a translucent fabric, a skilled karigar would ensure that the reverse also has a clean finish."

CHANDERI

Historically woven in fine cotton, the Chanderi later evolved into the signature silk-cotton blend we know today, giving it that subtle sheen. Its motifs have traditionally been inspired by architecture, celestial elements and nature. If possible, source directly from weavers in Chanderi, Madhya Pradesh, or explore brands like WeaverStory that work with craft clusters across the country. Raw Mango has expanded its vocabulary to include art deco elements, while clothing label Shorshe offers a fresh interpretation with gota detailing. "For first-time sari wearers, a light cotton Chanderi is a good idea—it is simpler to handle, drape and care for," observes Narayan.

PASHMINA

A winter wardrobe essential, this sari is handwoven in Kashmir from fine pashmina wool. It may be woven on a wooden loom or in the twill tapestry kani technique or adorned with sozni hand embroidery. Its warmth makes it particularly suited to colder months, while its softness allows it to be layered without feeling heavy. Contemporary interpretations, like Kashmir Loom's dual-shade metallic sari, feature a subtle sheen on one side and soft pashmina on the reverse. "It's versatile because it's relatively unassuming at first," says Verma. "Upon second glance it affirms its place day or night, anywhere in the world. I've worn it with a turtleneck, blazer or cropped knitted blouse. It's the most worn of all my saris."

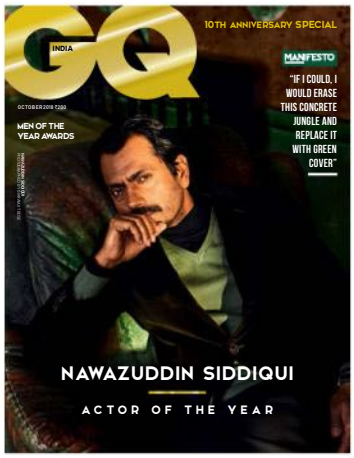
WELL WORN
A modern sari collection must include the heritage weaves but also reflect who you are.



MANASI SAWANT.

GQ

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PHOTOS: BIKRAMJIT BOSE (OCTOBER 2018); TARUN KHIWAL (SEPTEMBER 2018); R BURMAN (FEBRUARY 2019); PRASAD NAIK (AUGUST 2019); ERRIKOS ANDREOU (OCTOBER 2019); TARUN VISHWA (MARCH 2019); ALL COURTESY OF *GQ* INDIA

Tinker tailor

The modern Indian groom is moving beyond the timeworn canvas of the sherwani, using his own stories to challenge what it means to be traditional. Because why must brides have all the fun? By ARMAN KHAN.



For his wedding in June 2026 to Tim Breuner, Vikas Sethi, a data and analytics manager in San Francisco, wanted to use the red silk sari his mother wore at her wedding. He just didn't know what form that could take. So he reached out to a friend—the designer Gaurav Khanijo—who took over the reins and ran wild. "The sari is 50 years old, and I saw it every few years in the almirah. I didn't realise how much wear and tear it had already gone through," Sethi says. "So Gaurav and team spent a lot of time layering it. He decided to make my jacket entirely from the sari. It was a total transformation."

The cuffs of the jacket were from the border of the sari and so was the collar—all of it emerged from the zari of the sari. Under it, he wore an anarkali in the same shade, also incorporating some of the sari's elements. Khanijo's team had to do a lot of lining and darning inside the jacket for the sari to hold and not look too frumpy. "I wanted my mother to see the final look on the day of my wedding, and when she did, she was so pleasantly surprised. We even put up a picture of her wearing the sari from her wedding so that everyone could clearly make sense of my look," he says.

For a long time, the Indian fashion designer's muse has been the bride. The groom's wardrobe?

A NEW ERA
Fashion designers are noticing that grooms are increasingly conscious of what they wear to their weddings, with greater attention being paid to fabric, silhouette and form.

VANSH VIRMANI.

"Grooms no longer want to be dressed like a maharaja with a big turban and heavy jewels. Their looks can now be funky"

Almost an afterthought, for there has been an easy template to follow for a while now—a nice sherwani, a smart tuxedo and an elegant kurta with a Nehru jacket are all a groom needs. Repeatable and sustainable, sure—but now, grooms are also looking for a bit of imagination.

"Grooms no longer want to be dressed like a maharaja with a big turban and heavy jewels," says designer Tarun Tahiliani. "Their looks can now be funky."

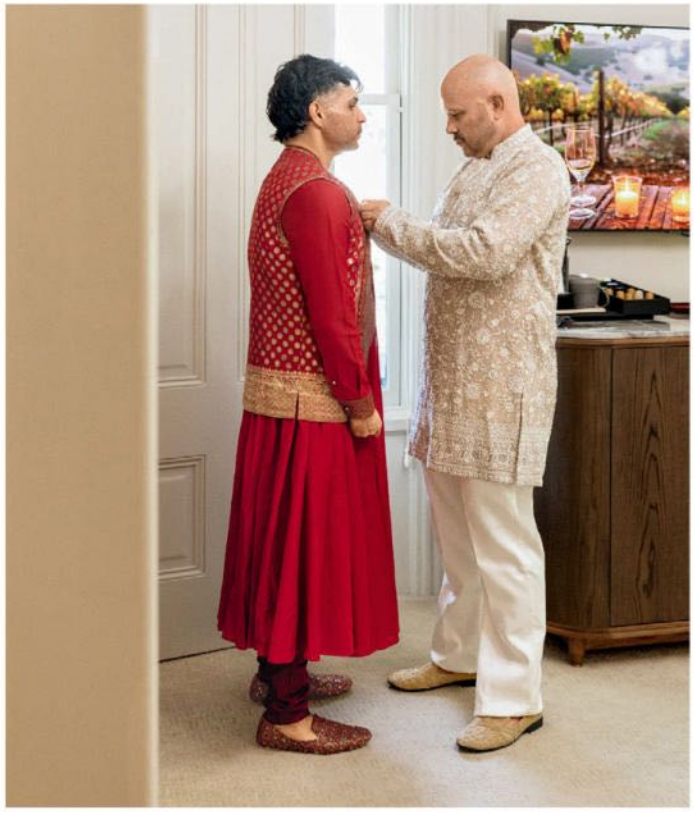
He has noticed that grooms are expressing themselves differently—curating their own wedding, wanting to dance and have fun. The clothes they wear, then, must complement this new need while still being functional enough to wear again in the future for a totally different occasion. "Grooms are clear that they really want the clothes to express themselves, whatever that might be," he adds. By default, this will result in variations that are not sherwanis.

This is often more about evolution than reinventing a working formula from scratch. For Prateik Smita Patil's wedding with Priya Banerjee at his late mother's home, Tarun Tahiliani tweaked the form of the sherwani, taking it back to its pre-Awadhi roots by deconstructing it. "It was all very heavy silk; he wore a silk drape shirt paired with a pre-stitched charmeuse dhoti and a pleated kamarbandh," Tahiliani says. Over it went a hand-embroidered sherwani jacket detailed with chikankari work and French knots, but it wasn't a sherwani in the traditional sense. "It was more like an achkan with its flowiness, and became this half-closed, half-open form that was all about comfort and modern sensuality too."

Designer Nikhil Mehra of Shantnu & Nikhil has also noticed Indian grooms becoming more conscious of what they put on their bodies. He explains that grooms are now "seeking options even within the traditional category, pushing designers to create more fluid silhouettes". Even when it's a sherwani, he says, they want it shorter with a waistcoat and shirt draped over trousers.

For Hrithik Roshan's look for his cousin's wedding, the designer duo put together a light grey stretch-jersey kurta embroidered with pastel peach floral motifs. "The form is that of a traditional waistcoat which came from old-school techniques on pashmina, so the look was a lovely mix of avant-garde meeting vintage India," says Mehra.





PAST PERFECT
Vikas Sethi had designer Gaurav Khanijo transform his mother's wedding sari into a jacket and anarkali for his own wedding.

DIANE BAGAOSIAN.

Elsewhere, this manifests as a wedding wardrobe with personality. When Abhinav Koppu married Aditi Gopalan in Bali earlier this year, his wardrobe was pared back while reflecting their Tamil-Telugu heritage. The whole wedding was inspired by a poem Koppu had written for Gopalan—comparing their love to a sapling that grows slowly, withstands harsh weather, finds nourishment and eventually blossoms with purple flowers.

Every ceremony, including the haldi, followed the poem stanza by stanza—and this was reflected in his looks too. "For the sangeet, I wore a blazer and pants with a little embroidered border from Bobo Calcutta," he says. "It connects to a point in the poem where a poisonous spore attacks a tree and Bobo's psychedelic explosions fit well with the theme." For the main wedding ceremony, he chose not to over-style himself and wore a purple stole with gold embroidery and a purple dhoti—to match the purple of the flowers in the poem, also Gopalan's favourite colour.

Even minimalist grooms are taking a considered approach. When Siddarth Morakhia married Rebecka Morakhia in February 2026 in Rajasthan, his mehendi look was designed by Delhi Vintage Co and was themed around the banajaras to reflect the ease and freedom in their relationship. "I wore a jacket that had a little bit of patina and rust because the buttons were vintage coins. It was fortuitous that we found it because they haven't made a similar piece. With the jacket as the base, the designers crafted pants in chanderi silk to go along with it."

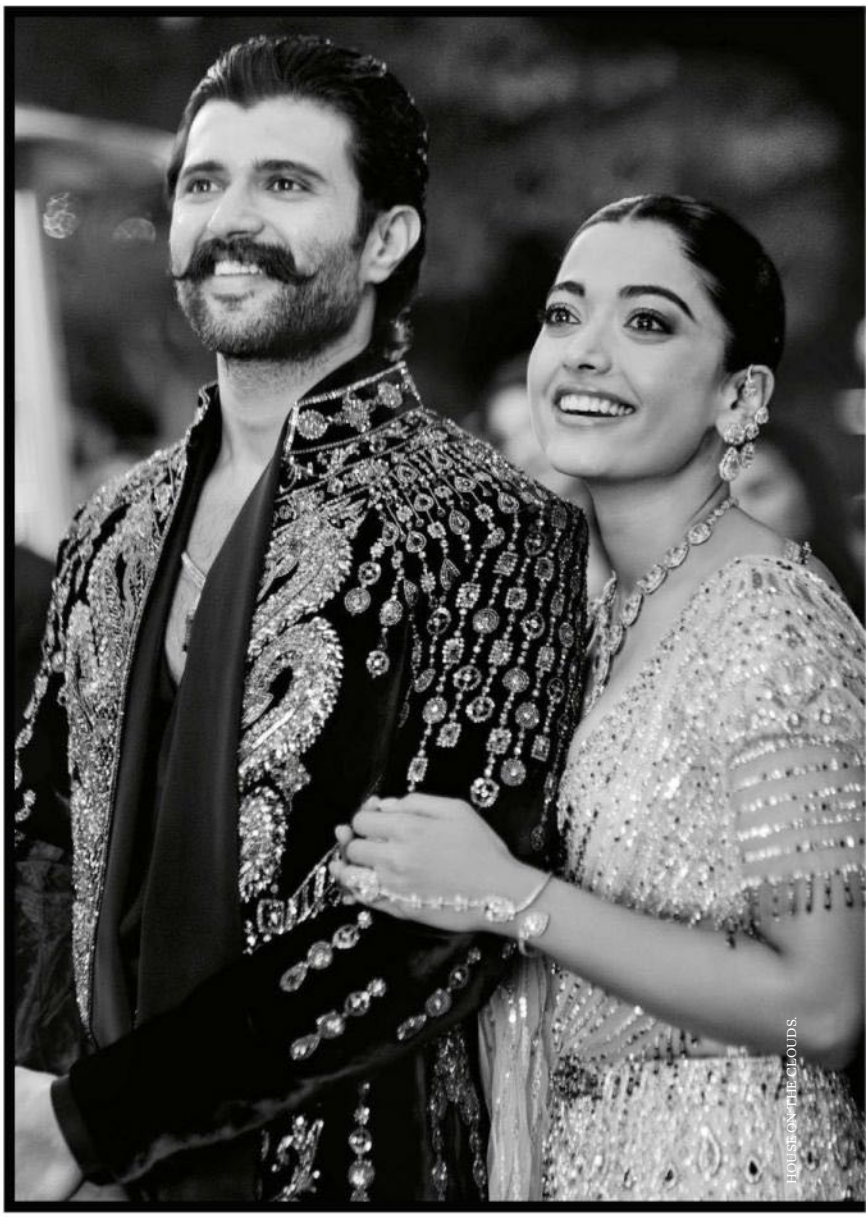
For the evening after the mehendi, the couple organised a qawwali performance for which Morakhia opted for a black angrakha under a long coat designed by the Jaipur-based Gotta Patti House. "Not doing the sherwani doesn't mean that the look won't be cultural," he says. "For the main wedding ceremony, too, I wore a choga designed by Gotta Patti House with an embroidered sun and moon. The jewellery I wore were small-scale versions of antique khanjars from Alwar—the blade and hilt were split into two necklaces and the hilt itself was in the shape of an elephant."

Stylist Anaita Shroff Adajania has seen this same attention to detail among grooms carefully selecting everything from fabrics to silhouettes. She has dressed the minimalist groom who prefers a beautifully cut tuxedo with a single piece of jewellery on the lapel. And she has brought the conservative groom into his maximalist era by dousing him in sparkling red for his wedding—where he arrived on an elephant carrying a sword. "It's no longer about ticking the boxes," she observes. "The looks must mean something."

Mehra echoes a similar sentiment. He has noticed that grooms, now, are largely prioritising fluid, flowing fabrics as opposed to tightly constructed, dated sherwanis that cannot be used for anything else except that wedding day.

What ties these grooms together is simple: they want their clothes to say something, whether that means a mother's sari rebuilt into a jacket or a poem worked into every ceremony. The traditional sherwani—originating as an avant-garde fusion of an achkan and angrakha in the royal courts of 19th century Awadh—is not going anywhere. It's too emotionally tied to the great Indian wedding to ever be written off. It's just that it's no longer the only answer.

"Not doing the sherwani doesn't mean that the look won't be cultural"



WARRIOR MODE
Below: For his sangeet, actor Vijay Deverakonda wore a Falguni Shane Peacock ensemble with dragon motifs on a velvet jacket and threw on a flowing sky-blue cape for good measure.



PHOTO: ATHUL PRASAD/*CONDÉ NAST TRAVELLER* INDIA

Bold and beautiful

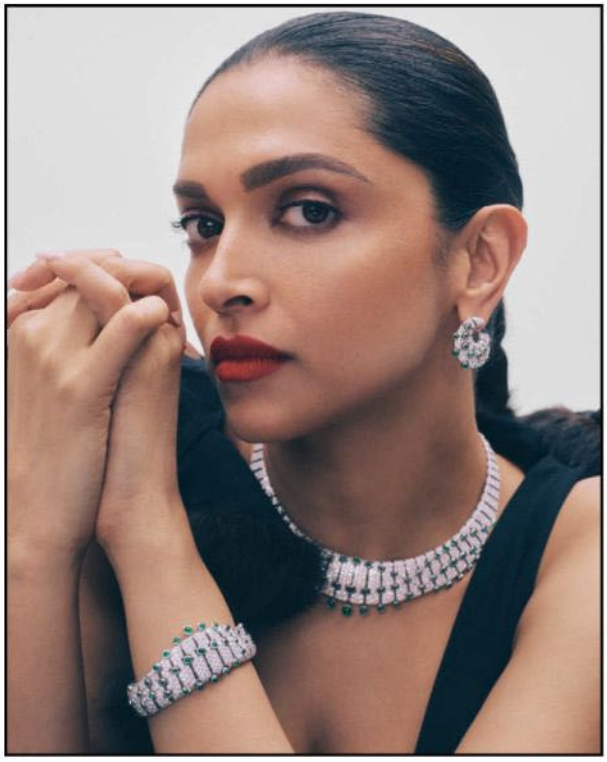
Diamonds are forever, polkis are trend-proof, heirlooms speak to ancestry. What's shaking up the modern bride's bijou box? By POORVI SINGHAL.

WHEN NIDHI SUNIL got married earlier this year, she turned to jewels to tell her story. The supermodel and lawyer tied the knot with Cambridge-based engineer and singer Noah Katz-Appel against dramatic backdrops of the Arabian sea. Her mehendi look—a plant-dyed ghaghra by Re-ceremonial—was anchored by statement earcuffs that extended into jhumars. Nail rings, a maathapatti and kamarbandh from Bhavya Ramesh lent an edge to her corset top for the reception look. A custom-made parandi and topi from Divani India complemented her Mughal-inspired zardozi lehenga for the kala sandhya.

In a whirlwind of templatised bridal looks laden with gold maalas and chokers, out from the left field comes the bride whose distinctive baubles make us rethink the rules of bridal jewellery as we know them. Sunil's looks became quite a talking point on Instagram. The one that went viral? For her vows by the Kerala backwaters, she opted for an all-vermilion Jade ensemble, which she elevated with a diamond necklace in a broad armour plate-like design, along with a matching maang tikka and bangles from Tyaani.

"The look was envisioned as a modern interpretation of the styles seen on Aishwarya Rai Bachchan in *Jodhaa Akbar*. The idea was to keep the monotone red undistracted to let the piece shine from under the veil," says stylist Akshay Tyagi, who curated Sunil's bridal moodboard. "Nidhi has donned so many different outfits and avatars professionally, that I thought it was important that we found her personality for her wedding looks."

Bridal jewellery has been that inviolable aspect of Indian weddings—by its very nature, it symbolises equity and continuity. But where it was once defined by grandeur and maximalism, today it's just as much about the bride's individual taste as it is about longevity. Think of the 'dripping-in-gold' memo realised by stylist Ami Patel for Priyanka Chopra's wedding look: long layers of polki necklaces and a gold kamarbandh, living up to her 'desi girl' moniker. Kiara Advani opted for the frosted look with a one-and-done diamond-emerald choker as a contrast to her pink Manish Malhotra bridal lehenga in 2023. Soha Ali Khan honoured her nawabi lineage when, for her wedding in 2015, she ditched the trends for a passa, emerald-green beaded rani haar and matching earrings from her mother Sharmila Tagore's personal collection. Evidently, the modern bride can take many routes. So what must make it into her jewellery stack?



ICE SPICE
Contemporary diamond chokers and sculptural bangles are timeless pieces to add to your jewellery box.

Begin, of course, with those timeless classics that will anchor your armoire. "Brides today are investing in versatile pieces that will go on tobecome treasured family heirlooms, rather than one-time statement pieces," says Jaipur-based jeweller Sunita Shekhawat. "A classic polki necklace, layered necklaces, chandbalis, timeless bangles that can be worn with both Indian and contemporary wardrobes are among the most sought-after pieces."

It's what Delhi-based designer Deepshikha Jaggi did when she tied the knot in February this year. For her pheras, Jaggi went all out with the good old polkis and emeralds. A Victorian choker layered over a matching multi-mala necklace, a striking emerald maang tikka and polki studs in place of the norm du jour danglers, tucked with multi-layered kaan chains rounded off her bridal look. Jaggi then worked closely with designer Tarun Tahiliani's atelier to customise her bridal sari so that it echoed the cascading effect of her jewellery, in the sleek pleats and the beadwork trailing down the shoulders and back of the blouse—all in hues of green.

JAMES TOLICH.





1



2



3



4

1. Emerald necklace, SUNITA SHEKHAWAT.
2. Earrings, HAZOORILAL LEGACY.
3. Necklace, CHARU JEWELS. *4. Emerald Rosetta ring,* KHANNA JEWELLERS.

SOUJIT DAS.

"The only way to truly justify this investment is to wear it—repeatedly and joyfully—rather than treating it as a showpiece destined for a locker"

Another trend jewellers are noticing: brides are raiding their ancestors' vaults. "They are restoring, redesigning and thoughtfully integrating treasured heirlooms—polki necklaces, jadau chokers, antique kadas, temple jewellery and traditional bangles—into contemporary styling while preserving their original character," observes Rohan Narang, director at Hazoorilal Legacy, who also thinks contemporary diamond chokers and sculptural bangles are high up on bridal wishlists. At her lapidary, Shekhawat has noticed active interest from many brides in restoring their ancestors' navaratna necklaces to align with their personal style.

Case in point is jewellery designer Richa Chandak who customised a classic gold choker with matching itsy-bitsy jhumkas in tandem with her bangdi—a traditional bangle set she inherited from her mother—for her reception look. Her grandmother's dainty gold necklace made it to her haldi ensemble,

while her mother's traditional kaan tanas—an adaptation of the kaan chain—were worn for her engagement, an homage to her Bengali roots. A kundan and diamond rani haar with danglers from her mother's collection were Chandak's second-most prized possessions. "While the rani haar elongated my frame, I felt something was missing. So we got a matching choker, nath and maang tikka to round off the look," says the Bengaluru-based bride who got married in December last year.

To make jewels built decades ago look relevant, celebrity stylist Divyank D'Souza prescribes restraint. "I'd pair such pieces with a minimal beauty look and modern styling that focuses on textile over embellishment, cleaner lines and effortless drapes to keep things lightweight overall," he says. "However, there is a strong case for styling these pieces traditionally too, with elaborate elements like multiple drapes, heavy set lehengas and all-over embroideries for formal occasions."

For evergreen pieces like the navaratna necklace, Tyagi recommends playing with the multi-coloured element by incorporating it into a mehendi look—whether you go the rustic heritage route or a little bright and poppy if you want it to look Gen Z-coded. He also thinks the aad—the Rajput choker-style piece with a cascading mesh of pearls or beads—is a sculptural heirloom that has tremendous staying power. "Use the shapes and geometry of it to construct your look, and layer the rest of your jewels around it for an uber-cool heritage appeal," he recommends. Or style it like Kareena Kapoor did hers for the Ambani wedding celebrations in Jamnagar, 12 years after she



1



2



3



4

1. Navratan necklace, SUNITA SHEKHAWAT.
2, 3 and 4. Necklaces, RANIWALA 1881.



HEAVY METAL
For supermodel Nidhi Sunil's bridal looks, stylist Akshay Tyagi incorporated statement earcuffs that extended into jhumars, nail rings, a maatha patti, a kamarbandh and a parandi—to draw out her personality.

ESHANT RAJU (NIDHI SUNIL).

wore it to her own reception: the only accessory elevating a gold zardozi Ritu Kumar number.

Elsewhere in the bridal jewellery-verse, centuries-old silhouettes are making a reappearance, but with a 21st-century update. One of them is the satlada—once a mainstay of Nizami wardrobes—but no longer necessarily made of similar-sized pearls. "Its modern descendant is the polki multilayer which trades density for lightness," notes Abhishek Raniwala, founder of Raniwala 1881. Think of actor Nayanthara's bridal satlada which featured seven lines of diamonds, polki and emeralds contrasted with a red sari. "Brides are defying convention by even wearing these as headpieces," says Raniwala.

Arm jewellery is also back in the spotlight—but with a major difference. "Once a single, fixed form connecting one ring or many to a bangle with delicate chains, the hathphool now comes in modular form," says Raniwala. "Think of a bangle that separates into a bracelet or ring—so the sentiment of the form travels well beyond the wedding day." Tyagi, who added one for Sunil's kala sandhya look, recommends picking one "for its frozen-in-time appeal." Shekhawat points to the bajubandh's modular makeover that lends itself to being used as a choker, brooch and more.

"The conversation [around bridal jewellery] has shifted from 'more is more' to meaningful, versatile and beautifully crafted," observes D'Souza. "The bride is asking whether she'll wear the piece again, how it photographs for the 'gram; if it complements her outfit instead of overpowering it and if it aligns with her style." In this economy, that means pieces that can be taken apart, layered differently or worn with everything from a sari to a blazer.

When in doubt, follow Jaggi's mantra: "Jewellery is a genuine investment and the only way to truly justify that investment is to wear it—repeatedly and joyfully, rather than treating it as a showpiece destined to live in a locker."



