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Paths Well Taken
Imran Amed

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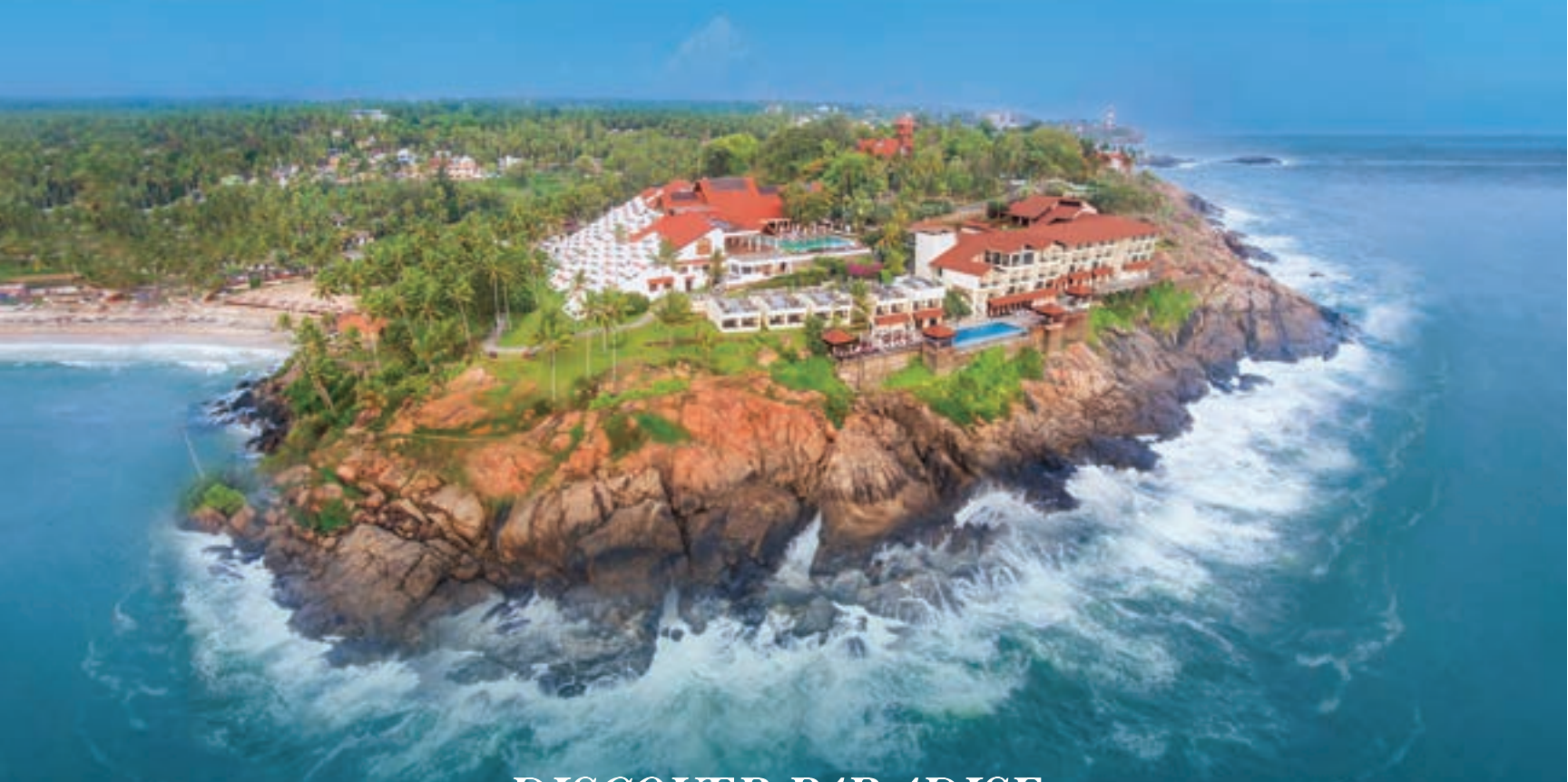
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EAT. LIVE. DRINK.

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Our Cover Story is the journey of an inspirational and important individual, who has not only highlighted the business of fashion but given fashion a whole new meaning. Founder of *Business of Fashion*, Imran Amed began his extremely successful company as a blog, and today, fifteen years later, *Business of Fashion* has become one of the most important names and voices in the fashion industry. As *Khoj* celebrates twenty-five years, we converse with Co-Founder Pooja Sood, who lets us in on what the artist space has planned for the years to come. Bookmaker, Photographer, and the recipient of *Hasselblad Award 2022*, Dayanita Singh's photo-novel celebrates her earliest years as a photographer, when she didn't really consider herself one. *Let's See* presents images from her archives, most of which will be seen for the first time. Master storyteller and one of my favourites, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni shares her relationship with writing and what it took to craft her upcoming novel *Independence*. Filmmaker, Actor, Writer, Nandita Das will be releasing her latest film *Zwigato*, a story of new urban India. The film gives an insight into the lives of the often unseen people who really are the heart and soul of the nation and its economy.

Anoushka Shankar lets us into her home, *Her Jannah*, and in an unfiltered conversation shares her joy and challenges of motherhood, how she balances her life, what questions arose through the pandemic, and how she's making sense of her new found realisation. Awarded *Best Chef New York State* from the coveted *James Beard Foundation*, Master Chef Chintan Pandya and Restaurateur Roni Mazumdar take us through their unapologetic journey of serving authentic Indian food to the western market through their various restaurants. One such eatery, *Semma*, won its first *Michelin Star* in 2022. *What's Your Story?* presents interesting, eclectic, and extremely artistic talents from different genres of creativity. The visual narrative highlights key thoughts that have shaped their artistry. Historian and Author Moin Mir, takes and makes us take a pause to celebrate Selinunte - The Sanctuary of Silence.



And *Coming Through In Waves*, Bharat Sikka's most recent photo essay, explores the youth culture, and invites and starts conversations around identity, gender, sexuality, and thoughts that are relevant to our times.

With that and much more, we end 2022 and wish you all a fantastic and creative 2023.

Shruti Kapur Malhotra, Editor-in-Chief



RYMN MASSAND [Design Consultant & Writer] Rymn is the creative director and founder of +RYMN, a design and creative consultancy whose clients include *Random House*, *Columbia Films*, *LVMH*, *NYTimes*, *Nickelodeon*, *The MOMA*, *Bloomsbury Books*, *Doubleday*, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, *Paramount Pictures* and *HBO* amongst others. In addition, she writes about travel and design for various publications including *Vogue*, *CN Traveller*, *Architectural Digest* and *The New York Times*. Cover Story, PG 016

KALPESH LATHIGRA [Photographer] Kalpesh Lathigra was born in London, England in 1971 and educated at the *London College of Printing* with a Postgraduate Diploma in Photojournalism. After being awarded *The Independent Newspaper Photographer Traineeship*, he worked for *The Independent* before freelancing for the national newspapers in the UK. Soon he switched to work on long-term projects, magazine and commercial assignments. He has recently completed *Lost in the Wilderness*, a body of work looking at life on Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota which he plans to publish as a monograph. Cover Story, PG 016



PRAKRIT RAI [Photographer] Born in Sikkim, Prakrit Rai is a photographer based in New Delhi. He specialises in fashion, editorial, portraiture and documentary. His personal work is heavily influenced by themes of representation, identity and culture. He is an alumnus of *Paris College of Arts*, France. Style, PG 128

SOUMYA MUKERJI [Writer and Editor] Soumya is a narrative journalist with fourteen years in the realm of convergent and counter cultures, global literature, multidisciplinary arts, and social issues. Before her role of Managing Editor of design publication, *STIR*, she was the Deputy Editor for *Platform Magazine*. Her work has appeared in *The Guardian*, *Hindustan Times*, *NDTV* and the *Times of India*. She has been a Guest Editor and Advisor to *The Remnant Archive*, an independent journal of literature, history and culture. Soumya travels often in nature and goes back home to poetry. Dialogue & Journey, PG 030 & PG 146



GAURI SARIN [Chef & Writer] Gauri is a lifelong hospitality vet, working in all aspects of the business, from operations to marketing and sales, to once upon a time the head chef of her own food truck. She is always in search of the best bites and the people who make them, frequently writing about her travels in a self-produced blog. Eat.Live.Drink. PG 178



VIKRAM KUSHWAH [Photographer] Vikram Kushwah is an India-born photography artist based in England. Shortlisted by the *National Portrait Gallery* London for the *Taylor Wessing Portrait Prize 2019*, and *Portrait of Britain 2018 and 2019* winner (by the *British Journal of Photography*), he spent his formative years in boarding school in the foothills of Northern India. Vikram completed his MA in Photography at the *University for the Creative Arts, Rochester* in 2010. He has since been practicing in the UK and India, among other countries. He focusses primarily on self initiated art projects besides working for fashion, art and culture based publications. NPAT, PG 156

MOIN MIR [Author] Moin Mir is a London based author of 'The Lost Fragrance of Infinity' and 'Surat: Fall of a Port. Rise of a Prince' www.moinmirauthor.com PG 154





TARUN TAHILIANI

Narrative

A large, light gray opening quotation mark (‘‘) is positioned on the left side of the image, above the main text.

**Our vocabulary has its
limitations, photographs can
go where there are no words.**

– DAYANITA SINGH

A large, light gray closing quotation mark (’’) is positioned on the right side of the image, below the main text.

PATHS WELL TAKEN

IMRAN AMED

Early one crisp, sunny, September morning I make my way down a leafy street in West London. One of those days that puts a pep in your step and a song in your heart and I am very much of the state of mind that infinite possibilities lie ahead.

A feeling very much reinforced as the subject of this interview opens the door of his beautiful home to me with a big smile and a warm welcome.

A lot has been written about Imran Amed and *The Business of Fashion*, the much lauded (and now vital to the fashion industry), company that he founded in 2007. Working at *McKinsey* as a management consultant, restless and unfulfilled, the idea of starting a blog whose purpose was to connect, inform and report on the notoriously insular fashion industry with quality analysis and exacting journalism may have seemed lofty, but I see it as an act of courage, and this courage and inspiration is exactly what I am here to talk about.

As we settle down on the sofa where it all began (years ago, after work, Imran would sit on this very sofa and write the first incarnation of BoF), I look around the cozy living room, piled high with books, to read and to admire, punctuated by pictures and paintings, mementos and objects that feel gathered with intention and care, it strikes me as familiar. The homes of most creative people I know feel exactly like who they are: speaking to their quirks and their stories, their interests and curiosities and a reflection of their journeys. We chat about that journey: the early years, clarity, identity and freedom.

Growing up in Canada as an Ismaili Muslim, with an Indian (via East Africa) heritage, speaking Gujarati and Kutchi at home, beloved by parents who nourished his creativity; the layered complexity of identity started early. While instilling all the Indian values of discipline, hard work and education was perfectly normal and expected, and served him in good stead as the years went by, what was perhaps unusual was their absolute understanding of their unexpectedly quirky, creative and energetic kid who was always slightly different than anyone in any room he walked into. Taking the advice of his fifth-grade teacher to enroll him in the choir, which led to years of musical theatre and public speaking was yet another added layer, that would ultimately lead to the pivotal moment of seeking out creative fulfillment that he felt was lacking in his life as a professional adult.

In a well examined life, it becomes very clear how much our communities and families are part of whom we become, and so much of Imran's (and BoF's) mission has been shaped by the notion of being slightly outside, of using that as an advantage and the confidence that came with developing a voice that could speak to all the facets of all the spaces he has occupied.

After attending McGill University in Montreal, and Harvard Business School, Imran went on to work for *McKinsey* as a financial consultant. A logical move for most: the beginning of a long career in the financial world, with all the attendant perks and advantages. A few years of that and it became very clear that this was not his road to happiness or fulfillment.

We are conditioned to continue on a path of success, especially within Indian communities that expect much of their children and from years of habituation that don't



leave a lot of space to break out of our prescribed roles and paths. The boxes (a good education, an institute of higher learning, a prestigious job, a healthy bank balance) have been ticked and the only way forward is to continue. What happens if one realizes that one has a combination of great talents and the best part of that talent was not being utilized, that one has so much to offer and somehow the fullest part of one's creative life was not going to be realized by staying in the status quo.

If you're Imran, you take a decision to leave, some may call it a risk, but really it was an inevitability, and you take a voyage of self-discovery to South Africa.

Rymn Massand: Let's begin there.

Imran Amed: Creatively stifled, deeply unhappy and feeling suppressed by this career I had chosen, I travelled to South Africa, and upon the recommendation of a friend went to meet his father (whom I had never met) who lived there in Kynsna. This wonderful gentleman sat me down and asked me why I was there.

My answer was that I am searching for something, I'm not happy with what I'm doing. His response to this simplest of statements was: "It took me until I was in my 60's to ask these questions of myself. You are very lucky to be taking the time out to have the conversation with yourself at this young age, and it will pay dividends in the future." Holding on to that piece of wisdom as a guide, I went to a 10-day meditation retreat outside Cape Town, taking that time to get some clarity, make some decisions. Along the way I met many people, many of whom I did not know, nudging me, helping me along. Once you start talking it seems the world starts responding. People give advice, elucidate, illuminate, help.

It felt that the Universe was somehow conspiring to help me too, and ever since then I have been clearer about my sense of purpose. In the long view, having that early sense of mission and purpose that I took the time to examine has helped with the present – with the multifarious opportunities that are a daily part of my life now, it helps to have a sense of why I do what I do, and how to stay focused on that mission.

RM: After this sojourn and upon your return to London, did the idea of the risk you were perhaps taking – the change in income, comforts and stability ever make you hesitate?

IA: Financially I was independent, having paid off my student loans and I did not have anyone relying on me. I didn't have a partner, nor a family to take care of, no obligations. It's easier to have the freedom that allowed me to make changes. I downgraded my life, took on a smaller flat, got a roommate at age 30. The advantage of youth means one is not set in one's ways, and I had the courage to start anew.

RM: What's interesting is that all that had come before (McGill, Harvard) probably worked to your advantage while you were entering this completely different world and culture of fashion. After all, those boxes you ticked are the ones that garner respect before you even walk through the door, and those doors are not easy ones to walk through. Did you feel that?

IA: As a gay, brown, Muslim man trying to navigate white, elite, privileged spaces – those foundational elements (a stellar education, hard work, values) are exactly what opened doors. They would not have opened without those boxes being ticked and once you walk through those doors you are held to a different standard, and have to work doubly hard. Having the fluidity and confidence that came with all these various achievements in my past, with being able to engage and converse on so many different levels was very much a result of the excellent foundation I had been fortunate enough to build.

RM: What was your idea about BoF's mission, I know you were very clear sighted about its purpose, and why it should exist, tell us a little more about it.

IA: In the early days, I could write a piece about YSL's PR strategy and where it went wrong and while most people agreed, no one said it or even less, wrote about it so openly and analytically. There were reverberations and consequences. Over the years, I have been quietly banned from fashion shows, screamed at by publicists and even threatened by powerful people who have waged campaigns to discredit our journalism. Yet we continue, because this independence is precisely what enabled BoF to stand out in the beginning and what sets us apart today. But at the same time, we don't do 'gotcha!' journalism that tries to tear things down. Ultimately, our mission is to open, inform and connect the global fashion community and one way we do that is by holding up a mirror to the industry to show where there are opportunities to do better.

RM: Lets talk about India. What defines BoF is good journalism, transparency and its ethos of not being beholden to their investors in terms of how you report on their brands etc. Many of India's fashion brands are owned by massive industrial companies (Reliance for example). It's a tricky web. How do you think it affects BoF's ability to report and stay true to its mission?



IA: The response to our journalism is the same in India as it is in most other places. From the start, members of the Indian fashion community have been enthusiastic supporters of what we are trying to do. After the United States, our second biggest following on social media is in India. Mumbai and Delhi are in our top five cities of followers on *Instagram*.

Of course, there have been times when we have covered important families and businesses and there have been some sensitive conversations, but I always try to handle it in the same way, no matter whom in the world we are covering. Listening to the feedback and then explaining our approach thoughtfully and respectfully, while staying the course. Over the years, this has helped our community understand why and how BoF's journalism is different, and has fostered a sense of trust and authority that takes time and attention to build.

India is set to become the world's third largest fashion market and some of our most widely read stories have been about India. (In 2013 Imran wrote a two-part deep dive into India's Wedding market, a long read that spoke to all the aspects of this multi-Billion-dollar industry and more recently, a candid interview with Bollywood's most popular actress Deepika Padukone about the Indian fashion market and what the world's biggest brands need to understand about India.)

RM: Is there a feeling of identifying with "India" in some way that has changed over time for you?

IA: Identity is a very interesting thing. There are so many layers that accumulate over the lifetime of multiple generations, it takes time to unpack. While I was brought up with Indian values by parents who had immigrated to Canada from Kenya, I had never been to India or East Africa while growing up. In those early years, I considered myself Canadian through and through, part of the country's rich multicultural fabric. Then, in 1995 my parents announced that they were moving 'back home' to Nairobi. How amazing that they still considered East Africa home and looking for a change, off they went.

My sister, Shazhan and I visited Kenya for the first time in our early 20s. It was a culture shock: the social and racial segregation, the economic disparity, everything was new to me...and I really struggled that first summer. But soon I began to observe it without judgment, and to understand the connections East Africa had to my own heritage and





identity that I hadn't fully understood before. Words that I had grown up thinking were Gujarati or Kutchi were actually Swahili words which had been integrated into our everyday language, 'Indian' food that we had eaten growing up was actually infused with East African adaptations and local ingredients.

Everything started to make sense. Unravelling this rich, layered existence would ripple (for me) through the next decades. I first started visiting India regularly for work in the early days of BoF. This is how I first met Nikhil. (Nikhil Mansata and Imran have been together for almost ten years). At first, being in India, where the sounds and smells are familiar and everyone looks like you, yet all is unfamiliar was a strange sensation of being simultaneously foreign and familiar. Meeting Nikhil's friends and family, being part of his world there (Nikhil is a stylist and very much part of the editorial, fashion world working on diverse projects for brands and magazines) and sharing a group of friends there makes me feel very at home in India. Most of all, I feel grateful that Indians have taken to me as one of their own, as someone who can represent us on the global fashion stage. And funnily enough, I get the same feedback from East Africans, from Canadians, from other South Asians, from Muslims. In this way, I am really coming to stand in my own layered identity with confidence and pride, and this has only come through the understanding of how these layers add up to who I am.

RM: Are there any designers or artists in India that you particularly love?

IA: Anamika Khanna! Every time one holds a piece she has made, you get the feeling that it has been made with intention. It's not just a product, there's intention and purpose. I've had the privilege of visiting these tiny factories around India (and the rest of the world) where artists and craftspeople are making things with their hands, the skills and intention and detail – that's what India has to offer the world.

Scores of big luxury brands have their embroidery or sequin work etc. done in India and then fly it to Italy or France and label it 'Made in France': The global fashion industry needs to give more credit to India for the work it does, give credit where credit is due. Thankfully, that's started to change. I am really impressed with Dior, who have put their work with India (in particular their work with the amazing Chanakya School) out front, giving credit to the people who make our clothes.

RM: Lets quickly talk about the pandemic. Each one of us were affected in myriad inexplicable ways, some of which were instantly obvious and the impact of others which will be felt over the next months and years. What it did, for a lot of us, is give us the moment of pause that encourages reflection and some insight. What was your experience in this universal moment of pause?

IA: As you can imagine, the years before had been nonstop, travelling for over one hundred and fifty days a year, hopping continents and countries, moving from one city to another. It was so stimulating and exciting, but it didn't leave a lot of space to exhale. The

pandemic made me stop, piece it all together and reflect.

I finally had the time to think and process everything that had happened in the last decade or so. I began to understand and reflect on the position I hold in the fashion industry, and what this represents for people who are excluded for a variety of different reasons. I learned that my story is evidence that through hard work, focus, dedication – all those values my parents taught me – I can show young people everywhere what is possible, achievable, do-able. It's what Virgil Abloh always said, 'You can do it too!' (Imran receives messages from people from all over the world on his personal social media accounts: Canada, Kenya, Karachi — some seeking advice, others telling him how much his journey has inspired them and often just letting him know the importance of having someone like him represent all that they identify with, that perhaps they can find their role in this industry as well).

RM: How does that feel?

IA: It is an amazing feeling and I didn't realize how much it meant. The best part is what I can do with this position to open doors, shift conversations and change mindsets.

There was a moment, during the pandemic, when someone from the Ismaili community in Canada asked me to do a talk for a virtual conference. I had already done one with them a few years before, so this time I agreed with the caveat that I be able to talk about my personal journey as a member of the LGBTQ community. As Ismailis, we pride ourselves on the idea of pluralism, welcoming the different cultures and traditions that make up a very disparate global community. This should also apply to people with different genders, sexual orientations, abilities – everything. It was important for me to use my role to open up this conversation which had not been possible when I was growing up. There was no visibility for other gay people like me in our community who could act as role models. I told my mother about the fact that I was doing this talk, but not what it was about. After the talk aired, she began to receive messages from our community – all positive and all encouraging, including a teacher from her school in Nairobi who told her how amazing it had been and how proud she was of me. That was a special moment. To be able to speak my truth to a community without which I would not be who I am. The community that raised me with values, ethics, discipline and a focus on education (all of which have paid off for me in ways I cannot even begin to explain). For this, I am truly grateful.

Growing up, I struggled with my sexuality and my identity, unsure how I could fit into the Ismaili community. Being a Muslim at Harvard Business School during 9/11 brought on deep feelings of shame and fear in the face of Islamophobia on-campus. Being a prominent South Asian person in the elite world of global fashion means confronting prejudice and intolerance of all kinds. Now I know that so much of my mission in life is to shift the way people think, to foster understanding and acceptance of people who are different. By bringing different layers of myself to offer new perspectives; by using the part of me that a given community understands to share a part of me that they don't; by leveraging my various experiences to give me a level of cultural fluency, a global-ness that has allowed me to slide into various worlds and situations and make a difference in each. And in doing so, I become more clear everyday about my own sense of purpose: why I do what I do.

RM: Any advice for so many who wonder how, especially as they figure out what they want to do.

IA: Seek out what you want to do, know what you have to offer, really get to know yourself.

Take the time, pause to ask yourself questions and truly understand what brings you joy and energy. That is the fuel for the hard work that is necessary to do anything that has a real impact on the world. Despite what they say in the media, there is no such thing as an overnight success.

Around the time of Brexit, Britain's PM, Theresa May said, if you think you're a global citizen then you're a "citizen of nowhere." It sent shivers down my spine because it was a rejection of everything I believe in. I am a citizen of everywhere and in that lies my deepest strength and power."

A powerful thought to end on. There is a lot more we could speak about, but the morning has passed in conversation, and other duties call. I leave with the feeling that this is just the beginning of a long thoughtful dialogue, and the ability to reconcile our many facets with an actual purpose requires a degree of courage that in turn requires an honesty with ourselves. A lot to think about as I step into the warm afternoon. ///

Words Rymn Massand
Photography Kalpesh Lathigra

BoF sits at the very center of the global fashion community, and that's our mission- to connect. Through that interaction, we foster connections, create opportunities, businesses that we bring together, relationships and creative collaborations that BoF helps to facilitate.





Photography Sharad Srivastav

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF KHOJ

POOJA SOOD

To search is what *Khoj* means, and that's exactly what this experimental open space has been engaging with for the past twenty-five years. I had the opportunity to chat with Director and Co-Founder, Pooja Sood, to know what it's taken to run this very accessible, welcoming space that gives a voice to the artists, lets them rise and fall, pushes them to ask important and relevant questions, urges them to leave their comfort space and hopes that along the way, they not only surprise themselves, but also create something that they wouldn't otherwise.

Shruti Kapur Malhotra: Congratulations on completing twenty five amazing and inspiring years. From conducting annual workshops when you began, to curating weekly programs, where do we see *Khoj* go from here?

Pooja Sood: Thank you so much. The past 25 years have been sometimes difficult but overall super exciting! Looking ahead, we are continuing broadly with some of the thematics that we have been working with: ecology, gender and technology.

SKM: Let's talk about technology further.

PS: At *Khoj* we are keen to explore the role of Artificial Intelligence and the internet – with a special focus on the ramifications of both on the social landscape. On the other hand, we also need to navigate the newer forms of art-making such as NFTs which have taken the art world by storm.

SKM: Do you look at technology as a boon or bane then?

PS: A bit of both, I suppose. While new technologies have made medical sciences and industries more efficient, if we think about what it's doing to people, it's not such a pretty picture: the internet, and social media in particular, are stealthily entering every part of our lives and are instrumental in us becoming a pretty dysfunctional society. They have entered our

private lives insidiously and continue to mine us for data for commercial purposes. Even worse, it's playing an ominous role in elections and democracies around the world!

So, if we believe that artists are a critical voice and hold a mirror to society, then we really need to support artists who are working on understanding both, the positive and negative aspects of new technologies and digital networks.

SKM: So, artists should be really 'responsible (to society)' in what they create?

PS: I think there are different genres of art making. We, at *Khoj*, are committed to all kinds of practices; material practice, live arts, expanded cinema and image making and socially engaged art practice. So it's not the form that they choose that is important, but what they are trying to say /or do with it that makes a difference. At *Khoj* we are looking at both "what does art do?" and "what can art be?"

SKM: Then what comes first for you? The person or the idea?

PS: The idea, ofcourse! We hope that the artist can deliver the idea through their work – But its OK if it does not work out. We provide a safe space for failure and if an artist can take that risk – so must we! So, for me personally, it's always the idea.

SKM: It must be very important for you to connect with your artists then.

PS: Yes! Personally, I've learned everything I know about art-making by just being around artists as they've worked in our studios: you see the way they think and how it translates into artwork. So yes! I think it's really important for us to spend time with the artists who are in residence at *Khoj*. Since *Khoj* is a space for experimentation and exchange, we urge artists who come to *Khoj* to explore ideas that they wouldn't in their own studios. We believe *Khoj* provides a physical and intellectual

space which allows for meaningful conversations and pushes artists to extend their practice – or indeed think afresh!

SKM: So basically, they come here to get themselves out of their box?

PS: Perhaps. Or they come to realise a project that they wouldn't get support – financially or otherwise from elsewhere. I think it's the fraternity of artists who come together for a residency or project that makes a vibrant place for conversations (and arguments) over ideas, practice, art-making, politics and life, to create a truly unique experience for the artist.

SKM: I feel earlier, art was a very isolating process, but now, in order to connect with the viewer, you need to engage. You have to collaborate because collaborations have become so huge. The world is a hybrid cultural playground, it is important for an artist today to kind of think of all the senses.

PS: I agree. I think of all the arts, the visual arts has the most isolating process with artists mostly working out of their own studio spaces. At *Khoj* however, our residencies have been curated to build inter-sectionalities; our residencies on food, science, gaming, to name a few, have allowed for multiple forms of collaboration and research and consequently led to a mixed audience that visited *Khoj*.

SKM: Interesting, but did you question something that did not work?

PS: To answer that we'll have to define what we mean by 'success' – which isn't really that important for a place such as

Khoj because we truly believe that if we ask artists to experiment and take risks – as an institution, we too have to do the same. So yes, there have been times when we have been (and continue to be) tentative about some of our projects and the kind of questions we are attempting to ask; sometimes there are no new insights that are produced which is when we feel we need to rethink our questions or our methodology. To be honest, we're quite Ok with this way of working as we see ourselves as a learning space: for artists and as an institution itself.

SKM: Now that you're looking back, what has been the most challenging part of the job?

PS: I think there have been different challenges at different points in our journey. Being artist led, just keeping the international workshops going – even if they were annual events – was a huge challenge. Having grown organically, when *Khoj* got its building in 2002, we were swamped by staffing and governance issues. Animating a space all through the year was vastly different from hosting an annual event and planning an annual calendar needed a different kind of resource structure and commitment. One of our biggest challenge to date, however, remains funding. Despite the generous support of artists, gallerists and individual patrons to whom we are most grateful, most of our funding is tied into three years cycles from international institutions, which continues to keep *Khoj* in a precarious position. Then there is the greater challenge of remaining relevant to the times. Building the residency





programme – in keeping with our commitment to supporting emerging practices and emerging artists was a painstaking process which developed over many years. And while it is easy for an institution to remain within its comfort zone, we believe that we need to be nimble and keep our ear-to-the-ground in order to pivot when necessary to stay relevant and fresh.

SKM: What an interesting approach. We have been following your journey since its inception and have been your great supporters. Tell us about your immediate plans.

PS: As I said, we want to try and delve deeper into the thematic that I spoke about earlier. More importantly, we are also looking at succession planning. We've got consultants on board to put governance systems in place and to help with my transition. We also need to have a transfer of organisational knowledge which is

essentially putting all the accumulated knowledge over the past 25 years on paper for the next person. Further, we have to make sure that *Khoj* is resilient enough, financially and otherwise, hopefully, for the next twenty five years. That's going to be a lot of hard work!

SKM: Is it Important for whoever takes your place to be part of the community?

PS: That's a really interesting question because when we started out on the discussions with the consultants, I truly believed that we could wrap up everything within a tight timeline. What we have learnt along the way is that succession planning is very different from a recruitment. It's about setting governance systems in place but also about building collective leadership within a team after which we can decide what kind of person (or persons) are required for *Khoj*. So to answer your question – what skill set we are looking for in

1997

Khoj holds its first international workshop in Modinagar

2001

Initiation of the South Asia Network for the Arts

2002

Khoj gets a building in Khirkee Extension, New Delhi

2003

Khoj curates its first student residency: *Peers*

2007

Khoj begins its inquiry into Art & Ecology

2008

Khoj curates India's first LIVE Art Festival

2010

The Khoj book is launched, with 5 essays & 101 artists' interviews.

Khoj initiates an Art Management program, ARThink SouthAsia

2011

Khoj curates an interview marathon by Hans Ulrich Obrist

2013

Newly renovated Khoj building opens to the public.

2014

Word. Sound Powers—a curatorial collaboration with Tate Modern

2015

Khoj publishes *Khirkee Voice/Khirkee Avaaz*

2017

Curatorial Intensive South Asia/CISA begins
Khoj organises Asia Assemble, a three day gathering of artists.
Khoj curates the Khirkee festival

2019

Peripheries & Crossovers: Art as Social Practice begins

2020

Khoj initiates the Khoj Support Grant

2021

Khoj gets a new visual identity and website

2022

Khoj turns 25



the next person - is still open ended. I presume it will need to be someone committed to the arts; someone who is passionate about the arts - but maybe not from the arts itself. We are yet to find out!

SKM: True that! Well good luck for the next twentyfive, but before I end our most enlightening conversation, let's sum up what *Khoj* was, is and will be...

PS: *Khoj* was always about keeping artists and their practice at its core. My hope is that *Khoj* will remain true to this and will continue to provide a lively space for art practices and critical discourse even as it builds networks of allyship and care. ///

Words Shruti Kapur Malhotra



Photography Karan Kumar Sachdev

DAYANITA SINGH

A GAME OF SEE-SAW

What did the person see, what did the camera see? The photographer muses perspective through her new photo-novel, a mirror of India in the 80s and 90s.

Novel: (n) interestingly new or unusual.
Novel: (n) a fictitious prose narrative of book length, typically representing character and action with some degree of realism.

She sits impishly on the cover, a girl in her twenties, armed with a spread of mysterious prints, mischief in her eyes and magic in things they are yet to see. Dayanita Singh did not yet know that she would go on to be the lens through which the India of the late 80s and 90s would come alive in all its restlessness and revolution, that she would be the artist that would create the photograph of a contrasting, colourful, culturally throbbing country in evolution—paradoxically, in a monochrome palette. *Let's See* is a photo-novel so intimate and lifelike, it stops being an archive and starts flowing as graphic prose.

It's almost strange that while we see a set of motion pictures, even fleeting videos, as a complete device in storytelling—with or without the aid of the spoken word or subtitle, we are yet to acknowledge fully the power of the still photo-novel. Photo books have, for the larger part, assumed the stature of coffee table indulgence, vanity projects, collector's items rather than an alive, pulsating form of storytelling for the keen reader. *Let's See*, like most of Singh's earlier works, challenges that norm powerfully.

"Our vocabulary has its limitations, photographs can go where there are no words," she says. "In fact, I always hated it when people said, 'where was this picture taken and when was it taken'? As though that is the reason behind taking the picture. I'm not going to photograph

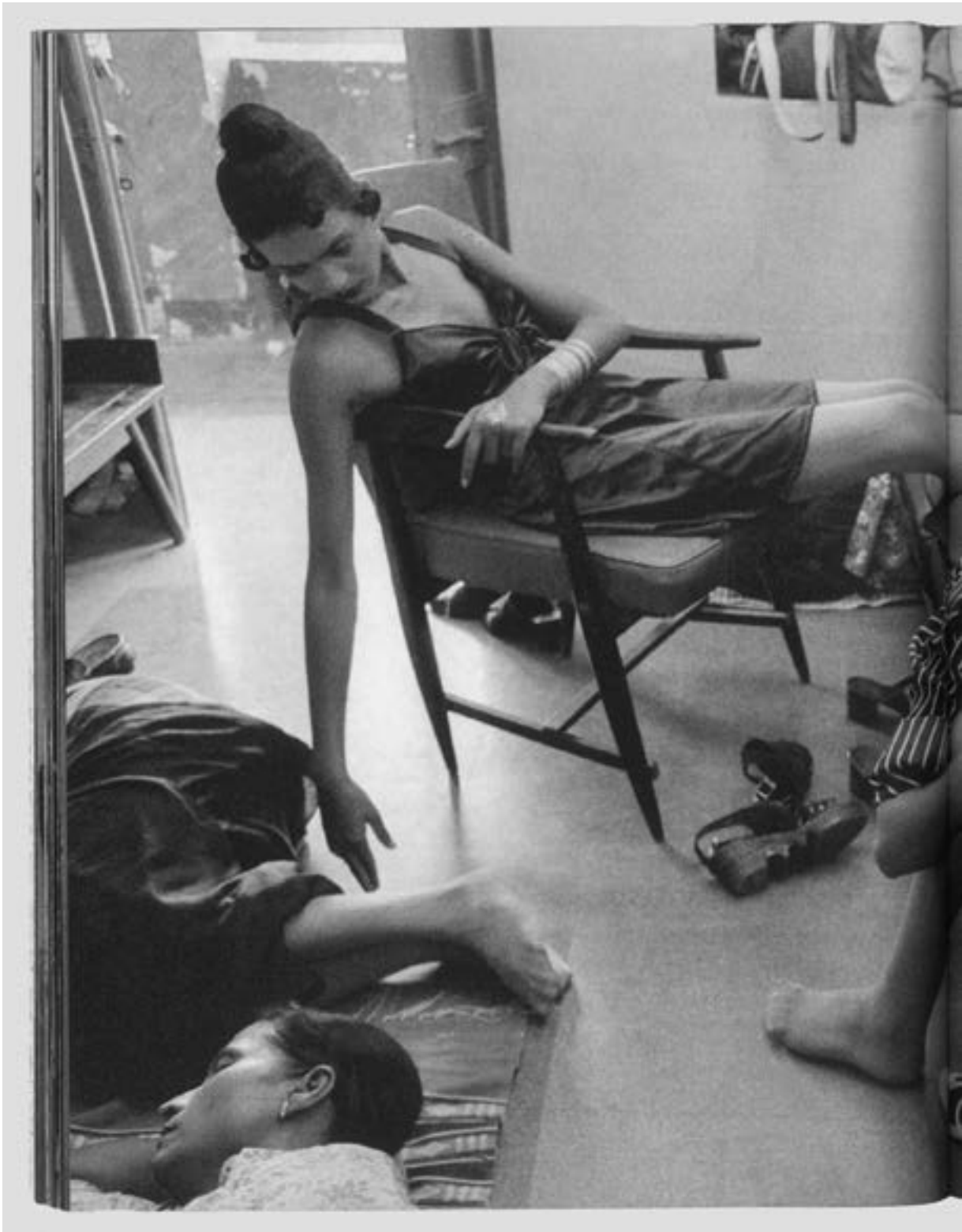
something because of where it is. I'm going to photograph it because of what it's saying to me or what it's eliciting from me." Fair enough, Singh has not used captions for any of her photo books, except a layer of text, far from illustrative, in an earlier work, *House of Love*. Her playfield is emotion, expression, evocation—not explanation.

Let's See comes to you as an open book, an invitation. To hop on and hop off the bus as you like, but every part of the city is abuzz with an important chapter – and you get to interpret it as your own. There's no text – the creator follows a reductive structure, a welcome one in a world teeming with too many words full of imposition or conjecture.

The COVID lockdowns afforded her the time and leisure to look back at her archive and see the important story (in fact, stories) that lay within.

"Otherwise I would've never had the time. I remember, when I saw one of the first images, there were two boys looking at a mirror. I thought to myself, who is this person who's making these images? It was so far removed from what I am now that I didn't even look at it really as pictures that I made! So it was very easy to make an edit because I was forty years removed from the work." Which is when I ask what she thinks of the photographs clicked by her younger self. "In those images I found a tenderness, a vulnerability, even the intention was so different at the time because I didn't think of myself as a photographer," she recalls.

One way to look at it is as the story of the progressives, the rebels, the revolutionaries silent and strong, the powerful rich and poor, the play of paradoxes that brought up a country's creative sensibilities, arts and industries, law and order through its transformational years. The protagonists are both celebrities as they are street, many you have heard of but those you've rarely seen, or known, as their most vulnerable selves – the





characters becoming and unbecoming, taking you behind closed doors and hearts. Singh's journey in those seminal years offers glimpses of the journeys of all of us – an entire country and its people in movement, struggle, joy, rest, exultation, ennui.

The characters have a polar range: Orijit Sen, Sanjay Dutt, KPS Gill, Feroze and Mohit Gujral, Zakir Hussain, Waheeda Rahman, transfolk and non-binary lovers, Gladrags models, prisoners and performers, all in their element, often wild – sometimes in warm embrace, other times resting – never devoid of an undercurrent of plot and perseverance. There's an effortless bridging of public and private lives – the in-betweens from a comfortable presence, side gaze, just being there.

"The people I was photographing were not conscious because they didn't think of me as a photographer, I too did not see myself as a photographer. I was there because I was part of the conversation. Making photos was my way of listening. But when I found all these images I had to make an edit. It's like you may have notes, ten thousand words of notes, but you have to edit out. So I had this idea, let's see both as what did the person see, what did the camera see? And let's see what happens. Let's see. But then the really time consuming part is the sequencing, because I really wanted you to read it like you would a novel."

No matter where you dive in, there are various chapters of life. There's infancy, youth, old age and death and the wonder in between – many a kid staring at alcohol – always in the father's hand while the mother is taking care of them.

You see the story of grit behind the glamour, never harsh or staring into your face but always a moment in the continuum, however awkward or unpredictable. You map unusual landscapes, restricted areas, where otherwise it would be impossible to tread and immerse yourself in a time of booming black spaghetti, disorganisation, uncertainty but also a time of renaissance. The punctum prevails throughout the story as an important feature – just so you do not fixate or obsess on one part of the whole.

As a long-time practitioner of text, it is a welcome change to read the human story of a country caught in candour—in

movement, never 'frozen' as a moment. "I used to always say that Hasselblad is my third breast, because I don't photograph from my eyes, I photograph from my belly." Wordless, it speaks a thousand languages, tells stories manifold and brims with a multitude of interpretations of two decades of transformation. A change that is as much a challenge in content as in form. The doyenne of independent photographic publishing, she tells the truth just as it is – no, as they are, its many facets. Of course, acceptance and access may be a privilege one may argue, but it is the sensitive articulation of the seemingly simple slices of life and the theatre of the everyday absurd that probe the deepest. Was it all by chance? Yes, and no.

"Chance is the key word in my life, because if there's something I've mastered, it's the skill to recognise chance. First to create the circumstances for chance to happen, and then to create the circumstances to act upon that chance.

I would write to the *Miss India* pageant and ask if I could take pictures backstage. Or to *Gladrags* so I could see men in the place of beauty. Anything that crossed my way I could follow, because I had this magic tool of the camera with me. So it wasn't really the love of photography, but how it allowed me to move between different worlds, to go wherever I wanted to be free."

As for the form, it's paper, scissors, not (set in) stone. Aside from its multitudinous covers, there's a special binding that makes it flatter than a normal paperback. "And the secret of the book really is that it had to be very well printed and still that shouldn't be what people notice at all. So for the image quality to disappear, it had to be printed in a certain way. The book is full of mid-tones, which is really difficult to do on uncoated paper."

Written in the lexicon of bare witness, the work goes beyond fancy tongues or the vernacular to reiterate that if you speak the language of love and humanity, you can create and read life's story just fine, you can learn well from the past.

I am reminded of what one of my favourite authors, Alice Munro, once wrote – "Because this is not a story. It is Life." ///

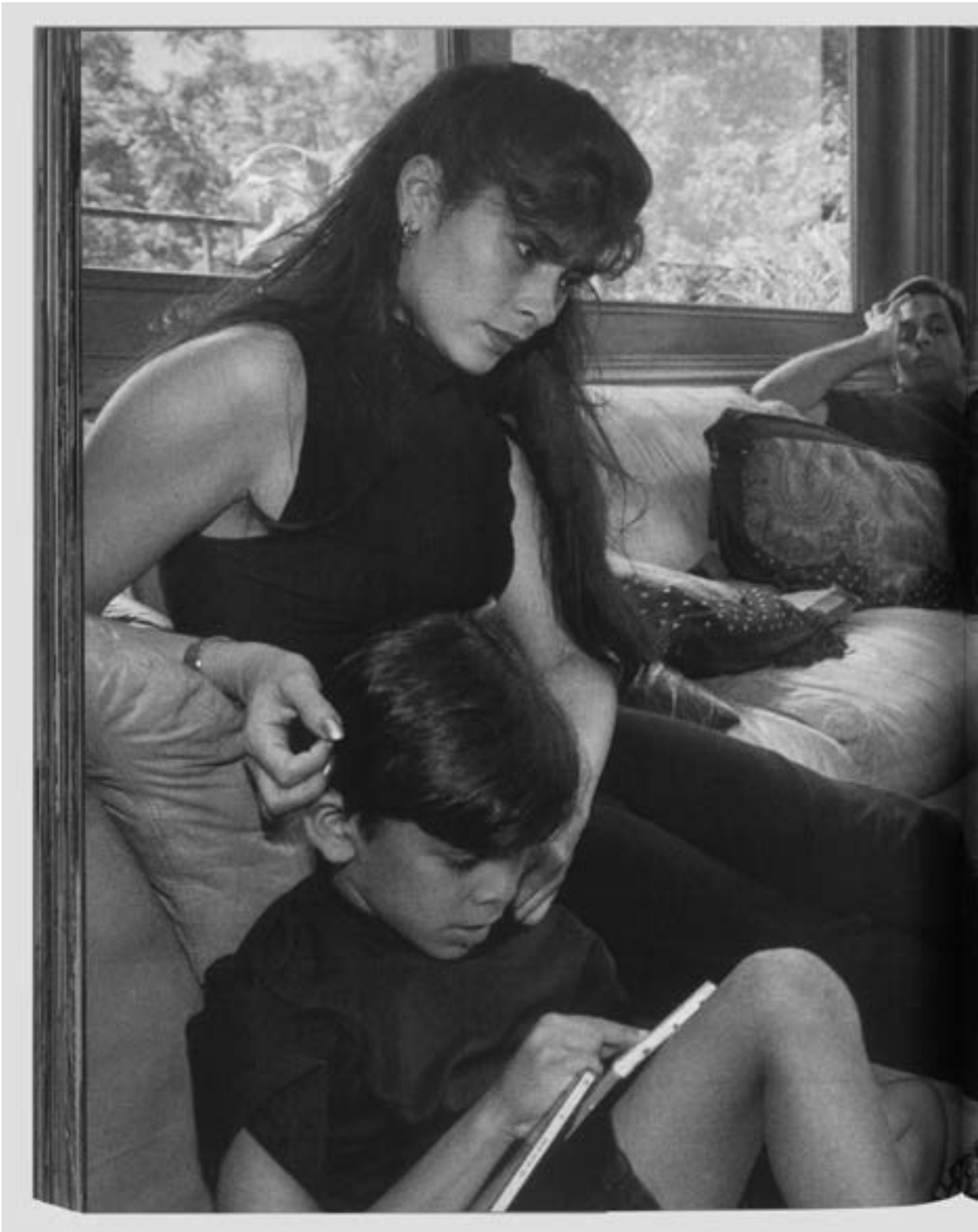
Words Soumya Mukerji

DAYANITA SINGH LET'S SEE

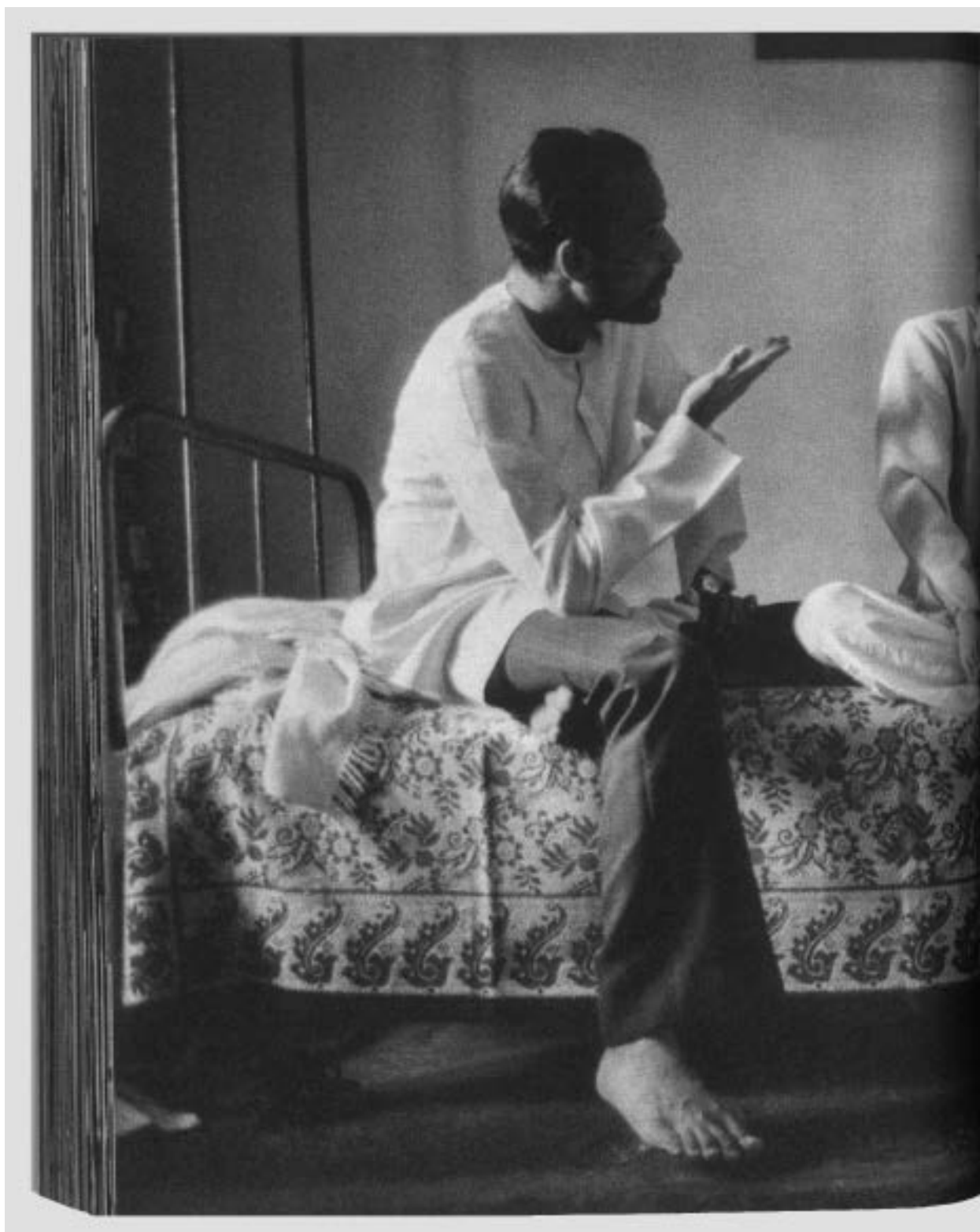


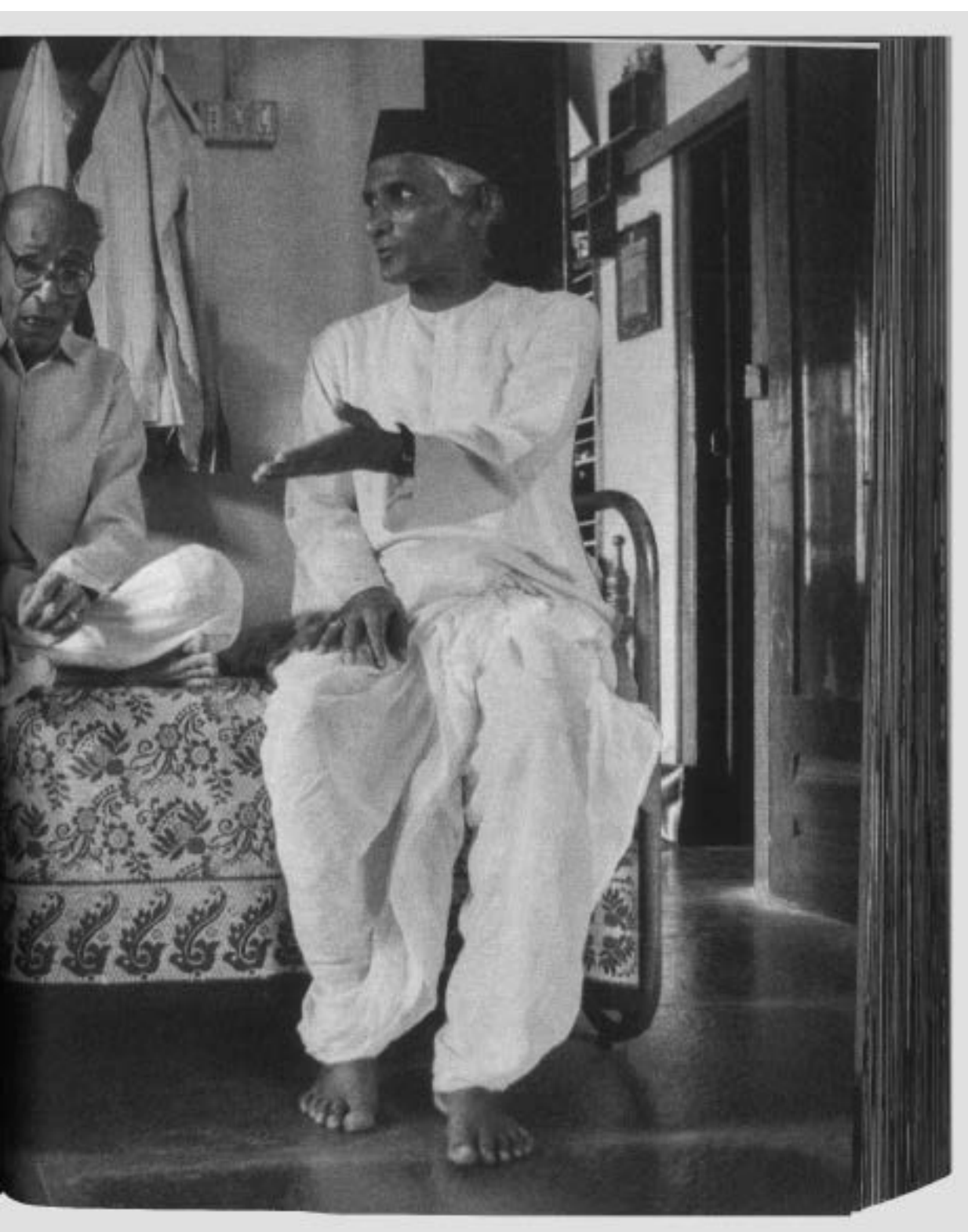
Steidl

Published by Steidl, Germany









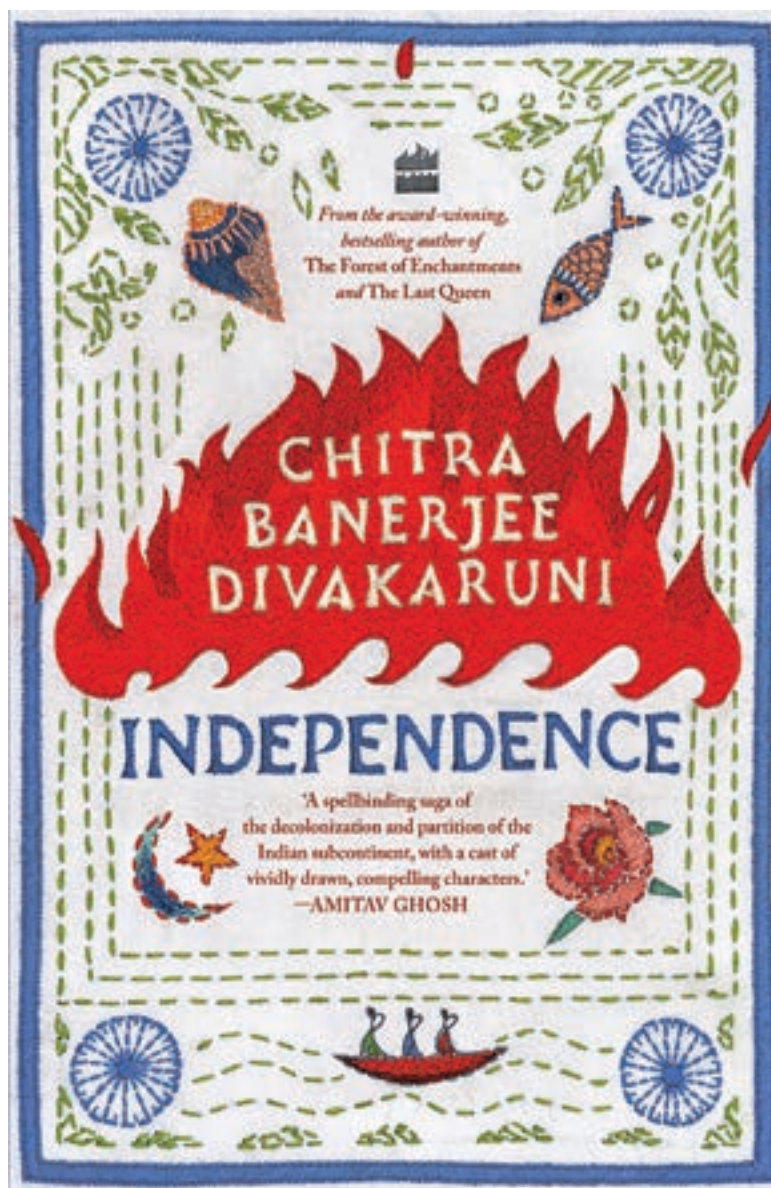
CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

WOMEN WRITING WOMEN

When I was an undergraduate student of English Literature, in our very first semester, we were taught an important excerpt from *The Mahabharat*, called 'The Dicing'. During one of the lectures, my professor paused and suddenly exclaimed, "You girls need to read *The Palace of Illusions*, it rightly gives the power back to Panchaali." None of us were ever the same after we read Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's magnificent opus, full of myth and magic, when we suddenly realised the power of women writing women.