Holiday romance

Ask the couple who snuck off to Paris behind their parents' backs or the one that nearly had a Zoom shaadi in Dubai—the best honeymoon happens before the wedding. By JYOTI KUMARI.

Nobody tells you this when you get engaged—that the honeymoon is now a separate project with its own timeline, and it does not report to the wedding. Don't trust us? Ask around. The couple that married in June is going to Italy "in March, hopefully". The couple that married last year is still deciding between Japan and Greece, which is code for neither.

It isn't that people have stopped honeymooning. It's that the wedding gets first claim on everything the honeymoon needs. The leave is spent on the functions, the budget on the lehenga and the bar, and whatever energy survives three rounds of sangeet choreography is owed to a circuit of post-wedding lunches hosted by aunts whose mission is to feed you till you just can't eat anymore.

ETHAN HART.

"Somewhere between arguing over directions—which happened only once—we figured we could probably figure out marriage too"

So the trip waits. Six months, a year, squeezed in around appraisal season, taken by two people who are already thoroughly married and a little tired of planning. Which is why some couples cheat the schedule by taking the trip before the wedding instead. Not because it's cheaper or easier, but because that trip—the lazy, answerable-to-no-one kind—is what a honeymoon was always meant to be, and rarely gets to be after.

For wellness entrepreneur Varuna Shunglu and her partner Saurav Roy, COO of Landocs, the pre-wedding trip was reconnaissance with room service. Both their families are from Kolkata, but he flew in from the US and she from Kolkata to meet in Thailand: "the perfect halfway point, geographically and emotionally." At that stage they'd spent barely a month together in person. "We hadn't yet seen each other navigate airports, wrong turns, hangry moments or deciding where to eat—arguably the real compatibility tests," says Shunglu. Her Bangkok itinerary of street food, foot massages and shopping was, by her own admission, "a carefully disguised personality assessment". He, meanwhile, was quietly grading her on scooters, hikes and less-than-perfect plans. His laptop came along, naturally. They escaped to a blissfully empty Koh Samet, found a treehouse café with ridiculously good coffee and got lost on quiet roads. "Somewhere between arguing over directions—which happened only once—we figured we could probably figure out marriage too," laughs Shunglu. They flew home into a world tipping into COVID, and the grand Kashmiri-Bengali wedding their families were planning shrank overnight into an intimate lockdown ceremony. "Looking back, we're so grateful we stole that one carefree week together."

Sometimes the trip is pure rebellion. Aarti Sheth-Cooper and Farshid Cooper had been dating since they were 16 and, when they decided to marry at 23, their parents still hadn't allowed them to travel together. Not even once in seven years. So when she landed in Europe on a business trip and he happened to be there on a family holiday, they did what any reasonable couple would do. They snuck away and met in Paris for four days. "Part of it was defiance. We thought, we're getting married now, even if we get caught, what's the worst that could happen?" she says. They walked along the Seine, watched the stars, let themselves be gloriously lazy. The wedding, when it came, was a week-long affair with over 3,000 guests. "In a way, Paris almost felt like the real wedding. Just the two of us sneaking out the door, starting our life there." They've visited 43 countries since, and they still go back to Paris every year or two.

And sometimes the universe takes over the itinerary. For Pankaj Gupta, founder and partner at Flavour Pot Foods, the Dubai getaway was a surprise from his fiancée, chartered accountant Sanskriti Jain-Gupta, an escape from the pre-wedding madness. What Jain-Gupta hadn't planned for was the Israel-Iran war of June 2025 spilling into the Gulf in the middle of their trip, closing airspace and grounding flights across the region. One morning, the couple woke to blasts in the sky above them and their phones buzzing with panicked calls from parents and siblings. On the ground, life carried on, so they did too, café-hopping and taking long walks, "getting to know that last side of each other just before D-day". But after about 12 days of cancelled tickets, they started plotting in earnest. "We started thinking, what if we can't leave for the next couple of months? We could actually have a shaadi ready over here. We have friends in Dubai, we could get our parents on a Zoom call and do a nice little wedding," says Gupta. "I would have absolutely done it if the situation demanded. A part of me almost wishes the wedding had happened there." Stranded with your soon-to-be spouse: better or worse? "Definitely better. The fact that you're coming home together, sleeping together. It would have been a hundred per cent worse if Sanskriti wasn't there."

The trade will tell you this is still fringe behaviour. "Indians, especially in the arranged marriage setup, do not travel alone so much before the wedding. That's a bit of a rarity," says Gaurav Punjabi of honeymoon specialists Cozymoons, whose clients prefer to save the ambition for after. One couple commissioned a single legendary honeymoon day, complete with floating champagne breakfast and secretly framed photographs; another chased all four seasons across four continents in 30 days. Pritish Shah of luxury travel specialists Travel Duet agrees the pre-honeymoon remains rare, though couples increasingly slip away just before the wedding for other reasons, sometimes with friends and family in tow.

But that is exactly the case for it. Unlike the honeymoon, which has become a whole production, the pre-wedding trip asks for nothing. No photographer hiding at lunch, no itinerary built for Instagram. Just two people, briefly unreachable.

"Everyone who advised us to travel before the wedding and warned us about the madness that follows actually undervalued it," says Gupta. "What the trip gave us was a little assurance; that, there might be fights and things might get out of hand. But we're getting married. At the end of the day, that's the only thing that matters—and everything else follows."



DOING THE MATH
Whether you're considering an intimate mountain retreat or an extravagant multicity affair, every memorable wedding begins with clear priorities.

VANSH VIRMANI.

The wedding equation

Planning a wedding that reflects your vision begins with a budget. Here is all the expert advice you need on where to splurge and where to save for an event to remember. By NUPUR SARVAIYA.

LUXURY ISN'T ABOUT how much you spend, but about how intelligently and intentionally you spend it. When it comes to weddings, the new language of opulence isn't defined by size or scale, but by unforgettable experiences, heirloom-worthy fashion and thoughtful hospitality. A well-planned budget, then, becomes the foundation of a beautifully executed wedding, helping you decide where to invest and spend.

It starts with understanding that no two weddings are alike. "There can't be a one-size-fits-all approach to wedding budgets," says Priya Maganti, founder of RVR Eventz and Design. "Every couple has unique priorities, and the budget should reflect their vision." Maybe you

have your heart set on a wedding in Rishikesh—and you believe location, decor and hospitality are key to a memorable celebration. Perhaps what you really want is to haul just your closest friends and family to Kyoto and get married in your mother's wedding lehenga. Or perhaps your specific plan has always included 300 people and the pair of you (wearing Sabyasachi) dancing to Avicii live on a beach in the Maldives. For every moodboard exists a strategic budget. Because budgets exist to fit visions, not the other way round. Whether you're considering an intimate mountain retreat, a grand palace celebration or an extravagant multicity affair, every memorable wedding begins the same way: with clear priorities.

FOR AN INTIMATE LUXURY WEDDING: ₹75 LAKH

The vision: A ₹75 lakh wedding can comfortably host 150 to 250 guests with elevated decor, thoughtful hospitality and personalised touches. "Identify your priorities, then assign numbers. Couples can save by keeping the guest list intimate, repurposing decor across events and choosing fewer but high-impact design elements," says Maganti. "Instead of extravagance, build the celebration around thoughtful experiences." Think of handing out Kodak disposable cameras to a group of close friends to capture genuine, candid moments—as Maganti did for Vijay Deverakonda and Rashmika Mandanna's wedding earlier this year. You could also try setting up a vintage-style audio guestbook for loved ones to record messages, or commissioning a live sketch artist or setting up a nostalgic midnight-chai-and-Maggi bar that becomes the unofficial afterparty.

The venue: Hosting the wedding in your own city can significantly reduce costs by removing the need for hotel stays and extended hospitality, freeing up the budget for more memorable touches. Consider properties such as Grand Hyatt Mumbai, JW Marriott Bengaluru Prestige Golfshire Resort & Spa or an exclusive private farmhouse in the NCR.

The decor: "Decor isn't a line item; it's the visual memory people walk away with. So the percentage should rise with the budget, not stay flat. Pick one or two focal points rather than decorating every square inch," advises Gayatree Gupta, founder and creative director of Basket-Case Design. "Invest in the mandap, stage backdrop or entrance, then let lighting, foliage and drapery do the heavy lifting. When it comes to florals, build from a sensible mix of fresh and preserved blooms. Lighting is what I'd recommend couples put their money on."

The wardrobe: For the wedding wardrobe, celebrity stylist Tanya Ghavri says, "Invest in one hero couture moment and balance the remaining looks with emerging labels. Focus on fit, colour and styling." A standout look from Rahul Mishra, Gaurav Gupta or JJ Valaya can be complemented with brands like Ridhi Mehra, Kshitij Jalori or Papa Don't Preach for the other events. To accessorise, opt for simpler designs from Suuraj Popley, Zoori by Hazoorilal Legacy and Diva Jewels.

Don't feel compelled to buy everything new. Some of the best bridal looks aren't commissioned, but inherited. If an heirloom sari or lehenga has been lovingly preserved, consider making it the emotional centrepiece of your trousseau. Give it a new lease of life with a contemporary blouse and styling. Rental platforms, too, offer a sustainable option to wear sought-after couture across events, without committing to a purchase.



ALWAYS JOY
For a small-scale wedding, build the celebration around thoughtful experiences—such as handing out Kodak cameras to guests or setting up a chai-and-Maggi stall.

Budget blueprint
Venue and accommodation: 30%
Decor and design: 20%
Food and beverages: 20%
Entertainment: 8%
Photography and videography: 8%
Fashion and jewellery: 14%



CENTRE STAGE
Build the visual narrative with floral chandeliers, Insta-worthy entrances, custom signages, personalised bars and beautifully styled lounges for guests to mingle.

FOR AN ELEVATED ESCAPE: ₹1 CRORE

The vision: The jump from ₹75 lakh to ₹1 crore isn't as much about scale as it is about refinement. "Prioritise layered lighting and production, exceptional guest hospitality [when choosing your venue] and experienced photography and videography to preserve the memories," says Maganti. Think of curated experiences like music performances or mehfils, calligraphy artists creating bespoke keepsakes for guests or a dessert grazing table. Studios like Fourfold Pictures and Epic Stories are well-equipped to capture every tiny detail.

The venue: At this budget, a destination wedding within national borders becomes advisable. "Factor in guest count and room inventory," says Rohit Chhokar, director of sales and marketing, The Westin Resort & Spa, Himalayas. "Most properties, like ours, offer only complete buyout options. But couples can maximise value by choosing shoulder seasons, optimising the duration of the stay, and planning a well-curated itinerary with meaningful events rather than increasing the number of functions." Narendra Bhawan, Bikaner, with its heritage touches and unmatched hospitality, and Taj Green Cove Resort & Spa, Kovalam, with its beach and backwater views, are two great choices.

The decor: Gupta recommends using premium florals, layered lighting and a unified visual language across every function instead of treating each event as a standalone production. "This is where you graduate from 'tastefully assembled' to 'actually designed'." Build the visual narrative with floral chandeliers, Insta-worthy entrances, custom signages, personalised bars and beautifully styled lounges for guests to mingle.

The wardrobe: According to Ghavri, this is where the focus shifts to fine-tuning details rather than overhauling your approach. "Brides can invest in better textiles and finer craftsmanship." Introduce one designer piece, perhaps from someone like Abhinav Mishra or Anita Dongre, and pair it with fine jewellery from labels like Sanjay Gupta Hyderabad and Manish Malhotra High Jewellery. Ghavri cautions against forgetting the invisible expenses. "Styling fees, lingerie, footwear, shapewear, hair and makeup and honeymoon outfits can quietly inflate costs. Reserve 20–30 per cent of the wardrobe budget for these overlooked essentials."

Budget blueprint
Venue and accommodation: 30%
Decor and design: 25%
Food and beverages: 18%
Entertainment: 8%
Photography and videography: 8%
Fashion and jewellery: 11%

FOR AN EXPERIENCE-LED AFFAIR: ₹2 CRORE

The vision: At this level, weddings can become immersive experiences, not just Instagrammable events. "With this budget, you can move away from standard luxury towards bespoke storytelling. Experiential production, concierge services and curated itineraries are possible," shares Maganti. Think of treating your guests to a chef-led culinary trail across Bangkok or a half-day tiger safari in Ranthambore followed by a spa session. You can also opt for cinematic photography with companies like House On The Clouds or Raabta Studios, and thoughtful gifting, such as artisanal confectionery hampers from Shakkr or gift boxes from Indian Heirloom Company.

The venue: "Full property buyouts become more achievable depending on seasonality, number of days and lead time, allowing for complete privacy and exclusive access," says Farhan Hamidani, director of sales and marketing at W Goa. Having the whole property at your disposal, he says, can help with multiple bespoke events, organising premium entertainment, menus driven by the destination, personalised decor and those little touches, like welcome hampers, personalised check-ins and curated itineraries, that make all the difference. You can also unlock some coveted properties—like Pilibhit House, Haridwar, IHCL SeleQtions, or Hotel Irada in Pune—or enquire about partial buyouts.

The decor: With a larger budget comes the opportunity to create distinct identities for every event. "Decor can comfortably sit at 25 per cent of the [allocated] budget. Go higher if you've decided decor is the main character of this wedding. This can manifest into full scenography territory,"

HAUTE SAUCE

Step into the realm of couture—other than designer wedding wear, invest in some timeless bridal jewellery pieces like polki chandbalis or a delicate necklace.



says Gupta. "Think custom installations, floral ceilings, hanging sculptures, imported blooms, custom tablescapes and layered lighting that transform each venue."

The wardrobe: Ghavri recommends stepping into the realm of couture. "You can include pieces from couturiers like Falguni Shane Peacock and Tarun Tahiliani. Invest in fine bridal jewellery: timeless pieces like polki chandbalis or a delicate necklace that can be passed down through generations," says Ghavri. Reach out to brands like Raj Mahtani or Raniwala 1881. "You can also consider a classic tennis necklace from your family jeweller," she adds. "These can be layered with heirloom pieces."

Budget blueprint
Venue and accommodation: 30%
Decor and design: 30%
Food and beverages: 15%
Entertainment: 7%
Photography and videography: 6%
Fashion and jewellery: 12%

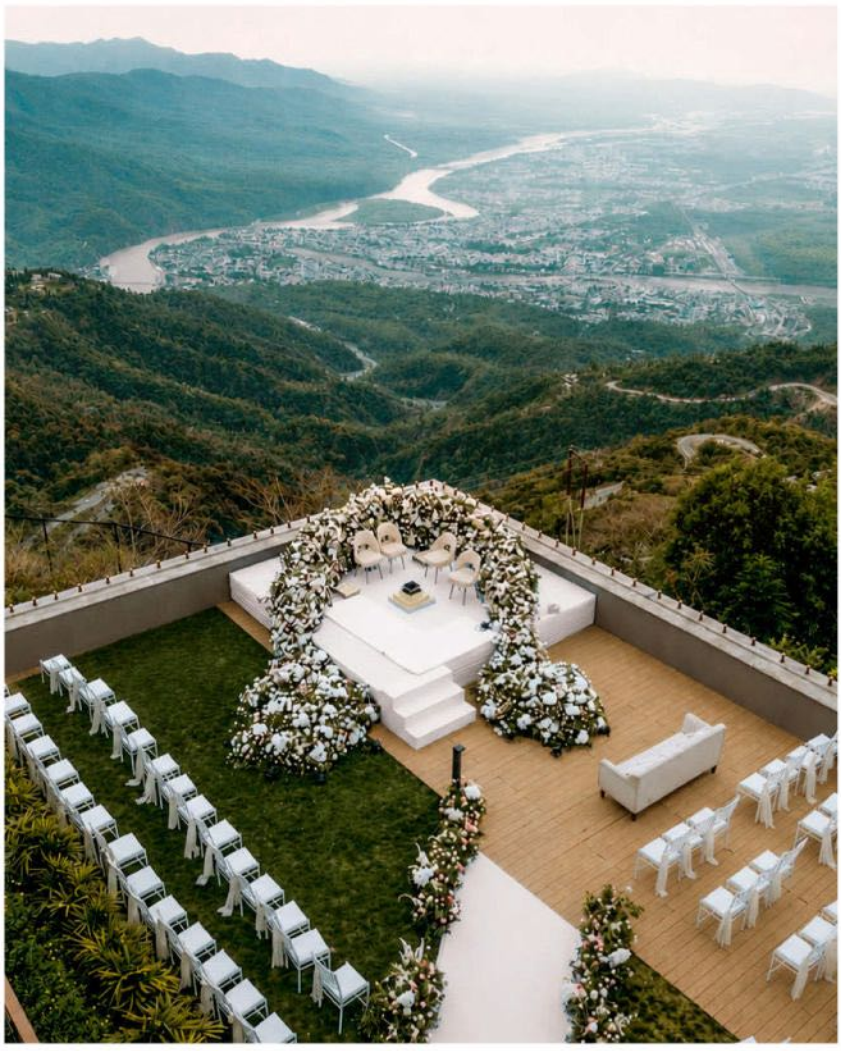
FOR THE ULTIMATE EXPRESSION: SKY'S THE LIMIT

The vision: When budgets stop defining possibilities, you have complete creative freedom. "This is where hospitality transforms into theatre, with every moment carefully choreographed to surprise, delight and immerse your guests," says Maganti. Every touchpoint, from the invitation suite to the farewell brunch, can be designed around the couple's story. Imagine end-to-end customisation with concierge services, international decor specialists and wellness programmes.

Couples can commission internationally acclaimed artists or DJs for a private concert. Create fully immersive worlds—transforming the venue into a Tuscan piazza, Marrakech souk or Japanese garden with performers and scentscaping. Set up a perfume-bottle-engraving station. Fly in celebrity chefs for exclusive dining concepts or recreate favourite restaurants' menus. And each event can be captured by the likes of Stories by Joseph Radhik or Vishal Punjabi behind The Wedding Filmer. The key thing here: imagination.

The venue: "For a super-luxury destination wedding, the venue becomes the foundation of the entire celebration. We always advise couples planning weddings to secure their venues 9 to 15 months in advance," says Rajan Malhotra, director of sales and marketing, Fairmont Udaipur Palace. You can go for heritage Tuscan estates like Il Borro, complete takeovers of palace hotels in India, a bohemian beach wedding at W Maldives or JW Marriott Maldives Kaafu Atoll Island Resort, a wabi-sabi-inspired affair in Japan or plan glamorous festivities at one (or more) of Dubai's luxury resorts like Atlantis The Royal or The One&Only Royal Mirage. Malhotra also advises paying attention to hospitality-led guest experiences, from curated welcome ceremonies and personalised check-ins and check-outs, to children's engagement activities and wellness programmes.

The decor: "Pick the vision first and let the cost follow," advises Gupta. "When



GO LONG
Every touchpoint, from the invitation suite to the farewell brunch, can be designed around the couple's story. Imagine end-to-end customisation with concierge services, international decor specialists and wellness programmes.



TAILOR-MADE
This is where couture meets imagination: designer collaborations, archival pieces and customised and heritage jewels built with rare gemstones.

"We always advise couples planning weddings to secure their venues 9 to 15 months in advance"

the goal is complete transformation, floral installations can go architectural. Think floral walls, suspended gardens, rare blooms flown in. Add to that custom fabrication, bespoke tablescapes—down to the cutlery—architectural installations, custom-built environments and immersive lighting."

The wardrobe: For Ghavri, this is where couture meets imagination. "Brides can collaborate with ateliers such as Manish Malhotra, Tarun Tahiliani and Abu Jani Sandeep Khosla for never-before-seen pieces. You can incorporate archival pieces, personalised embroidery and rare textiles. Jewellery, too, can be customised with maisons in India and overseas with every element created around the bride's vision." Heritage jewellery houses like Birdhichand Ghanshyamdas, Kishandas & Co, Khanna Jewellers and Shree Jewellers are known for their one-of-a-kind commissions. "Rare gemstones, archive-inspired designs and innovative techniques can be integrated into bridal jewellery."

Budget blueprint
Venue and accommodation: 20–22%
Decor and design: 40–45%
Food and beverages: 12–15%
Entertainment: 8–10%
Photography and videography: 6–8%
Fashion and jewellery: Bespoke

Rites of passage

As wellness and wedding cultures continue to collide, TARINI SOOD investigates the parallel detox regimes and cosmetic treatments—the quick fixes—that have attached themselves to modern brides.

Between getting engaged and getting married, a whole ecosystem springs into action for most modern brides. Dermatologists, nutritionists, gym instructors, makeup artists—all in service of the same goal: to help get that coveted bridal glow. Do a gut cleanse, stop sugar, start supplements, cut dairy—more often than not, the pursuit of bridal beauty comes with a detox plan in tow.

Blame it on trending reels if you will, but once the algorithm gets a whiff of a bride-to-be, it wastes no time. The information comes flooding in. An acne breakout that left behind a patch of hyperpigmentation prompted 31-year-old corporate banker Simran Walia to type "bridal glow" into her search bar. "After that, it was a flood of bridal wellness content—from OMAD (one-meal-a-day) diets and magic citrus juices to ayurvedic ghee cleanses and coffee enemas."

She found it fascinating before eventually becoming alarmed. Her wedding was still eight months away but was she already too late? Walia admits she seriously considered a gut cleanse programme, which promised a flat belly and clear skin, before deciding against it. "It got too overwhelming, so I did what I thought was realistic." She eventually found middle ground, cutting out sugar and alcohol, making a conscious effort to stay hydrated and adding an oral vitamin C supplement to support her skin.

> "There is an expectation to completely transform before the wedding: to look glowing, toned, calm and flawless all at once"

While every bride is different, a common sentiment seems to unite them—a persistent feeling that they need to be doing more. This expectation does not manifest out of thin air either. "The minute you become a fiancée, everyone has advice—from friends and cousins to makeup artists and wedding vendors," says Thea Mehta, a 30-year-old marketing professional who found herself dodging recommendations on diet plans. "There is an expectation to completely transform before the wedding: to look glowing, toned, calm and flawless all at once," she says. Rather than subjecting herself to an unrealistic standard, Mehta embraced guardrails instead of rules—avoiding oily, carb-heavy food and staying consistent with movement.

Maybe that's one of the ways that bridal detoxes have found their way into the modern wedding lexicon—not through anything major, but through an accumulation of seemingly harmless advice. Add the clamor of social media to the mix and what sounds like grounding acts of self-care—through a deeply transformative phase of life—can morph into a stressful preoccupation with a slimmer waistline and glassy skin. Ironically, wellness becomes less defined by nourishment and more by restriction.

It's a progression that clinical nutritionist Shabnam Shama has witnessed first hand. "I have clients sending me reels every day asking, 'Should I try this? I saw this on Instagram. I saw this on TikTok'," says Shama. "GLP-1,'skinny teas' with laxative effects, one-meal-a-day diets, juice cleanses—there's always some detox or diet hack promising almost overnight results." While she understands the motivation behind it, she believes the culture around bridal wellness has spiralled. "I once had a bride who insisted on water cutting so she would look more toned and her abs would have more definition in photographs."

Somewhere along the way, wellness got confused for appearance and became something to optimise. Of course, not every woman responds to that pressure in the same way. Trisha Chawla, a 32-year-old digital strategist and writer, never bought into the idea of a dramatic bridal cleanse. "I've had PCOS for 10 years and been mid-sized my whole life," she says, explaining that weight loss never came easily, no matter what she tried. So, rather than starting a trending new diet before her wedding, she leaned on the knowledge she had gathered over the years. Every meal focussed on protein—whether that meant poha with Greek yoghurt, swapping out a carb-heavy meal for a protein toast or carrying protein-rich, home-cooked meals in tiffin boxes wherever she went. Strength training formed the backbone of her routine too. "It's one of the few things that genuinely supports my body and hormones," she says.