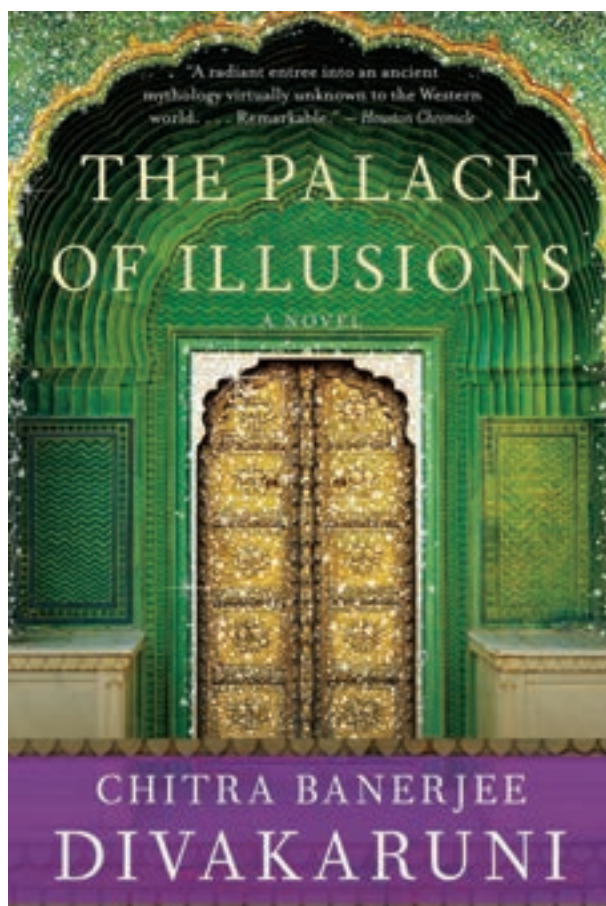
Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a literary force. One who has been at the helm of creating narratives driven by the female voice. "I am interested in women's stories and in placing women at the centres of those stories. I want to make my heroines human, with human flaws. I am against whitewashing them." Her clear authorial intentions have led to a prolific production of books, all with women and their lives and perspectives, at the forefront. Whether, it was *The Palace of Illusions*, with the mythical Panchaali, or her most recent book, *The Last Queen*, with the historical Maharani Jindan, the female figure and the multitudes she carries within, has been Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's primary concern. Now, with her upcoming novel, *Independence*, women once again take centre-stage of an epic piece of fiction, this time with the backdrop of India's freedom struggle.

In an insightful conversation, the author walks us through the various elements that constitute her craft and the making of her new, highly anticipated, novel.





Photography Krishna Giri



Nidhi Verma: Do you remember the very first piece of fiction you ever wrote?

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: It was an autobiographical short story about a young woman who comes to America and almost immediately receives some bad news about her family that shatters her hopes and plans for her life. The idea was a good one, but the writing was terrible — I was too close to the subject matter. Soon afterwards, being a vain person, I destroyed it.

NV: But did it somehow lead you to realise you wanted to be a writer?

CBD: Yes. It was after the death of my grandfather. He was in India; I was a graduate student in USA; I did not get to go home for his funeral. I realised I was forgetting him — he had been very important in my life, the family member I loved most. I decided to write about him so that I would remember. So that he would live on in my words, however imperfectly. I have several poems, stories and novels where grandfather characters are important.

NV: And what about today, if you could, what would you say is the reason you write today?

CBD: I write because I can't imagine a life without it. It gives me a reason for being. It allows me to go deep into my imagination and share the worlds created there with readers. It is the most joyful thing.

NV: So, it is a joyful relationship.

CBD: I love it, though I am often frustrated with the process and — like others — go through writer's blocks. I often have to throw away drafts and start again. I often have to revise significantly. But there is a special joy in creating, in feeling the story coming through you.

NV: It seems you have a set standard for your own craft and language.

CBD: Yes, I do. I can't always articulate it but I know deep down when the writing isn't good enough. Then I'll struggle with it and revise it until it is acceptable.

NV: How many times do you generally revise a paragraph?

CBD: On a good day, it comes out perfect. On other days, many times. Sometimes I have to put it away for a few days and get back to it with fresh eyes.

NV: And are there any quirks in your process?

CBD: I like to write in my study or in any empty room in my home. I write facing the wall, so I will not get distracted by things outside my window. I get cranky if I'm interrupted. I like silence when I write, though many friends I know like music. I like writing late at night when everyone else is asleep. Sometimes a breakthrough idea, or a special sentence, will come to me when I'm in the

“Once I finished ‘The Last Queen’, I wanted to write the story of India’s freedom, her final victory over the British who had dominated her.”

shower. Then I have to keep saying it aloud until I can get to my writing computer. When I get writer’s block, I take a nap. Often, when I wake up, my subconscious has solved the problem I was grappling with.

NV: Let’s talk further about inspiration then for some of your specific books. For instance, with *The Palace of Illusions*, what was your starting point?

CBD: When writing a novel, I start with the idea — which comes to me in many different ways. *The Palace of Illusions* grew over several decades, from a question that rose in me after reading *The Mahabharat*; stories from which my grandfather used to tell me during my childhood. The question was, “But what are the women thinking/feeling/wanting?”

NV: What about *The Last Queen*, was there a question for it as well?

CBD: Yes, the question arose from seeing a painting of Maharani Jindan: I wanted to know who she really was, since history had chosen to largely forget her. Then, once I finished *The Last Queen*, I wanted to write the story of India’s freedom, her final victory over the British who had dominated her land, tortured her people and stolen her wealth. I had the dream of offering this book to my Indian readers in the 75th year of India’s independence.

NV: With your upcoming novel, *Independence*?

CBD: Yes. I felt a deep need to tell the end of the story of the British in India — the British who had done such great wrong to Maharani Jindan, snatching her kingdom from her through treachery. I wanted to write a book where they were forced to leave India and we finally regained our freedom.

I wanted to focus on how Independence and Partition, affected the lives of ordinary people — particularly women. So, although important historical figures such as Nehru, Gandhi, Jinnah and especially Sarojini Naidu appear in the book, it is largely the story of three sisters in a rural Bengali family who navigate these dangerous and exciting times and how their lives take many unexpected turns. It is a story about patriotism, violence, death — and love. Love plays a big part in this novel.

NV: A lot of research must have been involved in the creation of this book.

CBD: After I started with research into the period (1940s), I then created a detailed outline. I tend to do this when I write a novel, so I have a sense of the shape of the book. Then I made character notes for the sisters and the people important in

their lives. This led me to more research. Then I started writing. I would often revise a chapter before writing the next. Sometimes I would have to stop to do additional research.

NV: And were there any roadblocks?

CBD: Often it was difficult to find out exactly what had happened. Often there were contradictory accounts, as of the Hindu-Muslim riots of 1946 in Calcutta (Direct Action Day) and of the Noakhali Massacres later that year. So, I would have to weigh the different sources to figure out which one was most accurate.

NV: I am sure the pandemic did not make things easier.

CBD: I was unable to travel to do on-the-ground-research in places important to my historical novels; Amritsar and the high security prison at Chunar Fort were two places I would have liked to visit while writing *The Last Queen*; for *Independence*, I wanted to visit many sites in Calcutta that were important in 1946 and 1947, especially the Hyderi Manjil, the mansion in Belgachia where Gandhi stayed in August and September, tumultuous months of rioting in 1947.

Personally, it has been challenging as well. Friends and family have passed away, with no chance for me to see them and say goodbye. Teaching (my other profession) was hugely disrupted by the pandemic and I had to learn to try and be an effective communicator online, and help students who were struggling.

NV: As your dream is finally coming true, do you have any words for the readers of *Independence*?

CBD: I want them to get what I got in researching and writing this book. I want them to know our country’s history, especially that of the Bengal Partition, which has not been written of as much as the Punjab Partition. I want them to understand how hard people struggled and how much they sacrificed so that India could gain her freedom. How many lost their lives and homes in the process. I want them to feel deep in their hearts how important it is for us to come together as Indians and not let things such as ideology or religion divide us and lead us to violence.

NV: Lastly, what are you working on next?

CBD: I am excited to be working on the dual biography of a very interesting and important couple — my first book of non-fiction — but I have been asked to keep their names a secret until the publisher is ready to announce it. //

Words Nidhi Verma

BANI ABIDI

Bani Abidi's artistry is evocative. It is engaging. It is often satirical. And hence, it is often sharply subversive. Her collective creative oeuvre is more than two decades in the making now and so is her relationship with art. "The habit or practice of making art establishes the way I go about life and how I observe it," she remarks contemplatively of this long-standing current relationship, as we begin our conversation. "I'm constantly juggling between experiences, my understanding of them and translating them into an artwork. So, I guess I would say that my mind works in a particular way, differently than someone in another profession. And I rely on the moments and epiphanies of thinking up art ideas as a way to process things around me."

While today, the Berlin-based Pakistani visual artist is widely heralded as one of the most prominent art practitioners in the medium of video, as a young, undergraduate art student, back in the early '90s, she had initially ventured towards learning painting and printmaking. Her affinity for the moving image suffused itself prominently in her practice only later. This penchant for the medium of video is actually rooted in her time spent as a graduate student in the US, where she was immersed in a rich world of viewing films in subsidised university cinemas, leading her to experiment with the moving image herself.

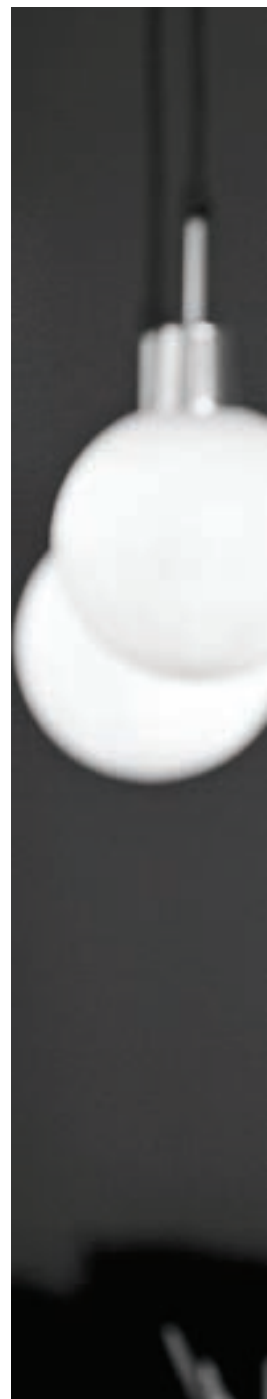
"I think the reason why I respond to it is the possibility that a certain thought can reveal itself not in a single moment, but over time and that too with the multiple layers of image and sound," she explains, divulging why her films don't follow traditional narrative structures. "They are more like moments stretched in time," she adds. One of her earliest works in video, *Mangoes*, made in 1999, is reflective of this.

In it, the artist plays two women, one Indian and the other Pakistani, both expatriates. As they sit side-by-side, eating mangoes, their conversation runs the gamut. Exchanging fond memories from their childhoods while eating mangoes, soon paves way for nationalistic notions as they begin comparing the variety of mangoes grown in the two countries. The divide between the South Asian subjectivities, that were once part a whole, is elicited profoundly, within a mere three minutes and twenty-four seconds, proving very early on that Abidi's work with video was and has continued to be subsequently, revolutionary.

The artist's filmmaking gaze is also frequently accompanied by a powerful tool — humour. And her employment of this tool is closely connected to the themes or concerns she predominantly gravitates towards exploring through her work. For instance, the modern nation State is of immense importance to her. "I'm interested in how it organises and determines our lives: bureaucracy, control, officialdom, surveillance, borders... nation wide patriarchal controls of sorts." Her work is seeped in empathy for the victims of emboldened authoritarian States. "I like to watch and plug into their ways of negotiating power and control and surviving," the artist reveals.

Her use of satire is therefore rooted in her interest in the performance of power, which "I find to be a laughing matter," she declares. Take her photographic body of work, *The Reassuring Hand Gestures of Big Men, Small Men, All Men* (2021), where she examines the aforementioned performativity profusely. Through close-up photographs of hand gestures of a vast array of male politicians from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the artist probes, with wry humour, into the theatre, that is, politics. The repetitive juxtaposition of these gestures deftly unveils the formulaic body language of male political power.

For Abidi, it is clear that humour is a gentle and oblique tool that contains and articulates critique. She elucidates, "I think making fun of an offensive person or





Photography by Schokofeh Kamiz

someone who takes themselves too seriously disables them in a way. It's a more infuriating thing to do to a person you are trying to critique, rather than complain and moan about what is wrong, which actually preserves their status and control." Both *Mangoes* and *The Reassuring Hand Gestures of Big Men, Small Men, All Men*, are on view at her ongoing show at *Experimenter*, Ballygunge Place, where she is exhibiting several new bodies of work as well.

One of them is her new film, *The Song*, which makes its Indian premiere at the exhibition. In the short fiction film, an old man, of supposedly Middle Eastern or South Asian origin, seems to have recently arrived to a European city as a refugee. He finds himself confronted by the silence in the small, empty apartment that has been allotted to him and has flashes of sounds from an 'elsewhere'. "The film was inspired by my many encounters with people and 'their' songs, conversations and sounds in my very migrant rich neighbourhood in Berlin," Abidi informs, "I have worked in different ways with migration and sound and am personally very moved by the idea of being acoustically displaced. About what it means when one moves away from soundscapes that define one's life."

The film was commissioned by the *Film and Video Umbrella*, an organisation that funds artist and experimental films in the UK, leading Bani Abidi to shoot something, for the very first time, in Berlin. "The protagonist is a non-actor and a recent refugee to Germany. The team that I worked with was almost all-German and it was a very intimate experience to make this very small and simple work together," the artist tells me of the work that is a significant part of her solo show. Speaking further about the show, she affirms, "What I would like viewers to take away from the show at *Experimenter* (my main international gallery) is that the many Pakistanis and Indians have a shared sense of being, history and purpose, who depend on, learn from and love each other more than anyone else."

After many years of making and planning videos, the artist tells me that she has started drawing and painting again recently. "The ability to make drawings on paper on one's dining table, or in bed or while sitting outdoors is a nice break between all the elaborately planned videos. It is very liberating. Even though a lot of my drawings are still serialised and I make them in sets and sequences," she elaborates. This finally motivates me to ask, as our conversation nears its conclusion, how in a world constantly in crisis, does one keep creating as an artist.

"It's a good question," she begins, wondering aloud, providing enlightening insight with every word that follows, "I think a lot about it these days given that one third of Pakistan is submerged in water, and everyone is preoccupied with relief work. It feels completely unnecessary to be planning an exhibition. But till there is life, there are newer (or older) and fairer ways of living to discover, better ways for children to be educated about the world, about the earth, change to be identified. And this is the project of creativity, care and awareness. What is insignificant in this larger reality of doom and disaster is the art market and capital. But that is just a tiny portion of what art is and can do, in any case." ///

Words Nidhi Verma





Facing Page: The Reassuring Hand Gestures of
Big Men, Small Men, All Men, 2021
Inkjet prints on Alu-dibond
Dimensions variable, Suite of 69
This Page; Above: The Song, 2022
Single-channel video. Below: Mangoes, 1999
Single channel video
3 min 24 sec
Courtesy the artist and Experimenter, Kolkata.



NANDITA DAS

You're not surprised when Nandita Das, an exceptional actor, director and theatrist of at least a thousand acts, tells you that the journey hasn't been easy. In the last twenty six years, Nandita has done more than forty feature films in ten different languages, directed three feature films and a couple of shorts. From her first film, *Fire*, she has been a part of so many different stories, worked and met numerous faces along the way that enriched her life and experiences, 'I worked with directors like Mrinal Sen, Shyam Benegal, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Rituporno Ghosh, Mani Ratnam and many others. Each of them gave me something precious that I took away with me. A lot of the learning happens subconsciously'.

Acting, she tells us, was something she stumbled upon and has remained a hesitant actor since. 'When I did *Firaaq* I didn't know I would direct again. I have always seen films as a means to an end, a way to express my concerns. I am attracted to stories that mirror our times, challenge our prejudices and shed a light on people that remain unseen. Be it *Firaaq*, *Manto* or now *Zwigato*, these are stories I felt compelled to tell.'

The conversation around her latest film, *Zwigato* and her journey continues below...

Can you give us a blurb on *Zwigato* in your own words?

Zwigato is a story of new urban India and the relentlessness of life, but not without its silver linings. The film explores the life of an ex-factory floor manager who loses his job during the pandemic. He then works as a food delivery rider, grappling with the app on his phone and the world of ratings and incentives. Simultaneously, his wife, a homemaker, begins to explore different work opportunities. The fear of these new experiences is coupled with the joy of newfound independence.

What inspired the film?

I directed *Firaaq* in 2008 and then ten years later it was *Manto*. I was exhausted from the long and gruelling process of making a period film, set across two cities. After that, I wanted to do something small and simple about relationships. Then Covid hit us and the lockdown exposed us to new realities. So, wanting to make a film about a food delivery rider and his family came out of that experience. We consumers, for our own convenience, became more and more dependent on the gig workers and less and less aware of their struggle. The no-contact deliveries further pushed them away from our bubbles. But the film is about many small things that are hidden in plain sight. Fewer films are being made these days about urban workers that have become an inevitable part of our world. Apart from the film being about the life of a gig worker, *Zwigato* is also about our normalised biases of class, caste, religion and gender. These have all subtly found their way into the film, hopefully making the invisible, visible.

The idea of this film started with a discussion about growing unemployment and the complexity of gig work with my publisher friend, Samir Patil. We then began writing a short film about a day in the life of a delivery rider. Then Sameer (Nair), CEO of *Applause Entertainment*, who was to produce it, nudged me to expand it for a feature film. Initially, I felt the subject would not immerse me enough, but as I began to delve deeper into it, I was drawn to the human aspects of this collision of new technology and the life of a worker, who is a mere cog-in-the-wheel. Also, I began exploring what impact all this has on their family, especially the wife. With the rise of the gig economy, the struggle between man and machine that Chaplin depicted in *Modern Times* has now shifted to one between man and algorithms.

What made you pick Kapil Sharma for the role?

The pandemic also impacted actor availabilities and shooting schedules. Casting became a nightmare. Then one day, Kapil Sharma popped up on my screen while surfing for something on the Internet. Before I cast Kapil, I hadn't even seen his show, as I haven't had a TV for many years now. I began to watch some snippets online and found his natural charm and candour and how he represents the 'ordinary' man, though he no longer is in real life, perfect for the character. And so, I reached out to him on an impulse, not fully knowing if he would be right for the part or if he would be open to doing a film that is not a comedy. He promptly responded. And then we had many interactions that very quickly convinced me that he was the one. I think, not knowing his comic work freed me from that burden. I didn't change a line to accommodate his public persona.

It was a big change for him, in every possible way. He said playing an 'ordinary' man reminded him of his growing-up years and his days of struggle. He drew a lot from the life before he had moved to Mumbai and into television. He got into the skin of the character quite effortlessly.

We come from very different worlds, but at the core, connected with such ease. While he completely submitted to my process, he has a very sharp mind and always questioned if something didn't make sense to him or made interesting suggestions, without needing me to always accept them. He is very real in the film and I am so glad I went with my instinct.

Your first film as a director, *Firaaq*, was based around a real life occurrence while *Manto* was based on a complex real life character but *Zwigato* seems to come from a different place. How easy or difficult was it to do cinematic justice to a fictional character?

Honestly, I don't see *Zwigato* as a departure from my previous works. While *Firaaq* and *Manto* can be labelled as being inspired by reality, but so is *Zwigato*. They all are inspired by real people, real incidents and real experiences. In fact, in *Firaaq* my disclaimer was 'A work of fiction based on a thousand true stories.' After all everything is inspired from reality. Of course, when we fictionalise, we create composite characters, we add more elements to the story, we basically fictionalise reality. In its core, all three feature films have stemmed from similar concerns.

In *Zwigato*, I realised, how much of the particular and peculiar about our current moment can be revealed by simply following four days in the life of a food delivery person. Apart from the world of the gig economy, so many disparities also made way into the story by just being true to the context. At the core I deeply desire to unravel an aspect of the human condition and evoke empathy for the characters whose lives are being explored.

Let's talk about your way of working. Is filmmaking a solitary journey for you or is a collaborative art?

For me, filmmaking is both a solitary journey and a collaborative art. They are not mutually exclusive. Many people work together to make a film and each one is

Craft is something that comes with experience. The more you do it the more you learn and find ways to try them out. The only way one can truly be original is by internalising all those learnings and making them your own. Otherwise, what is really original? Everything has been said and done before.

important and crucial to the process. Right from the director to the spot boy, as they are called, play an important role. Having said that, the weight of the vision and how it comes to life, primarily lies on the director's shoulders. The director is like a conductor in an orchestra, where each one is playing their respective instrument, but the conductor is the one who creates the harmony. Without the conductor, it would be utter chaos. Often in India, people don't know what a director really does. If performances are good, it's the actors, if cinematography is good, it is the cameraperson, the look of the film is credited to the production designer and so on. But each crew and cast needs to be aligned to the director's vision and together they create every aspect of the film. The director is constantly making choices. The whole is not just the sum total of its part. And that is what makes it also a solitary journey because only the director has the bird's eye view and knows where they are heading towards. Sometimes it does get really lonely because no one really knows all the other pieces of the jigsaw puzzle. But that is why good collaborations can create wonders and make the journey more fulfilling.

How has your craft evolved over the years?

Craft is something that comes with experience. The more you do it the more you learn and find ways to try them out. The only way one can truly be original is by internalising all those learnings and making them your own. Otherwise, what is really original? Everything has been said and done before.

I am not a trained actor, director, producer or writer. I have learnt only by doing them. If you instinctively observe life

and people, much of it comes handy while working. Also, I have always written what I have directed and therefore my thoughts and ideas begin to get formed about how I want to tell the story while writing itself. I am deeply involved in every aspect and department of the filmmaking process. As the director, that is what naturally comes to me. Everyone thinks I am anal about everything, while I think I end up compromising on many things due to the multiple factors that are beyond my control. But over the years, I feel I care more about people and life than 'my art'. There are times when I have to choose one over the other and I find myself sacrificing art for life and people. It's an inner shift, I guess. While craft is very important, I believe that filmmaking is not just that, but the intangible ways in which each person chooses to tell the story. That is what makes one's voice unique.

What is next?

Now that I have begun to embrace direction less hesitatingly, I am going to be jumping into another film soon after *Zwigato* is released. I am doing some research, as and when time permits. I am reading many scripts, both as an actor and a director. There is no dearth of work, but not all of it is good. It is one life and I want to make sure I use my time well on this planet. Over the years and more so after the pandemic, I have learnt not to plan too much and be open to surprises and change. So, while I have begun work on the next film, I will dive into it fully only after baby *Zwigato* is fully delivered to the audience. ///

Words Hansika Lohani

STUDIO LOTUS

AMBRISH ARORA, SIDHARTHA TALWAR, ANKUR CHOKSI, ASHA SAIRAM & HARSH VARDHAN

If one were to ask Ambrish Arora, founder of and a Principal at *Studio Lotus* about the firm's evolution since their establishment in 2002, he'd tell you it could be looked at through multiple lenses. He was at that time a partner with Amardeep Behl on the *Khalsa Museum* narratives at *Design Habit*. *Studio Lotus* Co-founders Sidhartha Talwar and Ankur Choksi were team members at back then. Eventually, working on a subsequent interior project with Sidhartha made Ambrish realise how fulfilling the entire experience was, the sharp focus on detail, space and material was far more exciting. The project went on to win a few awards owing to its radical outlook. This was a moment when Ambrish decided working in the domain of creating spaces was what he wanted to pursue instead of exhibition or museum design. Thus, *Studio Lotus* was born and established as a multi-disciplinary practice by Ambrish, Sidhartha and Ankur.

Their journey hasn't been easy, the first six to seven months were spent struggling without almost no work, meagre savings and no actual experience. Despite working with limitations, the founding members were very clear with what they wanted for their firm; for them to push the envelope for interiors and the built form. Their focus from the onset was on frugal innovation and what could be done with few resources. The only way of working on a lower budget was to find their way with what was locally available. Their philosophy materialised due to their circumstances and the desire to do more with less.

We're in conversation with Ambrish Arora, Sidhartha Talwar, Ankur Choksi, Asha Sairam and Harsh Vardhan the Principals at *Studio Lotus* who tell us more about the firm's evolution, good design in India, their future and more.

THE EVOLUTION

Ambrish Arora: The first year we barely had two or three projects that weren't enough to sustain us. Within a year, we were also on the verge of shutting down. Luckily, we were called through INTACH to do a craft fair in Patiala since the earlier appointed designers ended up backing out at the last minute. This was definitely a turning point for our studio, considering we managed to push our envelope even within a limited time frame. It was a large production since they were aiming to compete with the *Surajkund Crafts Mela*. The installation we did was made with cotton and bamboo, even before sustainability became a buzzword that it is now, we were looking at ways to generate minimum waste and ensure every component was recyclable, while making sure design was at the fore. Subsequently our first adaptive reuse project at the Mehrangarh Fort came to us by chance through our connection with INTACH. Despite not having the experience in conservation, our work did involve some understanding of it and responding to a historical site that was the fort in Jodhpur. It was a low cost project that was done sensitively making use of the local resources and won us many accolades. Parallely we also worked on a retail space, *Viya Home* and the *F-Bar* at Lado Sarai, Delhi.

With the bar we played a lot around the interface of technology and space. Soon after, we bagged the *Raas* hotel project which was a point of inflection for the practice and it also won us a major award at the *World Architecture Festival* in Barcelona. From a



Clockwise from top left: Amrish Arora, Sidhartha Talwar, Asha Sairam, Ankur Choksi, Harsh Vardhan. Photography Noughts and Crosses LLP.





work perspective thereafter, we've continued taking the same approach philosophically. We look at luxury differently from how it is defined. Our imagery is not derived from the west, we derive meaning from indigenous materials and techniques and interpret it in a contemporary context.

One of our main agenda's includes pushing the envelope using local skills but giving them a new forward looking form, both in terms of the way materials are used and how buildings take shape. For a country like ours, we personally look at low tech rather than high tech considering our access to technology is limited when you start leaving the urban centres. One important aspect we deal with, is the harnessing of manual labour as opposed to machinery. The idea isn't to replicate what a machine can do but rather focus on what a hand can achieve that machinery can't. We continue to ask similar questions even as we've upscaled to over a hundred team members over the years.

What's relevant to us is very different from where the world is moving to that involves increased mechanisation, sterilisation and standardisation. With the resources available to us we can move towards customisation instead, considering the cost of the hand is still so affordable here. Beyond generating livelihood it brings alive buildings in a tactile manner. I like to look at our practice as a laboratory that engages with how these ideas can be implemented across different scales and building typologies.

As opposed to a corporate approach, we still maintain our studio-like trajectory that helps us produce projects that are rich in diversity. We have a huge focus on the growth of our people within the team and creating a collaborative approach with all our stakeholders. The projects are an outcome of that rather than the other way round.

DESIGN IN INDIA

Ankur Choksi: We in India have a very rich repository of indigenous thinking which is historical, local and regional. We find that currently a large part of our idea of sustainability has been heavily shaped by the west, it is heavy on engineering and ends up creating another problem of extra material, extra cost. It is extremely vital to recognise that it isn't one size fits all. Each region within the country generates a different response be it in terms of climate, culture or the social aspect and we need to look at what is available

Above: Krushi Bhawan,
Photography Andre J Fanthome.
Facing page: Raas Chhatrasagar,
Photography Avesh Gaur.

and easy to do within that context.

In Rajasthan, it's easy to work with stone whereas in Ladakh, one uses a lot of mud and clay. The ability to study our history of material and skill is critical. If we were to look inward and combine that with current best practices then every project has the ability to produce an outcome that is forward looking.

THE RAAS HOTELS

Asha Sairam: We worked very closely with Nikhilendra Singh, one of the owners and the creative and operational force behind the hotels. In terms of a hotel with a commercial return and tight timelines, there's a jugalbandi involved that we've been very blessed to have developed with him this kind of synergy and trust. The property at Jodhpur was a first building project for him and for us, considering we hadn't done any building before and had only worked on Interiors till that point. One important aspect of the project was the ability to question the existing paradigm of heritage tourism. He wanted something for tourists and we came up with something that reinterpreted tradition, something appealing both for Tourists and the locals that offered a new way of looking at regional architectural tradition.

Even though we didn't know what we would end up building, there were no images we were referencing Nikhilendra's partnership in the journey as a client who trusted our intent as we went along allowed us to move beyond a safe response. and explore a new expression that was rooted in tradition but which had a contemporary face. The subsequent Raas hotels that we have worked upon have each had a distinct identity responsive to the region they have or are being built in.

The idea of luxury in all the Raas projects comes from attention to detail, high degree of craftsmanship, authenticity of construction and using regional material. The materials might be ordinary but their use and other touch points denote a very high degree of finesse which constitutes luxury. It's about capturing the spirit of the place. This process is something that has extended into our other projects across various typologies.

Harsh Vardhan: Most contemporary architecture is practiced in a manner that everything is resolved on a drawing board and one goes to the site and builds it out. On the other hand, in our case it's much more of an iterative process- we shape an idea, put



our concerns down, make a skeleton. We include the Client, consultants, contractors and vendors, engaging with how they can contribute to build on this vision... This way of functioning promotes collaboration that extends into the way work happens at site as well.

THE ARCHITECT'S RESPONSIBILITY

Sidhartha Talwar: We believe it's our responsibility to do the best we can for all our stakeholders. The client being the primary one deserves an outcome that improves the quality of their life. Beyond that, as architects, we have a responsibility to all the collaborators, the masons, the contractors and how we manage to get the best out of them. We can design the best building but if the person at site isn't building with the right attitude, the outcome wouldn't be favourable. That's an important step most miss out on, our more enlightened clients ensure that the people working on site are happy, engaged and involved all throughout. What a building will be ten years down the line is a function of how much love and effort has been put in creating it. We also have a responsibility to our neighborhood; the building I create will exist for the next fifty to hundred years. Questions like what it does to the street, how it interacts with the city visually and functionally, have to be engaged with.

For Krushi Bhawan, the clients wanted a typical closed off office building but we suggested lifting the offices off the street, freeing up the ground plane and offering the facilities to the people of Bhubaneswar as well. The cafe, the library, the meeting rooms, the gallery and the gardens are all open for public use. This is giving back to society, using architecture in some way. Finally, we also shoulder a responsibility to the planet, everything we build on earth has an impact. If there's a piece of land we're taking over to build something that didn't exist, there's also the flora and fauna being affected. Sustainability for us is our consciousness of what that building will consume in terms of energy, resources and materials. It's also about understanding how a building contributed to the cultural fabric of a city. These are the multiple aspects woven in for all projects undertaken at the studio.

THE FUTURE

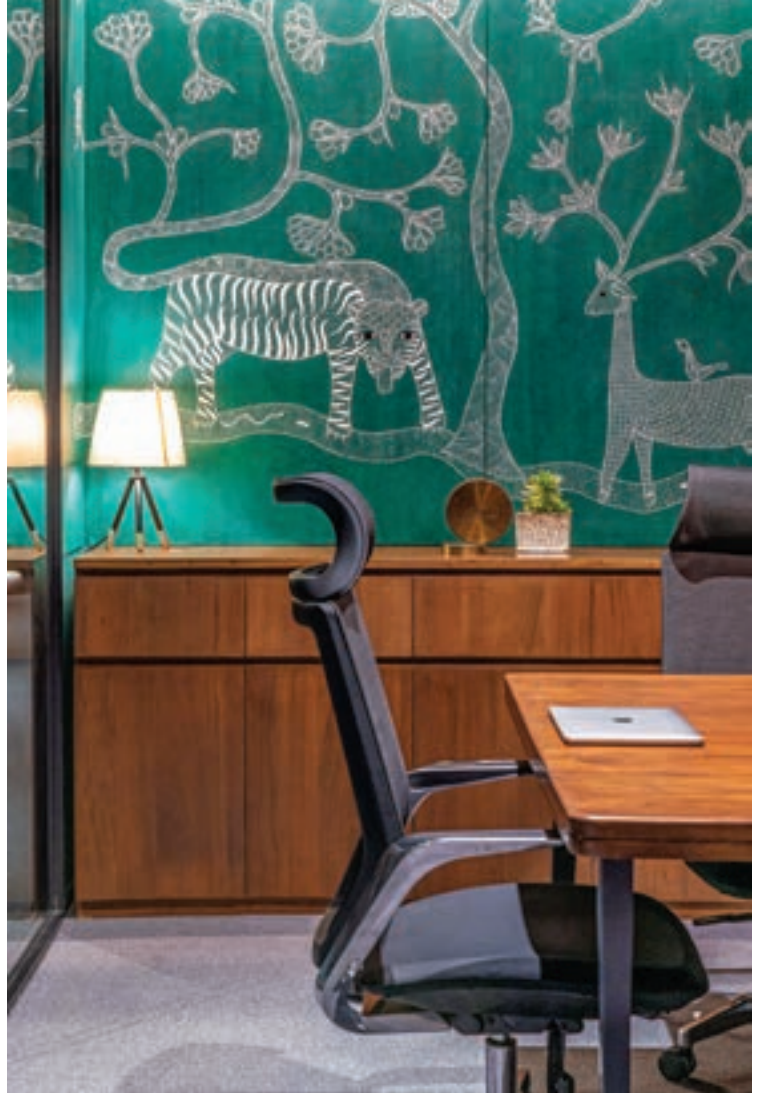
Harsh Vardhan: We're trying to define what success means to us and we're looking to create an organisation that increasingly empowers all the stakeholders who work with the studio. We want the studio to be represented by not a face or a group of faces but by a set of values and anyone who aligns to these values and can choose to add their slice of genius and gets a chance to interact, collaborate and use other people's resources.

It may sound abstract but this is what we're aiming for; if we could have a system in place which is almost like a network where people who subscribe to the same set of values can contribute to and take away from. While we're still unsure about the boundaries of ownership, we wish for it to not be owned by a person. We're hoping for it to become some kind of an open source idea which is supported by a sustainable financial model. ///

Words Unnati Saini



Facing page: Raas Chhatrasagar,
Photography Noughts and Crosses
LLP. This page; Top: Trilegal,
Photography Avesh Gaur. Below:
The Villa in the Woods, Photography
Noughts and Crosses LLP.







COMING THROUGH IN WAVES

BHARAT SIKKA

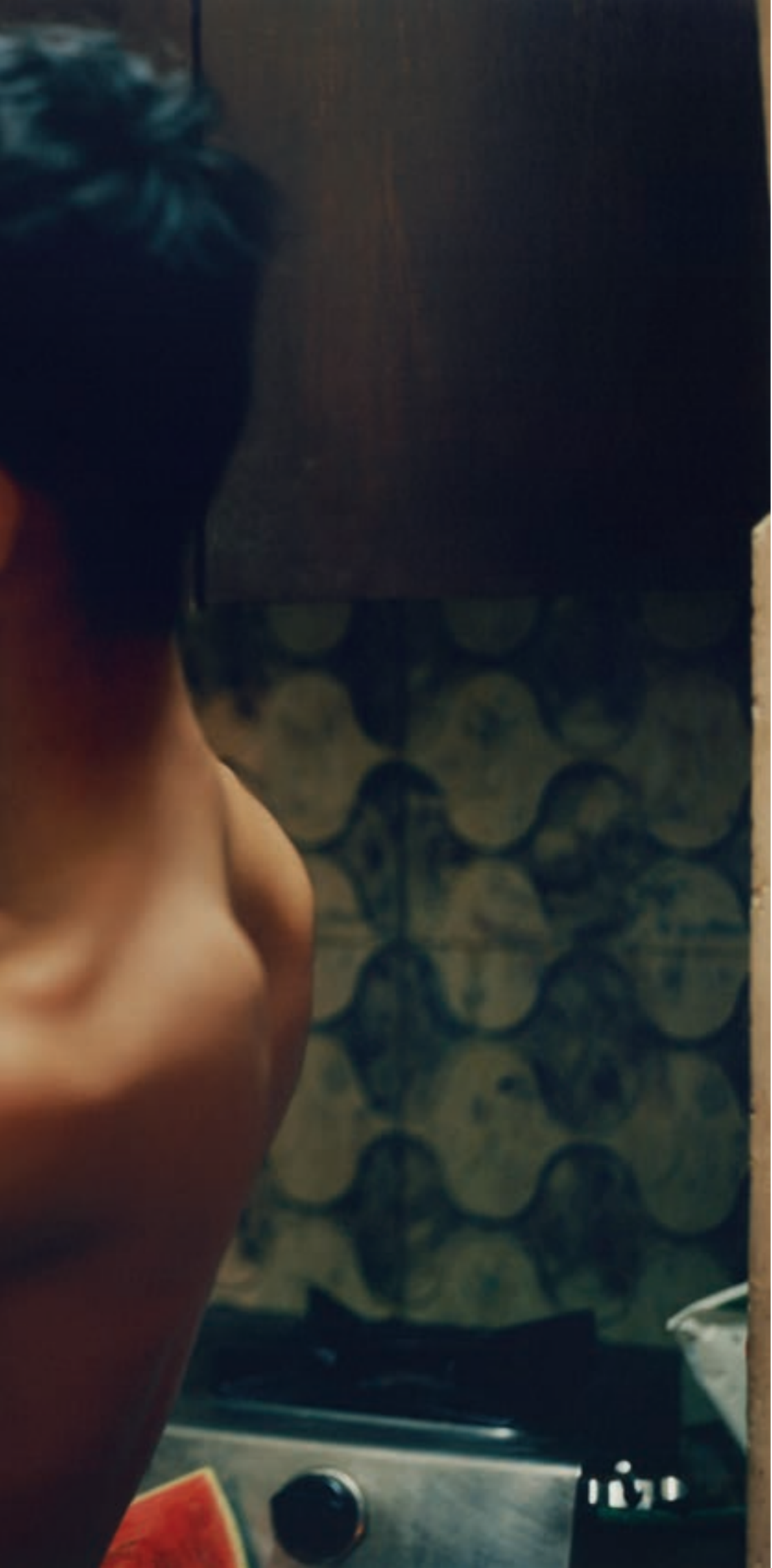




Bharat Sikka's "Coming Through In Waves" navigates an intrinsic that wades through the fringes of youth culture, built on a lingering reminiscent thought of exploration of youth identity, conceived during the 90s. The oeuvre invites dialogue around gender, sexuality, and psychology. Straying away from a stereotypical youth culture snapshot, there is transcendence into a warmer ether. The collaborations are layered to engage multiplicity in dynamics, building a narrative that is a confluence of reality and fiction, resurrected by its participants. They are untethered, exercising a voice that speaks of the politics of their being, more insistent now than ever. With the current constitutional state of India and the growing severity of regulations, it is a privilege that may not sustain. *Coming Through In Waves* looks to preserve their voice through the medium of image-making. The body of work also addresses conflicting associations between traditions and the vulgarity of a consumerist society. With liberation and individuality, there is an endless churning and feeding to which one surrenders in vain. Sikka uses a 4 x 5 camera to impede this constant consumption, to fissure the pace of temporality. Perceiving it as a means of ritual, the camera was used to sedate the momentum, almost opposing the routine of the part-takers. For Sikka, setting foot in someone's personal space has the equivalence to opening Pandora's box. With each encounter, one stumbles upon histories, curios, obligations or proverbial obstacles. Sikka's work has a certain deliberation. He brings about the frame to reflect a glimpse of himself while keeping his subjects in focus. Through *Coming Through In Waves*, Bharat Sikka not only reconstructs the mainstream photographic representation of India but also rewinds time to consider the various lives he could have lived. Through his subjects, he embodies personas that could have been.

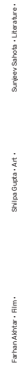
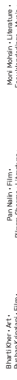












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DIA MEHHTA BHUPAL

Dia Mehhta Bhupal's practice consists of creating large, life-size sets of spaces which we each frequent, spaces that she believes are becoming increasingly transitional. Her material: the careful inlay of finely spun magazine paper rolls, each expertly turned by her hands. It can take her years to complete a single set. A waiting room, a supermarket, a public toilet, or a cinema theatre – these are all landscapes to which we are accustomed, and their presentation is at once uncanny, as it is insightful. She is interested in presenting to us what we already know to be real, albeit with a particular tension: spaces that we know to be brimming with bodies, here, are left entirely empty. What does it mean, thus, to be presented with a topography of absence? Mehhta Bhupal extends the narrative further with the delivery of extraordinarily hyper-real images, the display of which – as large, and almost iridescent, diasec prints – brings viewers to a halt and claims their immediate attention. Her practice innately requires her to expertly juggle its several stages: from conception to final form, Mehhta Bhupal effectively performs the role of architect, craftsmen, designer, curator, and of course, photographer, too. It is a layering up of personal experiences into a single frame, she says, but it also the layering up of several different creative mechanisms that dialogue and converse throughout the stages of the practice. These are images of a deliberate and careful construction, sharply infused with a sense of criticality, and narrative potential.

ARTIST BIO

Dia Mehhta Bhupal is one of India's most eminent and distinctive young artists. Her work is unique, subtly combining the social message of sustainability (extensively using only recycled materials) with meticulously photographed 'constructed images'. Bhupal graduated with a BFA in Photography from *The Parsons School of Design*, New York, after completing her foundation studies at the *Central Saint Martin's College of Art and Design*, London. She is represented by *Gallery SKE*, Bangalore, and has exhibited her work across the world, with solo and group shows, including at Biennales at Kochi in India, Lyon in France, Yinchuan in China, and *Art Basel*, to name a few. Bhupal routinely combines her passion for art and community, and is associated with several philanthropic causes, including education. She is the creative director of *The Corona Quilt Project*, a community initiative founded during the global pandemic.





Waiting Room 2, 2019
Diasac print
240 x 180 cm



GYM, 2018
Diasac print
240 x 180 cm



Airplane, 2016
Diasac print
240 x 180 cm



Waiting Area 1, 2016
Diasec print
240 x 180 cm



Bathroom



Play Area, 2019
Diasec Print
240 x 180 cm



Locker Room

YASHNA KAUL

BIOGRAPHY

Yashna Kaul (b.1995) is an image-based artist working in the expanded photographic field. Engaging primarily with vernacular photography, she employs a range of digital tools and analogue techniques to question the authenticity of photographs. Her current work appropriates the family album to examine the relationship between memory and mythmaking through animation, collage, and experimental bookmaking. She received her BFA in Photography and Imaging from NYU Tisch School of the Arts in 2018 and was the recipient of the department's Thomas Drysdale Production Fund and Seth Tobias Award. Her project, *The Image World* was included in *Nowhere is Home* at Photoink, New Delhi (2022), *Betwixt and Between: Photography, Time and Place* at Flower City Arts Center, Rochester (2018) and *Family Photographs* at Jamestown Arts Center, Rhode Island (2018).

ARTIST STATEMENT

A photograph claims to materialise memory as something that can be possessed, suggesting that a moment may be lost without one. Even outside of this implied nostalgic loss, the intentioned photographic act itself mediates what is to be preserved and what is not. In this sense, photography may be as much about forgetting as it is about remembering. This notion has preoccupied me as I engage with my family photographs to understand my father's experience with early onset Alzheimer's.

At first, I thought these images had preserved his memory; so I tried to reconstruct them to serve him better. But soon I realised that they had performed for him, and our family, in the way all family photographs do. They performed the function of memory and served as our family's means of self-representation; they portrayed an incomplete history conforming to the dominant mythologies of family life, excluding its challenges and fractures. In addition to the customary omissions, our family albums maintained some bigger gaps in our memories — of polygyny and estrangement — to fall strictly in line with the scripted familial gaze of accepted conventions and ideologies.

There are thousands of these photographs that performed for my father. Could they have served as facilitators of the work of his compromised memory? Can they serve as objects of my memory of him?

"We speak so much about memory because there is so little of it left"

Pierre Nora

















HOW FAR THE LIGHT REACHES

literature 1

SABRINA IMBLER

Sabrina Imbler's debut book is, quite simply, extraordinary. The book's full title is *How Far the Light Reaches: A Life in Ten Sea Creatures*, deftly describing what is an astounding journey into the depths of the ocean, with a twofold metaphoric dive. As Sabrina guides readers by the hand into the vast ocean of their own existence, acquainting us courageously to the different facets that make them the person they are, they use one sea creature per essay to both attain and impart enlightenment vis-à-vis their life, and perhaps living at large. The book is thus a wondrous voyage of discovery, both inward and outward.

Sabrina Imbler is a renowned science and conservation journalist. Their work has been a part of various esteemed publications, and "Like many other writers," they reveal, "I fell in love with writing as a kid." This love for writing, however, did not immediately lead them toward composing essays, "I wanted to write books — specifically fantasy books about women warriors and magical creatures, like the ones I was reading. In fourth or fifth grade, I wrote a book like that with my best friend Neaka, an experience that impressed upon me the fact that it is incredibly hard to write an entire book and conceptualise an entire world. So, in college, I pivoted toward essays, which felt more manageable and concrete and also helped me realise I rely on writing as a font of self-revelation."

Self-revelation has certainly been at the core of Sabrina's writing, percolating profusely in their debut collection of essays. Nevertheless, it was not their sole intention behind the book's creation. "I hope they (the readers) feel inspired to pay attention to the natural world, oceans or otherwise. I hope people feel moved to find common ground between themselves and the creatures that we share the Earth with. I don't mean this in the sense of anthropomorphism — saying that a creature is just like us in this way or that — but rather imagining how creatures might

be modelling other ways of living, other forms of community, other ways of inhabiting a self. How are we more like creatures than we realise? How can we learn from them? How can we ensure their futures are protected on this planet?"

More excerpts from my conversation with the author follow.

How did the idea for *How Far the Light Reaches* emerge?

How Far the Light Reaches emerged from a column I was writing for a digital magazine called *Catapult*. The idea behind the column, called *My Life in Sea Creatures*, was to pair memoir with writing about sea creatures whose biology or existence had illuminated parts of my own experience. The first essay I ever conceptualised for the column was *My Mother and the Starving Octopus*, the idea for which first struck me when I read a news story about the octopus at the heart of the essay — a deep-sea octopus that brooded her eggs for four and a half years without moving or eating. I was struck by the idea of this, how a creature with the intelligence of an octopus could have fasted for so long without moving. As I tried to understand my fixation on this octopus, I realised it reminded me of my mother and the rest became the book.

I think of my book as a love letter to the ocean and the fantastic creatures dwelling in it, whose unfamiliar and wondrous ways of living help make my own life more familiar to me. I hope it is a plea to protect the oceans and value marine life for reasons beyond the benefits they offer to humans; a plea to respect and preserve them on their own terms. And more personally, I hope my book is a reflection of young adulthood, how I have learned and changed and tried to become a better person.

Walk us through your creative process and influences.

I am the kind of writer who figures out what they're trying to say in the process of



I am the kind of writer who figures out what they're trying to say in the process of writing, so many of my pieces originated with an obsession, with an octopus, a memory, a region of the ocean.

writing, so many of my pieces originated with an obsession — with an octopus, a memory, a region of the ocean. I fixate on things all the time and I often write around whatever that obsession is until I figure out how it makes me feel, or what I'm trying to say about it. But the seeds of many of these essays started with the creatures themselves. I learned about a lot of animals by reading popular science stories about them, like Ed Yong's stories for *National Geographic* and *The Atlantic*. But some animals stuck around in my mind, which was a sign to me that they were in conversation with some aspect of my life or experiences and a sign I might want to write about them.

So, the biggest influence was probably the natural world itself. I watched a lot of nature documentaries, went to aquariums and beaches and tried my best to imagine myself in these corners of the world I might otherwise not have access to. And whenever I would get stuck or write myself into a corner, I would reread some of my favourite essays to remind myself of the power of lyric and precise language. These pieces often had nothing to do with the content of my book — a few examples are *On Summer Crushing* an essay by Hanif Abdurraqib on Whitney Houston and *There I Almost Am* an essay by Jean Garnett on twinship — but I think helped light a fire under my butt to finish whatever I was trying to do in my own pieces.

And how have your own roots influenced this work?

Many of the essays are about my adolescence and various identities I've come into understanding over the years, which is perhaps the most direct answer. But I tried to write a book that felt true to all my origins — true to my hometown, to my working experience as a science journalist, to the communities I belong to. This resulted in what I feel like is an incredibly specific book; whenever I try to explain I wrote a memoir about sea creatures and queerness, race, et cetera. I initially worried it was too specific to appeal to a general audience. But I realised pretty quickly I have no idea how to write a good book for a general audience. I can only write a book toward and for my communities, all of them, as directly as possible I can.

Tell me about the challenges that came your way.