However, one recommendation turned out to be a step too far. An 'oral moisturiser' supplement containing wheat seed oil that, she was told, would boost skin hydration, triggered such a severe reaction that she was nearly hospitalised the night before her engagement. Months later, she decided to give it another try, only to nearly collapse during a wedding jewellery appointment. "Even if you're following an expert's advice, see how your body feels when introducing something new. I learned

AVANI RAI



INNER BEAUTY
Somewhere along the way, bridal wellness got confused for appearance and became something to optimise.



ASHISH SHAH.

"Treatments certainly have their place, but they enhance healthy skin—they don't compensate for its absence"

that the hard way." Everybody reacts differently, she explains, a reminder that what may work for one person may not always work for another.

Chawla's experience raises a larger question. Most of these supplements, diets and detoxes are temporary fixes designed to prepare us for a single day. But how far should we be willing to push the body for something so fleeting?

"Your liver, kidneys, lungs and heart are already helping with a detox every day," says Shama. Even juice cleanses, contrary to popular belief, don't magically flush out toxins. In fact, an only-liquid diet alone can have the opposite effect. "Your body sees it as starvation. It doesn't know you have a wedding deadline." Temporary fixes may make one feel lighter or look leaner for a day or two, she explains, but if the goal is to look and feel your best, the answer is in building sustainable habits.

Sixth-generation Ayurvedic physician Dr Ravi Paneri shares Shama's view. "The idea of a bridal detox has become distorted," he states, explaining that a flatter stomach in a week is usually reduced bloating or a fluid shift, not fat loss or digestive correction. Even in a discipline like Ayurveda, which is deeply attuned to individual constitutions, a detox is a slow, deliberate process built around digestion, elimination and true nourishment.

Shama explains that some of her clients understand this, coming to her a year or even 18 months prior. "These women aren't looking for a quick fix, they're looking to address larger issues," she says. "We try to identify the trigger and manage that, while adding more foods that support deeper healing." She explains that many women also think about things like fertility, hoping to conceive soon after the wedding. The same extends to concerns like acne and pigmentation. They aren't treated in isolation—and Shama looks for a common underlying cause. Gut health may be the culprit for one bride, while another may require more comprehensive blood tests or an ultrasound in case of conditions like PCOS or endometriosis. "This is the starting point," says Shama, a more effective approach, she believes, than prescribing a one-size-fits-all crash detox.

Being a bride today comes with a different set of expectations than it did a decade ago. Heavy cakey salon makeup has been replaced with minimal coverage and radiant, flawless skin that can be captured in high definition. Dr Geeta Mehra Fazalbhoy says, "80 per cent of the brides that come to me today aren't looking to cover imperfection, they're looking to not have any at all." The dermatologist believes the scrutiny on social media has intensified the pressure—with every stage of the wedding, including the proposal, carefully documented and photographed.

"Even if we're starting six months before, I first need to correct you internally for you to look better externally." Before discussing interventions, Dr Fazalbhoy evaluates everything from sleep and nutrition to vitamin deficiencies and hormonal imbalances. While rejuvenation techniques like carbon toning (also called the Hollywood facial), lasers and microneedling can certainly help refine the skin, she says they work best when built on a solid foundation of healthy habits. That means prioritising nutrition, hydration, regular exercise and quality sleep, while keeping skincare simple and consistent. "Treatments certainly have their place, but they enhance healthy skin—they don't compensate for its absence," she says, advocating for balance. "We have two kinds of brides: the overdoers with a 20-step skincare routine and the ones who do nothing at all. Our job is to get them somewhere in the middle."

Maybe this is the takeaway—weddings mark the beginning of a new chapter, and a milestone this emotionally charged doesn't ask for optimisation, but consistency and balance in the lead-up to it. Because by the time you arrive at the altar, the rituals that once took centre stage shrink back to their rightful scale.

AD

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL HOMES IN THE WORLD



PHOTO: JIGNESH JHAVERI/*AD* INDIA

ONE OF A KIND

When every bride begins with the same set of decisions, how can you truly be different? The answer might lie in sentiment, personality and a departure from convention. By THEA MULCHANDANI.



ESHANT RAJU (DEVANSHI TULI).

Ten years ago, when I pictured my wedding day, I was in a blush pink lehenga. It sat high-waisted; the blouse had a boat neck, capped sleeves and an open back. Five years ago, I knew I wanted to be a red bride—I would wear a deep burgundy lehenga with antique gold accents and a sheer dupatta. Today, my moodboard has been wiped clean. There are couture runways galore, a plethora of designers to choose from and inspiration

RENEGADE BRIGADE
For her haldi-mehendi, Devanshi Tuli wore a custom Aseem Kapoor outfit with a short skirt, which she paired with archival silver jewellery and old boots.



HIGH TIDE
Shreya Daffney's Gadwal weave wedding sari, accentuated with a Kannada poem woven into the pallu and seashells strung into her blouse, honoured various aspects of her identity.

ESHANT RAJU (SHREYA DAFFNEY).

appears at first scroll, but I no longer know where to look. Has bridal-wear become homogenised? Does nothing seem to stand out anymore?

Every once in a while, I come across a bride whose outfit isn't necessarily the most expensive or elaborate, but it's somehow very chic. Whether it's through a little DIY magic like hand-drilling gilded seashells onto a blouse, or upholding century-old traditions with a necklace crafted from silver beads and cloves (yes, the spice), the styling centres on authenticity rather than trends. And authenticity has no singular definition. It can mean prioritising practicality, crafting something with deep sentimental value, or even refusing to compromise on your vision. Speaking with these five brides, I've realised the most memorable bridal looks are simply the ones that are extensions of the bride herself.

DEVANSHI TULI

Two weeks before her wedding, stylist and creative director Devanshi Tuli met designer (and close friend) Aseem Kapoor, intending to pick up something off the rack for her haldi-mehendi. Kapoor refused—he wanted to make something new just for her. Tuli had one request: a shorter skirt. For her, practicality came first. "I didn't want to spend the day worrying about stains or damaging the outfit," she explains. "I also thought it might be cold, so I suggested a top with a kimono-inspired jacket over it." In Kapoor's hands, that idea evolved into a pleated ghagri that sat between the ankle and the knee. He paired it with a metallic corset bodysuit with intricate, colourful floral appliqué, layered under a bold Uzbek ikat velvet jacket. "He also played with the silhouette very well, because the corset cinches your body, but the boxy jacket moves away from it. It balances everything out," adds Tuli. She finished the look with old silver jewellery pulled from Harubhai Zaveri's archives—including a necklace worn as a headpiece—and a pair of boots accessorised with ghungroos.

Tuli's wedding went viral online, but that was never her intention. "There are very few moments in life when everyone you love is in one place," she says. "Everything, including making my garment, was planned so I could actually

spend time with them. We didn't do proper photographs, we skipped the cake-cutting, we swapped traditional floral decor for oranges. I kept things simple and honest, which people found attractive."

SHREYA DAFFNEY

When architect Shreya Daffney first came across sari revivalist Vinay Narkar's textiles circa 2018, she fell in love with them instantly. Years later, there was only one person she wanted to help design her wedding sari. Since her husband is from Telangana, she decided on a Gadwal weave. "It had to be sindhoor red because I always thought I'd be a red bride. And I definitely wanted a veil," she says. Daffney had also seen what Narkar could do with text: "I wanted a Kannada poem woven into the pallu. It was one of the main reasons I went to Vinay." To balance the traditional weave and colour palette, she decided to get a bit more experimental elsewhere. For her beach wedding look, she collected seashells herself, painstakingly drilling holes into each one before spray painting and gilding them to decorate the straps of her blouse. To honour her Christian heritage, Daffney crafted a 20-foot veil at home. "We started with 10 feet and then realised it wasn't dramatic enough," she laughs. The sari was finished with fish, seashell and sunset motifs—a tribute to having grown up in Udupi. "I've always lived three to four kilometres away from the sea, so I'm attached to it in a very physical sort of way."

MALKAH ASHRAF

Malkah Ashraf didn't have to look too far for her wedding outfit. Her mother is Ayesha Ashraf of Sihali Jageer, a brand preserving Pathani and Rajput heritage through their clothing. Together they designed a farshi pyjama that drew heavily from the bride's recent and not-so-recent past. "The inspiration for the colour was my nani's nikah dupatta," she says. "I love that almost sharbati pinkish-red colour with hints of gold coming through as the fabric moves." The outfit was woven with real silver zari and embroidered by artisans in Lucknow. Along the hem ran Ganga-Jamuni detailing—a hallmark of farshi ghararas worn by royal and nawabi families. Most of the jewellery was either heirloom or designed by her mother. For her naath, she drew inspiration from actress Amrita Singh's bridal look, while around her neck she wore a laungine, a traditional Pathani necklace strung with silver beads and cloves, and the very same one that her mum wore at her wedding 29 years ago. "I was very surprised it was still in perfect condition," she laughs. "My wedding was an opportunity to showcase my history and my roots. No one can imitate it, because it was just true to who I am and who my family is."

SUMIRAN CHHETRI

For her reception, model Sumiran Chhetri had a very specific vision of an ivory sari stuck in her head. After weeks of scrolling, shopping and trying on countless options, nothing came close. "I wanted my garment to have beads and crystals in a certain way," she says. So, with the help of a designer friend, she went shopping in Delhi's Lajpat Nagar, found the perfect embellished fabric and decided to create the sari herself. The look evolved along the way too. A traditional blouse made everything feel too heavy, so she switched



FAMILY MATTERS
Malkah Ashraf wore heirloom jewels designed by her mother, including a 29-year-old laungine—a Pathani necklace strung with silver beads and cloves.

ESHANT RAJU (MALKAH ASHRAF).



SILK ROOT
Above: Sumiran Chhetri balanced individuality with tradition by pairing a burgundy velvet shawl with her parchment white sari glittering with pearls and crystals. *Below*: Saaheba Bedi recast her mother's sangeet lehenga into a sharara and wore it with heavy polki jewellery for her jaimala.

to a halter neckline. The final product was a parchment white ensemble, layered with a sheer drape that featured rows of glimmering pearls, crystals, beads and sequins. "When I discussed it with my mom, she said I couldn't show up to my own wedding in all white. I needed some sort of red to look like a Nepali bride," she explains. A wedding in November also meant braving a Kalimpong winter, so a rich burgundy velvet shawl found its way into the look. "Most brides already know what they want. I kept asking people for opinions and looking at more outfits online, and it only made me more confused," says Chhetri. "In the end, I just trusted my gut, and I'm glad I did."

SAAHEBA BEDI

Lawyer Saaheba Bedi's jaimala outfit wasn't new at all. It was her mother's sangeet lehenga—one she'd admired ever since she was little. "When I started shopping, I'd bought outfits from all these amazing designers, but something still felt missing," she says. "My mum suggested wearing hers, and it just felt right." She gave the orange, pink and gold tissue lehenga her own spin, reworking the original lehenga into a sharara. "I live in pants, so I wanted it to feel like me." For this look, her brief was simple: more is more. She wore polki jewellery gifted by her in-laws during her roka, her heaviest earrings and a hairstyle she'd had saved on Pinterest for years, complete with mogra and gold chains running through her hair. "It really felt like I was bringing a little bit of my parents' wedding into mine," she says.



ALAN JAMES HADLEY (SUMIRAN CHHETRI); SHUTTERDOWN (SAAHEBA BEDI).



Time after time

Your mehendi outfit doesn't have to rot in the back of your closet because it's 'too much' for any other occasion. Three stylists guide POOJA SHAH on the afterlife of wedding wardrobes.

VANSH VIRMANI.

Nisha Kundnani married at an intimate ceremony at the Taj Mahal Palace and Towers, Mumbai, in 2012, wearing Sabyasachi from a period when the designer favoured khadi, before the voluminous cancan silhouette became ubiquitous. Her wedding brunch lehenga, a multi-panelled composition of silk and hand-woven textiles, and her maroon khadi sari for the civil ceremony, remain the most significant garments she owns.

Recently, the celebrity stylist and creative director of Bridelan wore her unconventional black Sabyasachi reception lehenga to a friend's winter wedding in Kolkata, styled with a sharply tailored black blazer, her mother's Yves Saint Laurent watch and a stack of wedding kadas. "Your wedding outfits are the most emotional clothing you ever wear," says Kundnani, who actively looks for occasions to rewear those pieces. "The memories from your wedding rush back, but there's satisfaction in knowing that these pieces are not preserved in lockers, but repurposed in everyday life."

For most women, a wedding wardrobe follows a beloved designer or a favourite shade. Yet these pieces often disappear to the back of cupboards, dismissed as too ornate or for "one time use", a perception rental and resale platforms have further reinforced. But a growing number of women are beginning to understand that bridal garments, when selected with discernment, can be transformed into something unexpectedly versatile with a bit of imagination.

"Brides are returning to heritage weaves and opting to style family vintage pieces with contemporary garments for a legacy look," notes Kundnani. She has seen women take timeless jewels and layer them, wear them as statement pieces and use them to dress up Western outfits. "Your jewellery becomes the most reusable because those are the finest pieces you own, and you will tend to rewear them all your life." She frequently wears her wedding jewellery, crafted by Amrapali in silver, polki and antique gold. She is particularly fond of a statement bracelet—using it to dress up a simple kurta—and styling her wedding bangles with a plain sari.



SOMETHING NEW
Tanya Vohra Ahuja suggests commissioning new blouses and swapping a dupatta for a cape when rewearing wedding outfits.

Former fashion editor and stylist Tanya Vohra Ahuja, who got married in 2020, approached her wedding wardrobe with longevity in mind. Nothing in her trousseau—including her pink Anamika Khanna bridal lehenga embroidered with zardozi in gold, silver and pearl—was intended for a single appearance. In 2025, she rewore her anand karaj outfit for her brother's wedding: a Tarun Tahiliani chikankari anarkali with a dupatta attached to a veil. This time, she draped the dupatta conventionally rather than over her head and switched her original earrings and mang tikka for a ruby and uncut diamond set by Raj Mahtani. For her Kshitij Jalori mehendi look—a blue sari reinterpreted as a 'dancing lehenga'—she wore her hair down and added kaan chain earrings. When she rewore it to a friend's wedding, she added a rose-coloured zari brocade dupatta, changed her hair into a sleek bun and threw on a matching tassel and pearl set. Even her sangeet ensemble evolved. The ombré blouse with the sculptural Gaurav Gupta waterfall lehenga was later transformed into a one-shoulder silhouette, inspired by one of the designer's couture shows in Paris. "Every piece is truly one of a kind," she says. "Why wouldn't I want to rewear them?"

For Marjhan Emaan Kausar, who married in Dubai in 2017 wearing a silver Sana Safinaz bridal anarkali, the appeal of rewearing wedding clothes is rooted in practicality. "I have never been one to keep buying desi outfits, especially when they take up so much space," she says. "My personal style is about mixing and matching, and my philosophy is only buying items you can wear in four ways or more."

The most versatile piece from her wedding wardrobe proved to be the sharara trousers from her nikkah look, later paired with her grandmother's sari blouse for a Y2K aesthetic. She is already considering how to revisit her Nomi Ansari wedding lehenga for a sibling's nuptials by "removing the cancan to make it lighter, or making a lighter skirt with the blouse". She has also repurposed her wedding dupatta as a shawl over a black Mischka gown for a gala.

Accessories, for Kausar, are where a look can be pushed furthest from its original context. "I love adding maximalist accessories like jhoomars in my hair or layering multiple necklaces," she says. Over the years her style has evolved: She uses the digital wardrobe app Indyx to rebuild outfits she can visualise. She also uses Pinterest to brainstorm ideas, noting how even pairing a crisp knotted white shirt over a classic sari or a high neck blouse with trousers can create a fusion look that is not only reserved for special occasions.

"It's hard to ignore trends especially for your wedding," says Kausar, "but my advice is to opt for artisanal and local brands that focus on quality. I am inspired by trends, but I don't let them or other people's opinions dictate my style."

Kundnani encourages modular dressing, or the idea that one buys garments that mix freely with existing wardrobe pieces, allowing their lifespan to expand indefinitely. For instance, she has styled her dupatta from her wedding brunch with a muslin black Anarkali and plans to wear it as a shawl with an ivory suit. As she has done, modular dressing encourages purchasing items that are interchangeable, detached or can be paired with neutral colors.

One way to do that is to commission new blouses when rewearing an outfit or swap a dupatta for a cape, as Vohra Ahuja suggests. Her advice to brides: "Do your own research on designers. Instead of buying seven mediocre outfits, invest in three or four high-quality pieces. You will be able to deconstruct the pieces in ways that can be adapted in the future."

"If you invest in couture, the quality speaks for itself," she says. "These are all, after all, heirloom choices that I hope to pass on to my daughter one day."

VISION QUEST

From a drone-borne veil to a baraat on a conveyor belt, the country's busiest wedding planners recount the bridal couple's instructions that tested physics, patience and the occasional aviation law. By JYOTI KUMARI.



WORK IN PROGRESS
Behind every viral wedding moment is a planner who heard the brief, took a long sip of coffee and started making calls—to engineers, fabricators and, sometimes, to a hotel concierge who still hasn't recovered from the last wedding.

Every wedding planner in India has learned to fear one word. Vision. It usually arrives over untouched canapés, accompanied by the sentence: "We have an idea…" And after that, reality tends to have a difficult afternoon. The idea rarely has much regard for logistics, budgets or the natural habitat of large cats. A veil carried away by robotic butterflies. An urli the size of a small swimming pool. A library inside a school bus for a back-to-school theme. Behind every viral wedding moment is a planner who heard the brief, took a long sip of coffee and started making calls—to engineers, fabricators and, sometimes, to a hotel concierge who still hasn't recovered from the last wedding. Some of these visions came to life in ways even the clients hadn't dared to imagine. Others were gently and diplomatically talked back down to earth. And once in a while, it was the planner who said no. The country's busiest planners recount the briefs that made them pause.

He didn't want an urli for two. He wanted one for the whole gang.
"A typical urli is a 4-by-4-foot circular vessel. It's where the bride and the groom sit during the ceremony while family and guests pour water and haldi over them. Some designers have gone a little bigger with just enough space for two. But nobody had done what Vijay [Deverakonda] wanted. He didn't want a vessel for the couple; he wanted one his whole gang could sit in, all of them splashing water like in a pool. So we designed and built it from scratch but at 16x16ft, an urli turns into something a civil engineer would have opinions about. The safety and water logistics were planned down to the last detail. But the brief itself never changed: everyone in, together." —Priya Maganti, founder, RVR Eventz and Design.

One dog was over the weight limit. The groom refused to send her as cargo.
"The bride, Shivani, had one request that mattered more to her than any design detail: her two dogs, a French bulldog and a black pug, had to be at the wedding. The challenge was that one of them was over the airline's cabin weight limit, which meant travelling in the cargo hold. Splitting them up wasn't an option, and neither was sending them as cargo. That's when the groom, Abhisar, took over. He found a professional pet transportation service with trained handlers and arranged for both dogs to travel together by road as a surprise. We coordinated the arrival to fit the wedding schedule, but the gesture was entirely his. Watching Shivani reunite with her dogs was one of the most emotional moments of the celebration. Safe to say, they had no trouble making the guest list." —Dakshita Bhatla, founder, DB and Spaces.

Farm-to-table wasn't enough. They wanted the paperwork.
"Clients ask us where we get our ingredients from all the time. It's part of the story they love telling the guests. But we had a client who asked us to prove it.

"The safety and water logistics were planned down to the last detail. But the brief itself never changed: everyone in, together"





ASKED & ANSWERED
From a deep fact check on every locally-sourced ingredient in the dinner menu to assisting VIPs (the bride's pets) fly in style to attend the reception, these wedding planners have done it all.

Properly documented certification of provenance for every significant ingredient on the menu. They didn't want the romance of sourcing, they wanted paperwork. The menu suddenly looked more like an audit trail where we traced every significant ingredient back to its source. The jaggery in the gud mithai came from artisanal producers in the Sundarbans. The spices for the Punjabi dhaba-style dishes were sourced from villages near Amritsar. We revived ponk from Surat for a contemporary version of bhel, used yak cheese from Bhutan for ema datshi and shaved Alba truffles over handmade pasta—each with its provenance on record. None of it was about excess. Today's guests travel. They've eaten the original version of things, and they know the difference. The storytelling still mattered but it had to survive a fact check." —Dipti Sawalka, founder, Gourmet Design Company and Varak.

The groom who wanted to headline his own baraat.

"The baraat is the one part of the wedding where the groom's only job is to show up and be adored. However, this groom decided to work his own shift. He had been training as a DJ and decided there was no better stage for his first live set than his own baraat. Our first thought was that this would be unforgettable. Our second was that most debut gigs don't involve a moving procession. The console had to mix live while travelling with the baraat, with power, sound and connectivity all staying in sync along the route, leaving zero margin for failure. The best part was watching the guests slowly work it out. Everyone assumed the groom was playing pretend at the decks, the way grooms do, but then the transitions got suspiciously good. By the end of the baraat, he'd managed to headline his own wedding." —Darshan Shroff, founder, Momenté Weddings.

"Everyone assumed the groom was playing pretend at the decks. By the end of the baraat, he'd managed to headline his own wedding"



They wanted the butterfly wands from *Crazy Rich Asians*.

"The couple had been planning their wedding with us for eight months, and this particular idea arrived with barely a week to go. They showed us a reference from the wedding scene in *Crazy Rich Asians*, where guests hold up glowing butterfly wands as the bride walks in, and they wanted one in every guest's hand. Nothing like that was available in the Indian market. We couldn't source them at such short notice either. Which meant that we were inventing them. The team went from excitement to adrenaline somewhere between designing, prototyping, manufacturing and testing something nobody in the country had ever made, all within a few days and with no room for failure. At that point, it stopped feeling like wedding planning and started looking like product development. But the wands were ready before the wedding, and the butterflies made it to the aisle." —Darshan Shroff.

The brief included Saturn's Rings.

"This couple, deeply fascinated by astronomy, asked us to turn their after-party into an interactive stargazing experience. Our immediate reaction was excitement. Wedding planners don't usually find themselves checking cloud cover for Saturn. At a heritage venue in Rajasthan, under an open sky, we brought in a professional-grade telescope and an

WIRED, NOT TIRED
One planner designed, engineered and produced those glowing wands from *Crazy Rich Asians* in record time. Another brought astronomers and telescopes to a wedding in Rajasthan.

expert to guide guests through the night. The real risk was the weather. November skies are unpredictable, and even a slight cloud cover would have ruined it, so we worked with the expert to identify the best viewing window and built contingencies around it. For one evening, the event plan depended less on vendors than on the solar system. Thankfully the sky cooperated: Saturn's rings were clearly visible, and guests could actually see them during the celebration. The groom loved mythology, so a second expert wove stories about the constellations into the viewing event. The couple later told us it created exactly the pause they'd hoped for amid a high-energy celebration—a moment for their guests to feel the wonder together." —Monil Shah, founder, Kkings Events.

A family dinner with thrones, please. For 300 guests.
"When Vinati and Adeetya's family first spoke to us, they had a simple brief with a complicated number attached to it. A Sajjan Goth is traditionally an intimate community meal where 50-70 people sit together as one family. They wanted that exact setup but for 300 guests. There would be no smaller sittings and no compromise on the silver cutlery or the traditional Rajasthani recipes. For us, the challenge was never the food; it was keeping a gathering that size from turning into a banquet. So the seating became long-facing rows of low, hand-carved thrones, like a royal courtyard, and the service was choreographed so every table ate at the same time. But then the family did what families inevitably do—they took over. Buckets of dal in one hand, trays of churma in the other, they went from table to table serving everyone themselves." —Siddharth Bavishi, founder, The Wedding Trunk.

Too mad, even for this business
Not every vision makes it past the first meeting—such as the Swiss-themed celebration complete with a functional cable car, or the back-to-school wedding that called for a library inside a life-sized school bus. But the ones that didn't are still remembered with affection.

The butterfly veil.
One bride decided the veil deserved its own grand exit. As she walked down the aisle, it would be attached to a fleet of tiny drones disguised as butterflies, which would lift it from her shoulders at exactly the right moment, carry it away to reveal her, then fly to a floral moon installation behind the mandap and perch there for the rest of the ceremony. At that point, it transcended bridalwear and entered the engineering territory as a mini aviation project. "It blended technology, theatre and design in a way we'd never been asked for before," says Aashna Saran, founder of Aash Studio. The precision testing that such an aerial installation would demand required more resources than the wedding could spare. The butterflies never flew.



PIPE DREAMS
Some ideas—like butterfly-shaped drones lifting a veil off a bride's head or a white lion as the groom's entry mate—are best left in the realm of imagination alone.

The white lion.
A groom requested a white lion as part of his wedding entry. "He simply had the vision," says Shroff. "There wasn't a specific source or supplier in mind, so it became our responsibility to assess whether something like that was even possible." This was one brief where the planners decided the vision could stay just that—a vision. The team wasn't willing to pursue a live animal on ethical grounds and told the groom as much. He got a production-led entrance instead. Storytelling, music, lighting, stage design—and zero apex predators.

The baraat where nobody should walk.
A groom envisioned a 45-minute baraat in which not a single guest would take a step. How? He proposed a conveyor belt. The plan involved a custom-built travelator nearly half a kilometre long, carrying the entire procession to the venue. "It sounded surreal," admits event decor specialist Abhinav Bhagat, whose team briefly took this idea seriously. The idea was eventually retired to the drawing board. It remains, for now, the world's slowest-moving and best-dressed airport travelator that never was.

Perfect match

Choosing the right wedding makeup artist is about more than a flawless portfolio, writes RITUPARNA SOM.



UNDER YOUR SKIN
Pick a professional who understands your skin, style, clothes, venue, personality and comfort level, and has the confidence to make all of them work together.

There is a particular kind of panic that comes with choosing your wedding makeup artist. Get it wrong, and you risk anything from mismatched expectations and last-minute cancellations to makeup that overwhelms your features or simply leaves you feeling unlike yourself. This is the face you'll see in every wedding photograph for decades to come, and the artist putting on that face is also the person with whom you'll spend some of the most emotional hours of your wedding day. So how do you know they're the right fit for you?

Every bride in this story began where most brides do: Instagram. But while social media helped shortlist artists, none of them made their final decision there. Designer Amreen Sandhu found herself looking beyond dramatic transformations and perfectly lit portraits. "The biggest thing I searched for was whether every bride still looked like herself, rather than one signature face repeated on everyone." As someone who spends her life thinking about silhouette, balance and proportion, she wasn't searching for the strongest aesthetic but the most adaptable one, someone whose makeup could elevate

SUSHANT CHHABRIA.

rather than compete with the craftsmanship of her wedding wardrobe.

London-based dentist and content creator Kavita Ravi-Shankar took an equally unconventional approach. Instead of studying still photographs, she watched videos, paying attention to how artists interacted with brides rather than how they blended foundation. "I think you spend so much of your day with a makeup artist, just you and them," she says. "I was looking at whether they were laughing with the bride, how they spoke to her, whether they felt warm."

For content creator Karmaa Dhir Dhingra, the decision had been made years before she got engaged, when makeup artist Shraddha Luthra chose her as the muse for one of her editorial beauty looks. Watching her work up close mattered far more than following her feed. "I literally told her then that whenever I get married, you're going to be my first phone call."

Interestingly, despite their very different weddings, every bride arrived at the same brief: they wanted to look recognisably themselves. For filmmaker Karishma Kohli, who has vitiligo, that meant finding someone who understood that makeup wasn't about erasing her skin. "I just had to find a way where I found an artist who would let my skin just be," she says. Having spent years trying to conceal first the white patches and later the brown ones, she had finally reached a place where she wanted neither hidden. Her makeup artist understood that restraint, not coverage, was the greater skill. "If you look at my wedding photographs, you can see the browns on my face because she's not done a very heavy job."

Dhir Dhingra was chasing a similar feeling for different reasons. "I wanted it to look like I've done my makeup, but in a cleaner, more polished camera-friendly manner." She wanted to consciously avoid heavy lashes, dramatic contouring and trend-led bridal makeup, preferring what she describes as a timeless, almost French approach. Sandhu echoes that philosophy from a design perspective. "Choose someone whose work you still admire when you remove the lashes, jewellery and bridal outfit from the picture. Great makeup should stand on its own."

What surprised almost every bride was that choosing a makeup artist had as much to do with communication as it did with cosmetics. Sandhu skipped a trial altogether because conversations with her artist gave her enough confidence that they were creatively aligned. Ravi-Shankar, meanwhile, met her makeup artist over coffee while shopping for her bridal wardrobe in Mumbai. "She just got all the looks that I wanted," she says. More importantly, "she helped me with every step of the way, even matching bangles to my outfits." The relationship quickly expanded beyond beauty into styling, jewellery and colour palettes. "It wasn't just about my makeup."

That collaborative spirit became particularly important because Ravi-Shankar was planning an Indian destination wedding in Madeira, Portugal, where everything, from climate and natural light to logistics and multiple ceremonies, demanded careful consideration. She wanted someone who understood Indian bridal dressing, could drape garments, travel internationally and create three completely different looks that still belonged to the same wedding. "Sometimes you can have a look that is beautiful and a venue that is stunning, but they're not quite matched." Her look for the whimsical jungle-themed welcome dinner, complete with crystal butterflies tucked into her hair, only worked because every detail was designed with the tropical setting in mind, particularly the colours and tones of Madeira.

If Ravi-Shankar's experience highlighted the importance of collaboration, makeup artist Rhea Oberoi's experience exposed the importance of professionalism. Despite booking six months in advance, paying her deposit and thinking everything was in place, her first makeup artist cancelled two months before the wedding. Looking back, she believes brides often spend too much time debating eyeshadow and not enough evaluating reliability. "Always confirm timings," she says. "You cannot cancel at the last moment." Having worked on the other side herself, she also believes brides need to arrive prepared. "You need to know what kind of makeup you like... and then book your makeup artist accordingly." Moodboards, outfit references, jewellery, skin concerns and even preferences around lashes should be discussed before the booking is confirmed, not discovered on the wedding morning. "It's all in the details."

Perhaps that's the biggest lesson these brides offer. The right makeup artist for you isn't necessarily the most followed, the most expensive or even the one creating the most viral bridal looks. It's the one who understands your skin, style, clothes, venue, personality and comfort level, and has the confidence to make all of them work together. Because the best wedding makeup doesn't transform you into someone else. It simply ensures that, years later, when you look back at your wedding photographs, you still recognise the person smiling back.





TRUE TONE
Brides like Amreen Sandhu (*left*) and Kavita Ravi-Shankar (*right*) had very different weddings but one common brief for their makeup artists: they wanted to look like themselves.

HOUSE ON THE CLOUDS (AMREEN SANDHU); MIGUEL PONTE (KAVITA RAVI-SHANKAR).



Bones of contention

What wedding goes by without a touch of chaos and conflict? But with a little help and expert advice, all can be smooth sailing—at least in your head—writes DARSHITA GOYAL.

You have probably heard the run-down saying that in India, a wedding is not between two people, it's between two families. In reality, the celebration has far more moving parts. It hinges on the wedding planner, the designers, the photographers, the caterers, the weather, the venue and the mood of every guest aligning to ensure things go just right.

Ask anyone who's been married (or attended a wedding) and you will learn that more often than not, the balance shifts and chaos ensues. Missing bridal lehengas to MIA vendors, differences in opinions and the weight of everyone's expectations: it's easy for things to go sideways. Plus, don't weddings have a way of making conflicts feel more high stakes than they are? So what do you do to turn down the heat and ensure you all get to the mandap—and out of it—in one piece?

THE ETERNAL DEBATE: SHOULD YOU BE SPENDING YOUR LIFE'S SAVINGS ON THREE DAYS?

"I'm probably the first bride who went to therapy with her parents-in-law before even getting married," laughs Mumbai-based entrepreneur Shallot Rego. Rego has done well for herself financially. However, ideologically she doesn't believe in spending years of one's income on a wedding. To help her fiancé's family understand her emotions better before her wedding in February this year, she brought on board a psychologist to host fortnightly check-ins in the lead-up to it.

Together, both families uncovered their complex relationship with money, bringing nuance to the dreaded budget conversation. "Finally they understood why I did not want to spend lakhs on expensive decor and entertainment so we drew a line there," the bride says. "And I also met them halfway by investing more on the venue and the rooms for the guests because that was important to them."

Counsellor Deepti Chandy echoes this sentiment. "It's most important to talk about money transparently and, if it's difficult for a couple, they should have someone mediate the conversation," she says. "A wedding can create lasting tension that can continue into the marriage. Couples should address and leave the conflict behind." She adds that repeated affirmations make all the difference. Despite a disagreement, the bride and groom should verbalise how grateful they are to be spending life together. This reminder helps reintroduce safety.

FIGHT OR FLIGHT
Missing bridal lehengas, MIA vendors, differences in opinions, the weight of everyone's expectations—it's easy for things to go sideways.

VANSH VIRMANI.

WHEN YOUR DREAM WEDDING VENUE HAS BEEN DOUBLE-BOOKED…

Sakshee Sarrawgi was proud to be a Type-A bride. As the founder of a design-first marketing agency, aesthetic is everything to her and she planned ahead to fulfill any vision. She booked her venue a year before her wedding in February. But a month before the big day, she discovered that the luxury hotel had double-booked the spot. "I was obviously shattered," the Bengaluru-based bride says. "I remember spiralling because I just could not believe they could do this to us."

At the time of booking, Sarrawgi's point of contact at the hotel told the family that there may be a chance of rain since Bengaluru weather is temperamental. The couple agreed; but the hotel insisted that they add the backup venue to their contract to ensure that was locked in. "We were naive and believed them because we were going through a close family friend's contact," Sarrawgi says. "That was our big mistake." Fortunately, instead of a battle, the management took responsibility and even opened up a previously unavailable lawn for Sarrawgi's rituals. As an apology, the hotel also gave the wedding party access to an exclusive bar at a discounted rate.

Siddharth Bavishi, founder of wedding planning agency The Wedding Trunk, insists that vetting the contract is key. But in the aftermath, planners should focus on protecting the couple's experience without escalating emotions. "We would go straight to the hotel's senior management and also coordinate with the other wedding party sharing the property to find a workaround," he says.

HOW TO ESCAPE THE RECEPTION STAGE AND LIVE TO TALK ABOUT IT.

It's a tale as old as time. The couple sees the reception stage as a buzzkill while the parents want every guest to leave with a picture. For Hyderabad-based Swathi Reddy, dodging the endless photoshoot was a non-negotiable at her March 2026 wedding. She spent hours fighting her parents and cajoling her fiancé's family to get on board.

Rajesh Satankar, founder of wedding photography company Knotting Bells, suggests: "We usually recommend blocking 30 minutes for family portraits after which the couple gets off the stage to prevent queues from forming."

Or you could fall back on Reddy's trick. "The discussion wasn't going anywhere so my husband and I took matters into

"A wedding can create lasting tension that can continue into the marriage. Couples should address and leave the conflict behind; repeat affirmations to each other"

our own hands," the lawyer giggles. "We gave the photographers strict instructions to disappear for half an hour after the cake cutting, so we could get off stage. If there was no one there behind the camera, what could we do?" Thankfully for the couple, the gamble paid off. The team eventually returned to capture candid shots of the evening which the families loved.

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOUR WEDDING PLANNERS GET COLD FEET?

In 2025, graphic designer Jayati Jain was celebrating her then-fiancé's birthday when she received an ominous phone call. "Our wedding planners told us they were backing out 45 days before the event," she recalls. "It was sheer panic." At this point in the planning, Jain had designed detailed moodboards for each event but the team were yet to appoint any vendors. "All the decor was pending, they had not booked the pandit, the DJ, the logistics team, the bartenders, the live musicians. Nothing had been executed," she remembers.

Eventually, for her Jim Corbett wedding, Jain chose a planner suggested by their photographers and now believes that change was for the best. Bavishi's advice if you find yourself in a similar situation: Instead of starting from scratch with a fresh plan, ensure that the new planners audit what's in motion and fill the necessary gaps to save time.

And yet, he admits, this kind of situation is hardly extraordinary. "The first priority is looking for planners through trusted referrals. It's a big advantage if they have worked in that city before, especially at the same venue, since they will already know the local vendors and logistics," he says. "At the last minute, how calmly the planners handle the pressure matters as much as their creative vision."

To help choose the right vendors, therapist Akanksha Chandele insists on listening to your body's signals as much as the planner's big ideas. "Finding value alignment in the initial stages of the planning process is important. Feeling safe in any relationship or collaboration is extremely significant and often the most overlooked element because weddings tend to be all shiny and glittery," she explains. "It becomes easier to lose touch with oneself. So the couple needs to notice how their nervous system responds in different conversations with the vendor [to vet their choice]."

WHEN YOU DON'T WANT A BIG, FAT INDIAN WEDDING WITH AN EXTENSIVE BUFFET.

With her 2023 wedding, Mumbai-based Kahini Calcuttawala tweaked every expectation of a desi ceremony. There was no religious ritual, just a legal signing at her parents' house. After a tussle, she even brought the guest list down to 20 people. Then came a new point of conflict: the catering. "I'm a huge foodie. I envisioned a cocktail vibe with small plates," says the founder of a digital creative agency. "But my parents were concerned that the guests would expect a traditional meal with more Indian dishes."

Luckily their caterer found a middle ground where the food fulfilled the small plates mood without feeling hyper-experimental. "We discussed our concerns with our caterer and she reassured us that the menu would include dishes that everyone could enjoy. And it was very well received," Calcuttawala says. "But it did take a few arguments to figure it out with my parents. Eventually I also understood their point of view: they wanted to make sure we make the experience special for our guests too."

Ekta Sharma, the lead planner at wedding planning agency The Paisley Project, believes it's important that the couple get the party they imagined while the families also have the comfort of knowing everyone's well fed. "You can begin the evening just as the couple imagined, with cocktails, beautifully done small plates and food being passed around as everyone mingles," she shares. "Then as the evening goes on, bring in a small, thoughtfully chosen Indian menu. It does not need to be a large traditional buffet, just a few comforting dishes that make the meal feel complete."

PICTURE THIS: IT'S THE NIGHT BEFORE YOUR WEDDING AND YOUR OUTFIT IS MISSING.

With caste and financial differences at play, psychologist Shreya Agarwal battled a three-year-long resistance from families on both sides before they agreed to a wedding in 2025. Just when she thought everything was smooth sailing, her designer's workshop caught fire, delaying the bridal lehenga. "It was just one thing after the other. I received my blouse at midnight [before the wedding] and didn't even get to try it," says the Gurugram-based bride. "I just had to trust it would all work out."

Thankfully for Agarwal, the ensemble fit just right. But Tina Tharwani, the co-founder of planning agency Shaadi Squad explains that wedding planners ought to be prepared for last-minute wardrobe changes. "For bridal couture, we always advise clients to have fittings well in advance to allow for time to address any last-minute issues," she says. "At the end of the day, the goal is to make sure the couple never feels the pressure of these situations. We could find a tailor of good repute who can step in for quick alterations. Also having a backup outfit is never a bad idea, but it should be something that the bride loves and doesn't feel like a Plan B."

Meanwhile Chandele believes acknowledging the stress is key. "This pile of nerves and emotions is not just about the lehenga," she says. "They have been compounded over time with the fear and anxiety around the wedding. The best thing to do here is allow the breakdown or some release to happen so that the body can feel lighter on a psychosomatic level."

To have and to hold

Sometimes, the family cheering us down the wedding aisle isn't the one we inherited, but the one we chose, writes ANKITA SHAH.



RAMNEEK AND I arrived when the sun had already dipped into the sea. A Russian violinist, arranged last minute by our friend, was playing 'Perfect' by Ed Sheeran. Another friend announced our arrival. Our friends rose from their seats and I remember my heart racing at feeling so completely seen. Later, they would come up on stage and read us poems. Later, they would dance with us till their feet turned sore. Later, they would hold my hair as I puked on the shore. If they could, they would have held the sun in their palms and extended the golden hour. They were, after all, the friends who'd been with us through career swerves, difficult bosses, grief. To choose this family was as much about having been chosen by them.

Ramneek and I had been together six years when his parents insisted on a simple gurudwara ceremony. Neither of us had wanted to get married, least of all in a traditional way, but we gave in by seizing some control back. We exchanged vows before 25 of our friends on a beach in Goa prior to the religious ceremony.

Weddings in India carry such a burden of social signalling that everyone's reputation feels at stake in the smallest of matters. The autonomy of the couple is very quickly compromised. The first thing to go out the window: who gets to be a part of this event?

For Tanima Saha, 33, and Denny George, 36, the guest list consisted of four friends. After five years together, the couple registered their marriage in court. Denny's parents didn't know they were getting married, whereas Tanima's parents did but weren't invited. "My father wasn't okay with our live-in relationship. He wouldn't step into our apartment or invite us to anything together. I held a grudge," she says. Their witnesses had long been witnesses to their lives. "They sent me food when my father was in surgery, helped me move through nine different apartments and immediately accepted Denny into our circle." Most of all, they never imposed their vision on how Tanima and Denny imagined their wedding. The only insistence was a two-tier cake a friend surprised them with. They were very happy to make room for it.

"I had seen other weddings where they cared about rituals more than the person," says Christianez Ratna Kiruba, 31, who first registered her marriage with Mohammad Aslam Ali, 37, under the Special Marriage Act before celebrating with a multi-faith ceremony officiated by a maulana and a pastor. Where family would have stood, friends stepped in—holding the phoolon-wala chaadar, giving her away in the Christian ceremony, helping Aslam drape his mundu, and deftly pushing back against the rituals she didn't want to perform.

Christianez's parents opposed her relationship with Aslam and tried to stop her friends from attending the wedding. A few years ago, they had drained her savings from a joint account to render her financially vulnerable. The couple, both doctors, worked overtime for six months to save for the wedding they wanted. Friends refused reimbursement for flights, lent her jewellery, even taught her how to plan a wedding. "Because of them, I never felt my family was not there," she says.

For many, the act of choosing a family contains an inherent cost. But it is still an act of self-liberation—to say we will not participate in the practice of love that is conditional.

Sukanth Rallapati and Vaibhav Dalal, both 48, got married in Sri Lanka after 11 years together, simply to have a ball before the "knees gave way". They invited friends and former colleagues who had known them for over 15 years. "As much as we were celebrating our love, it was also the group that had stood by us through thick and thin," Sukanth says. He chose the property, while their friends planned everything from the food to fireworks—including gifting them a choreographer. They forgot the steps on the day. "It didn't matter. Everyone was so intent on having fun."

To "make memories" has become a cliché, a phrase emptied of its soul. But memories are our vital life force. The stories we tell ourselves make us who we are. To choose who you bring to the altar, to compose a frame with the people you love, is to imprint upon your mind the story you would never want to forget. The pictures of Ramneek and me reading the vows did not come out great. But in these four years, I have never gone back to those photos—except now. Never needed to. That weekend is still so warm in my body, and my friends and I, we remember everything.

FINDERS KEEPERS
To have your chosen family at your wedding is an act of self-liberation.

VANSH VIRMANI.



SIMPLE REQUEST
Many young couples are now opting for "blessings only" weddings.

VANSH VIRMANI.

Present Perfect

Somewhere between mountains of unusable crockery and rows of offended elders, lies the new art of the wedding gift, writes HUZAN TATA.

I'M SURE I wasn't the first bride who thought "how many ugly vases is too many ugly vases?" as I sat surrounded by three plant pots, two weirdly-shaped clocks and three sets of wine glasses, wondering what to do with them. As Parsi weddings mostly encourage monetary gifts, I didn't have many things I'd need to regift or donate. But I haven't been surprised to learn that many newlyweds have ended up with over five pressure cookers, lots of glassware, several idol figurines and a few ugly bedsheets at the end of their wedding festivities.

Call it what you will—tradition, affection, a need to show off or just the unspoken rule of "this is how it's done"—extravagant gifting (or gifts that no one asked for) at weddings is that elephant in the ballroom that few want to address. Millennial and Gen Z couples have clearly had enough, with many opting for "blessings only" weddings, when not requesting guests for things they actually want or need.

UK-based Anisha Mathur, and her partner Manish Prayaga, were on the fence about accepting gifts they wouldn't be able to lug back home after their Indian wedding. They decided to

go the wedding registry way—something they'd seen many couples around them adopt. "I love receiving gifts, so I wasn't going to say no to them," says Mathur.

They chose to register on the then-new website Hazlnut. "They were very flexible with the type of offering they could give us and they also helped us write descriptions of products on the website in the way we wanted," she says.

"I thought my mum would be hesitant to share the link within our family circles, but before I even floated the idea, she asked if we had a registry. My aunties were the first people who contributed," laughs Mathur.

Not all aunties are as open-minded though, with some couples still finding it hard to convince their elders that gifts of their choice, or no gifts at all, isn't an insult to tradition. Roshini J had an intimate 70-person ceremony in Goa where guests were asked to contribute to "Roshini and Ashwin's First Proper Getaway Fund" via UPI payments. But they had to follow that up with a reception in her husband's hometown Chennai so that their parents wouldn't think they were going completely nonconventional.

"Our wedding was in November. We got Christmas cutlery from a friend's mom, who explained later that she thought it was disrespectful to minimise a wedding by just giving money and she needed to give an actual gift," says Roshini. She's just happy guests at their Goa ceremony fulfilled her getaway fund.

Ugly vases or tacky photo frames may never completely go away, but their number might go down from three to one at a single wedding. "Registries aren't upending tradition—they're a modern, organised interface for something already embedded in Indian wedding culture," observes Hazlnut founder Siddharth Bharteeya about the rise of platforms like Kiki, Gifaa and his own. "It's an evolution, not a revolution. We're showing families the alternative—intentional, convenient, waste-conscious gifting. The generation getting married now is pragmatic and less bound by older social conventions. Couples are already informally sharing gift preferences with close circles; we've simply formalised and digitised what is happening."

Kinjal Chaturvedi, founding partner at wedding planning service Asterisks Events, says: "In many cases, families find a middle ground—parents may accept traditional gifts, while guests are also given the option to donate or contribute to a meaningful cause or substantial gift. Ultimately, the goal is to respect tradition and modern values, and we're definitely seeing a gradual shift towards more thoughtful and intentional gifting. What will change is the form of the gift, not the sentiment behind it."

There are others who've decided that their big, fat Indian wedding is enough of a gift for them. "We only accepted gifts from really close family members. For other guests, we kept a placard in their rooms that requested donations for Shishur Sevay," says fashion and luxury consultant Karnika Kisnadwala.

The Kolkata-based NGO, which provides care and protection to abandoned and orphaned children, is quite close to Kisnadwala's heart. She even sourced hand-painted bags made by girls in their care to give to guests as wedding favours—as a way to promote their work. "It does make a difference. Even something simple like feeding the less fortunate during your wedding goes a long way," she says. "We spend so much on our weddings—I think this is one way to give back."

WISH LIST
1. *Narrow diamond hinged bangle*, TIFFANY & CO. 2. *Bahaar hand-knotted rug*, JAIPUR RUGS. 3. *Zodiac trinket tray*, VIYA. 4. *Love Hibiscus fragrance for women*, AMOUAGE.



Up in the air

Humidity, hard water, altitude and an open bar—your skin and hair didn't RSVP for any of this. Keep this destination-wedding survival guide handy. By PATSY ANTHONY.

Between all the non-stop dancing from the sangeet to the cocktail, three outfit changes a day and spending more time in security check queues than your own bed, destination weddings ask a lot of your body.