It's terrifying to write a memoir, something I am realising more and more as the book nears publication. The younger version of myself had little idea what it would feel like to share so much of my personal story with the world. Books can feel very

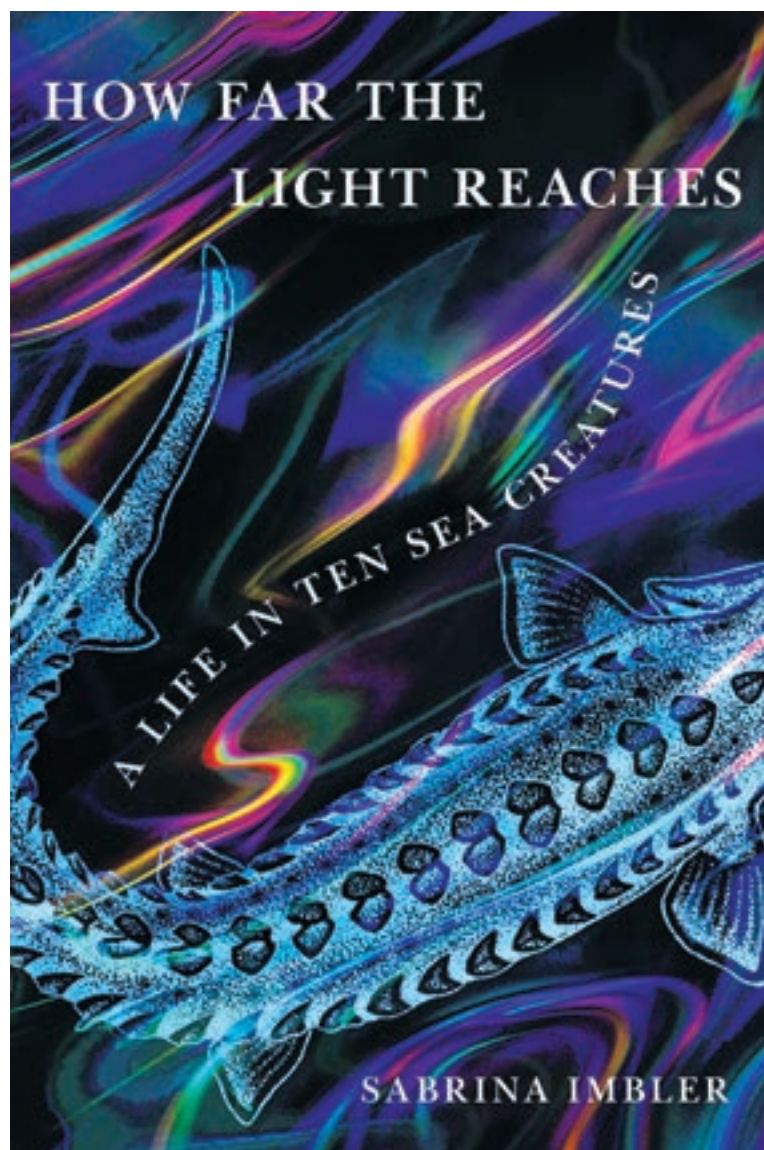
intangible when you propose them, especially when you're twenty-five. I know twenty-five-year-old Sabrina imagined I would feel much differently about publishing this book and probably would not have expected there would be so much anxiety involved. But I feel lucky that I took several years to finish the book, a time period in which I learned a lot about myself and also put some guardrails over what I was willing to share with the world, about myself and my family and also to learn that you cannot write a good book if you fear you will be cancelled on the internet.

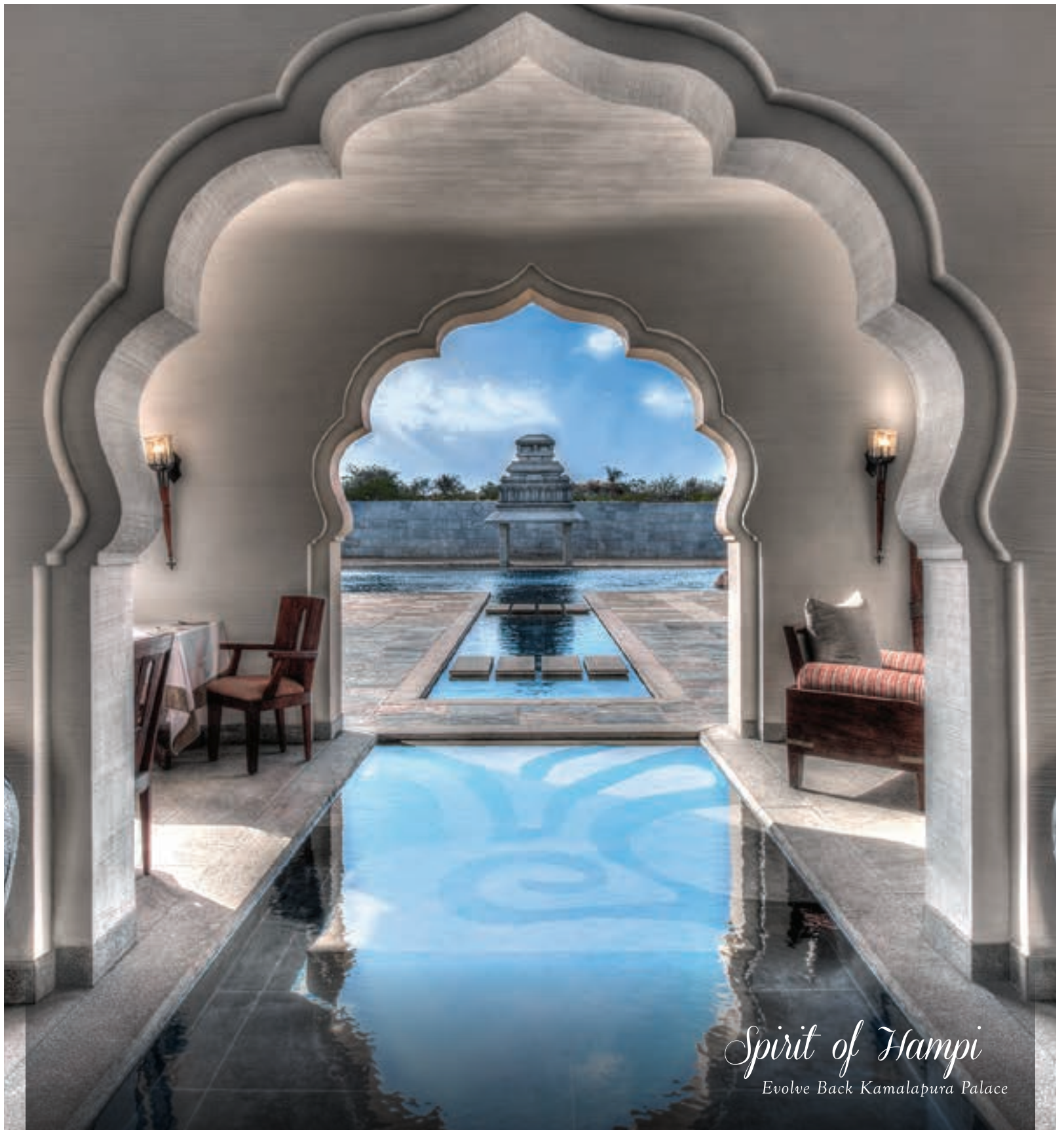
This book was also originally due in August 2020 — a deadline I missed. I actually went on book leave in March of 2020, which obviously coincided with the global pandemic, which meant I spent four months off work paying hundreds of dollars a month for COBRA insurance to try and work on a book that I could not concentrate on and actually felt like the least important thing in the world. And then in June I was laid off from that job and had to scramble and learn how to freelance, which I was never very good at. The pandemic delayed the book but also forced me to reconsider myself and my place in the world and crystallised the things that were most important to me. I'm glad I didn't force myself to finish the book on the original timeline, because it would have been pretty bad.

What are you working on next?

I'm working on resting. I've been writing this book alongside full-time writing jobs, or attempted full-time freelancing, for several years and it's been exhausting. I feel lucky to now work at *Defector*, a worker-owned company that values a work-life balance and workers' personal projects. So, I'd like to work just one job for a while and when the next project comes, hopefully I'll be rested and recovered in a way that makes me excited to tackle it. ///

Words Nidhi Verma





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THE BLUE SCARF: STORIES

ANU SINGH CHOUDHARY AND KAMAYANI SHARMA



THE AUTHOR

Anu Singh Choudhary was born in a village in Siwan, Bihar and grew up in a fairly lower middle class neighbourhood in Ranchi. The quest of higher education and opportunities brought her to Delhi, where she lived for over twenty years, after which she shifted to and currently resides in Mumbai, “because of my own need and greed for more work, more exposure and more opportunities,” she confesses.

“The one thing that has stayed a constant in my life, like most of us, are stories. The stories that adults told us to amuse us, to trick us, to cajole us. The stories about ourselves that we created in our heads and wanted the world to believe in. The stories that master storytellers and practitioners of various art forms had been telling the world, despite all their internal and external struggles in order to document their lives and times. Very early in my life, I had realised the power of stories — both oral and written. I’d also realised that written stories are more immortal, even though you move on and/or decay as an individual. Storytellers die, stories don’t. It was this realisation (which some may call greed to be famous and almost immortal) that led me to the world of writing,” reveals the writer, whose book of short stories, originally written and released in Hindi, is now being translated into English, titled *The Blue Scarf: Stories*.

THE TRANSLATOR

“My experience with translation before this was mainly in the context of poetry and critical writing. I had been looking to work on prose when *HarperCollins* approached me with the commission a couple of years ago. The first story I read from *Neela Scarf* (*The Blue Scarf*) could well have been told to me by a friend or appeared on my social media feed,” Kamayani Sharma recalls the beginning of her journey as the translator behind *The Blue Scarf: Stories*. “I enjoyed the collection’s slice-of-life tales of small-town young women navigating the city. Anu’s straightforward tone and breezy style were relatable to me as a reader from the same world as her characters. These narratives are seldom represented in popular Hindi fiction, which has tended to be centred on the experiences of men. So, I was happy to take up the project.”

THE BOOK

Slated for release in January 2023, *The Blue Scarf: Stories* revolves around various women, who navigate the diverse circumstances that arise from living in India and their unparalleled resilience. “The women around me — some my peers, some older and quite a few of them who are younger than me. These women and their untold stories of relentless search of a world that could’ve been a fairer one has been my only inspiration not just for this book, but for almost everything that I write, or will ever write,” acknowledges the author of her predominant thematic inclination. She further informs me that, “The courage of these myriad characters, especially women, who hail from different worlds but share their faith in pursuit of a world beyond the uncomfortable status quo — that forms the core of this book.”

Women writers were hence her primary influences as well. “Ismat Chughtai and Krishna Sobti are two of my favourite writers. I would like to be influenced by their courage with the characters and their way with the language, but it’s a long arduous journey of *saadhna... riyaz... relentless practice of writing*. And then there is Nora Ephron. If only I could be half as witty, half as prolific,” she exclaims.

THE COMPOSITION

The author admits that there has been no consistent creative process she has followed to write the short stories. “More often than not, a character appears on a page followed by her world and the rest of the story follows in exploration of this world. This may sound a little abstract, but I have never planned a short story. Long format, however, requires a great deal of planning and structuring, which is another kind of process. Which is why I find writing short stories liberating. They are like small doses of safe spaces (and gratification) that I keep going back to every time I am dealing with physical fatigue and mental exhaustion.”

In terms of translation, Kamayani’s process focussed primarily on making sure that the stories were found and not lost, in translation. Giving me further insight, she shares, “I think my process was quite simple, really. I read the collection through to get a sense of the tenor of Anu’s voice and a feel for the plots. This helped me figure out how to approach the collection overall, because there has to be a unifying quality that results from the original writer’s vision. Then, as I worked on each individual story, I would read the whole of it closely again and then work line by line, paragraph by paragraph. I tried to adopt a method of zooming in and out of the text by reading it with fresh eyes every few pages. This was to keep the translation supple and avoid common pitfalls like calques and stiff dialogue. On the whole, Anu’s language is crisp and candid, in keeping with the forthrightness of the stories she writes. So, my focus was to retain that quality without robbing it of its texture.”

THE CHALLENGES

“Naturally, at the most basic level, I found the idiomatic bits and dialogue to be the trickiest parts. In a couple of cases, I had to tweak metaphors and find a way to convey a character’s regional or economic background marked in the original dialogue. And then there are the less procedural decisions: for instance, irony and humour are expressed a bit differently in English, so I had to be careful with adapting that facet. This is where the subtler grain and cultural differences embedded in languages posed a substantive challenge for me as a translator.” However, she has masterfully managed to strike the balance between accuracy of meaning and consonance of affect in her translation, as was her intention.

For the author, her biggest challenge has been, “more internal than external. Like all writers and artists, I suffer from imposter syndrome. In 2015, I wondered if these stories were worth publishing in Hindi; in 2022 I am still wondering the same — why would anyone want to read translations of stories that are deeply personal, intimate and sometimes even reckless?”

THE HOPE

Perhaps an inadvertent response to Anu’s dilemma is Kamayani’s hope for the book. She shares that, “I hope that English-language readers will get a glimpse into the everyday adventures and travails of young women trying to make it in urban India and perhaps catch sight of themselves within its pages.” And for the author, “Love and faith — that’s all I want readers to take away from these stories. And maybe a motivation to read more women writers.” ///

Words Nidhi Verma

THE BOOK OF EVERLASTING THINGS

literature 3

AANCHAL MALHOTRA

Belonging and Becoming. Aanchal Malhotra's debut fiction novel, *The Book of Everlasting Things*, operates in this incredibly precarious liminal space — between belonging and becoming. Told in five parts, the book navigates century long timelines alongside expansive and ever-changing topographies, charting the history of some of the most turbulent times of our world's past, especially India's. However, in its telling of history, the people are always at the front and center.

In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Salman Rushdie posited that, "Sometimes your character is not your destiny. Sometimes a plane flying into a building is your destiny. The larger world gets into the story not because I want to write about politics, but because I want to write about people." And people are Malhotra's primary concern as well. "I think that's what I've done in my non-fiction," she concurs with Rushdie's words when I refer to them during our conversation. "I write about political events through people because their voices have been silenced for so long."

Furthermore, exploring how the political pervades the personal is Malhotra's forte, owing to her extensive work as an oral historian and writer about the 1947 Partition of India and its related topics. While her two highly acclaimed non-fiction books, *Remnants of a Separation* and *In the Language of Remembering*, contain within them invaluable partition stories, many may confuse *The Book of Everlasting Things* as being a partition narrative as well. And although Partition is certainly a significant aspect of the book, in its entirety, the novel is much more ambitious. "I think if you take the trajectory of my three works, I'm moving farther and farther away from Partition, the nucleus of Partition, at least. I like that because it's a very heavy subject and with this book, it gave me a sensory respite as well."



By 'sensory', Malhotra is alluding to the exhaustive employment of the sense of smell in her book. So far, she has been invested heavily in alternate historiography concerning Partition that is inclusive of personal testaments and *Remnants of a Separation* was a pathbreaking book for it relied entirely on the tangible recollection of Partition — through objects carried by the displaced refugees when they forcibly traversed across borders. Tangibility has thus been an important aspect of Malhotra's work as she is also the co-founder of *The Museum of Material Memory*, a "digital repository of material culture of the

Indian subcontinent.” Surprisingly, in her fiction, she ventures towards a rather elusive, intangible pursuit — of using smell as an element of storytelling.

“For me the entry point into writing this book was curiosity about perfumery,” recalls Malhotra, before sharing an insightful anecdote that fostered this curiosity. A tale of personal history told to her by her mother, recounts how her maternal grandfather, who was a chemist by profession and worked for *Dabur*, used to receive little samples of scents for making products, like soaps. During summer, much before air conditioning became available in India, people relied on air coolers, and many still do, which require water to be filled inside them for providing cool air. Her grandfather would pour the scent samples in the water of the cooler and their house would be engulfed in different smells every day. “I became enchanted with this environment that smelled of one thing by one person’s little act of beauty and mischief.”

This enchantment led Malhotra to Janhavi Lakota Nandan of *The Perfume Library*, who lent the author the extensive olfactive knowledge and lexicon, with which she has so meticulously composed her book. And with this remarkable endeavour, the author carefully provides more visceral enlightenment than pedagogy. “But of course, one has to be just a little bit obsessed to pursue a realm that cannot be seen, that can only be perceived through the organs,” remarks

Below: “A box of flavours/ scents that my grandfather received in Dabur”.



an important character in her book. It is rather telling of the people who become obsessed with perfumery in the book and of the writer of these characters as well, who has, through years of research and personal experiments, managed to capture the esoteric ‘syntax of smell’ (also a chapter in the book) efficaciously. I realised how deeply the author had immersed herself in probing into the art of perfumery when she animatedly shared details from the time she collected jasmine flowers and observed the way they wilted, changed colours and retained their fragrance, a process she attentively includes in the book as well.

Ittar, naturally derived essential oils that are further used to make perfumes, becomes a predominant preoccupation of the book because of two of its main protagonists, Vivek and Samir Vij. The uncle-nephew duo’s lives are suffused with smell, owing to their reckoning as ittar makers. For Malhotra’s fictional enterprise, it is clear that the conception and creation of her characters was pivotal and her two fictional families, the Vij and Khans, both based in pre-partition Lahore, take centerstage. She acquaints us to the Vij family’s history, going as far back to 1870, and the evolution of the members and physical traces of their ancestry — their house, Vij Bhawan, in the neighbourhood of Shahalmi Gate, and their ittar shop in the famed Anarkali Bazaar. The Khan family are introduced much later, but acquire equal significance as the narrative progresses, as it is in the lovelorn story of Samir Vij and Firdaus Khan, that the heart of the book lies and beats potently.

“Samir Vij was the anchor for me and still remains,” reveals Malhotra, as she embarked on the epic, five-year-long journey that was the writing of *The Book of Everlasting Things*. “The boy who’d swallowed the monsoon” is how she uniquely introduces him to us on the very first page of the book. He is the reader’s dominant companion as well since much of the book is told from his perspective. “He’s such a complicated character and he’s so unlikable at times, but the one thing that remains quite consistent for him is this desire to keep some part of home alive, even if he doesn’t agree with keeping it alive,” the author confides, connecting the dots between the book and its epi-graph, a little excerpt from Joan Didion’s *The White Album*, that speaks succinctly of the making and remaking of home as a place in actuality and in our imagination.

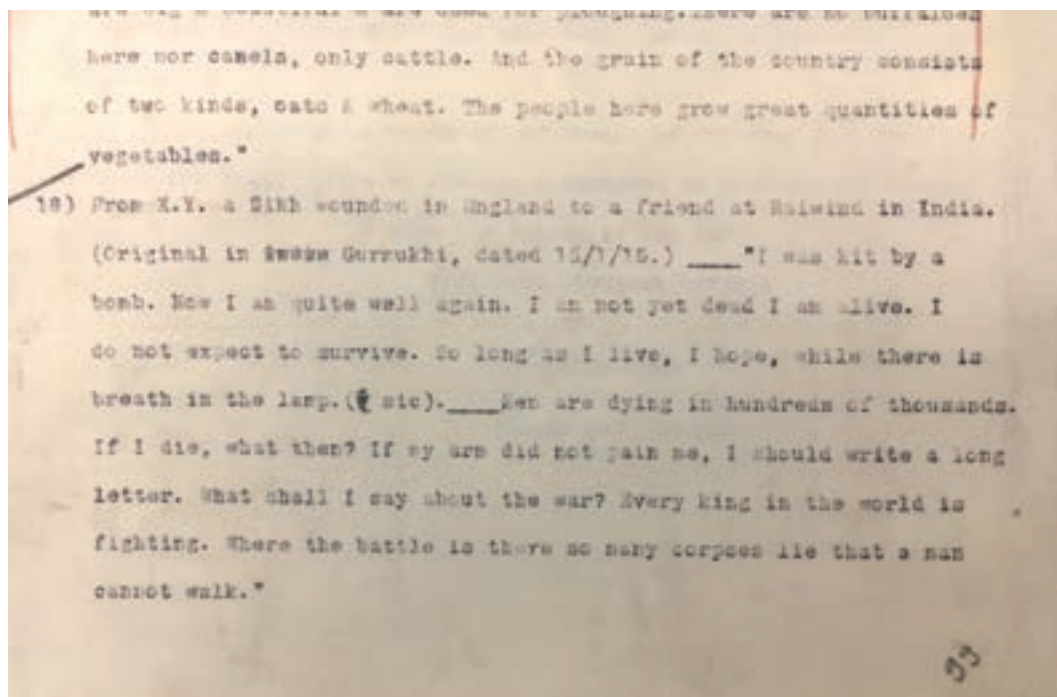
With this idea of home, also comes the idea of belonging. Samir’s paternal grandfather, Somnath Vij, tells him

of their ancestral property and Lahore, “Whatever you do Samir puttār, whoever you become, however life changes, this is the place where you belong. This is home.” And with the historical events leading up to India’s partition, this belonging became increasingly threatened for many Hindus, who were either killed in or had to flee Lahore. The loss incurred was immeasurable. So, who does one become when they are bereft of the belonging they had once found in their place (home or homeland) or their people (family members, friends, lovers)? In Samir and Vivek Vij’s story, which consciously mirror each other, Malhotra compels the reader to look for answers, never revealing them directly.

Through Vivek Vij’s story, the author also assumes a monumental undertaking — to portray the life of an Indian sepoy during World War 1. She does so through contrasting narratives — Vivek’s letters to his family while he was a sepoy, and later, in a peripeteia moment of the novel, through the revelation of the personal journals he kept during the war. “Not much is known about Indian sepoys that fought in WW1. There is no knowledge. We don’t know what the soldiers felt. We don’t know what they did. We don’t know what they ate. We didn’t even know that India factored into the war when we learned about it in school. I wanted to fill this lacuna of knowledge. And they deserve to be read about in their own voice,” explains the author of her motivation behind this undertaking.

However, the language of war is demanding, and often, desolate. I can only think of Salinger’s words from his short story, *For Esmé—with Love and Squalor* that almost accurately describes this language through juxtaposition, when he discusses a soldier’s girlfriend’s letters to him by saying “She wrote to him fairly regularly, from a paradise of triple exclamation points and inaccurate observations.” For Malhotra, her incredible research prowess and dedication for going through the exhaustive letters written by sepoys, archived at *The British Library*, helped her achieve riveting authenticity with the vernacular and the lived experiences. This facet of the book is perhaps one of the most gripping and all-consuming aspects of it — a genuine triumph for its writer.

Another character, the author tells me “demanded more time, effort and space in the book than I had originally intended.” In Firdaus Khan, we find the pre-occupation for another dying art — naqqashi, an ancient art form of calligraphy and engraving. Owing to her father,



Altaf Khan’s progressive practice of raising her daughter to be self-sufficient, through Firdaus we meet a formidable woman, a gifted artist, and Samir Vij’s love. And in her, we find the liminal space of belonging and becoming interrogated through a different, yet equally important, lens. As a Muslim woman, she is not forced to leave Lahore when it became a part of Pakistan, but she is left behind by the love of her life and eventually, forced to succumb to patriarchal and religious norms by marrying a man she doesn’t love. And so, the question arises, who do we become when we are forced to belong to a place or people we’d rather evade for somewhere and someone else? And yet again, the author leaves it to the reader to find their answers.

As I read *The Book of Everlasting Things*, its vastness had me stunned. It propelled me to inquire about the author’s writing process, who disclosed deftly her methodical modus operandi. “It’s very hard to tackle the idea of a novel. Harder still, if you’ve never done it before. And if it’s going across continents, time zones, characters and aspects of life that you know nothing about, you require other people’s help as well in doing your research. What is easy is to get down a sort of outline. I’m very, very organised. After making an outline, I divide it into parts, divide those parts further into chapters, divide those chapters further into sections. If I tackle one section at a time, then it’s not so hard for me.” While her method may seem almost mechanical, *The Book of Everlasting Things* is far from a mechanical read. It is emotionally

Above: “Letter from British Library_IOR/L/MIL/5/825/1 - INDIAN BASE POST OFFICE, BOULOGNE - Reports of the Censor of Indian Mails in France - Vol. 1.” Facing Page: “Page from my journal.” All Images Courtesy Aanchal Malhotra.

Fiction has a mind of its own, sometimes characters do things that you don't intend for them to do, but what you can do is ground them in your own reality somehow.

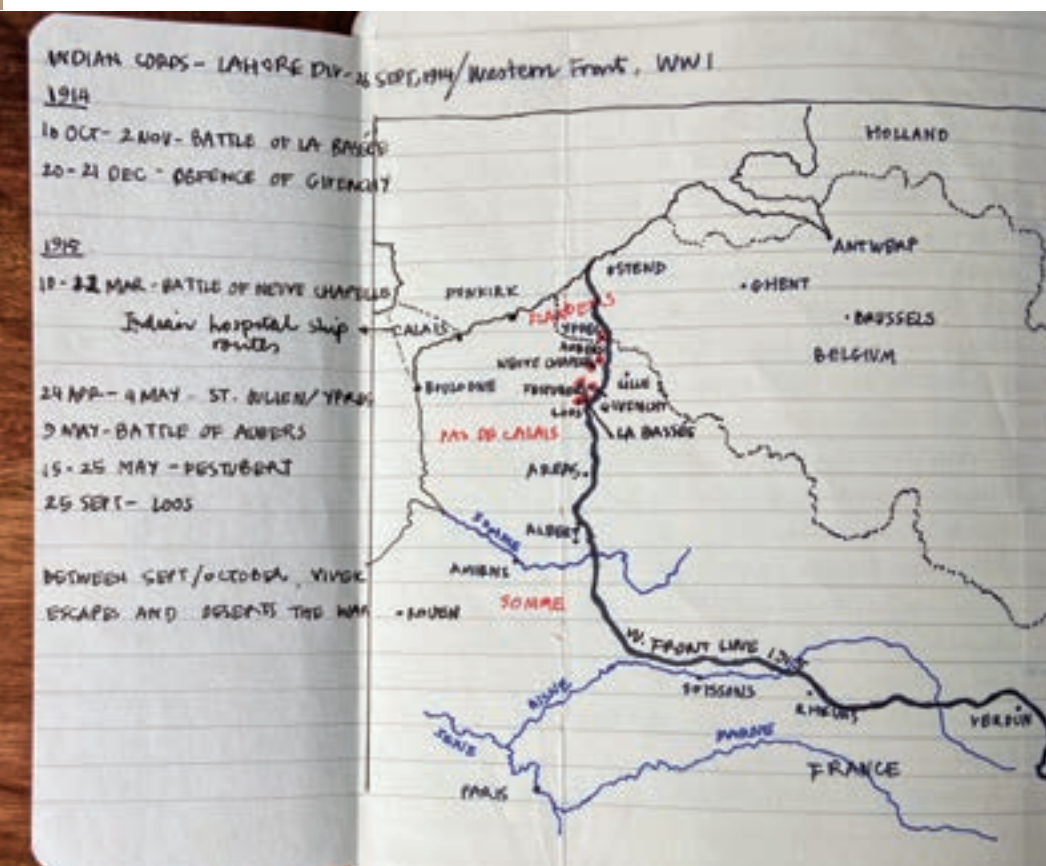
taxing. However, unequivocally rewarding. Although thoroughly imbued with a heavy sadness, intrinsic hues of levity and beauty also emerge every now and then, soulful and redemptive.

Another intriguing writing trick the author shared with me was her use of real-life anchors. For instance, Vivek's birthday falls on 16th September — becoming something of personal significance for me because I share the birthday — which is also the author's grandfather, Vishwa's, birthday. Similarly, her rather transportive descriptions of pre-partition Lahore and its vicissitudes are steeped in tales from her grandmother, Amrit, who was a resident of the city before partition. The book is dedicated to the both of them as well. "I find it very hard to make stuff up from nothing. Years of honing yourself to be a historian will do that. But with fiction things happen that you don't expect. Fiction has a mind of its own, sometimes characters do things that you don't intend for them to do, but what you can do is ground them in your own reality somehow."