The damage begins before you land. "The recycled, pressurised cabin air on long-haul flights acts like a vacuum, sucking moisture straight out of your skin," says Dr Kiran Sethi, founder of Isya Aesthetics & Active Longevity. When the barrier gives up, it "either turns dry and flaky or goes into panic mode, overproducing sebum."

Dr Chytra V Anand, celebrity cosmetic dermatologist and founder of Kosmoderma Clinics, points out that the real villain isn't the travel or even the climate—it's dehydration. "Disrupted sleep, stress, alcohol, salty foods and altered meal timings can increase inflammation and trigger puffiness, breakouts and worsening of pre-existing skin conditions."



Geography only compounds it. "At altitude," Anand warns, "UV exposure is significant. While cold temperatures and low humidity can cause dryness and sensitivity." In the tropics, Sethi notes, "intense UV exposure near water drastically increases the risk of immediate tanning, sunburn and hyperpigmentation."

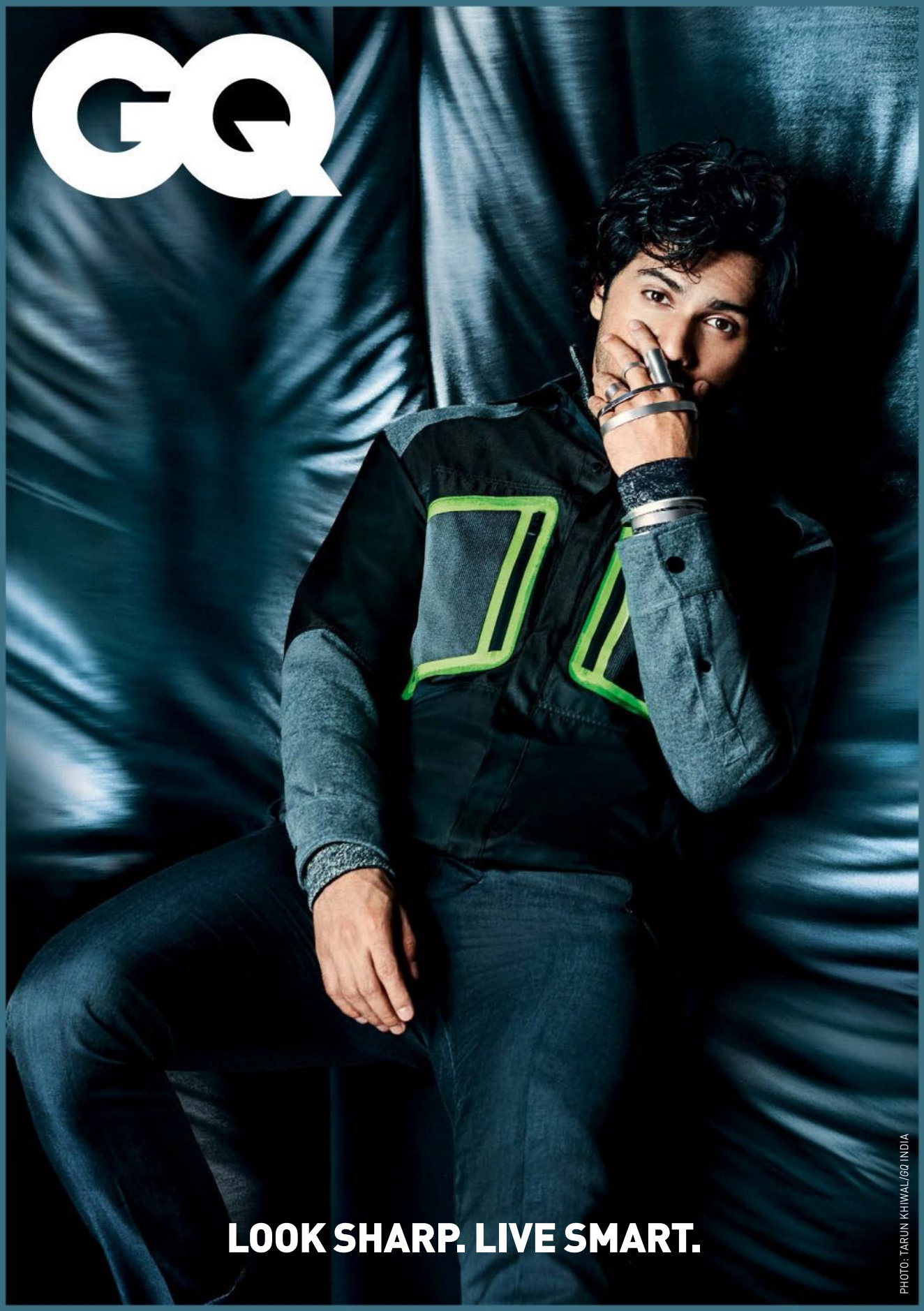
With so many variables, what is in your control? "When the schedule gets overwhelming, just stick to the basics," says Sethi, "cleanse gently, moisturise and wear sunblock." She also warns against the temptation to "prepare" your skin for such an event—to not experiment with aggressive new facials, chemical peels or heavy DIY packs right before you leave.

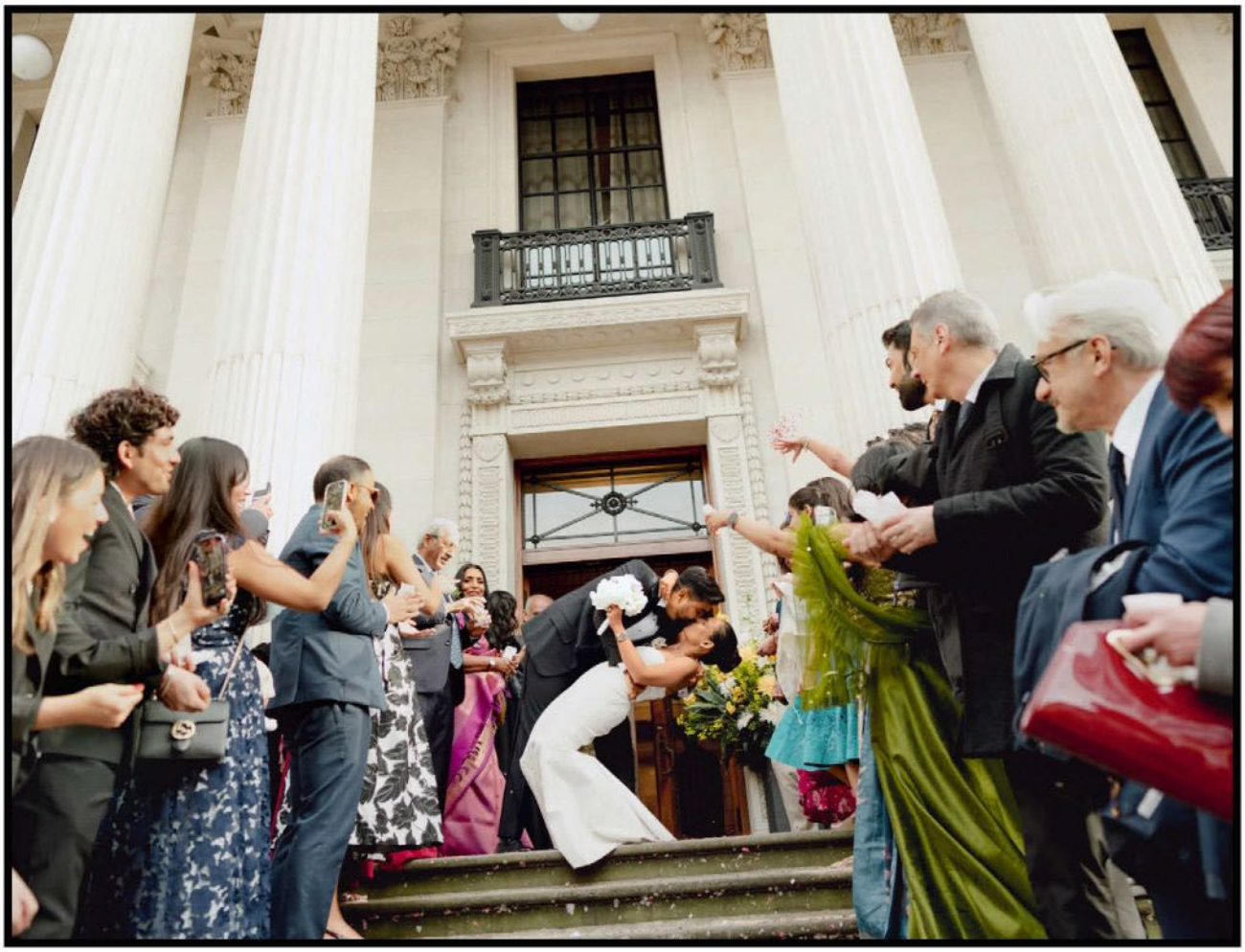
Hair needs the same restraint. "Humidity causes frizz, while dry climates, sun, salt water and chlorine strip moisture, damage the hair cuticle, fade colour and increase breakage," says Anand. "Start with a nourishing hair mask a week before travel, trim split ends, and carry a sulphate-free shampoo and conditioner." Between the blow-outs and the humidity, what your hair actually wants isn't more product—it's a routine built around reliable products, such as the Forest Essentials bhringraj and shikakai hair cleanser and a Moroccan Oil serum.

"When the schedule gets overwhelming, just stick to the basics—cleanse gently, moisturise and wear sunblock"

"The biggest mistake travellers make is following exactly the same skincare routine in every climate," says Anand. "Your skin does not need more products when you travel; it needs the right adjustments." Read: a light lotion like D'You In My Defence moisturiser swapped in for a heavy night cream in the tropics; a hydrating serum like the La Mer renewal oil layered under a powerful sunscreen like the Isdin Fotoprotector at altitude. No 10-step ritual required—just a dopp kit of multipurpose minis and enough water to survive the mehendi.

BIKRAMJIT BOSE.


GQ
LOOK SHARP. LIVE SMART.
PHOTO: TARUN KHIWAL/GQ INDIA



SIGNED, SEALED, DELIVERED
Shukti Sahni married her Delhi-origin partner at the same London courthouse as Dua Lipa—"We did it first!" she laughs.

Paper hearts

In the shadow of the big, fat Indian wedding lurks its humble, sensible cousin—the civil ceremony at a courthouse. What makes a woman choose this low-key way of getting married? By NIDHI GUPTA.

AT THE MARRIAGE registrar's office, the ceiling fan turned languorously. A bureaucrat in a wilting brown shirt sat at a large desk piled with dusty files tied in red string. My partner and I stood in front of him, feeling like truant school children summoned to the headmaster's office. I wore a Kanchipuram silk sari in a blinding bright pink—the compromise for saying no to a lehenga weighed down by sequins and cancan—with delicate gold temple jewellery inherited from my grandmother. My partner turned up in a dull gold kurta and dhoti.

There was mithai and baskets of marigold petals, but no orchestra and fireworks in the wings. The bureaucrat opened our file with a slightly bored look on his face—indeed, he double-checked our names to confirm he had the right one from that day's docket. "You want to be his wife?" he asked gruffly, after enquiring about how long we'd known each other. Within minutes, we signed on a dotted line and he pronounced us married.

A month later, there would be one night of merriment aided by an open bar at the Hyatt in Gurgaon—another compromise for saying no to a three-day party, to assuage disgruntled relatives. But this March day 12 years ago, it was just the two of us, bound as much by our love for travel as we were by our liberal, agnostic

THE PHOTO STORE.

world-views. With us were two dozen of the people we loved most looking their best—arriving from lands as near and far as my office in Ballard Estate and our homes in New Delhi—all of us fanning ourselves and biding our time with selfies in a queue outside the Fort civil court's bleached facade.

There is a particular kind of room in this country where marriages are made—but rarely the best photographs for a conventional wedding album. India's booming wedding economy is now estimated at somewhere between $40 billion and $130 billion a year (depending on which reports you trust, and there are many from IBEF, WedMeGood, Custom Market Insights and dozens more). The average urban wedding runs into the tens of lakhs, catering to several hundred guests, with families often spending a vast fortune (occasionally the size of a small country's GDP) on wardrobes and jewellery alone.

In this scheme of things, registering a marriage in the civil court is often thought of as a dull formality. It is a process "strongly advised" by the Supreme Court and state laws but, in India, a marriage's validity isn't always governed by a piece of paper. Some people, though, choose the courthouse wedding. They choose to solemnise their marriage in the eyes of the law rather than in ritual alone.

It is worth asking why a woman like Sakshi Rawte-Dhar, not yet 30, would stand outside the Bombay High Court's marriage registrar's office holding nothing but the knowledge that her partner was on his way with a bouquet, and feel, in that ordinary corridor, something closer to the thing weddings are supposed to produce—and so rarely do. Or why Urmi Mistry, after the sudden death of her father-in-law delayed everything by a year and a half, would sit her parents down and describe, instead of a wedding, a life—savings, travel, a house someday—and watch them come around to it, tearfully, as if she had narrated something utterly inconceivable, and yet wholly revelatory.

These are not women rejecting marriage. They are women rejecting its packaging. And in going the legal route and designing their nuptials to their own individual tastes, what they might actually be choosing is themselves.

Mistry, the eldest daughter in her family, never could conceive of spending lakhs on a wedding—posing an inherent conflict to her parents who must've been saving for it since the day she was born. That breakthrough with her and her Ahmedabad-born partner's parents took its time. But come wedding day, she kept the pink bandhani sari and lost the 200 guests. She kept the family lunch for six at the Taj Mahal Palace and gained, unplanned, a tiramisu cake sent by friends who could not be there. She calls that cake, without irony, the best part of the day.

Rawte-Dhar remembers that her own father had wanted a courthouse wedding and that he had laughingly said that she was living that dream for him. But she and her Bengali-origin, Baroda-raised partner did choose to not have any religious ceremonies. So her grand wedding took place in the company of their parents and two friends, followed by lunch at Bombay Canteen. And then there was a party for 25 at the Bandra bar where they'd had their third date—which, she says, did more work emotionally than a banquet hall ever could have.

Others have found a way to marry tradition with their own "radical" outlooks. Shukti Sahni and her Delhi-born partner married at the Old Marylebone Town Hall in London. Running away from the "concept of traditional weddings" was one of the many things that brought the couple closer, including an aversion to dating clichés, a love for travel and her medical issues with a borderline tumour. So they got married in court in London—and Sahni says being an atheist was a key reason for why they chose this route. But since atheism means only a disbelief in deities and not in loving her family, the couple followed it up with a small Hindu wedding in Bali for 120 people. Their parents were able to respect their traditions and Sahni got to modify the rituals—only four pheras walking side-by-side, a vow-reading ceremony in the mandap—all of it done in cahoots with a sporting priest.

Many others standing in these courthouse queues turn up because it is not as much a personal choice as the only choice available. Jamila Khokhar and her husband are what is colloquially called a "Hindu-Muslim couple". They'd lived together for six years before they decided to tie the knot. She had no idea of the Kafkaesque endeavour that lay ahead.

Their first choice was to do pheras, but when they were told that they'd need to bribe lawyers, priests and local politicians if they wanted to marry without a religious conversion, they applied under the Special Marriage Act online. They were then directed to meet a BMC officer—erroneously or unlawfully, it is unclear—who also tried to persuade her to convert. Think of the future of your children, he said. I'll get your marriage done on the desired date, he said. She walked out. All of this delayed their wedding by two months—until a bonafide lawyer guided them through the nuances of the Special Marriage Act process and finally brought them to the Khar court docket.

These choices come rooted in a conviction that the scale of a wedding may not have any bearing on the size of the marriage it is meant to celebrate

When it finally happened, Khokhar wore a dhoop chaon sari and her partner wore a lungi and kurta. While they were at court with their parents acting as witnesses, 20 of their friends decorated their house with flowers. Upon returning, they exchanged garlands while the groom's mother sang Tamil folk songs. Then they sat down for sadhya, after which they drank and danced until one in the morning. Khokhar, who has supported her family financially since 21, remembers the day fondly—for it carried all the warmth, affection and love she could have asked for in the world. It is difficult to call this small.

The weddings that take place in these courtrooms aren't always built on aesthetics—although, whether it is Dua Lipa, Charli XCX, Gauri Pratt or your average marketing professional, who doesn't turn up looking their best on a day when they're about to sign up for lifelong cohabitation? But they do come rooted in a conviction that the scale of a wedding may not have any bearing on the size of the marriage it is meant to celebrate.

Occasionally, it hits me—a marriage surviving over a decade can feel like its own victory these days. And in those moments, I think of that bureaucrat's face as he handed us that pistachio-coloured certificate, finally melting into a toothy smile—reflecting the hope we felt in our hearts.





IN PLAIN SIGHT

Emily Hu and Zarius Shroff crafted a wedding where every ritual, garment and inherited custom was given room to breathe. By PALAK GODARA.

When Emily Hu arrived at Ohio State University from Shanghai in 2015, she was still finding her footing in a place that felt far removed from home. Through a friend (and future bridesmaid), she met Zarius Shroff, a member of a close-knit Ohio friend group that had largely grown up together before arriving on campus. Their story had the makings of a classic rom-com from the very beginning, even if neither of them realised it. "I thought he was incredibly annoying," Hu says.

An awkward dynamic involving mutual friends frequently left them on opposite sides of situations, but neither ever disappeared from the other's life. They celebrated birthdays together, showed up to the same gatherings and remained fixtures in each other's orbit long after graduation. Friendship came first. Love took the scenic route.

As Hu recovered from a battle with cancer while living far from her family in China, Shroff remained a constant presence. "His unwavering support, patience and genuine intentions helped me rebuild my confidence," she explains.

Around the same time, Hu found herself describing Shroff to her mother—the qualities she admired in him, the ways he showed up when it mattered and the kind of partner she hoped to find someday. Her mother's response was simple: "Then why don't you date him?" Sometimes the answer is so obvious that it takes someone else to point it out.

By the time they began dating in 2021, it felt less like a revelation and more like arriving at a conclusion that had been hiding in the margins all along. "Everything felt incredibly certain," says Hu.

Within months, Hu, a marketing manager, and Shroff, an AI engineer, were planning a move to San Francisco together. While the pace surprised some, neither questioned where the relationship was headed.

Looking back, both describe the transition from friendship to partnership as surprisingly uncomplicated. "There wasn't a

BLOWN AWAY
Emily Hu and Zarius Shroff got married at a Californian ranch overlooking the Pacific after a long courtship bearing the hallmarks of a classic rom-com.



RITE ROUND
For the Parsi wedding ceremony, the couple met with a dastoorji in the Bay Area to better understand the customs they hoped to honour.



EASY RIDER
The bridesmaids had to mount an impromptu steaming mission after discovering that the wedding gown—fresh from China—had never been unpacked.

lot of 'let's see where this goes'," recalls Shroff. "Once we were official, it felt certain almost immediately." What appeared impulsive from the outside felt entirely natural to them.

The proposal arrived during a trip to Maui. Hu, usually responsible for planning their travels, had been instructed to leave one evening free. Shroff's explanation—a vague "dinner and a show"—did little to satisfy her curiosity. "When I asked what show, his wonderfully unconvincing answer was, 'Something about boats'," Hu laughs.

On a secluded overlook above the Pacific Ocean, the only other person in sight appeared to be photographing the scenery. "I was so nervous I couldn't figure out when to actually do it," admits Shroff. "Finally, the second Emily turned away for just a moment, I got down on one knee." The photographer, Hu later learned, had been part of the plan all along. Back home in California, the surprises continued when Hu's best friend emerged unexpectedly from behind their front door—a fitting epilogue to the evening.

When it came time to plan their wedding, the couple kept returning to the same idea. "We wanted every tradition to have meaning, every guest to feel welcomed into our cultures, and both of our families to feel equally represented—to see a little piece of home and feel a sense of nostalgia in the celebration," says Hu.

For Hu, the search for a venue had always begun with the ocean. Sea Ranch Lodge, perched along California's rugged northern coastline, immediately felt right. From the bluffs, she found herself thinking about the two places that had shaped her life. It felt a little like standing between two bookmarks. "Shanghai was just beyond the horizon, while I was in California," she says. "It felt like the perfect place to begin this next chapter of our lives."

> ""We wanted every tradition to have meaning, every guest to feel welcomed into our cultures"

Rather than squeezing three traditions into a single occasion, the couple gave each one its own spotlight. "It was important to us that no culture felt like an afterthought or a compromise," says Hu. For both, that intention was deeply personal. Hu had spent her life moving between Shanghai and California, while Shroff grew up navigating the traditions of his Parsi heritage alongside everyday American life. The wedding became an opportunity not only to bring those worlds together, but to slow down and engage with customs that might otherwise have remained family stories or childhood memories. Rather than blending everything into a single narrative, they chose to let each tradition speak in its own voice.

The celebrations began with traditional Chinese wedding door games, where Hu's bridesmaids put the groom and his groomsmen through a series of playful challenges before finally granting them entry. Designed to test the groom's determination before he reaches the bride, the tradition brought together humour, competition and a healthy dose of chaos, quickly drawing guests into the spirit of the weekend. "I grew up watching these games at weddings, so I knew I wanted them to be part of ours," says Hu. Equal parts rite of passage and obstacle course, it set the tone for the festivities to come.

A Chinese tea ritual followed, with Hu dressed in a custom Long Feng Gua crafted in Shanghai by the same family-run artisans who had dressed generations of brides before her. "The Chinese tea ceremony was the most emotional moment for me," says Hu. "Hearing my parents share the same blessings and words of wisdom with me that they shared with my sister felt like a true coming-of-age moment."

Soon after, the couple slipped away for a first look in a meadow beside the lodge. Waiting with his back turned, Shroff felt the anticipation of the day settle around him before Hu tapped him on the shoulder. When he turned around, both were in tears. They later returned for a Western ceremony overlooking the Pacific. "Our friend gave this beautiful speech, and then hearing Emily's vows was the moment that really got me," recalls Shroff.

Bear, the couple's pet and designated ring bearer, briefly forgot his responsibilities midway down the aisle. Hu, meanwhile, had already traded her wedding shoes for a pair of everyday sneakers to navigate Sea Ranch's uneven terrain and, only hours earlier, her bridesmaids had mounted an impromptu steaming mission after discovering her wedding gown—fresh from China—had never been unpacked. In everyone's defence, there was a lot going on.

Back at the ranch, the final rite was a traditional Parsi wedding, a part of the celebrations that required more research than the couple initially anticipated. "My parents didn't remember all the details of a full traditional ceremony, so there was a lot of digging around," says Shroff. "They even went back and found





DRESS TO IMPRESS
Left: For the Parsi wedding, the bride wore a crystal-embellished sari purchased from a shop near an agiary in Mumbai. *Right*: The groom's reception suit was crafted in a qingfang—a textile and tailoring hub—in Shanghai.



CROSS CONTINENTAL
The couple stitched together a wedding that brought together people from three cultures to honour their respective and shared heritage.



> "We can spend months preparing, but when life inevitably throws something unexpected our way, we choose to embrace and enjoy it"

their own wedding video to see what they'd actually done."

The couple also met with a dastoorji in the Bay Area to better understand the customs they hoped to honour. The rituals included the achumichu blessing performed by their mothers, the ara antar where a cloth briefly separated the couple before they were united, and the chero bandhvanu during which their fathers helped tie the ceremonial thread symbolising their union.

Fashion became another expression of heritage. Hu wore a custom Long Feng Gua for the Chinese tea ceremony, a red qipao detailed with royal blue peonies for dinner, an off-the-shoulder ballgown sourced in Suzhou for the Western exchange of vows and a crystal-embellished sari purchased from a local shop near an agiary close to Shroff's grandmother's home in Mumbai for the Parsi wedding. Traditional gold jewellery gifted by both families, paired with a Cartier set chosen by her mother, carried the blessings and memories of loved ones who could not be there in person.

Shroff, meanwhile, transitioned between a changshan, custom tuxedo and reception suit crafted in a qingfang—a textile and tailoring hub—in Shanghai, while his traditional dagli came from the Mumbai atelier that has dressed generations of men in his family.

The couple resisted excessive decoration, allowing the landscape to sing. Thoughtful accents of red—significant in both Chinese and Parsi traditions—punctuated the design, while the coastline handled the drama.

As daylight softened into evening, guests gathered for dinner, speeches and dancing. Glasses of baijiu were raised. Stories changed hands. Friends and family from different corners of the world came together on the dance floor. The details extended to the menu. Hu's signature cocktail was an extra dirty martini, while Shroff opted for an Old Fashioned. Their wedding cake featured three flavours—blackberry pistachio, strawberry almond and Mayan chocolate—a small departure from convention that mirrored the couple's preference for weaving personality into tradition.

Looking back, Hu sees the wedding as an extension of their relationship. "We can spend months planning, preparing and obsessing over the smallest details, but when life inevitably throws something unexpected our way, we choose to laugh, embrace it and enjoy the moment."

Later that evening, after the music had faded and guests had begun to retreat, the newlyweds slipped away to sit beneath a sky scattered with stars overlooking the Pacific. "The sun hitting the water, the waves rolling in—it looked like a pastel painting, too perfect to be real," remembers Shroff. For the first time in days, there was nowhere to be and nothing left to plan.

PICTURE PERFECT
Above: The couple with their beloved pet Bear—also the designated ring bearer—who briefly forgot his responsibilities midway down the aisle.

SUNNY PARK PHOTOGRAPHY.

ABOVE THE CLOUDS

Aarushi Gupta and Eby Vincent Mathew's multicultural wedding in Munnar tied their diverse backgrounds into a grand weekend to remember. By NUPUR SARVAIYA.

Every wedding can be billed as a love story, but Aarushi Gupta and Eby Vincent Mathew's was really a union of hearts, minds and worldviews. Gupta, a model, radio presenter and marketing professional from Lucknow who grew up in Bengaluru, met Mathew, a lighting designer from Kochi, in 2018 at his sister's engagement. Friendship came first, nurtured through impromptu road trips and a shared love for travel that grew into romance.

There was no lightning-bolt moment behind their courtship, just a years-long friendship that blossomed into something else. They moved to Delhi where they also started a lighting design practice together, further building a life entrenched in the same values and vision.

The proposal was only a matter of time—at a "secret spot" somewhere along the Kerala coastline south of Fort Kochi that the couple had stumbled upon by chance. That culminated in a low-key engagement party in Gupta's parents' home in Bengaluru, held a day after her sister's wedding to an American Muslim. The celebrations brought together families from three faiths under one roof, where everyone sat together singing old Hindi songs. "There is no space for hostility or religious differences in our home," Gupta says. "Only love."

When it came time to marry, they spent nine months planning a wedding that honoured their cultural roots with equal intention. Their celebration unfolded on a hilltop in Munnar late last year through two ceremonies, yet felt like one seamless experience for 120 loved ones.

Gupta had one non-negotiable from the start: "A venue that could hold every guest under one roof, with nobody missing a moment." The couple had always gravitated towards Kerala as the backdrop. But Kochi was not an option because they wanted to keep it small; while a beach venue was ruled out for the humidity. That left the hills. Their parents scouted Le Montfort in Munnar, a resort that was once a boarding school. The resonance was immediate. "Eby grew up in a boarding school so the connection to the venue felt natural," says Gupta. It also happened to be the highest point in town, so every event played out with a view of verdant hills.

Once the venue was locked—which took three months—the couple briefed Roshni Kurup of The Hue Story, a Kerala-based planner known for her command over local logistics. They wanted an intimate wedding—by Indian standards—that was deeply thought through but panned out as "a house party". "We wanted glamour but not excess; to have structured events but also to keep it chill," says Gupta.

Peak tourist season turned a four-hour drive into an 11-hour crawl for arriving guests. But once they arrived, the stress of this Odyssean commute melted away—with "Munnar's natural beauty, the cool December breeze and a resort-wide atmosphere that seemed like a school excursion rather than a formal wedding weekend," as Gupta describes it.

The festivities opened on a crisp morning with a haldi conceived as a gentle breakfast gathering, with Hindustani musicians playing sitar and flute setting the tone as the family took turns anointing the couple. That serenity, however, was short-lived. It was payback time for Eby's friends: inspired by the unruly, Holi-like haldi celebrations they had orchestrated for one another over the years, where eggs, ketchup and anything else they could find became fair game, they ensured the groom received an equally spirited send-off into married life.

For this occasion, held on one of the smaller lawns under the open sky, guests dressed in yellow and the couple opted for pastel pink. The bride-to-be wore a tissue sari gifted by her mother-in-law. The decor was built around the lotus—a flower that symbolises purity and prosperity in Indian weddings. The motif

GOLD STANDARD
For the pheras, the bride wore a kasavu lehenga styled as a half-sari, elevated with smoky kohl eyes for makeup and a braid threaded with fresh jasmine.



manifested through cascading floral hangings beneath a central tree on the lawns that became the focal point of the ceremony's setting, lush floral arrangements across the space and printed parasol canopies, before subtly resurfacing in the couple's phera garlands the following day.

Come evening, the mood took on a quieter, more teary-eyed cadence. The couple traded their initial vision of pastel florals for a monochromatic deep red theme. Framed by a large 12x8ft red frame positioned against sweeping views of the Western Ghats, the couple exchanged vows. Gupta promised to "keep paying attention", celebrating the everyday moments while vowing to "walk through the messy parts of life, figuring it out side by side". Mathew balanced humour with heartfelt sincerity, promising to "load the washing machine exactly the way you specify" and perfect her "Instagram-worthy pictures", before pledging to build "a life rooted in unwavering respect and absolute trust". They promised to cherish each other beyond life's milestones. Gupta wore a strapless, hand-smocked ivory sheath gown with pearl embroidery by Angèlique Raina's label Acquire, while Mathew matched her in an ivory and black double-breasted suit by Abhinav Jindal. Her gown, a modular piece designed to transform into a strapless tube top and skirt, reflected the couple's shared approach to their wedding wardrobe. "We wanted our clothes to reflect us, for us to carry them instead of them carrying us," says Gupta.

> "There was something about being in Munnar that made everyone drop their guards, fall in love and dance like no one was watching"

The next morning, the pheras commenced under a wooden mandap layered with marigolds, banana flowers, brass lamps, urlis and cascading jasmine strings. Instead of a horse and brass band, Mathew arrived on foot in a traditional kasavu mundu to the rhythms of chenda melam drums. This percussion ensemble is synonymous with Kerala's temple festivals and cultural celebrations. For his Malayali Christian family, who had never experienced a conventional baraat before, the procession was a joyful first.

The bride wore a kasavu gold lehenga styled as a half-sari and swapped her minimal makeup for smoky kohl eyes and a braid threaded with fresh jasmine. She'd





PLAYING DIRTY
Inspired by the unruly, Holi-like haldi celebrations they had orchestrated for one another over the years, the groom's friends ensured that he got an equally spirited send-off into married life.



ALWAYS AND FOREVER
For their vow exchange ceremony, Gupta wore a strapless gown by Angèlique Raina's label Acquire. Mathew matched her in an ivory and black double-breasted suit by Abhinav Jindal.

even gifted her bridesmaids kasavu saris and their guests were invited to embrace these traditional Keralite garments. "It has a special place in my heart for the simplicity and regality it holds," she says.

Even nature became an active participant. "The backdrop was ever-changing. We had absolutely no idea whether it was going to be a sunny day with a clear view of the mountains or if the mist would take over or if there would be a drizzle," recalls Mathew. "There was newness and familiarity all at the same time."

The wedding closed that evening with a classic black-and-white cocktail party around a chequered dance floor strung up with fairy lights. Gupta changed into a crimson, embroidered corset gown created by a designer friend. Mathew wore a classic black tuxedo by Abhinav Jindal.

Lunch, post-pheras, was a traditional Kerala sadhya served on banana leaves. Guests sat "licking their fingers" as they made their way through rasam, moru and paal payasam. An eggless cake and custom cocktails infused with locally-sourced ingredients like cardamon rounded out the menu for the cocktail night. Guests went home with locally-made souvenirs: Paul&-Mike chocolates, tea, dry fruits, honey and a vanilla-cardamom candle in a monogrammed tote.

The most enduring memories, however, have little to do with favours or fashion. A friend travelled for about 36 hours to participate in their life event. Others played officiant, emcee, stylist, DJ, game host and choreographer to the hilt. Relatives who never danced found themselves moving to hits from retro Bollywood and '90s pop. Everyone stayed up late both nights inside Room 304, the unofficial after-party headquarters. "There was something about being on top of the highest hill in Munnar with our loved ones that made everyone drop their guards, fall in love and dance like no one was watching," concludes Gupta.

OAKS WEDDING.

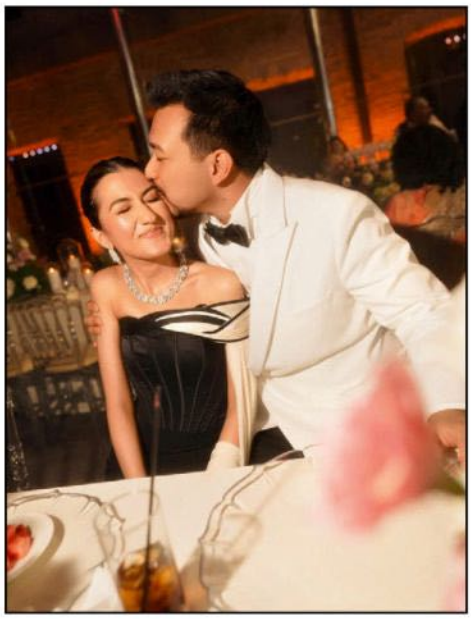
COMMON GROUND

Istanbul became the meeting point for Kwinraj Chand-Bharata and Panji Bharata's Hindu-Sikh and Muslim faiths, alongside their Punjabi and Javanese traditions—each honoured on its own terms. By PALAK GODARA.

The first member of Panji Bharata's family that Kwinraj Chand-Bharata ever met wasn't Panji. It was his father. Fresh off a move to Geneva in 2017 and eager to meet people, Kwin attended an Indonesian community festival, where she found herself chatting to a fellow United Nations employee. Before they parted ways, he introduced her to his friends and family. Among them was his son.

"My dad introduced me to this very pretty and very sarcastic woman," Panji laughs. "I was immediately interested but had to play it cool."

The two stayed in touch, meeting through friends and around Geneva whenever their schedules allowed. Their relationship shifted on a bench in Parc des Bastions, where they admitted there was something between them and shared their first kiss.



In 2023, Kwin returned to Geneva after years of working in Jakarta as a policy consultant. By this time, Panji was balancing project management with a career as a professional musician. "The distance was the test and passing it was the answer," Panji says. "We built the relationship slowly and deliberately, and by the time Kwin returned, neither of us had a shred of doubt left." It was at that same bench that, under the guise of sightseeing with Kwin's sister, Panji went down on one knee with a vintage Asscher-cut diamond ring and asked her to marry him.

Six months before family and friends gathered in Istanbul, the couple exchanged vows at an intimate civil ceremony in Carouge, Geneva's historic old town. Surrounded by their closest family and friends, Kwin wore a two-piece from Self-Portrait's bridal collection with jewellery by Indonesian label Tulola Designs, while Panji chose a custom Loro Piana suit tailored by Wong Hang Tailors.

When it came to planning the wedding, the question was never where to get married. It was where a relationship spanning faiths, cultures and continents would feel most at home. "Istanbul is a place that has spent its whole history being a bridge, Europe on one bank and Asia on the other," Panji says. "For two people of two faiths and two cultures, it felt like the only city that could hold a wedding like ours."

Kwin found the same sentiment at the Esma Sultan mansion. The 19th-century yali, an Ottoman landmark where a contemporary glass pavilion sits within centuries-old stone walls, echoed that duality. "Choosing it felt less like picking a destination and more like finding the right metaphor."

For the wedding, they weren't looking to merge cultures as much as to let them exist side by side. Working closely with their families and pandita Sapna Pandya, they refined the wedding script, bringing together Hindu-Sikh, Muslim, Punjabi and Javanese traditions without allowing any one to eclipse another. Whenever they found themselves trying to fit too much in, they returned to the same principle: "The point was to feel it, not to perform it."

The celebrations began a day before the wedding with an intimate Punjabi-style haldi attended by Kwin's family. As boliyan singers from London traded traditional folk verses across the room, her aunts soon abandoned their seats to join in, turning the afternoon into a family singalong. Styled throughout by Tanya Vohra Ahuja, Kwin wore an archival yellow Balmain blouse from her own wardrobe with a royal-blue handwoven silk brocade lehenga by Payal Khandwala.

Later that afternoon, Panji's family arrived for a small mehndi and chunni blessing ceremony held in Kwin's hotel room. Wearing a white Self-Portrait co-ord that paired naturally with the bandhani dupatta Panji's mother draped over her shoulders, Kwin was welcomed into the family with gifts. Panji, wearing Indonesian batik, had Kwin's initials worked into the henna on his palm.

Heavy rain over the Bosphorus forced last-minute changes on the morning of the wedding, with the ceremony shifting indoors. Before any of that, however, the couple carved out a moment that belonged only to them—meeting for a first look. Kwin wore a custom Tarun Tahiliani silver-and-gold embellished corset lehenga beneath a soft tulle dupatta embroidered with their wedding date and the words "promesse de lumière"—French for "promise of light"—and finished with a dainty diamond set. Panji waited in an ivory-and-gold Tarun Tahiliani open-jacket bandhgala and matching safa. "I wasn't ready for how she looked,"

LOVE SONG
At their reception, the groom surprised the bride by singing "Amin Paling Serius" by Indonesian pop star Sal Priadi—his first public performance and, he jokes, possibly the last.



IN YOUR AFTERGLOW
For their wedding, Kwin wore a custom Tarun Tahiliani corset lehenga with a soft tulle dupatta embroidered with their wedding date and the words "promesse de lumière"—French for "promise of light". Panji wore a Tarun Tahiliani open-jacket bandhgala and matching safa.

Panji says. "I forgot everything I had planned to say."

The ceremony began with Panji's baraat winding through the venue to the sound of Turkish drummers. Guests were welcomed with tea and sweets before taking their seats beneath floral installations framed by hand-drawn illustrations by Dubai-based artist Deveena Sood.

Pandita Sapna Pandya opened the ceremony with a Ganesh shloka followed by reading sections of the Surah Al-Fatiha. Printed booklets translated every prayer and ritual into English so guests from four continents could follow every moment. As if on cue, the azan drifted across the Bosphorus while the rain that had shadowed the morning finally began to lift.

Rather than a conventional kanyadaan, both sets of parents came forward to place the couple's hands together, transforming the ritual into one of equal partnership instead of one family giving away a daughter. The couple chose to omit the bidaai altogether and, during the saat phere, they switched positions after the fourth round as another gesture towards shared partnership.

Literature found its place alongside liturgy. Kwin's paternal aunt recited Kahlil Gibran's *On Marriage*, while the ceremony programme included passages from Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*. Instead of a traditional mangalsutra, Panji fastened a bespoke diamond-and-sapphire evil-eye bracelet around Kwin's wrist, nodding to Istanbul while retaining the meaning.



TOGETHER FOREVER
For the wedding, the couple weren't looking to merge cultures as much as to let them exist side by side. "The point was to feel it, not to perform it."

A live gamelan ensemble accompanied the Javanese sungkeman where the couple knelt before their elders to seek their blessings. They placed flowers in memory of family members who could not be there and 300 guests answered the community vows with a resounding "I do".

As the reception began, Kwin exchanged her bridal lehenga for a sculpted off-white and black couture gown by Gaurav Gupta from his Paris couture collection, and accessorised it with a statement diamond set and custom pearl heels. Panji turned up in an ivory Gaurav Gupta tuxedo finished with Louboutin dress shoes.

As guests settled into dinner inside the Esma Sultan mansion's glass pavilion, Panji surprised Kwin by taking to the piano to sing "Amin Paling Serius" by Indonesian pop star Sal Priadi—his first public performance and, he jokes, possibly the last. The evening continued with an original composition by Panji's sister before British musician Reuben James opened the live jam session Panji had long envisioned, carrying the celebrations well past midnight with ALR Music's "Superfly".

The menu reflected that same spirit of personal storytelling. The Esma Sultan kitchen brought together Turkish, Asian and Western influences, while the cocktails carried memories of home. One featured kecombrang, or torch ginger, brought from Jakarta by Kwin's mother to recreate the gin and tonic she made for the couple at home. Others nodded to their shared surname and the cities that had shaped their lives together.

Standing on stage, they looked out at 300 faces from every chapter of their lives—all the worlds they called home gathered under one roof. "If you ask us what love looked like that day," says Kwin, "we wouldn't point to the vows or the verses, or even to each other. We'd point to all of them."

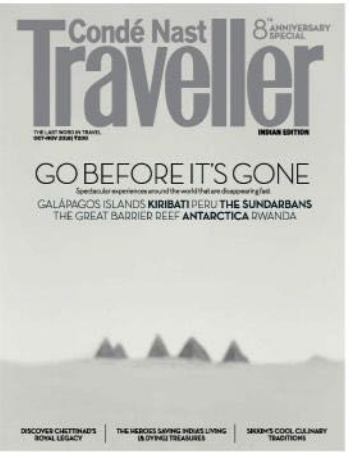


OPEN VERSE
At the Punjabi-style haldi, boliyan singers from London traded traditional folk verses across the room. The bride's aunts soon joined in.

NAMAN VERMA.







Condé Nast Traveller







THE LAST WORD IN TRAVEL

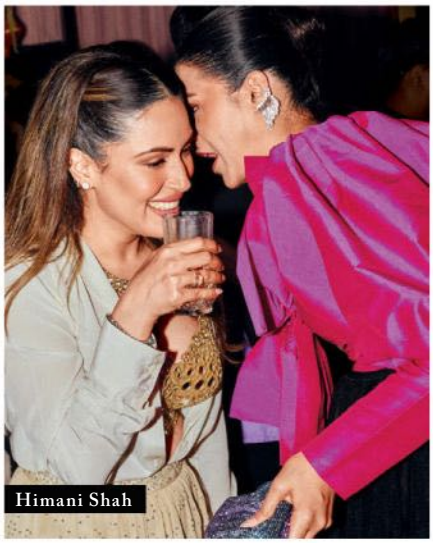
Everything that went down at Vogue Wedding Atelier



AT THE TAJ PALACE, New Delhi, Vogue Wedding Atelier 2026 unveiled how the country celebrates and shops for the modern wedding. At its heart were couture and craftsmanship, expressed in an edit of jewellery, fashion and luxury experiences. More than 6,000 guests from 20+ Indian cities and 10+ countries came together to discover what's shaping the modern wedding, from private walkthroughs and masterclasses to the Sari Pavilion, International Pavilion, Vogue Brides Desk and the debut of Vogue Café in India. At the centre of the weekend was the Bijoux Ball, presented with Johnnie Walker as the celebration partner, which gathered an exclusive audience after hours for a night of occasion dressing.

What made this edition significant was not simply its scale, but what it revealed about the Indian wedding today. Brides, grooms and families are looking beyond the conventional, towards pieces, experiences and traditions that feel distinctly their own. It offered a glimpse into how India's most discerning wedding audience is choosing to celebrate.


JJ Valaya and Aisha Rao

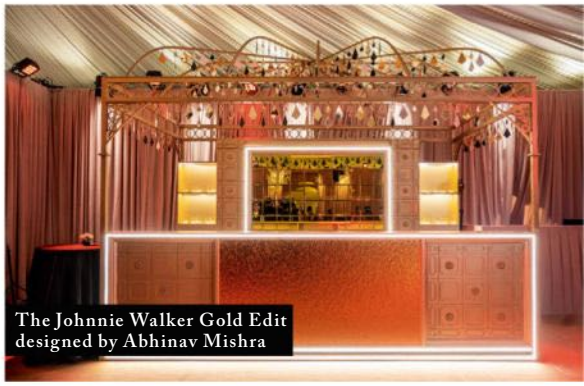

Himani Shah


Sara Tendulkar and Kalyani Saha Chawla


DJ Rabab Randhawa and DJ Nake


An act by mentalist and illusionist Chirag Jethwaney


Abhinav Mishra


The Johnnie Walker Gold Edit designed by Abhinav Mishra


A soulful performance by Jonita Gandhi


The guests in their element



BIJOUX BALL: AN EXTRAORDINARY EVENING

The Bijoux Ball, with Johnnie Walker as the celebration partner, brought fashion, jewellery and culture together for the evening, where guests dressed in their own distinctive ways.

Sara Tendulkar, Falguni and Shane Peacock, Abhinav Mishra, Kalyani Saha Chawla and many more arrived in statement jewellery and occasion dressing.

The evening unfolded with Jonita Gandhi's soulful performance and a mentalist act by Chirag Jethwaney. DJ Rabab Randhawa and DJ Nake took over from there, and the dining space turned into a dance floor.



At 'The Gaurav Gupta edit', the designer spoke about his new bridal collection



'Modern bridal beauty: YSL beauty edit' with makeup artist Mehak Oberoi



'Find love in the age of dating apps' by Anip Patel, founder of Mohan Matchmaking



'Beyond the surface: Skin as an investment' by Dr Jaishree Sharad



Namrata Soni with the Purple Martini community



'Indian craft, global ambitions' by Manish Malhotra



'A journey to inner glow' by Rashi Chowdhary



'The new Indian wedding: Where tradition meets individuality' by Innocept Studio x Sunaina Singh Designs



'Beyond the big day' by RVR Eventz & Design x Atelier by VBJ


Ishmita Badalia of Golubhai Badalia Diamond and Anaita Shroff Adajania


'Ten things I wish brides would ask me' by Devika Narain


'Made with love' by Joseph Radhik


'The next generation of heritage' by Sunita Shekhawat


Digvijay and Niharika Singh Shekhawat


'The alchemy of oudh' by Ajmal Dubai


Rahul Mishra, Surita Tandon and Simran Grewal


Florals by Farmerr


Rochelle Pinto and Manish Malhotra

VOGUE CAFÉ ARRIVES IN INDIA

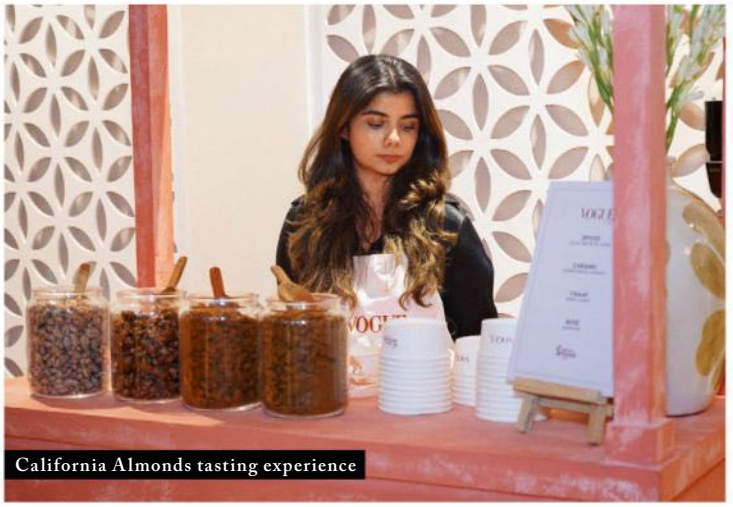
Making its India debut, Vogue Café became the social heart of Vogue Wedding Atelier, and a space to pause, eat and let the conversations of the weekend unfold.

Across the three days, Manish Malhotra, Gauravi Kumari, Rahul Mishra and Kunal Rawal were among those who stopped by, alongside guests from fashion, design and culture.