While the author maybe downplaying her fictional capabilities, her book speaks instead of her clever competence, especially when you realise, only near the end, that *The Book of Everlasting Things* is self-reflexive in the most surprising way. Also, through the title, intertextuality within Malhotra's written body of work is elicited, borrowed from a book of poems the author discovered while writing about Professor Partha Mitter for her book *Remnants of a Separation*. She candidly corroborates this intertextuality as being intentional.

In life, we are repeatedly told, that nothing lasts forever. *The Book of Everlasting Things* nevertheless attempts to take a different stance. It proclaims that perhaps, there are certain things that have the ability to outlive us. Things, especially intangible ones, "like memory and myth", that we inherit from our previous generations, both knowingly and unknowingly. And they tend to guide, ever so silently, who we become. *The Book of Everlasting Things* reminds us of such significant things, constituting the soul of personal histories that often get lost in the larger historiography of the world. Fortunately, Aanchal Malhotra's efforts to keep these personal histories alive has found fascinating form in historical fiction, that is inspiring, illuminating, and will perhaps influence every reader in some way to find, create and document through unique ways, their own personal histories. ///

Words Nidhi Verma



KACCHEY LIMBU

SHUBHAM YOGI

film 1

Twenty years ago, the genius filmmaker Guy Ritchie made a film, the opening credits of which actually set the tone of Shubham Yogi's life. The title sequence announces the cast in a memorable way, as the unlikeliest of robberies goes down; through a series of rip-roaring vignettes and freeze-frames. If the sequence seems clichéd now, that's because it was a genre-defining piece of cinema. Cool as hell circa 2000, the opening minutes of *Snatch* almost single-handedly reinvigorated the British gangster movie. Years later, watching the film in college where Shubham was actually studying Law, the opening sequence piqued his curiosity about its creation and made him learn who a director really is. That's how it all began.

Shubham started from Delhi but is now travelling the world with his debut film, *Kacchey Limbu*. It is a coming-of-age film about an entire family who is trying to balance emotions and loyalties with the girl of the house wanting to play cricket. It definitely sparks debates (for the sport being played by men more often) and more so because the daughter and son of the family find themselves playing for opposing teams. The film promises colour, comedy, love and joy.

To know more about his journey with the film, we touched base with Shubham just before he was boarding a plane for the world premiere at *Toronto International Film Festival*.

How would you describe your relationship with writing? Did you practice it a lot while growing up?

I was always writing but in college I wasn't writing to be published. I didn't have any of those aspirations. I actually was writing for myself not really knowing what am I writing for. And where do I tend to take it. But I just kept writing because I enjoyed it. When I tried to move to Bombay, it was all in the hope to find a job as a writer. I did not know what an assistant director was back then. And at that point I was told that, 'Tumhe angrezi aati hai, likhayi nahi' which was the case. That's something which was the earliest learnings of my life...that just because you have ideas, does not make you a good writer... There's a lot more that goes into it. *Kacchey Limbu* wasn't any of the stories I had written before I moved to Bombay. It was in fact something that I wrote while my time with Anurag Basu. He was producing for television and he asked me to write something and the outline of what *Kacchey Limbu* is today was born then.

What do you gravitate towards in a story?

I'm not sure if gravitate is the right word. But I do find myself thinking about the human condition a lot when I'm writing. And it's not just a term to use, it's also something I've found is an easy go to. Like a checklist to develop. Characters which become relatable to everybody and it's basically a broad term that I have been using. Because it starts with birth then goes to conditioning, goes to the environment one grows up in and the conflicts that come from there. So human condition is what I try and understand/attempt to explore via writing. Not to say I succeed but that's something that comes to mind when you ask a question about themes I gravitate towards.

Do you have a writing process?

I think my writing process is mostly doing lots of outlines. Doing them again and again. Till I find confidence enough to commit to them into a story and write them in prose and not the screenplay format. And once I'm able to do that and it could be a three-page or thirteen-page or a thirty-pager; the prose of the story. And from there, I get to a stage of finally being able to write a screenplay which is the point where the actual process starts because for me writing is all rewriting and rewriting. I have learnt the difficult way how edits are not possible for me. You edit one thing and then suddenly there are ten different ideas. I like to go back to the drawing board back and starting all over again and I am quite comfortable doing that. That's been one of the toughest learnings but also one of the most rewarding. In a nutshell, my writing process is about rewriting over and over again and not being afraid to go back to page one.

Any directorial conundrums that came your way of your debut film?

Challenges were really just the pause and restart of the thing. We shot through the pan-





demic. We were supposed to start before the second wave hit. We were ready with tech recces, we were ready with locations and then we had to pause because of the second wave and then we started again. And not all of our crew was able to join us again so we had to hire new heads. Those were the conundrums, not so much on set. Just being able to get to a stage where we were able to align our visions, all departments together, was the place where we had the most work to do and everybody came together quite well. Maybe I wasn't happy with the delays back then because of the pandemic but today I'm glad because the team that came on board absolutely took the directions really well and showed me what all was possible with what I had in mind. The kind of conversations I had from there on, especially with my DOP, Piyush Putty and film's music director, Anshul Thakkar had been very rewarding.

What significance does the title hold?

The title is significant to me for two big reasons. Number one is, ours is a very Bombay story. It is a story that breathes Bombay. Cricket is very dear to Bombay. The kind of tournaments we have here, I doubt there are similar tournaments happening anywhere in the country or anywhere else in the world for that matter. All the amateur players, mostly the kids, who are not old enough to be taken seriously in these gully cricket matches are called Kacchey Limbus. You let the kid win or have two chances at batting. But they quickly want to grow out of that tag. Everyone here must've been a Kachha Limbu at one point in their life. Besides that, the second reason why this title is significant to the film is because every character besides one is a Kaccha Limbu. Everybody needs to grow up and that includes the parents of the protagonist to the sixty year old parents, to the boy who is going to give a corporate interview. Everybody needs to grow up. It is a coming of age story, not just for the protagonist but for every character in the film. Characters who need to grow up and accept their evolving roles.

What do you want the audience to take away from the film?

I would be really kicked if the audience would understand how it is okay to not have the answers to all the mysteries of life. It's okay to not know what you want to do. That it's okay to just be and it's to not win. It's okay to not feel bad if you lose. It's okay to be in it for the love of it and not for the outcome. Quite honestly that's how we made the film. All of us were in it, just for the love of what we were making. And if the audience feels the same, I'll think my job is done. ///

Words Hansika Lohani



THE SILENT ECHO

SUMAN SEN



In the middle of towering, snow-clad mountains, an abandoned, dilapidated bus sits uncannily. Inside the bus, four little children are waiting for the viewers of the short film, *The Silent Echo*, to acquaint them of their ambition as musicians. This opening sequence of Suman Sen's short film, with its stunning backdrop and intriguing mise-en-scène, immediately announces to the viewer that this film is about to be a short but sentimental cinematic journey.

The Silent Echo is a story about unfulfilled dreams, underlying emotions, unspoken despair. It is about the way we see the world and the way nature sees us. It is about the overburdening and irrelevant distinction we make on ourselves, without even realising how insignificant we are," discloses Suman. Atmospheric and affective in its visuality, the film finds the roots of its ethereal undertones in Bombay's monsoons. "Mumbai monsoon is gorgeously destructive. I live on a higher floor and the rooms face the direction of the sea. A direct, ghastly sea wind passes through my rooms. During the rainy season, if you try to open the windows a little, a whistling sound creates a very eerie, atmospheric feel. I think this is the incident from where I started conceiving the story."

The film, though, is set in the mountainous terrain of Nepal, majestic and mystical. "I am a mountain person and for some reason I have a biased belief that whatever innocence is left in the world, it's there in the mountains. Maybe because mountains make you humble," expresses the filmmaker of his intention behind basing his film in the mountains. The topography is crucial to the echoic language of the film, that is subtly powerfully and rarely verbose, relying with unassuming proclivity, on the imagery of the shots and the characters within them.

"I developed the original idea to a screenplay and shared it with my producers around late 2019," remembers Suman, sharing that it took a month to craft the final script. "The idea was not to do something pretentious and preachy. The production of the film was really a humbling experience for me and a little overwhelming too. A story that I conceived in the confines of my room, to see it getting a life – it felt magical," he adds. Furthermore, he travelled across the Himalayan range for more than a month and collaborators from across the globe, from Bangladesh, Paris, Nepal, Sweden, Lebanon,





eventually came together to make this film happen.

The film's creative production is astounding. It opens to an immaculate landscape, contrasted quickly by the bus in shambles. Both carefully thought-out, placed in juxtaposition with great attention and detail. Cleverly setting the context of the film, this sequence makes it clear that the environment is a character in the film. "I wanted to prioritise the setting to create a contrast with the characters," reveals Suman.

"Finding the location took us weeks. The production wouldn't have been possible without the constant support my Nepali producer. I am usually very picky about all the elements of the film, especially the location. We started a road trip from Pokhara to Jomsom. We camped in Jomsom for days and started exploring the villages and unexplored locations around. While travelling we accidentally found a ridge right beneath Dhaulagiri range where people hardly go. It was exactly the way I had written it in the script," he shares further. When the production team found a dysfunctional bus near Pokhara and Suman approved it, they managed to haul it to the top of the mountain with a crane and started working on it to make it look withered and damaged. "We spent a few days just to get the look of the bus correct," adds Suman.

Since the film was shot in the most extreme part of North-Western Nepal, close to the Tibetan border, in a language unknown to the director, the challenges that came his way were numerous. "I was in the lap of the beautiful yet unforgiving Himalayan ranges where the terrain and weather are equally challenging. It was average minus ten degrees temperature, with a constant nagging ghastly wind on top of the mountain. Thankfully, we could finish the principal photography of the film, right before the pandemic crippled the world, around February 2020."

Casting was another challenge. The children in the film are exceptional in their expression of quiet ambition, and even quieter existence. They are small figures in a large world, intent curiously to find their way through their regional music, regardless of how different it may be from the music that is considered popular or enjoyable by the masses today. "The kids I worked with in this film are not actors. They are indigenous kids from the Mustang district of western Nepal, bordering Tibet. They are from a forbidden land named 'Lo Manthang', culturally and linguistically influenced by Tibet. I do not speak the language of the film, but that never stopped me from communicating with them. They usually come to study in Pokhara in winter time at the refugee camps. We camped in Pokhara to do the casting and met at least one hundred kids across schools in different parts. Finally, through an intensive auditioning process we selected four kids from three different schools."



The Silent Echo is just the beginning for Suman Sen's filmmaking. Currently busy with the Oscars campaign for *The Silent Echo*, as it has qualified to be considered for the 95th Academy Awards, he tells me more about his upcoming projects, "I am about to finish the post-production of my second short film *Cry Me A River* set in Taiwan, for which I received the grant and support of the *Information Bureau of Taichung City Government*. My debut feature film, *Eka* (Solo) will be going on floor in early 2023. It is an India-France-Bangladesh-Canada-Norway co-production and has received *Aide aux cinémas du monde* by the CNC. I am entirely invested in the pre-production of the feature film at this moment." ///

Words Nidhi Verma



ARVIND PRATAP

film 3

Arvind Pratap comes from Chauri Chaura near Gorakhpur. It is a town better known for the British opening fire at a protesting crowd and the Non Cooperation Movement finally being called off by Mahatma Gandhi.

Arvind had a humble beginning, about which he tells us with great joy and melancholic emotions—his family got their first-ever TV set the day he was born but growing up cinema was an unconventional career choice to make. Like many filmmakers, cinema became his escape from the impeding pressures of living. He studied Marketing against his wishes and even worked at *Dainik Bhaskar* for a few months but all along, still deeply invested in storytelling. Next on the cards was Bombay—a move that has now put him on the map with festivals like *Busan* [among others] screening his debut feature, *Mariam*.

Mariam talks about the complexities of surrogacy through the eyes of woman who lives on the margins of the society and is abandoned by the surrogated parents. In a country where motherhood is accorded celestial status, this is a tough story to tell. But Arvind felt consumed by the subject after learning that the government had made the surrogacy illegal for single parents. The film definitely raises polarising questions. To understand more about the film and how it was treated, we spoke to Arvind.

THE FILM

I started working as a home tutor when I was short on funds in Bombay. I did work for an ad agency, for a bit, when I first came and then even got a gig as an AD at a show that got shelved in just fifteen days. I taught for a couple of years to gather funds and that's how I could make *Mariam* happen. And the story of *Mariam* came from a maid who I came across while teaching as a home tutor. That's how I developed a character in my head. And then during the lockdown, there were so many migrants who were forced to flee back home because



of lack of employment in the urban cities. And even the people who decided to stay, the problems they faced. The poor condition they were in—they had no jobs but still had to submit school fees, pay bills etc. All of that inspired the story. The basic idea was to base a story around a migrant and then later I added other elements like surrogacy, the lengths to which a woman can go to provide for her family. And even after doing all of that, she fails. Because the surrogated father runs away. It is a heartbreaking story. Also, I read an article on surrogacy which said that a single parent cannot surrogate a kid, that got me thinking that what if a couple does decide



to surrogate a child but then life gets in between and they decide to separate. What happens to the kid then? What happens to the mother? And then there's her family who is obviously suffering because they don't have any source of income during the lockdown.

THE TAKEAWAY

My main crux was firstly about immigrants and about the surrogate mothers if they are abandoned. Because in the film, she finds herself completely lost. A Muslim woman who decides to do this for money; she belongs to conservative

setup so the aftermath of all this turmoil. So, it is also somewhat questioning the legal system.

CREATIVE PROCESS

I first visualise the story in my head. This is like the basic idea of the film that I have in my head. I constantly end up thinking about it wherever I am. I try to clear the plot in my head. How is it going to start, how is it going to end? I picture it all in my head. And then, when I start to write, the process becomes much easier for me. It didn't take me very long to write *Mariam*. I had the rough first draft ready in a few



days. I don't think I can do anything when I'm writing because that's the only thing what's on my head when I'm doing that. I tend to write hours at end. It consumes me completely. I isolate myself when I'm thinking and when writing.

CASTING PROCESS

Earlier, I wanted to cast someone else in the primary role but she didn't think she was fit to play the character. Then I approached Chitrangada Satarupa who was also reluctant at first but then she saw a little bit of my work and quickly agreed to do it. I found Bhoopesh Singh on Facebook. For that character, I wanted someone older looking, as compared to Chitrangada. This is something I have noticed in the Muslims, they often get their girls married to older men, so I wanted to show that age difference. I had seen his work in *Gangs of Wasseypur*. He was kicked about the role after seeing my earlier work as well. The story clicked with everyone I feel; Chitrangada could relate to it. And there are three kids in the film. We met and auditioned close to twenty thirty kids but I wasn't able to find the right faces. And *Mariam* has three sisters in the film. I found the girls through my nephew who is also the DP in the film. The family actually lives in the slums of Goregaon and the mother is trying to give the best education to all her six daughters. They had zero experience in acting apart from the TikTok videos they made but they did a flawless job on the film.

CHALLENGES

Apart from the funds, you need the right team when you're making a film. A team that understands your vision, a team that gives you the result you want because the writer/director has been breathing the film. He nurtures it like a kid. So, you need the right people who understand your sensibility, who can take actions/orders because every director looks at a story in a very different way. Everyone has their own way of storytelling. We give so much importance to filmmakers because their vision is what makes a film. His/her treatment, each shot, framing, mood makes a film. I had decided to take a female cinematographer but it didn't work with her. We weren't able to achieve what we wanted from it actually. And then there are other problems like getting the actors, the kind of performance you want from them so it's a mix of those things.

WRITING/DIRECTING

I would like to go for both. For me they both go hand in hand. I visualise every shot when I'm writing. I blow up every little detail of every shot in my head. Also, I write a story keeping in mind the amount of resources I have. What location should I lock in, what are the characters going to look like? All this is done in my head while I'm penning down my story. So, it is impossible for me to choose. ///

Words Hansika Lohani

JITWAM

Jitwam's 2022 has been a whirlwind, to say the least. For over a decade, he has been meticulously piecing together his portfolio. And this year finally marked his mainstream breakthrough with his latest album, releasing for the first time on a big independent label, *Warp*.

Jitwam was born in India, raised in Australia and now lives between New York, Berlin and London. He's been all over the world and his music reflects that. Some progressive beat aesthetics, with a hint of Southeast Asia's flavour, sounds picked up from the streets. It's groovy and catchy with rock, funk, jazz, old-school beats and psychedelia. Multiple styles with an even trippy visual experience—an element that is given equal importance in Jitwam's body of work. "This is what I try to do with my music," says Jitwam, "Makes you stop and think, where the f*** did that come from? Music that transcends the conscience and makes for an out-of-this-world experience."

His latest album *Third* is an offering around his life as a multi-cultural and cultured being. It is also an ode to New York, how he absorbed the city and how it impacted him. His musings, stories and the change that happened within.

To begin with, can you take us through your early days?

My childhood was a dream. I'm an only child so I had to keep myself occupied with thoughts and dreams. A lot of which I found expression in music which is a real solitary act and kept my daydreams fulfilled. It's funny... because even up until this day, a lot of my creativity comes from intense boredom and nothingness. As a child, my aspirations were really dreamlike... and whilst I've always been doing music, I only took music seriously when life forced me to during my time in New York.

You moved countries while growing up, what was the only thing constant

for you?

The only constant is family. The only constant are the thoughts you choose and the company you keep and how you choose to spend the time you have.

What emotion does music evoke in you?

Music for me, are like photographs. They paint pictures that remind me of places, spaces and times I've been through in my life. All my friends are through music. All my best times are with music. All my memories are associated to the sounds that surrounded them. For this, I am forever grateful...

What kind of music did you grow up on? Can you talk a little about it?

Like any Indian parent, our household was filled with Bollywood classics of yesteryears. Lata [Mangeshkar], Asha [Bhosle], RD Burman was always on as early as I can remember. Being a third culture kid, I listened and absorbed everything that came my way... from the Beatles, to Tupac, Dr. Dre, Korn, Daft Punk, Spice Girls... you name it, I was into it. It's this melting pot of genres and sound that I try to evoke in my own music. Try to make stuff that sounds most like my childhood.

Your music is a mix of hip hop, R&B, little by psychedelia, especially with your most recent album, *Third*. How would you describe your current music sensibility? Can you talk in context of *Third*...

Unconsciously, I'm trying to follow the legacies of some of India's greatest composers. Always fusing new sounds into old forms... with this album it really is a cultural melting pot of sound. The album was created during the height of xenophobia and I really wanted to show that despite, genre, class or creed... we all dance to the same drum, the same heartbeat.

What inspired *Third*?





The album was largely inspired by my time in New York. New York is one of the most diverse places in the world and for the album I dreamed of it as the home for diaspora from all over the world. I wanted the record to feel like you were walking through the different boroughs of NYC soaking up the smells, sounds and rhythms from all the different blocks and neighbourhoods along the way. From disco, to jazz, to soul to bolly-punk, no stone is left unturned.

When writing, what comes first to you... the melody or the lyrics?

My writing style hasn't changed all that much. I improvise into oblivion and see my work as a sculptor of sound. Chipping away at the rock until it takes the form and shape that it needs to be.

Graphics are a big part of your music. How involved are you when it comes to making videos for your music? What conversations do you have the visual artist?

Like everything in life... it's all a team effort. I'm so blessed to work with some of the most inspiring and inspired people in the world. Vivek Vadoliya was instrumental in bringing this project to life... and it was through many conversations about life that the visuals for *Third* came about.

How would you differentiate *Third* from the music you've created in the past?

Third is just a continuation. An evolution of the same. Nothing's really changed. Still trying to find the perfect beat.

Any musicians from India that have caught your eye?

So many! India is bursting at the seams with new creatives. Definitely check out the *Chalo Comp* we've done on my label *The Jazz Diaries*...Nateo8, Sid Vashi, Chrms... there's so many sounds and emerging talent to discover. ///

Words Hansika Lohani





JAIMIN RAJANI

The greatest and most important adventure of our lives is discovering who we really are. We mistakenly think of self-understanding as self-indulgence and we carry on without asking the most important question we'll ever ask: Who am I really? As Mary Oliver put it, 'what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?'

It is a process that involves breaking down – shedding layers that do not serve us or don't reflect who we really are. Yet, it also involves a tremendous act of building up – recognising who we want to be and passionately going about fulfilling our unique destiny – whatever that may be. For Jaimin, it was music. 'It's true that for a very long time I did not listen to any kind of music, but that was because I wasn't drawn towards any of the artistes that my peers were listening to. Only towards the end of high school, I discovered voices that made me feel a certain way which I had never felt before – Jim Morrison, Frank Sinatra, Dylan, Freddie Mercury, Roy Orbison, Cliff Richard and Hank Williams, to name a few. I found honesty, simplicity and sophistication in their music – with just the right elements, their songs are comprehensible and not superfluous at all. This is the quality I appreciate and admire the most even now.'

It was all very sudden for him; he watched the *Concert for Bangladesh* with George Harrison take over the stage and was blown away by Harrison's unparalleled showmanship and stage persona. By the time he finished singing *My Sweet Lord*, the seed was sown.

Jaimin was born in Bombay and predominantly raised in Calcutta in a conservative Gujarati family where even a cursory thought of aspiring to become a singer-songwriter was unfathomable. They were only encouraged to pursue more lucrative disciplines such as chartered accountancy, business or computer science. 'Who and how I was back in those days, is far behind me. I went to Poona to avail a degree in business administration which turned out to be quite useless. After having worked at an illustrious conglomerate in Bombay followed by my stint at a small advertising agency in *Kala Ghoda*, I came to terms with the fact that I wasn't cut out for such jobs. As far as my schooling goes, I'd rather dissociate from my alma mater than talk about it.'

Jaimin's debut work is a full length album called *Cutting Loose*. A long fourteen-track album of music that is confrontational, conversational and was born out of an urge to give a voice to his feelings. 'It actually took about two years of work to put this album together but yes, some of the songs were written seven years ago when I had just started to write. Initially, other songwriters inspired me. Now, the urge to express a thought or a feeling that can best be conveyed in this format is reason enough to write a song. I thought it'd be nice to properly record some of the songs and put them out to see how they're received by others instead of sitting on them. So that's how it transpired.'

The music on the album was also a work of experimentation to make it sound what the album sounds like now. 'Subharaj Ghosh (lead guitarist, co-producer) and I used to meet actively to brainstorm and figure out the instrumentation, requirements, tempo and things like the tone of the electric guitar and which acoustic guitar to use on which song. Since I had no prior experience in studio recording or performing in a group, I was having a tough time playing to a metronome. So as a hack and as an alternative, I asked Subharaj to program the drums for me. Then I recorded my parts on top of those programmed drum tracks. Later we got real drummers to play on the songs of course. The goal was to establish a unified sound for the album.'

Jaimin mostly writes in solitude without any company. Some production related decisions are collaborative, but not conception. 'We're all constantly changing and becoming more of ourselves with every passing day. This album is like a log file. If written with honesty, each song represents a timestamp of a songwriter's life. In their original and primitive stage, they sounded very different from one another. In order to package it well, we added flesh and turned them into a homogenous collection so that it sounds like they all belong to the same batch, but the structure essentially coincides with the original states.'

And like most creatives, inspiration to Jaimin can come from everything and everywhere. A song idea. It could be anything – 'a lyric, a riff, a melody or sometimes simply a topic / theme that occurs and acts as a precursor for the composition. If I find it to be compelling enough, I pursue it. The rest of the writing happens in an altered state of mind I believe.' ///

Words Hansika Lohani



SIJYA GUPTA

Sijya Gupta is a composer, producer and designer who grew up in Delhi, surrounded by a family who were not musical nor artistic so it was quite a magical surprise for her to be gravitating to the arts. Her first inclination was explored through Visual Arts she delved into while at NID. Music came much later in life but her virgin foray into it was rather stilted. “There was always an extremely strong interest, but no real skills. I could sing a little bit, but somehow never got around to picking up an instrument properly. I remember trying at several points in my childhood but it just never clicked.” Not being able to create music, Sijya was troubled. “There was no way for me to be a musician without being able to play an instrument. So, I decided to be a listener and a fan instead and that’s what I was until very recently.” Even though there was an undeniable desire to create music, she started work as a visual designer and gradually began taking up more and more music-related projects: album art, event artworks, music videos. “Those were really the only things I was thrilled to work on, I guess till I started making music myself. It was incredible when I got onto a DAW and actually made something that sounded like music. I remember actually crying to my parents, thinking I might have found something I connect with so deeply.”

To create any form of art, is beautiful and frustrating, painful, cathartic, sometimes quick and sometimes slow. To Sijya, it didn’t feel as thrilling in the first six months of doing it. “But it’s still perfect for me. It makes me happy and fulfilled. I attended a series of *Selector Pro Workshops* in 2018 by *Wildcity & British Council for Women* in electronic music, that’s where I first got introduced to Ableton and started playing around with it. Then I joined weekend classes in Music Production at *Global Music Institute*. So, it’s all fairly recent. It was addictive at first and I’d spend every evening trying to make something. With every attempt I guess my little experiments started to sound coherent. I think I made a total of a hundred and forty tracks from which I’ve chosen six to be a part of the upcoming EP.” Sijya’s first notable claim was with *boxout.fm* called *Have to Make My Bed* which has been championed on platforms including *BBC6 Music*, *Feel My Bicep*, *Bandcamp’s New & Notable*, *Crack Magazine*, *Mixmag*, *Rinse.fm*, *NTS*, *Worldwide.fm* and *boxout.fm*, *Rolling Stone India* and *The Wild City*, by the likes of Tom Ravenscroft, *Machine Woman*, Tom VR, CEE and more.

Sijya grew up listening to rock and started listening to more electronic music with *Radiohead* working with Nigel Godrich. “I listen to a lot of music and different things are like companions to different feelings, that’s the beauty of music. It has an immediate effect on you, it kind of takes over entirely. I used to live like I had the soundtrack to my life playing in my ear at all times. I don’t do that anymore. Of late, I’ve been listening to a lot of women in the experimental-pop space, Yaeji, Roisin Murphy, Tirzah, St. Vincent, Angel Olsen, Mitski, Mica Levi, Laurie Anderson, Perera Elsewhere. That’s also more and more the kind of music I’m making. All of these women are incredible,” explained Sijya.

Scheduled to release this month, Siya’s debut EP is called *Young Hate*. Over six varied musical offerings and their respective videos, the EP is slated to showcase Sijya’s vision as a music and visual artist at its most synchronous and far-ranging. “As a graphic designer working with other content, I’ve been frustrated and wanting to make a fully self-authored work, you don’t get to do that very much as a graphic designer, to be the captain of the ship. So, this was a great opportunity to make a lot of interesting things. Surprisingly, I’ve not been tackling it like a design job, in that, apart from a few minimal rules, I haven’t defined a full visual identity or language for myself. I think this project as a whole is a bunch of experiments that were waiting to happen and the next one is probably going to be very different.” Sijya has collaborated with a whole host of interesting talent in the way of animators, filmmakers, artists to create something for every track. “And for the music, it’s honest, simple but experimental music, a bunch of oddities and accidents taking form into pieces of work, which will hopefully strike a chord with at least someone else.” ///

Words Hansika Lohani

DHRUV BANDIL

Growing up in a small town inspired designer Dhruv Bandil to develop a creative consciousness. Over the years he found joy in the little gestures of self expression he observed, be it the manner in which women draped their sarees, the garments in local tableaux and sculptures at temples— all of which were responsible for pushing him towards fashion. “The unsatiated hunger to create is what keeps me going. I went to the *National Institute of Fashion Technology*, Mumbai to pursue my Bachelor of Design in Fashion. I have always admired one of the most prominent names in Indian fashion — Manish Arora. After graduating from NIFT, I was fortunate to join his design team,” he explains. It was during his time in Arora’s team did Dhruv realize the vitality of group effort in the seemingly individualistic world of fashion.

For the young designer, who is also all set to pursue a Masters in Womenswear from *Central Saint Martins* in the near future, his practice is a mirror to his imagination, culture and experiences. He is fierce about his commitment to innovate and conceptualise while challenging anatomy with hyperbolic silhouettes, providing an alternative to our existing reality. “I believe that every design project emits energy that can be felt and my role as a creative is to translate that energy into a 3D form. I am currently working on developing my aesthetics and pushing the boundaries of Indian contemporary art through clothing.”

As someone whose practice stands right at the intersection of fashion and the arts, the designer’s tendency to experiment stems from his utmost respect for

creative expression. His ultimate goal lies in being able to contribute to the aesthetic vocabulary that drives our world today, possible through a design language that remains authentic to his true self. When it comes to the process of his avant-garde practice, Dhruv likes to stay rooted in instinct. With every new project of his he tries to channel the energy he may have felt strongly during some experience of his life that had an impact on him. “It starts with a concept, something that feels right to me. Based on this, I further continue working on multifocal explorations and based on a lot of trial and error the final range is created. I rarely sketch at the beginning as it could be quite delusional.”

His new collection, *Threshold of Vrindavan Widows*, draws from his childhood in Morena and his family’s frequent visit to the religious town of Vrindavan which also happens to be the asylum for widows across the country. As the widows wait for death and their reunion with the almighty, the young designer wishes to capture the essence of this reunion through his designs. “Death is their ultimate euphoria, liberating them from their earthly form and ushering them into a tidal wave of celestial energies.”

The fashion of now for the designer’s sensibility is easily defined. It revolves around self-expression, now more than ever, establishing a certain *je ne sais quoi* that is hard for him to ignore translating to and filling within him, a reservoir of artistic freedom and originality. This uniqueness translates into a strong sense of self-assurance and joy. ///

Words Unnati Saini





ARUN PRABHU NG

BILLBOARDS

The thought of setting up *BILLBOARDS*, a cross-disciplinary creative design agency, came to the founder Arun Prabhu NG when he and his team noticed the lack of connection between common folk and design. Picking up mainly from the nuance found in life and nature, the firm is centred around the verticals of architecture, art and communication design where their work expands over multiple cross domains related to architecture that has a futuristic scope. The collective constantly strives to update themselves owing to the needs of the general public. They wish to establish themselves as a melting pot for refreshing innovations and designs that transform and touch everyday lives. "The firm is presently focusing on design areas that deal with ingenious and allied designs and limitations of space as well as intriguing space utilisation of large plots."

When talking about one of his biggest breakthroughs, personally and for the firm, Arun takes me to his research work and awareness program for the public about small-scale architecture and the possibility of utilising space in a tiny area. "I designed a portable/detachable housing unit in just a 6 ft x 6 ft space in the back of an auto-rickshaw, to demonstrate the power of small spaces. This unit has all the necessary spaces that a residence should have such as the living area, kitchen, sleeping area, working space, toilet and bathtub and also lounge space with a shade on the terrace. After this project reached a wider audience throughout India, we received multiple leads from the common public who didn't have prior knowledge about architecture or design and we got an opportunity to give consultation to people pan India to transform their lives for the better. Currently, we are working on the possibility of catering our service to the masses with respect to designing small spaces. One of the main factors that revolve

around this small-scale architecture or any category of design is the behavioural aspect of the user." The essential aspect in design for Arun is how they structure an individual's experience and what changes they employ based on the individual's behaviour is an essential aspect.

BILLBOARDS as a practice is also heavily rooted in their core belief that sustainability is posterity. For them it is the amalgamation of aspects native to the region, be it culture, pattern, materials or even the method of construction being employed. One of their recently completed projects, *True Blacks*, Arun animatedly tells me, makes use of the raw texture and colours of sandstone as commonly found in the city of Hyderabad. The building is grounded in simple principles of nature that open spaces are retained where possible; these pockets of double-height, breathable spaces employ a certain kind of flexibility with ever-changing shadows, making them almost light. Whereas if one were to compare this to the firm's other projects, *Solo:01* and *ChaiGaadi*, sustainability is confronted in a different manner and the lack of space is a boon to conserve energy and water to not disturb the surroundings.

For Arun, good design is user friendly. The firm's main goal is for the users to embrace functionality in a manner they haven't seen before. "Be it an expansive collection of curated weekend homes in the masterplan, all having their unique footprint and aesthetic or modular interior space for a large family. We try to bring in a sense of ownership to the client by design, the ultimate users of the space." Currently keeping busy with a wide variety of architectural projects the firm is engaging with, Arun is positive for their future to be able to impact lives positively. ///

Words Unnati Saini





ANANYA KHAITAN

NOVEL

For *Novel's* founder and graphic designer, Ananya Khaitan, enjoyment of work is top priority. His visual design practice that undertakes a plethora of projects involving book design, brand identity design, web design and visual communication consultation, is built on the foundation of working with dedicated and passionate individuals and taking up projects that pique their curiosity. In the same breath explaining what his practice stands for, Ananya also adds, "There's certainly some other criteria, such as 'no working with evil corporations' and 'avoid assholes', but those come second to fun."

His journey to set up his own practice follows a linear trajectory. He grew up loving the arts as a child and possessed the talent to draw as soon as he was capable of holding a pencil. He went onto train himself in digital drawing once computers made an entry in his life and eventually pursued a degree in design not knowing much about the field but found it to be exactly where he belonged. "Where I deviate from the usual trajectory is that I was sceptical about entering the field, in spite of it being a natural fit for my talents. I (foolishly) thought that it wouldn't be cerebral enough for me and it took pushing from friends and family to take the leap. And how glad I am that they pushed." Ananya's idea of good design is rather poetic, he feels it is in the eye of the beholder. He tells me his take on it has only gone on to become less certain as time has passed by. "Seen one way, any design that makes new things is bad, given the calamitous precipice the planet stands on right now. By that

definition, all design is bad." Steering clear of the larger picture and micro analysing his take, he believes the general idea behind design is utilitarian. It comes with the end goal of constructing an experience and hence the entire process of it should result in a captivating one.

His creative process depends on the kind of project he is engaging with. If he were to identify an overarching commonality, he would break it down into two parts, namely, comprehension and translation. To begin with, he indulges in a detailed dialogue with his clients to come up with a concept at hand. "Once we're all working with a similar conception and vision for the project, then begins the ever-formidable task of translating that into visual design. There, as they say, the rubber hits the road."

An interesting project *Novel* worked on recently was for *Khoj International Artists' Association* where he did the brand identity and website redesign. "A collaboration between *Novel* and *Thoughtput*, was an immersive, multi-year process figuring out how to bring to the fore *Khoj's* unique curatorial voice, and build an institutional archive for its rich twenty-five year history of programming." *Novel's* plate is quite full at the moment with upcoming projects that are promising and thought provoking as Ananya tells me. He's working on an upcoming series of books with *Khoj* which adds to the transdisciplinary art discourse in India. There's also an encyclopaedic book with *Mapin Publishers* in the works that begins with "5 billion years ago: Earth began". ///

Words Unnati Saini









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A modern kitchen interior featuring a dark, minimalist design. A large, dark-colored Gaggenau range hood is mounted above a cooktop. A pot is on the cooktop, and steam is rising from it. The kitchen has dark wood cabinetry and a large window overlooking a lake and mountains. The ceiling is made of light-colored wood. The overall atmosphere is warm and sophisticated.

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about the earth, change to
be identified. And this is the
project of creativity, care and
awareness.”**

– BANI ABIDI

HANGING ON FINGERTIPS

Photography **Prakrit Rai**

Fashion Direction **Ameet Sikka**

Assistants **Lalrinfela Tlau, Unnati Saini**

Hair and Make-up **Atreyi Haldar**

Clothes and Accessories **Gucci**

Location Courtesy **Crashpad, Mangar**



Amit Negi & Rahul Munda



→
Shweta Payal





↑
Amit Negi

Ujjwal Gurung





↑
Shristi Sharma

Robston Soares



Vishnudut





↑
Rahul Munda









↑
Naina Ifat Shaikh





↑
Tanya Lakra



Nayna DungDung



MISE EN SCENE: A EUROPEAN STREET SCREENPLAY

WHEN A HYPE-AVERSE TRAVELLER GOES SCOUTING THE INNER LIVES OF TURKEY, ITALY AND SWITZERLAND ONLY TO FIND HOLLYWOOD ALL AROUND!

TURKEY CHASE

“You’ve never been to Istanbul? Where the moonlight on the Bosphorus is irresistible,” Bond asks his secretary, Money Penny, in the 1963 blockbuster, *To Russia With Love*. Imagine my luck to land here on a full moon night, only to discover that the ancient mosqued skylines, the spirited Turkish dances on the Bosphorus cruise and the waves sparkling below my feet through the glass floor of the vessel are just as irresistible, if not the crisp autumn air, throbbing with nightlife. “Red wine with fish. Well, that should have told me something,” as the agent would say.

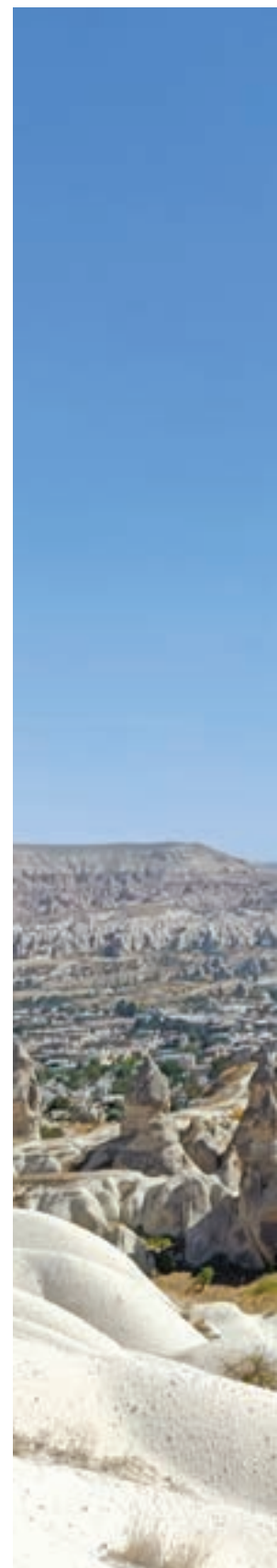
Cut to the morning scenes. At the grand Taksim Square, the pigeons are aflutter, the youngsters swish around on skateboards, the black hijabs flow as freely as little white dresses. My stroller is a bit of a drag, but under the brilliant blue sky, its weight disappears. Biting into a ring of Simit – a circular bread snack baked here since the 1500s – and a heavenly cup of black çay in a dainty tulip cup (a gift of the Ottoman culture), I see myself in a movie of movies. If only, now, Bond was by my side.

“Let’s just say that Istanbul’s a rough town,” he would retort, shattering my romanticism. And I would understand just why, as ditching the touristy staples, I walk along the Beyoğlu district and take the narrowest alleys thanks to GPS’ shortcut suggestions. The ground is dug up here and there for construction, the children at play recreate village scenes, the men seem brusque but fear not – the celluloid in your head amplifies the stereotype.

Eventually emerging from a non-descript cluster at the road across the popular Istiklal street, I am greeted by high-street brands, an endearing bookshop named ‘Insaan Kitaap’ (literally translating to human as a book), trams buzzing across and street art all over. Two miles away, I’d lose myself in the dense Grand Bazaar and recall 007’s famous chase scene from *Skyfall* (2012). “Having a car chase in a street with nothing in it is boring,” special effects supervisor Chris Corbould was quoted as saying. “But as soon as you have a background for the chase, it comes to life. Istanbul has a real character to it.”

With curio resplendent in Arabic inscription and Islamic history, fine craftsmanship in ceramic and glassware, calligraphy and quaint cat motifs owing to Egyptian legends, the market thrives in tradition. Its clamour and chaos are strangely endearing. “Sometimes the old ways are the best,” I would hear Craig, as Bond, whisper.

Ben Affleck, in his runaway hit *Argo* (2012), would agree. The movie, with a backdrop of Iran, had some significant scenes filmed in Istanbul. The Grand Bazaar of Istanbul





becomes the Grand Bazaar of Iran in the 1970s. The realism is remarkable.

I am walking the bazaar while picturing motorbikes skidding along tangerines, brawny men and full-bodied women, lights, (mobile) cameras and action everywhere! Istanbul's identity is a melting pot of Europe and Asia – a camaraderie of culture, history, religion, surrealism and struggle. A play of good, bad, ugly – the contemporary continuum, as it is.

The magnificent mosques – even if you're not choosing the obvious itinerary – are unmissable. The Sultan Ahmed Camii or Blue Mosque is a spectacle on the city's horizon, as is the Hagia Sophia, that converges thousands of years of life, religion, people and culture. Combined, the calls of ancient Azaan through the day suffuse the city with enchantment.

The next day, at the traditional hamam, I am reminded of Cleopatra and her legendary baths, fifty kilometres from Fethiye, in the thermal turquoise waters where you can apparently still see the remnants of the ancient baths that were put there by Marc Antony as a wedding gift to Cleopatra. A bit of fantasy in the movies does not hurt. "Argo fuck yourself."

Turkey only gets more whimsical as you travel into the interiors. Mention-worthy are not just Konya, Rumi's own land and the subject of much reel musing, but also Cappadocia, the land of the ancient underground city and more recently, of hot ballooning indulgence. A perfect testimony is Zoya Akhtar's *Dil Dhadakne Do* (2015), the Bollywood film that cruises through the country's straits with spectacular scenes through the Valley of Love, Devrent Valley, Mustafapaşa, Antalya and the glorious volcanic vistas of Göreme, not just Istanbul.



Top: Window to Venice through Perosnal Structures, La Biennale.
Below: Salvador Dali and Frida Kahlo get a street makeover.



The claws and clouds of Mt. Titlis





NOT ALL PIZAZZ

“In Sicily, women are more dangerous than shotguns.” – Calo, *The Godfather* (1972).

It is almost a relief that some of Italy’s best cinematic spots are still not overrun by tourists. The ardent fans that come to visit ‘The Godfather (1972) House’ in Sicily, for instance, are far and few. Called Castello Degli Schiavi in Catalania, the villa is one of the few iconic features of the epic trilogy. In fact, all the three parts in the series have scenes along the Savoca and Forza d’Agrò as the plot follows the first family of Hollywood mafia – the Corleones, through their origin in Italy. It’s any irony that the organised crime of the area did not, back then, allow for filming in the Corleone territory without askance of a heavy sum for crew protection.

Anyway, as Peter Clemenza would say in the first classic, “Leave the gun. Take the cannoli”.

But it’s not just the sleek ricotta pastry – the other desserts too – with an occasional sip of aperol spritz or prosecco, are just as delectable by the Tuscan sun as they are by the Venetian sunset at Giardini (even better if like me, you enjoy immersing yourself

in the arts of the La Biennale, ongoing till November 27).

Sure, if you're a diehard romantic, go the whole hog with the gondola rides and plush life in Venice, but I choose to stick with Don Vito Corleone: "I have learned more from the streets than in any classroom." So, I start with wandering the streets filled with masquerade art, tiny bridges and water patrol (even a water ambulance siren!) aside from quiet corners such as Palazzo Mora off San Marco – every such pocket palpable with some strange, impending action any moment. The giant seagulls look as majestic as scheming – timeless keepers of secrets of the shining merchant down. Somewhere, Johnny Depp darts across the Rialto Market ala *The Tourist* (2010), an unforgettable scene not even suppressed by the beauty of the other marvels in the movie – Angelina Jolie, the Grand Canal, the Peggy Guggenheim Collection or the Scuola Grande di Santa Maria della Misericordia.

Next, I move to Naples. Conjuring the tale of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), I use the city as a base to glide through the waters to Amalfi and Positano in a fancy hat sipping Limoncello, but wondering what the barren insides of the islands must hold beyond the crowded summer coasts. Later, as my host suggests, I indulge in one of the oldest Neapolitan pizzerias, the Pizzeria di Napoli. What heaven must Julia Roberts have felt in *Eat, Pray, Love* (2010), to not have to share that melt-in-the-mouth meal! Further along, I find wall posters of the hardcore football fans, the ultras of Napoli, known to be a powerful and arguably dangerous, influence on the game. I walk past the *Diego Armando Maradona Stadium*, replaying images from Asif Kapadia's striking 2019 documentary on the sporting god. The town is now sleepy, now painted in guerrilla graffiti, now a party of pizzaiolos, now wondrous in its wide streets.



At crossroads in Menznau, Switzerland.



Gondolas in Venice, Italy.





Before I know, I've drifted into Rome. Crowe as *The Gladiator* (2000) may not be so glad to see the Colosseum long under restoration, but Princess Anne of *The Roman Holiday* (1953) would not care. The Vespa and suits and ties aren't all the rage anymore; the magnificence of historical architecture meets gelato slurping young travellers and contemporary design studios with ease. In the midst of a land known to be founded in 753 BC, the badass Banksy's footsteps at the Roma Tiburtina station turn around the modern artistic narrative.

The Vatican at the top, of course, stands timeless in the eternal city, mesmeric at twilight as insightful inside its museum. Somewhere, a controversial line from *Angels and Demons* (2009) comes to mind:

Chartrand: The Catholic Church is not a corporation, it's a beacon. A source of inspiration for a one billion lost and frightened souls.

Robert Langdon: Sure, I get that. It's also a bank.

SWISS PASS

In Switzerland, I land first in Zurich and owing to the late check-ins (usually around 3pm), spend a balmy afternoon in a park in the midst of Bahnhofstrasse. *The Girl with The Dragon Tattoo* (2011) hangs close in imagination, carrying out her fat money transactions along the bank-lined streets. In some ways, aren't we all her – fierce and yet fragile from within?

As Armansky would say in the movie for Lisbeth, I would for Switzerland: "She is different in every way." Quite the recluse, introvert even, held together by music, history, church, children, an inexplicable and indescribable essence.

I arrive at the idyllic countryside hamlet of Menznau – situated in the canton of Lucerne, to get away from the bright cities before. Along the quiet farm-stay is a dairy barn, peaceful pastures, sounds of grazing sheep and cowbells. There are maize and vine crops aplenty, I'm treated to a happy tour of the cheese and egg produce and the lights must go out at eight. From here, the day trains would take me into many a dream.

The first is Grindelwald, where a ski resort was reportedly turned into Princess Leia's home planet in *Star Wars: Episode III*. Had she been there today, her adventurous spirit would have taken her to the world's longest sledding ride, the Big Pintenfritz which is 12.5 kilometres. Alternatively, the Grindelwald-Pfingstegg cable car takes you from



the valley station to the private alp Pfingstegg with a summer toboggan run that snakes through the slopes for a day of fun. If not here, you'll find the alpine slides in Zermatt and neighbouring areas, too.

But for Bond, of course, the Swiss pass spells bigger thrill. Many films in the franchise have been filmed here: *Goldfinger* (1964), *Goldeneye* (1995), *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977) and *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (1969). Another summit, the Schilthorn or 'James Bond Mountain' is a draw for diehards. Perhaps this was one of the main reasons for Bollywood's rush in those days to the verdant valleys, complete with saris in sway and dramatic dances. At Titlis, posters stand testimony. Run far.

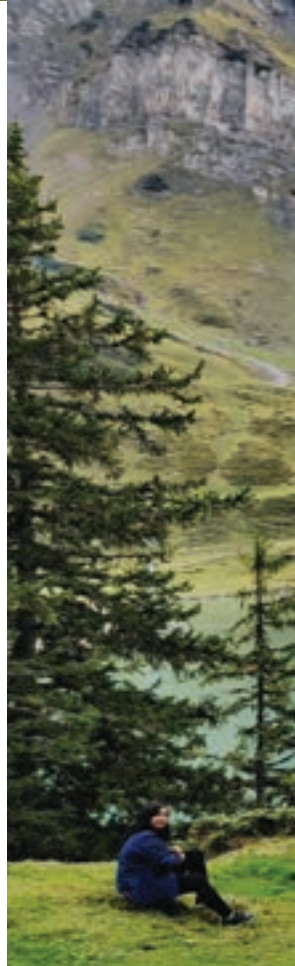
Amid the cheese and chocolate peaks, lie some surreal myths and legends of the land, the kind that perhaps encouraged films such as *The Golden Compass* (2007) also to find home here. Equally true is the opposite – real-life or futuristic plots such as *Contagion* (2011) and the *Bourne* series also came alive amid the Alps.

The Glacier Express (or its parallel Swissrail route) is a delight, filling up your senses to the brim with the most panoramic views of the highest ranges in Europe. Last but not the least, from the Sphinx Observatory dating back to 1937, you can take in views of the far German vistas that Wes Anderson set his magnum opus, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, in.

Take it in till you can take no more – take it in till your soul goes sore.

By the end, like Pussy Galore in *Goldfinger* (who was christening these characters, for Christ's sake!), you'd say: "You can turn off the charm. I'm immune." ///

Words & Photography Soumya Mukerji



↑
View from the train to Lucerne,
Switzerland

→
The Ober Trüebsee Alpine pas-
ture, Switzerland



pause

SELINUNTE

THE SANCTUARY OF SILENCE

MOIN MIR



Plotinus, the third century philosopher sought solitude to think. He left Rome for the Sicilian countryside. 2,000 years later, I'm travelling in his footsteps. Driving through fragrant Sicilian vineyards, date palms and gently swaying olive groves, I reach Selinunte—a once flourishing Greek city on the southern coast of Sicily, but now whispering through imposing ruins. Breezing past the ticket counter uninhabited by any tourist I stride into the vast desolate landscape that opens up in front of me. At the edge of the view, in isolated faded glory, shimmering through the dust of time, stands the Temple of Hera. As I walk the arid landscape tapestry comprising rock, wild shrubs, the occasional blooming oleander and a myriad of ancient ruined walls, the temple speaks to me through luring silence. The only sound accompanying my footsteps is the sound of crickets. Standing in front of the temple, I feel dwarfed by history and ancient Greek accomplishments. The roar of silence is so loud that it floods my ears with sounds of Greek rituals as they must have once played out in the temple. As I walk between the colossal columns, I hear the raging philosophical debates that must have echoed in the temple's grand hall. I spend much time in solitude here reading Plotinus' work. Time drifts. Occasionally I raise my head from ancient scriptures and marvel at my luck at being the only visitor to be embraced by this architectural jewel. The sun begins its slow descent into the emerald green Mediterranean and the dun coloured columns soak in the last lustrous golden light. I leave, knowing well that I will return.

HER JANNAH

ANOUSHKA SHANKAR

The magic of interviewing someone in their own home is so multisensory, so visceral. The energy, the conversation, the stories that are shared, are all so personal, so real and so true to their being. Over the past ten years of interaction with Anoushka and following her journey, the hour and half I spent in her Islington home earlier this year, unpacked layers of what we are made of and touched upon different facets. We all know Anoushka Shankar is a seven-time *Grammy*-nominee, whose music and musicality goes beyond boundaries and touches a chord every time, pulling us into listening to her play and perform, time and again.

However this time, our conversation was different. I got to know Anoushka, who post pandemic, is trying to make sense of her professional and personal world. “I’m finding it hard to kind of renegotiate how I think about music and touring. And so, I don’t really know what’s up at the moment. I feel I’m in some kind of potential transition or pause. But more in the, how-do-I-want-it-to-fit-into-my-life? Because there was something about just being still, and there was something about being present in one place and what it felt like not to emotionally and mentally be arriving or departing, right? To be still long enough that I was actually still and be comfortable.”

My originally planned meeting with Anoushka was in March 2020 but the pandemic had other plans and since then, with the world, we too, have changed, viewing our lives afresh. “I felt I rooted in as a mother in a way that I’d never felt rooted in before. And I feel like the way I’m glued in with my kids now and the way that I’m present with them, I wouldn’t be to this degree if it hadn’t been for the last two years. So, I’m not really willing to throw that away either. It’s a tough one because what I do and what I love does take me away from that obviously. So, I’m at a new phase of renegotiating that”.

GENESIS

The lockdown also drove Anoushka to experiment and explore making music for television for the very first time. In the past, she had done the score for a short film, *Shiraz*, that won an award. But she had never ventured into TV before Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy* was adapted by Mira Nair. “So, I co-wrote with Alex Heffes, which was really lovely. It was a very interesting period of putting the kids to bed and going next door to my mom’s guest room. We were all in my mom’s house for lockdown. I’d set up a mini studio in her house where I was writing and recording. And I loved it. I still felt creatively fulfilled and I was working, you know, but I was there. So maybe I’m a bit late to the party. Scoring is not only truly creative and fulfilling, but also it fills that family void one experiences when travelling or on tour.”