A look at Vogue Café




California Almonds tasting experience


Guests at Ras Al Khaimah


Charles Oudin Paris


A guest checking out the Judith Leiber Couture collection


Porte Bonheur Geneve


A look at the bridal collection by Elie Saab



Tableware by Baccarat

Vogue Wedding Atelier


Golubhai Badalia Diamond


Sandeep Lodha, Parul Dawar, and Shivek Gupta of Sanjay Gupta Hyderabad


Kantilal Chhotalal



Khanna Jewellers


Parul Dawar, Abhishek Raniwala of Raniwala 1881 and Sandeep Lodha


Rochelle Pinto, Raj Mahtani and Gauravi Kumari



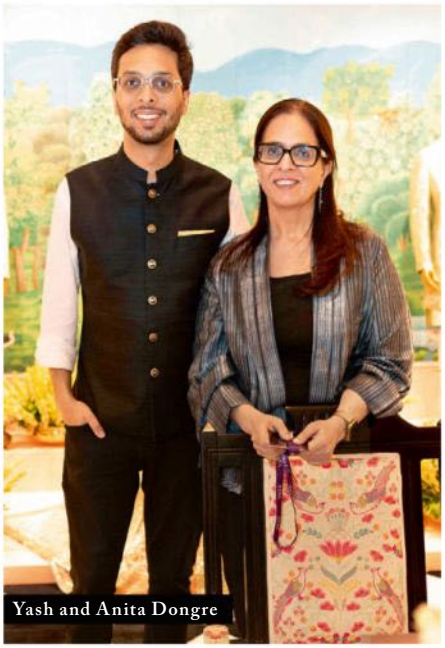
Abu Sandeep


Reva Goswami, luxury bridal makeup artist and beauty content creator


Mukta Malhotra, Manushi Singh of Rare Heritage and Sandeep Lodha

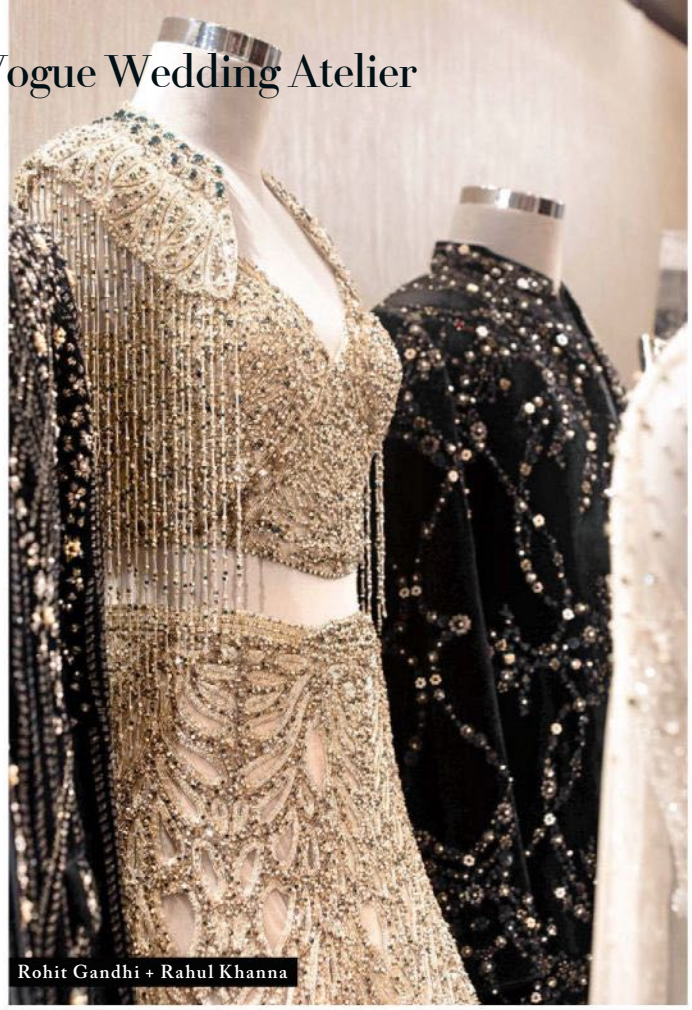

Rahul Saharan, wedding photographer


Hazoorilal Legacy


Yash and Anita Dongre


Ridhi Mehra

Vogue Wedding Atelier


Rohit Gandhi + Rahul Khanna

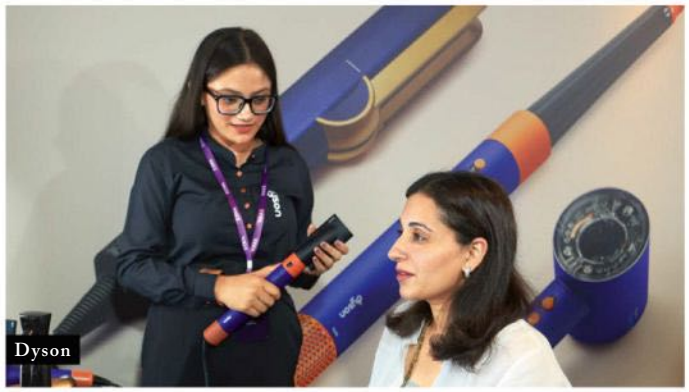

Tarini Manchanda at Ajmal Dubai


Dhaaga & Co


Hair and makeup artist Amrit Kaur at Moroccanoil


VCJ Bespoke Jewellery


Kunal Rawal


Dyson


Prakshi Sharma of RK Jewellers, Rochelle Pinto and Gauravi Kumari

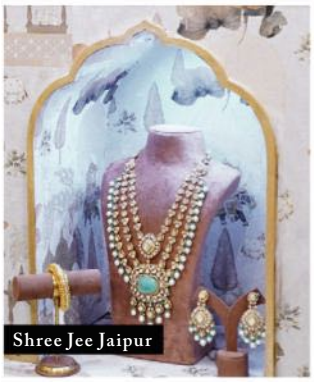

Papa Don't Preach


Brass metal repoussé by Tilfi



Sarah and Sandeep Gonsalves


Kanakavalli


Shree Jee Jaipur



Atelier by VBJ

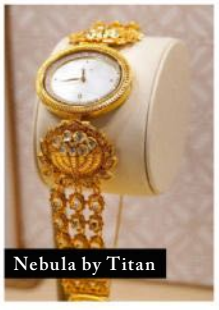
Vogue Wedding Atelier


Gajraj Jewellers


Charu Jewels


Shravan Kummar with Rochelle Pinto


Kshitij Jalori


Nebula by Titan


Takshni installation


Experience Zone: Johnnie Walker Wedding Vault designed by Yolo Entertainment & Weddings


Diva Jewels

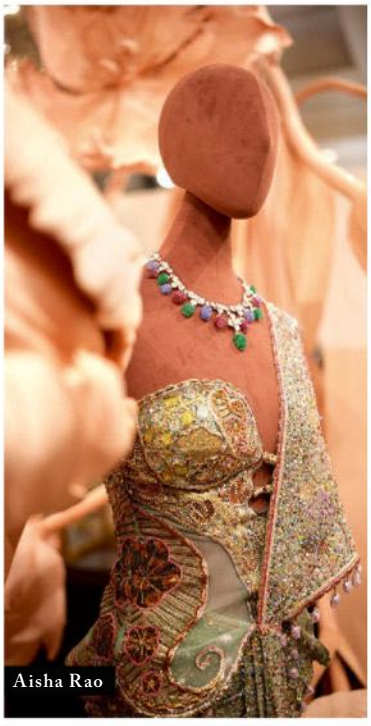

Suraj Popley with Rochelle Pinto


The House of MBj


Sunint Chadha of Bishan, Sandeep Lodha and Parul Dawar


Shree Raj Jewellers


Forevermark Diamond Jewellery


Aisha Rao



Vogue Brides desk


A shopper at Ahujasons


Shree Jewellers

Vogue Wedding Atelier



Momentz



The BMW X7 on display



Indian Heirloom Company (IHCo)



Rochelle Pinto at Creative Cuisines Inc (CCi)



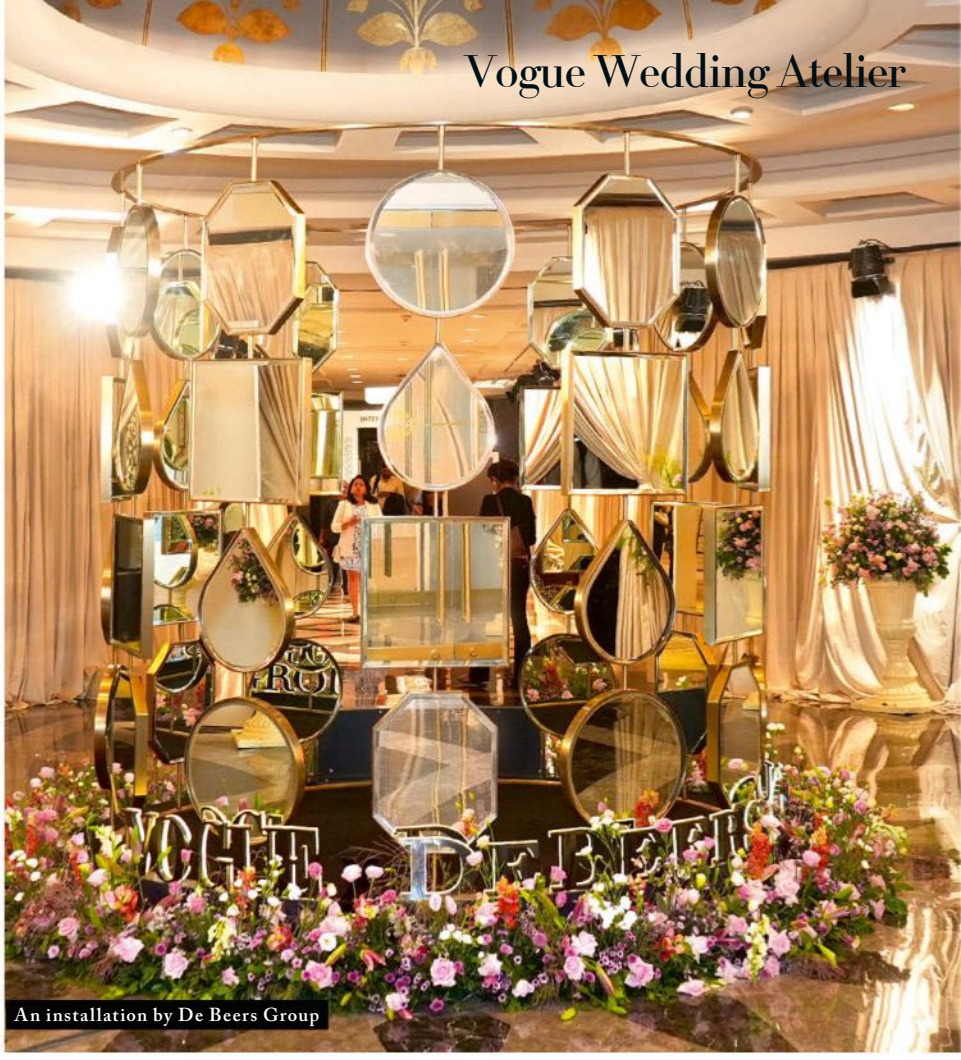
Mérci, a luxury maison for trousseau curation, art de la table and bridal registry

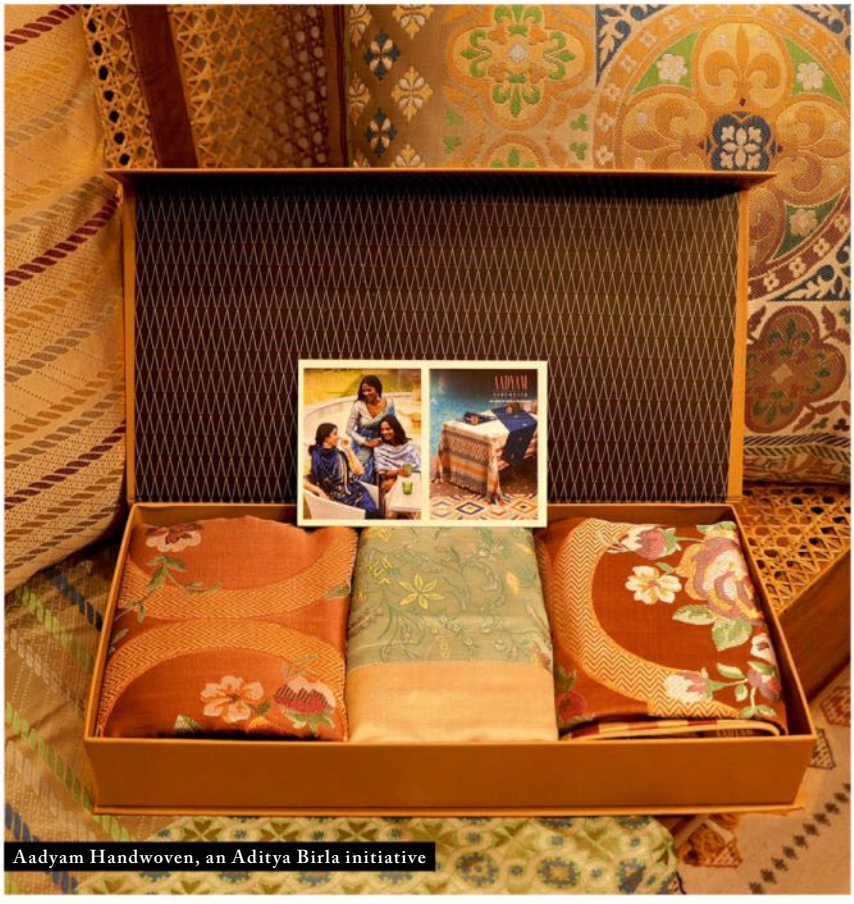


Katalyst World


Sterling silver bags by Shynora


Rivvaz Silver


An installation by De Beers Group


Aadyam Handwoven, an Aditya Birla initiative


Nespresso

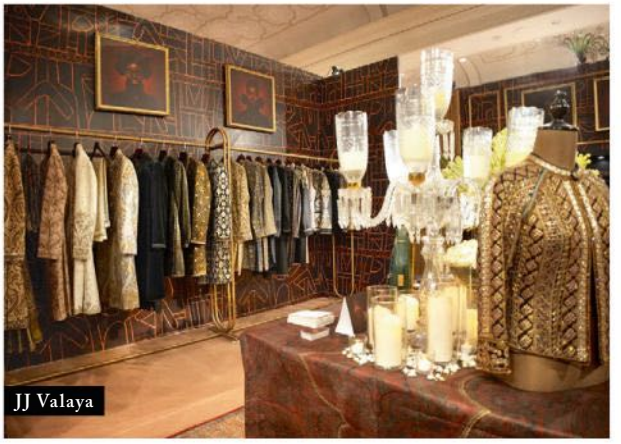


Innocept Studio


A look at the artisanal mithai by Shakkr

Vogue Wedding Atelier


Anita Dongre


JJ Valaya


Rahul Mishra


Falguni Shane Peacock


Manish Malhotra


Gaurav Gupta

VOGUE WEDDING ATELIER AMBASSADORS



ESHA AMIN PRADHAN

Celebrity stylist & fashion designer

"I loved seeing such a thoughtful edit of Indian and global luxury at VWA 2026—bringing together leading designers and jewellers in one exceptional showcase."



MOUSHUMI KHARA

Singapore-based personal & interior stylist

"One moment that really stayed with me was listening to Rahul Mishra in conversation with Rochelle Pinto about his roots and the journey of taking his brand to the global couture stage."



ASNA OBEROI

Luxury lifestyle creator, former Vogue Bride

"Vogue Wedding Atelier gives Vogue Brides the chance to tell their story through design, craft and a vision that is uniquely their own."



DIGISHA SHAH

Founder of DSPR

"Vogue Café was the perfect place to discover, connect and pause, while getting the chance to interact with the Vogue team."



REEMA THAKKAR

Founder of Spize Weddings and Events

"The finest artisans and designers brought together under one roof—beautifully curated and unlike anything I've seen before."



Marianne Midnight Noir lehenga, FALGUNI SHANE PEACOCK. *The Élan Cascade earrings and The Éminence Solitaire ring; both* GOLUBHAI BADALIA DIAMOND.



Slow and steady

A decade into her career, Sobhita Dhulipala knows that her secret strength is being able to march to the beat of her own drum. By DARSHITA GOYAL. Photographed by TARUN KALYANI. Styled by EKTA RAJANI.

It's a little after 8pm on a Friday night and Sobhita Dhulipala has already changed into a crisp, champagne-coloured pyjama set. It looks like it was picked from a shelf holding many neatly-folded, identical pairs; perhaps one for each day of the week. She's home after a long week of meetings and flights. Just the previous day, she was draped in midnight blue sequinned saris and showstopping champagne lehenga skirts from Falguni Shane Peacock's new couture collection Le Grand Voyage—the feather cape draped over one toned shoulder, bringing that fashion supervillain energy that everyone on Instagram is obsessed with right now.

Now, she is curled up on a sofa bed with her legs folded, shoulder-grazing hair swept back from her bare face and a mug of hot chocolate (instead of her trusty homemade filter coffee) in hand. She might be divested of the couture, but she carries that sense of wanderlust and the same theatricality. Even this scene, playing out over a Zoom call between Hyderabad and Bengaluru, has a cinematic quality to it, as if it were lifted from a show where the conflicted main character gets a moment to rest and reflect.

When I say this half-jokingly, the actor's interest is piqued. "I have to show you something," she says, walking out into her living room. "I just got this artwork and, coincidentally, it's called 'Main Character'." She flips the phone camera to reveal a large framed painting by surrealist artist Abhay Sehgal hanging on a wall. In it, a sari-clad woman sits with her legs crossed—not in a demure ladylike way, but man-spreading with one ankle over the other knee—under the soft glow of a lamp held up by a man's torso. "There's something so fantastic about a woman who can sit still and watch life go by," she says, explaining why she was drawn to the painting. "She does what she wants, how she wants and when she wants."

It's how some might describe the actor too. A decade ago, Dhulipala made her acting debut in Anurag Kashyap's *Raman Raghav 2.0* as an emotionally resilient but complex woman who held her own in the face of an abusive partner. Her filmography, comprising about 18 titles so far, may not be as populated as some of her peers, but this quest for messy female characters has evidently stuck, whether it is the ambitious yet morally ambivalent Tara Khanna in the series *Made in Heaven* or the elite sex worker Sita in the action film *Monkey Man*, directed by Dev Patel.

Between OTT shows and feature films, the first half of this decade saw Dhulipala on hyperdrive. She shuffled between set and red carpet premieres, she says, without much time for feeling. "I was in a churn and I loved that but, today, I'm not letting the current lead me. I'm more anchored. I didn't think I would enjoy this [slowness] but I have," she says.

Don't mistake the stillness for emptiness though. It's been less than two years since Dhulipala tied the knot with actor Naga Chaitanya Akkineni in Hyderabad. Thinking back to her traditional Telugu ceremony, she says, "I didn't think I'd end up with someone who's an actor or from my state but I always wanted a wedding that had my culture's nuances. It was part of the fantasy from when I was a child."

Earlier this year, she played a true crime podcaster in the Telugu language film *Cheekatilo*. Soon, she'll be back on the promotion circuit for Pa Ranjith's upcoming sci-fi action thriller *Vettuvam*, scheduled for a late 2026 release. In it, she stars alongside VR Dinesh and Arya as a character that she calls "feisty but not in a simmering, under the surface, way".

Despite all this action, Dhulipala insists this is her era of introspection. "As an actor, you want to feel chosen and validated," she says. "My role exists for consumption and I become the product, so it's easy to be wounded. For me, being the main character is to step away from this, to be still and give up the need to belong anywhere or to anyone."

Presumably, belonging to oneself more than to the world is a process for any public figure. Still, for someone like me sitting on the sidelines, her apparent comfort in her own skin has always been her most attractive quality. Dhulipala laughs, admitting self-assuredness didn't always come easy to her. She recalls seeing a jewellery ad some years ago, wishing she could star in it. "I knew I had largely done independent cinema and commercial brands are looking for actors who are more visible," she says. "Two years later, the same brand wanted to work with me because I was doing unconventional roles. That's when I started to realise, I don't need to have different feathers to belong, I am exactly who I should be."

What she's always known, even instinctively, is that there's power in showing the world facets of yourself beyond work. If you look at Dhulipala's Instagram, with a casual seven million followers, you will notice the signs of this expansion. In May, she created a new highlight to share homegrown designers that she wears: Lovebirds, Miuniku and Chorus sit high on the list. In June, she once again began her "book of the month" highlight, which she used to put out long before book clubs, celebrity-led or otherwise, became a thing. Constants on her bedside table: Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, George Orwell's *1984* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*.

Right page: Shirt, shorts and boots; all HERMÈS. *Exclusive green stone bridal necklace and diamond long chain; both* POPLEY ETERNAL.





Patricia Blue Hue Jeans set, FALGUNI SHANE PEACOCK. *Vest, Stylist's own. So Kate Booty,* CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN. *Peacock Rhapsody necklace, Amber Princess ring, Alora Diamond ring, Omega Bracelet, Roped Diamond ring and Orchid Enchanté ear cuffs; all* DIVA JEWELS. *Boîte Chapeau 40, Coffret Trésor 24 and Coffret Joaillerie; all* LOUIS VUITTON.



Rachel Ivory Luminous skirt, FALGUNI SHANE PEACOCK. *Top, Stylist's own. Gucci Trademark ring (both) and Gucci Horsebit bracelet; both* GUCCI. *Diamond pendant,* POPLEY ETERNAL.



"For me, being the main character is to be still and give up the need to belong anywhere or to anyone"

But really, it's not Instagram where she's spending most of her free time these days. "I recently got on Substack and it's so good. I'm reading about things like healthcare, what's lacking in Indian branding—just everything. I never post. In fact, let me read you my bio," she breaks into a cheeky smile, pulling up the app on her phone. "It says, 'Here to read, not to say. Don't bother following'."

At different points in our chat, Dhulipala describes herself as an "intellectual omnivore", "a solitary beast", "a hyper self-reliant animal"—all very assertive phrases that hint at someone who has spent time deeply feeling and understanding themselves. It reminds me of a frayed poster with a Franz Kafka quote that was stickered behind the door of my high school library: "A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us."

Whether it's Substack or paperbacks, the actor spends about three hours a day reading. (If it's a book, it's always a physical copy with corners of her favourite pages folded. "Never a Kindle," she says.) It's how Dhulipala makes sense of her world. It's among her non-negotiable self-care rituals, including working out and spending time in the sun. But where most people journal and meditate, Dhulipala loves "being in traffic, looking out the window and dreaming. Even planes get me in my feelings."

What about spirituality? "I have never expressed this publicly because I'm a little protective of this side, but I have enormous faith in the intangible," she shares. "I like to observe how I'm feeling on a full moon night and as the cycle changes. I'm a massive astro-geek."

Taking this as my woo-woo cue, I tell her that we're a night away from the Lion's Gate Portal, the window when the sun in Leo aligns with the earth and Sirius, creating a powerful time for manifestation. As I brace for resistance, there's absolutely no cynicism from Dhulipala. She instantly agrees to set intentions the following day. "I have my own mandir, my own altar, whatever you want to call it. I'll take a moment there," she says. "I actually spend conscious time and energy here."

Perhaps this reflection is the answer: the last few years have not only softened Dhulipala's outlook towards herself, but to the world at large. Unlike the steely characters she portrays, she says she is actually an extremely sensitive and emotional person. In the past, when people didn't show up for her in the way she hoped or when her role models didn't stand up for things they believed in, she took it personally, responding with disappointment and hurt. "Today I understand that power is not fixed, it's dynamic. You need to give people space and allowance for error," she says, and then repeats the last half as if it is a reminder to herself.

Candid to a fault, Dhulipala holds my gaze intently throughout our conversation. It's almost intimidating that she never looks away, not even to iron out a response. Actually, that's not true. The only time she breaks eye contact is when I ask what it's like to navigate a new marriage when you and your partner are ambitious, evolving public figures. I sense that she's more comfortable answering as 'the actor' and 'the thinker', than as 'the wife'.

She pauses to frame her sentences and finally says: "Within a few weeks of being married [in December 2024], I left to shoot in Tamil Nadu. I was there for over 150 days and in the first year of our marriage, I probably saw him maybe once a month, so we were still understanding this mix together. Now in the past few months, we're adapting to life. The one thing I know is we both prioritise what's needed to keep the connection healthy."

Like clockwork, she pivots back to her work, calling "*Vettuvam* the best work [she's] ever done". Since her debut, Sobhita has worked in more film industries than most actors—she has done films in Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and English. She was nominated for Best Supporting Performance at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival and her 2024 film *Monkey Man* went to the BAFTAs. At this point, does the actor have anything left to prove?

"The goal keeps shifting," she says. "A few years ago, I wanted to work with certain directors, I wanted to be on *Vogue* before 30. But now, I just want to connect with people, I want to make them think long after they have left the theatre. I want to tell stories about morally messy women who don't fit into neat corners."

Left page: Soft Nappa leather bomber jacket and top; both GUCCI. *Pants, Sobhita's own. Amber Bloom brooch,* DIVA JEWELS. *The Tourmaline Bloom brooch and The Florentine brooch; both* PRITHVIRAJ JEWELS.

MAKEUP: SAVLEEN MANCHANDA/EFICIENTE. ARTIST MANAGEMENT, HAIR: UMANG THAPA/ANIMA CREATIVES. SET DESIGNER: RESHMA RAJWDEKAR. BOOKINGS EDITOR: AANGI NAHTA. ENTERTAINMENT DIRECTOR: MEGHA MEHTA. ENTERTAINMENT MANAGER: REBECCA GONSALVES. ASSISTED BY: RAKOVINAI ZHO (PHOTOGRAPHY), NAHID NAWAAZ AND NYASA THAKKAR (STYLING). PRODUCTION: CUTLOOSE PRODUCTIONS.



Ribboned Radiance necklace, DIVA JEWELS.

A MOVEABLE FEAST

Armorise yourself with jewels in carats, bezels and silhouettes a cut above the rest—you'll be serving looks all season long.
Photographed by AASTHA MANCHANDA. Styled by NIKITA RAO.



Rose-cut diamond rings with Burma rubies, GAJRAJ JEWELLERS.



The Astoria bracelet, SANJAY GUPTA HYDERABAD.



Deep tourmaline earrings,
PRITHVIRAJ JEWELS.

Tourmaline and rose cut diamond necklace, SHREE RAJ JEWELLERS.





Pearl-embedded tourmaline stud,
HAZOORILAL LEGACY.



The Tiger's Legacy earrings,
PRITHVIRAJ JEWELS.



Tourmaline and rose cut diamond ring, tourmaline and uncut diamond bangle and natural ruby and diamond bangle; all SHREE RAJ JEWELLERS.

BOOKINGS EDITOR: AANGI NAHTA. FASHION ASSISTANT: NIDA SHAIKH. PRODUCTION: P PRODUCTIONS.



The inner circle

Behind every perfect bride is a chorus of hands that have dressed, steadied, celebrated and loved her into this moment. Photographed by SARANG GUPTA. Styled by MANGLIEN GANGTE.



(From left) On Vibha: Siren Bloom lehenga, GAURAV GUPTA. *On Antara: Zephyria mini dress,* ANITA DONGRE. *Burgundy ombre jacket,* JJ VALAYA. *On Janhavi: Crimson Eclipse Crystal gown,* ROHIT GANDHI & RAHUL KHANNA. *Sunflair champagne Banarasi tissue brocade gown,* AISHA RAO.



(From left) On Antara: Springfern hand-painted Picchwai skirt set (ivory), ANITA DONGRE. *On Janhavi: Blush Pink Crystal Feather mini dress,* FALGUNI SHANE PEACOCK.



(From left) On Vibha: The Emerald Moon Ensemble, SARAH & SANDEEP. Valli Muhurtham sari, KANAKAVALLI. On Janhavi: Jaya sari, TILFI. On Antara: Valli Muhurtham sari, KANAKAVALLI.

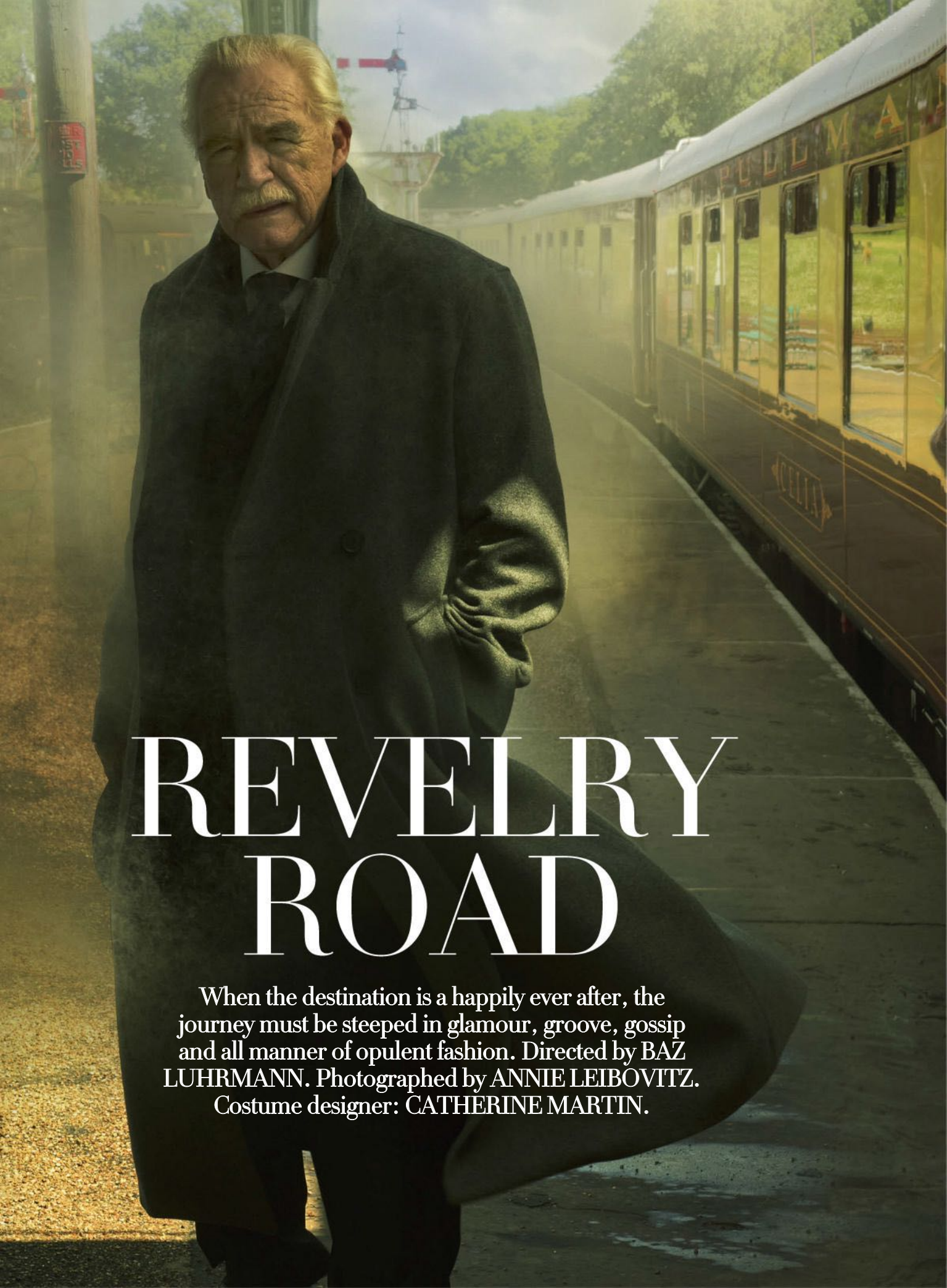


(From left) On Vibha: Burgundy Ombré Crystal Cascade gown, FALGUNI SHANE PEACOCK. *On Antara: Gilded Midnight dress,* ROHIT GANDHI & RAHUL KHANNA.



Multicoloured tissue embellished lehenga, AISHA RAO. *Pearlfect Chaos mule heels,* FIZZY GOBLET.

MAKEUP: ESHWAR LOG. HAIR: UMANG THAPA/ANIMA. BOOKINGS EDITOR: AANGI NAHTA. MODELS: VIBHA MEHTA, ANTARA PRABHANJAN/ FEAT ARTISTS, JANHAVI JADEJA/INEGA. ASSISTED BY: NYASA THAKKAR, NIDA SHAIKH. PRODUCTION: P PRODUCTIONS.



REVELRY ROAD

When the destination is a happily ever after, the journey must be steeped in glamour, groove, gossip and all manner of opulent fashion. Directed by BAZ LUHRMANN. Photographed by ANNIE LEIBOVITZ. Costume designer: CATHERINE MARTIN.



(From left) On Brian Cox: Coat, waistcoat and trousers; all PAUL SMITH. *On Letitia Wright: Dress and gloves, both* MAX MARA. *Shoes,* JIMMY CHOO. *On Josephine Thiesen: Coat and dress, both* AKRIS. *Hat,* CHRISTYS' HATS.





On Luke Thompson: Waistcoat, shirt, trousers and tie; all EMPORIO ARMANI. *Shoes,* CHURCH'S SHOES.





(From left) On Sadie Soverall: Gown and bodysuit, both MISS SOHEE. *Harriet Walter in* VALENTINO. *On Wright: Suit and shirt, both* ERDEM. *Shoes,* PRADA.



Sadie in GIVENCHY
BY SARAH BURTON.



Mason Alexander Park in VALENTINO HAUTE COUTURE.



(From left) On Thompson: Jacket, JUNYA WATANABE MAN. *On Cox: Waistcoat, shirt and tie; all Moss. Trousers,* POLO RALPH LAUREN. *Thiesen* in CHANEL. *Wright* in DANIELLE FRANKEL. *Archie Madekwe* in DIOR.





(From left) On Cox: Suit, DUNHILL. *On Madekwe: Top and trousers; both* VALENTINO. *Shoes,* DOLCE & GABBANA. *Harriet in* DOLCE & GABBANA ALTA MODA.



FASHION EDITOR: TABITHA SIMMONS. MAKEUP: LISA HOUGHTON. PRODUCED BY FARAGO PROJECTS. PRODUCTION DESIGN: MARY HOWARD. SET DECORATION: LEE FLUDE. SPECIAL THANKS TO BRITISH PULLMAN, A BELMOND TRAIN, ENGLAND. MANICURIST: MICHELLE HUMPHREY. TAILOR: DELLA GEORGE.



A suitable bag

An appropriately capacious bag with tasteful details is just the thing to add a touch of whimsy to your best wedding looks. Photographed by CHARLES NEGRE.

Mini square trunk,
LOUIS VUITTON.



Nonna bag,
DOLCE & GABBANA.



Mini Flamenco purse, LOEWE.



Shoulder bag, DRIES VAN NOTEN.



Le Teckel purse, ALAÏA.



Baguette bag, FENDI.



Flap bag, CHANEL.

PRODUCTION: LAMBERT LAMBERT. SET DESIGN: REMY RIERE.



DeVain embroidered shoulder bag, VALENTINO GARAVANI.



Coral centrepiece,
₹4,58,972, L'OBJET.

HORO SCOPE FIRE

LEO

The era of endlessly weighing your options is giving way to something more meaningful: choosing to invest in what truly matters. Whether you're nurturing an existing relationship or opening your heart to something new, you're beginning to understand that lasting love is built on consistency, intention and showing up, day after day. The love you have been pouring into the world is finally making its way back to you. Just don't become so focused on fixing every little thing that you forget to enjoy the connection itself. Love isn't only found in milestone moments—it's woven into shared laughter, quiet routines and thoughtful gestures.

ARIES

Drifting through the wind and flirtatious gestures may have got you excited in the past, but is that really you now? There may have been a constant battle between your head and heart but you are now beginning to find a balance between the two. Yes, you do get excited about newness, but also yes—you are willing to infuse this novelty into relationships that are already working for you. A positive shift in your personal life and relationships is incoming and, because of this, other aspects of your life are beginning to bloom too. And you are loving it. Ease into things instead of jumping the gun and there is nothing that would make you happier.

SAGITTARIUS

Superficiality is not your thing—it never was—but now you are entering a phase where you simply cannot tolerate it. And this seems to be working out very well for you. New people, opportunities, rewarding relationships and platforms are surfacing. You are being asked to reconsider all you have known and felt about love. Is it mere admiration and flattery or recognition that marks this feeling as 'love' for you? Because you may soon be redefining this for yourself. Companionship, realness and rock solid, consistent support top the charts for you—and that is exactly what you begin to find because that is what you have begun to seek.

Text by SNEHAA KHANNA SAHGAL.

HORO SCOPE WATER

CANCER

Have you been feeling like you've been fighting a lonely battle, Cancer? This cycle—of carrying the weight of the world upon your lone shoulders—is about to shift. As you stop trying to control every outcome and allow yourself to see the bigger picture, love starts to feel less like a burden and more like a place of belonging. With consistency and one intentional choice at a time, you can solidify this as your long-term happy reality. But remember, reciprocity, respect and shared emotional investment aren't bonuses—they are the foundation of everything you're trying to build.

SCORPIO

The endless back-and-forth is finally coming to an end. The constant weighing of options—wondering whether choosing one path meant losing another—has taught you everything it needed to. As a new chapter unfolds, replace hesitation with trust. Whether you're in a relationship or navigating love on your own, the energy is shifting in your favour. Your intuition is on fire and your naturally magnetic personality draws people and opportunities your way. All you want is some peace, quiet and that warm fuzzy feeling of love that engulfs you. It could come from a lover or a pet—let yourself receive it without questioning whether it's enough.

PISCES

You are no longer mistaking emotional drama and struggle for love. The days of settling for the bare minimum may be behind you and, Pisces, you are absolutely ready for it. Any new beginning feels challenging at first, but with just a little awareness and mindful effort, this too begins to feel comforting. Remember, healthier dynamics often require you to unlearn old patterns before they begin to feel natural. You have a lot of support and resources with you right now. You are no longer equating love with sacrifice. You are ready to open your arms wide and let life happen to you in magical ways.



Vide Poche Mermaid ashtray, ₹8,724, LAETITIA ROUGET.

Hand-painted fruit dish, ₹32,205, 1ST DIBS.



HORO SCOPE EARTH

CAPRICORN

Somewhere along the way, being dependable became synonymous with being available at any cost, and your relationships have begun to reflect that imbalance, Capricorn. And you are absolutely done. Exit this circus; trust yourself to know who values your presence and who only values what you bring to the table. Whether in love or in life, this is the moment to become intentional about who gets access to your time, energy and heart. Everyone may want to sit at your table, but not everyone will help you bring food to it. Become more respectful and discerning of your own time, energy and love. Choose reciprocal relationships and people.

TAURUS

Love has begun to feel a little more serious. For some, wedding bells are ringing, while others may feel ready to take their relationship to the next level. And if a commitment has been built on half-truths, mixed signals or emotional inconsistency, those cracks are becoming impossible to ignore. Wherever you are at present, a clearer path is unfolding for you. An end is imminent—be it within patterns or relationships. You are emerging strong and powerful, especially emotionally. A year from now, you'll look back and realise this wasn't the chapter that broke your heart—it was the one that taught you how to choose it.

VIRGO

Feeling trapped is not your scene anymore. You finally unshackle your mind from your beliefs about your capabilities. What others have to say doesn't hurt as much anymore—because your truth axis is turned inward now. As a difficult chapter comes to a close, whether it's an unhealthy relationship, a painful pattern or an older version of yourself, life begins to gather momentum in all the right ways. Love feels lighter because you're no longer carrying fears that were never yours to begin with. Blessings and happiness surround you in multiple ways. Taking a balanced approach now may be the best move you can make.

HORO SCOPE AIR

GEMINI

Maybe you're done—not with love, but with overgiving, overextending and abandoning yourself to keep someone else comfortable. This is definitely something you want to leave behind, Gemini. A new chapter is unfolding—one that shifts the way you see yourself, the standards you hold, and the relationships you're willing to invest in. As your confidence grows, so does your capacity to attract healthier, more reciprocal connections. This isn't about waiting for love to find you; it's about becoming an active participant in creating the relationship you know you're ready for. You've got this.

LIBRA

Enough with dwelling on your past with the sort of hard-hitting nostalgia that won't let you move forward. You like weighing your options, yes. But just as there will always be better options to choose from, there is also always a choice to focus on what is working in your life or present relationship. It's time to put an end to this vicious cycle and feeling left out and alone over and over again. Breathe. Take a chance on yourself and your life. The cycle ends the moment you stop expecting your past to predict your future and start allowing your relationship the chance to become something different.

AQUARIUS

You've been the one holding relationships together for far too long, Aquarius. The emotional anchor, the problem-solver, the one who keeps things afloat. Of course, you feel burnt out. But this need not mean that you run away from the world. You simply need to reconfigure your inner dynamics—from being the only one who carries the load to being the one who is willing to share it. For singles, love is about to move in your direction, but cut away the unnecessary noise that keeps you feeling unworthy. The cosmos is willing to lend a helping hand—if only you care to ask.



Lemon squeezer trio,
₹11,900, GOHAR WORLD.



FACETED FORMS

Hazoorilal Legacy introduces Facets, a fashion jewellery collection inspired by the movement of light. Rubellites, blue sapphires, emeralds, kunzites and heritage Polki come together in sculptural pieces that balance colour and form. The collection offers a modern approach to fine jewellery, with creations designed to craft a legacy for generations.

For more information, visit www.hazoorilallegacy.com



IN FULL BLOOM

Luxury fashion brand Prints by Radhika introduces its latest collection, Jardin des Rêves. The selection features a dreamy gardenscape with sculpted corsets, fluid saris, and sweeping gowns. Using ombré organza, painted meadows, and embroidered butterflies, the collection turns each piece into a surreal canvas.

For more information, visit www.printsbyradhika.com or follow @printsbyradhika on Instagram

THE MINIMALIST EDIT

The Bound Mini Melrose brings a polished take to everyday dressing. Its rose gold-tone case is paired with a matching mesh strap, while the crisp white dial keeps the design clean and understated. The sleek rectangular silhouette adds a distinct edge to its minimalist profile, balancing contemporary appeal with a sense of refinement. Designed to move from day to evening, it is a versatile addition to the modern wardrobe, with just enough presence to stand out without feeling overly styled.

For more information, visit www.in.danielwellington.com



Vogue DIARY

We bring you the best in luxury and fashion

ONE OF A KIND



Gajraj Jewellers brings together ancestral craft and rare materials in heirloom creations made to treasure. Each piece is handcrafted by master artisans, with an emphasis on detail and individuality. Designed beyond seasonal trends, the jewellery is made to be worn, collected, and passed down, carrying the character of its maker through generations.

For more information, visit www.gajrajjewels.com

IN A NEW LIGHT



As part of its Shikargah collection of Art & Collectibles, fashion and lifestyle brand Tilfi introduces Stillness and Sight, a pair of handcrafted candle holders that celebrate India's rich metalworking traditions. Skillfully shaped from a single metal sheet using the age-old technique of Banarasi metal repoussage, the stand depicts an intricate ancient hunting tableau. With its finely worked surface and detailing, the piece adds a regal touch to your drawing room.

For more information, visit www.tilfi.com

OCCASIONWEAR, ELEVATED

Through her eponymous label, Shimona Agrawal reimagines Indian occasionwear through a contemporary lens, bringing together design, textiles, and artisanal craftsmanship. With an emphasis on comfort and versatility, her collections move beyond traditional notions of occasion dressing. From intimate celebrations to festive gatherings, each piece feels refined and effortless, and can be worn long after the occasion has passed.

For more information, visit www.shimonaagrawal.com or follow @shimonaagrawal_ on Instagram





CELEBRATE IN STYLE

Kolkata's heritage and Taj's signature hospitality come together at Taj Bengal. Framed by elegant interiors, the hotel offers a sophisticated setting for weddings. Grand banquet halls, terrace gardens, and bespoke dining experiences make every celebration memorable.

For more information, visit www.tajhotels.com

TIME, IN COUTURE

Nebula by Titan and Tarun Tahiliani come together for the Phool Chadar collection, translating the floral artistry of the ceremonial phool chadar into timepieces crafted in 18K gold with Polki and Chandak detailing. The seven-piece collection includes two limited editions, Gulistaan and Kyaari, each limited to 40 pieces. Created for wedding celebrations, the collection brings couture, jewellery and watchmaking together in a refined expression of Indian craft and bridal tradition.

For more information, visit www.titan. co.in/ nebula-x-tarun-tahiliani.html



MADE TO IMPRESS

Irasva's Esperia explores modern jewellery through geometric forms, featuring baguette-cut rubies and diamonds. Each piece blends structure and light to craft jewellery that feels distinct yet easy to wear. Its architectural silhouette and craftsmanship offer a contemporary take on occasion dressing, designed to make an impression while remaining versatile enough for all occasions.

For more information, contact +91 8591049076 or email sales@irasva.com

Shoplist

FASHION

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Akris (www.akris.com)
Alaïa (www.maison-alaia.com)
Anita Dongre (www.anitadongre.com)
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JJ Valaya (www.valaya.com)
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Rohit Gandhi & Rahul Khanna
(www.rohitandrahul.com)
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CULTURE & LIVING
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Jaipur Rugs (www.jaipurrugs.com)
L'Objet (www.l-objet.com)
Laetitia Rouget (laetitiarouget.com)
Viya (www.viyadesign.com)

JEWELLERY & WATCHES
Anmol Jewellers, Turner Rd, Bandra West, Mumbai,
9821013886 (www.anmoljewellers.in)
Cartier, Jio World Plaza, Mumbai 022-31008382
(www.cartier.com)
Charu Jewels (www.charujewels.com)
Diva Jewels, Laxmi Industrial Estate,
Andheri West, Mumbai, 9619859590
(www.divajewels.com)
Gajraj Jewellers, Palace Rd, Bengaluru,
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Golubhai Badalia Diamond, Abhedananda Road,
Kolkata, West Bengal, 8697100632
(www.golubhaibadalia.com)
Gucci, Jio World Plaza, 80 4435 0321, (www.gucci.com)
Hazoorilal Legacy, South Extension II,
New Delhi, 011 48733333,
(www.hazoorilallegacy.com)
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8527723988 (www.khannajeweller.com)
Popley Eternal, Bandra West, Mumbai, 9930828279
Prithviraj Jewels, South-Extension II, Delhi
(www.prithvirajjewels.com)
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73 8000 9000 (www.shreerajjewellers.com)
Sunita Shekhawat, Ashok Nagar, Jaipur, Rajasthan,
0141 236 1385 (www.sunitashekhawat.com)

The merchandise featured editorially has been ordered at the above stores. Some shops may carry a selection only. Prices and availability were checked at the time of going to press. But we cannot guarantee that prices will not change or that specific items will be in stock when the magazine is published. We suggest that before visiting a shop you call to make sure they have your size.



Antique Victorian ruby and emerald earring, ANMOL JEWELLERS.

AASTHA MANCHANDA

Power pack

A compact, sturdy and stylish bag that can carry your entire world? Meet your constant companion as you dance, eat and toast through another wedding season.



Capucines East-West Mini bag, LOUIS VUITTON.

TARUN KALYANI.



VOGUE INDIA

BEFORE IT'S IN FASHION, IT'S IN VOGUE!







VOGUE INDIA

BEFORE IT'S IN FASHION, IT'S IN VOGUE!