SYNERGY

For someone who has been collaborating for years, this was the first time the collaboration entailed serving someone else’s vision. “Fundamental difference is the ego because it’s not my project. So, it’s a different way of thinking about music. It requires a different mindset of, how do I serve something that’s not mine? Which, I think, intimidated me initially, but now I’ve realised it’s more collaborative than I thought.” The chemistry and energy one exchanges via collaboration, if done right, is electrifying and all of Anoushka’s collaborations have been so euphonious.

“It’s creative, it’s sexual, it’s intimate. It happens in so many areas of life that something grows more when there’s two people involved. There’s just something about that energy that feeds me. Of course, I do write on my own. But I truly enjoy and feel like I come alive when I’m with another person. And, maybe that’s because I came to music so





much more from a live space. A lot of people start in a studio or start in their room. And then they grow towards performing live. Whereas for me, I spent years performing live even before I'd even written a note. So that relational energy of being on stage with my father, with other musicians, you know that feeling of electricity, of being led, is magic."

She continues, "So I've learned from and grown up in that process of how my mind can be led and influenced by someone else and how you're open to those ideas. I just love collaboration for that. I'm also quite an indecisive person and I can doubt myself a lot. So, there's also something about working with someone else where it gives me confidence. Where it's less scary or less lonely. So, there is something encouraging about being two people. There's also a feeding. Like I have one idea that might make them respond with a chord, but then that chord makes me feel something that I respond to."

COMPOSITION

The first time Anoushka performed on stage was when she was thirteen. Over the years, her musicality has evolved and has given her confidence to share and express from deep within, without feeling bare. "I look at some artists who are twenty and they're just so vulnerable and that's amazing! I couldn't have done that. For me, it's been over time. My first experience of writing was when I was twenty-five, it was *Rise*. It was more abstract. I was listening to some of my music yesterday, which I don't do very often. There were some songs from *Traveller*, for example and the song with Buika came on, which is called *Casi Uno*. And I was trying to remember the exact translation of some of the lyrics. And that made me laugh, because actually it was a love song I wrote about my ex-boyfriend

I look at some artists who are twenty and they're just so vulnerable and that's amazing! I couldn't have done that. For me, it's been over time... there's been a process of vulnerability, a step at a time, and the feeling that feels safe, that I feel seen and heard, that I feel okay. Then one more layer, one more layer. I think for me, it's been a process of realising that there's this beautiful trusting relationship with an audience that doesn't break me, instead it is a connection process. And so, I have built confidence in that through experience.

in English and I translated it into Spanish with someone because of the context of the album. And also, because that would've been too naked for me.

By the time we moved into *Love Letters*, I felt very confident being in my own first language and being very direct, you know. So, there's been a process of vulnerability, a step at a time, and the feeling that feels safe, that I feel seen and heard, that I feel okay. Then one more layer, one more layer. I think for me, it's been a process of realising that there's this beautiful trusting relationship with an audience that doesn't break me, instead it is a connection process. And so, I have built confidence in that through experience."

ONWARDS

Before the year ends, Anoushka will be releasing a vinyl and touring. The vinyl is called *Between Us*. "It's a live recording of myself and Manu Delago, with the *Metropol Orchestra*, which is a Netherlands-based orchestra, with conductor, Jules Buckley. So, it's music from across my albums, but in this new kind of orchestral space — very cinematic, very emotional. *Between Us* is coming out digitally first leading with the single *Land of Gold*, which is probably my favourite adaptation into an orchestra space.

There's one new song on there, called *Jannah*, which I had written maybe when I was twenty-five or twenty-six and I've performed it across many different shows, but I've never found a home for it in an album. I think I worked on it most extensively on *Traces of You*. We did an arrangement of it that fit the sound of that album. But at the end, I didn't feel like the music fit. It's always been more of a live piece. It's very dynamic, fast and busy. It feels kind of this happy, like butterfly garden, joy, optimism kind. So, I called it *Jannah* because it just always makes me think of a garden. When I play it, I just think of flowers, blooming and butterflies, and maybe it's too happy. A lot of my albums aren't purely happy. A lot of my studio albums kind of sit in a different moody space, whereas this is a live album. So, with the joy of it, the performance of it, it fits. I'm really happy finally to get this song out."

METAMORPHOSIS

As we move around Anoushka's house to see many valuable and cherished items, what she holds close to her heart, I see a more composed demeanour. I can't help ask if she feels she has grown up in the last few years. Considering, not only has she let go of her management and label and signed on with a smaller label, but also how she is learning the nuances of the business of music. "It may not sound very positive, but it actually is positive, but it's this idea that I am finite, you know, there's an idea that I am fallible, that I am breakable, that I'm not superhuman and therefore, the choices I make, the time I choose to spend on things is precious. I think that's really part of, what's changing my thinking and my choosing, what I want to be doing with my time and my skills, or with my parenting, or with my art. And I feel the conversation around mental health and the arts has really changed as well. Back in the day, there used to be a real point of pride, when one would say, 'I was exhausted and I haven't been home for so long, but I'm living out of a suitcase.' It was all just like cool, hardy stories. But now you ask yourself am I balanced? You know, am I happy? Those are the questions I ask, not how many shows I have done. I think there's just been a shift that is maybe come from getting older or maybe just coming to a place where valuing that mental health or that holistic feeling is far important than everything else."





Light Box by Martha Freud

And on that very evolved note, we moved on to what Anoushka really holds special in her heart. Of course, it was tough for her to choose just a few, but the ones that she did, resonated deeply with her.

1. This necklace that I wear was my sons first gift to me. He was five-years-old at the time. It was for Christmas. He had someone take him to a shop. He liked it because it looked like a honeycomb.
2. I love crystals and I love beautiful colours and this was from my older son. Probably also for Christmas. It's just an unusual, beautiful colour and he got it because he knew I loved that colour and it was really sweet.
3. This is from my mom's family. I think it's my great grandmother's, she used to use it for Puja (prayer), like the spoon. So, you can see how old it is. I think it goes back quite a few generations. I don't necessarily use it for prayer every day, but there are times when I'm troubled where I find it quite soothing.
4. This eye mask was a funny one, it was gifted to me with a sensual context. And then I came home and my kids were using it for hide and seek, so now it's a piece of art that lives on a shelf rather than hidden in a drawer.
5. I've had this piano since I was twelve It's the one my dad gave me. When I moved from my parents' house to London, I had it shipped from California. So, it's been in my family since then. And it still sounds amazing. Actually. It's a good piano.
6. Mugs, I've got a few of them. I've got this obsession with handmade mugs. I like the way they feel compared to the ceramic ones. When I travel I try and get a mug. So, this was from a holiday in Greece.
7. This Light Box is made by my friend, Martha Freud. She hand-dots every ceramic cup. She makes the candle, she dots the word and then she programs a computer into the back to kind of do sentences. So, there's usually a theme in a lot of the ones that she does or she works with, if she's doing a private commission.
8. Grammy medallions, why not?
9. This photograph I think was for a Vanity Fair photo shoot in the states when I was twenty. It's actually outside of our car garage in California, but they set up a backdrop. And just for whatever reason, they had this idea of my father carrying me in a wheelbarrow. This is one of my favourites as so many of the photos of the two of us were nicely taken however very posed I just love this one because he's being really funny and it's just makes you wonder - was he funny? He was very goofy. He was very silly. I don't think that always came out in photos, you know? So, I just love it. Like of all the photos of us. ///

Words Shruti Kapur Malhotra
Photography Vikram Kushwah





Clockwise from top right: 9, 4, 8, 2 & 3.

special

WHAT'S YOUR STORY?

SOUMYAK KANTI DEBISWAS
AANCHAL MALHOTRA
ADITI MITTAL
SHANTANU PANDIT
KHYATI TREHAN
GAUTAMI REDDY
SUMIT ROY

Photographer Prakrit Rai
Fashion Director Ameet Sikka
Assistants Lalrinfela Tlau, Unnati Saini
Hair & Makeup Atreyi Halder, Rynn.V
Location Courtesy The Quorum, Gurgaon

A full-page photograph of Soumyak Kanti Debiswas sitting in a modern, light blue armchair. He is wearing a black button-down shirt and a light green jacket draped over his left shoulder. He is looking off to the side with a thoughtful expression. The background consists of dark, paneled walls and a floor lamp with a warm glow on the right.

SOUMYAK KANTI DEBISWAS

Profession Filmmaker /// **Actor, producer, writer and now director - what do each of these roles mean to you?** They are all part of a puzzle and eventually you want to see the entire puzzle /// **What gives you maximum joy?** Writing gives me the most amount of joy and the process most amount of pain as well /// **As someone still fairly young in the industry, are you drawn towards particular stories or you like to explore various tales?** I would like to infuse mysticism in contemporary storytelling. I would like to work with metaphysical, mystical and spiritual truths in contemporary storytelling. /// **What or who is your biggest inspiration?** Nature /// **Your Platform moment** Every time I create platforms for others is my platform moment.

Shirt Siddhant Agrawal



AANCHAL MALHOTRA

Profession Writer & Historian /// **What's your Story?** I tell the stories of people who have survived extraordinary circumstances, but who often find no place in the pages of official histories /// **Contextualise yourself as a writer in one line.** Curious, archaeological in my methodology and persistent /// **One thing people will be surprised to know about you.** I write long form with an ink pen so every week I fill my pen with ink /// **Your Platform moment** When I saw people buying my first book. To see people interact with it and investing their time is memorable.

Jumpsuit **November Noon**



ADITI MITTAL

Profession Podcaster & Stand-Up Comedian /// **What's your Story?** 'The poorest Mittal in the world'
/// **Contextualise yourself in one line.** She tried /// **Last thing you do before you get on stage?**
Sweat /// **Your Platform moment** This is my Platform moment. Cause I did not know there was such
a curated selection of cool, slightly unhinged people and I am horrified that they included me in it.

Dress **Summer Somewhere**



SHANTANU PANDIT

Profession Musician **/// What's your Story?** A singer-songwriter from Delhi **/// Why do you do what you do?** I do what god tells me to do **/// What emotion does music evoke in you?** Joy **/// Your Platform moment?** 12:30pm, 24 July, 1993

Shirt Khanijo

A full-page photograph of Khyati Trehan sitting on a wooden armchair with a red cushion. She is wearing a green jumpsuit with large white polka dots and white sneakers. The background is a wood-paneled wall with two vertical light strips. The floor is dark wood.

KHYATI TREHAN

Profession Designer + Visual Artist /// **Why do you do what you do?** Design keeps my life interesting
/// **Design to you means?** Art but in service of people /// **Your platform moment?** Seeing my face
and name up on the Oscars website /// **What's Your Story?** Kid grows up to have a great relationship
with learning and discovers a profession that always gives her lots to learn about.

Co-ord set Lovebirds



GAUTAMI REDDY

Profession Culture Writer & Communications Strategist /// **What's your Story?** Everyone has something they follow with all their heart. Like sports or music. For me, my religion was, and still is, art! Watching and reading artists' interviews, learning fun facts, quotes, birth dates and all their crazy routines, and lessons and moments from their lives were like fables and allegories to me. Even today, artists and creatives are what I call my 'internal signal' and I'm so proud to be able to champion and tell their stories in my role at India Art Fair /// **What excites you about art?** That it's messy, organic and so basic to human expression, as elemental as writing or counting I would say /// **Your Platform moment** December, 2017. A week before Christmas, you know that time of year when no one wants to work? Well, I did. It was a cold winter. And it got colder when my boss decided to gift the tasks and responsibilities of three people on my three-month-old shoulders. For the next forty days, I did everything in my power to learn the ropes of the tornado we know to be the India Art Fair. It was hell and heaven combined. We eventually delivered a successful fair. Winter led to spring. The flowers bloomed and so did I.

Jumpsuit Siddhant Agrawal



SUMIT ROY

Profession Musician & Artist /// **One artist from the industry you can't stop admiring and why?** Dub Sharma for being a multi-talented genius and for doing everything on his terms /// **The next big thing in music is?** Artists realising collaboration as a medium and community building /// **Freedom to you means?** Not being restrictive in my creative process /// **Your Platform moment** Whenever I am at a railway station.

Jacket Khanijo, Pants Siddhant Agrawal

ARAMNESS GIR

A CURATED EXPEDITION FOR THE WILDLIFE ENTHUSIASTS

Comfortably nestled right on the fringes of the *Sasan Gir National Park* amongst flora, fauna and some of the last few remaining Asiatic lions, *Aramness Gir*, a luxury safari lodge coexists with the semi-nomadic Maldhari tribe. Founded by Jimmy Patel owing to his immense love for Gujarat, dedication towards wildlife conservation, *Aramness*, provides an experience replete with luxury but with a touch of the local flavour of the region. Located within the 18 square kilometre area that skirts the National Park, the lodge sits within a rarely undeveloped natural paradise in a protected teak forest.

Creating a truly immersive experience in the Indian wilderness, the design of the lodge is a creative collaboration between *Fox Browne Creative* and *Nicholas Plewman Architects*. Inspired by the idiosyncrasies of the neighbouring village of Haripur, the *Aramness* blueprint incorporates central cobbled streets with courtyard homes. Being sensitive to the natural surroundings the forest and the meadow gardens have carefully found their way on the property grounds. The team explains, “Our aim was to merge the natural habitat of the area with the built environment and pay homage to the original use of the land as farmland.”

Bringing forth a taste of the Gujarati village setup and its informal arrangement, *Aramness* stands tall with private kothis. Staying true to their name that stands for a peaceful village, the interiors have been designed to advocate for a deep sense of comfort and tranquility yet ensuring a luxurious experience. Constructed making use of indigenous methods and craft techniques native to the region, the lodge houses fifteen stand-alone single bedroom kothis and three standalone double bedroom kothis with a shared dining space. Each kothi is a spacious double storey building that includes a cool shaded courtyard and upper deck veranda that overlooks waterways and beyond to the dense forest. Equally luxurious in its approach, each kothi boasts of a private pool inspired by the characteristic Indian step wells.

Paying homage to the local craftsmanship, the design inventory for *Aramness* finds itself being carefully sourced or constructed in the state of Gujarat. From the pattern on the large sandstone and steel Jali screens, which is a replica of the perforations of the dried leaf of a sal tree, to the striking wall of Kutchi lipan plasterwork with its intricate inlaid mirrors handcrafted by local artisans. A cherry on top of the cake the vintage applique scatter cushions and hand-beaten brass tables only add to the detailed layering.

Adding to the Gujarati experience and staying true to the culinary repertoire the region has to offer, the gastronomical experience has been expertly crafted to not just include traditional flavours of Gujarati vegetarian delicacies but it also lends a unique opportunity to pique the palate with the most authentic non vegetarian fare, inspired by the tastes of the areas that encircle the lodge.

Curating an entire day of adventure for their guests, a day at the premises includes game drives into the park to view the Asiatic lion with a naturalist, jungle walks in the teak forest, visiting a Maldhari family in their home, sampling delicious Gujarati food or even better, doing as little as possible whilst soaking up the natural beauty of the park. Focusing sharply on providing exquisite hospitality, the experience at *Aramness Gir* further encapsulates the relation between man and wildlife that is exclusive to Gujarat. ///

Words Unnati Saini





DOLKHAR

A SOJOURN INTO THE HILLS FOR THE ADVENTURE SEEKERS

Identifying strongly with Ladakh, its language, culture and heritage, the boutique hotel *Dolkhar* was established to integrate a little piece of the region with the rest of the world, while keeping at the fore their values of conscious, sustainable and contextual travel. Inspired by the native area's traditional values, *Dolkhar's* building stands tall and exists more than a mere physical structure. It is, in fact, a manifestation of the team's ideas and desires beyond the confines of functionality. Neatly tucked away in Tukcha, at the heart of the main town, Leh, the boutique stay provides easy access to the city centre while also being remote enough to provide a tranquil experience away from the humdrum of the cityscape.

Comprising seven carefully constructed villas that represent Ladakh and the idea of community and sustainability, the property has locally sourced materials using indigenous techniques of construction and by artisans found in the region. The rooms at *Dolkhar* are a perfect reflection of how the locals experience the landscape of Ladakh considering the stone walls share the same colours as the mountains and the ceilings made of exposed talu ldungma are a reminder of the long stretches of poplar that come back to life in the spring every year. The villas also come with a rabsal, a Ladakhi balcony and a private patio on the ground floor.

"For instance, we have used the compressed stabilised earth blocks [CSEB] for our passive solar building, local willow and poplar wood for the roofs and traditional columns and beams for structural support. Thus, ensuring continued operation even through the winter." What the owner of *Dolkhar*, Rigzin Lachic has found most fulfilling through the entire process has been her collaboration with the artisans. Joining hands with over forty craftspeople from across different villages, the property boasts of interiors embellished with home grown techniques and crafts.

"We sourced customised cutlery from the metal artisans of Chilling Sumdha, traditional grain barrels or 'dzems' from artisans in Turtuk, some pots and ceramic figurines from Likir's only two potters, our rugs, throws and cushion covers from the women weavers of Kharnakling and finally our sinks and some traditional crock pots from Ladakh's only stone worker from Turtuk. All the wooden fixtures in the villas as well have been handmade by our carpenters from repurposed wood left from the construction." For Rigzin, apart from the ecological perspective for sourcing locally, another aspect that stands out the most is her passion for revival of Ladakhi crafts. While most of the handicrafts in the region are being practiced by last generation artisans, there's a dearth of young people in the indigenous techniques and appreciation for the existing artisans is not enough. There seems to be little hope for craft in Ladakh without intervention from both the community and the government according to the owner and to remedy the same she has also co-founded *Haati*, a social enterprise that works towards showcasing and creating a patronage for the craft in the valley and beyond.

Their gastronomical offering, *Tsas* serves the culinary confluence between modern haute and traditional Ladakh. A hyper local vegetarian restaurant set in an apple and apricot orchard within the resort, it incorporates produce from *Dolkhar's* kitchen garden. The food at *Tsas* is also a reflection of the fundamentals of *Dolkhar* and the carefully curated menu was worked on for months before deciding upon the perfect melange that captures the essence of Ladakhi cuisine. Authentic and stimulating, *Dolkhar* promises an experience. ///

Words Unnati Saini



THE TWENTY TWO

A GETAWAY FIT FOR THE URBAN TRAVELLERS

Built in a storied Edwardian manor on Grosvenor Square, *The Twenty Two* is a boutique hotel and a cultural space specially designed for the curious and the creative, dedicated to finding a moment of tranquility away from the buzz that surrounds London. Situated right along the northeastern edge of Grosvenor Square, the boutique property is close to the gardens that make way for North Audley Street.

A highly personal affair, the thirty one rooms and suites at *The Twenty Two* come with the most sinuous details embroidered into every stay. Each one is layered with its own character and designed to reflect the individual tastes of the guests and educate about the manor's history as a family home. Paying homage to eighteenth century Parisian design elements, opulent and maximalist in its nature, there are custom-made four poster and canopy beds, draped with luxurious Egyptian cotton linens. Adorned with rich silks and lavish velvets the furniture and furnishings are replete with colour and pattern. All perfectly balanced and held together with modern conveniences. Elegant cabochon marble bathrooms are endowed with luxury, carefully curated with the utmost wellbeing in mind.

The Butler and Concierge teams are on hand to curate and guide every aspect of one's stay, both inside and outside of *The Twenty Two* — should the guest feel the need to explore the city and the historic vicinity around. The bar-lounge that comes under the Member's Club is open to guests has a bohemian feel styled with ruched linen curtains, velvet seats and extravagant rainbow-hued wall-lights. Brainchild of Navid Mirtorabi and Jamie Reuben, they explain, "The ambition for *The Twenty Two* was to create a space where the creative and the curious, in London and globally, can come together and feel welcome; a living room of sorts where guests feel inspired and at home in their surroundings."

A great addition to the property, the neighbourhood restaurant brings a Mediterranean touch to modern British fare. With Executive Chef Alan Christie at the helm, the menu is carefully curated to minimal intervention and offers an uncompromising, lighter style. The drinks are pleasurable concoctions, where classic cocktails find a special mention with their original recipes, united by mindful practice and the highest quality ingredients.

Built as a private members' club the property delights those who desire discretion and quietude from the city. The dedicated setting for private soirée has an idiosyncratically charming flavour, is extravagant and yet provides a cozy feeling. The property offers especially customised menus to create a centrepiece and hand-painted scenes that are embellished by silk wallpapers. Bringing alive the nostalgia and the allure of the past in a contemporary setup *The Twenty Two* provides a fuss stay for the urban traveller looking for a getaway. ///

Words Unnati Saini





TWO PARTNERS, ONE PURPOSE, ZERO APOLOGIES

From a small mountain town in Asheville, North Carolina, to a laundry-room entryway in Melbourne, aromatic spices from the sub-continent are dominating the headlines and racking up the accolades. Dishes that were once reserved for road-side *dhabas* and *Nani's* dinner table take on modern personas, often borrowing technique and taste from chefs from the West. And while the proclamation of innovation might work for some, a pair of now New Yorkers, insist on a far more assertive approach to sharing desi cuisine with the world.

Enter Roni Mazumdar and Chef Chintan Pandya, the purposeful pair behind the *Unapologetic Foods* group that boasts a handful of NYC hot spots with a few more on the way. While their food and faces boast no shortage of recognition on the global news stand, their 'sorry-not-sorry' approach to serving Indian cuisine is as scant as the goat kidney and testicles served at *Dhamaka*, the latest of their sit-down concepts that recently earned Chef Chintan *Best Chef New York State*, from the coveted *James Beard Foundation*. "Expression of our cuisine in any different format is not wrong. But there's only one crime—when you never actually express it in its own real format. That's the problem we're talking about. There's nothing wrong with making mac and cheese with a chicken masala sauce. Do it all you want. But why do we feel that the only representation, we will never have, is the real one? That's the problem—the real Indian food has not been shown to consumers in this country yet."

Remembering himself as a pre-adolescent who migrated from Calcutta to New York, Roni recalls not always being so

unapologetic about *desi khaana*, hiding behind pizza, sandwiches and the like. As his appetite for food from his homeland grew, a reality set in—outside his own home, Indian food in New York and America at large, was reserved for the same five Mughlai dishes and a slew of westernised versions, contrived to suit what was always believed to be the American palate.

Some 8,000 miles away in Mumbai, a young chef-in-training, Chintan, found that even immersed in the culture, his problem was same-same-but-different to that of his future business partner. "The problem that happens in India is we're always taught about European food, not Indian food. I remember a discussion in one of our classes about bouillabaisse. It's a French soup. I remember how people were so proudly talking about it, how there's a specific book about bouillabaisse and how everyone should know about it. But we've never spoken similarly about champaran meat, which I think has more complex flavours than a bouillabaisse. That's why thousands of people, who pass out of that hotel management school, don't know how to respect the culture and the food."

It was during this same time, while learning about French and other master cuisines of the West, that Chintan set out to discover the dishes he wanted to eat and then some. Making his way through the country and spending time with individuals in the outskirts of big cities, Chintan focused on understanding these so-called forgotten dishes. What resulted was a handwritten notebook of recipes that would become meals at home.

But luckily for diners at *Dhamaka*,







those recipes did not stay only written down. The champaran meat, which could be argued as Chef's rebuttal to the almighty bouillabaisse; with over twenty-four hours involved in its preparation, and another four hours to cook, this Bihari staple is listed on the menu as "subject to availability". For those fortunate enough to score one of the twenty-five clay pots made daily, the tender chunks of mutton, mashed table side with a whole head of masala moist garlic, are worth every minute and monetary resource that Chintan doled out to get the execution just right for this legacy dish.

The menus at *Dhamaka*, *Adda Indian Canteen*, *Semma*, and the fast casuals that follow, show a level of diverse authenticity never seen before at an Indian restaurant in the West. Roni recalls the time before the unveiling of *Adda Indian Canteen*, when Chintan handed him the opening menu, studded with dishes that many Indians had never even heard of, let alone their neighbours to the West. Would the menu be resoundingly dismissed? Would they have to revise the list to fit within what had always been perceived as American tastebuds? The answer, as seen by the line that continued to wrap around the restaurant night after night, was no.

And with that hunger from their diverse patronage, Indian, American and everyone in between, the partners were further committed to serving Indian food unapologetically. "I think for him, he has reached a point where I say, 'Do you think people will like it?' and it doesn't matter. We're not actually worried about a dish that is going to fit into whose palate anymore. Rather, our entire focus has changed and we've grown together. He says, 'Don't ask me if people will like it. Ask me if I am doing everything I can to make this dish right'."

Along with the decision to serve the unsung recipes, the commitment to making them the right way imposes responsibility to source ingredients with the same level of unbridled honesty, as is illustrated by their delivery of paneer. Prior to the opening of *Dhamaka*, the soft-dairy dish was made in-house at their other restaurants. When the Lower East Side location opened up, Chintan knew he wanted to push the limits to deliver the most authentic version of the dish, catapulting the pair to find a dairy—which

remains top secret—to source all the full-fat milk they produce. The entire stock is used only to prepare the paneer and dessert at *Dhamaka*. The result is a beautifully prepared paneertikka, touched by Midas, whose sturdy fatness dissolves magically into cloudy lightness as soon as a morsel of it finds its way into a hungry mouth.

While *Unapologetic Foods* is most certainly a product of their partnership, Roni and Chintan recognise that for the group to continue to grow and sustain, their roster of key players must expand as well. "We talk about this all the time. Think of any Indian hospitality group, big or small, that has existed for eternity in this country. You'll always hear one chef's name. There will always be one king. And it's a conscious decision that we made. We said, it's not about us. It's about giving voice to our community. We don't just say that, we need to walk the walk." And walk that walk they have with Chef Vijay Kumar, who has earned carte blanche for the menu at *Semma*, showcasing mastery of his native Tamil Nadu cuisine. Mastery that has garnered the one-star of the *Michelin* accolade, no less. Recognition that the group grants to Vijay, while simultaneously celebrating themselves.

Inherently, for the group to remain chef driven, *Unapologetic Foods* puts forth the strategy of tailoring their restaurants to complement the chef by connecting with the talent, drive, and determination of an individual to bring what they can to the table. Much like what they did and continue to do for themselves.

This concept of challenging what has always been done just might be the true secret ingredient behind the success of the two. An unbridled commitment to preparing the ancestral dishes of their motherland, regardless of what could be perceived as the wants and needs of the consumers; a hands-on, seemingly too quality controlled approach to sourcing; a defiance on building themselves as culinary demigods in exchange for partners in the limelight. A sum of many parts, *Unapologetic Foods'* unorthodox submission to serving desi food in America, or to the world for that matter, will continue to build with each person added to the thousands on their waitlist. The proof is in the paneer. ///

Words Gauri Sarin



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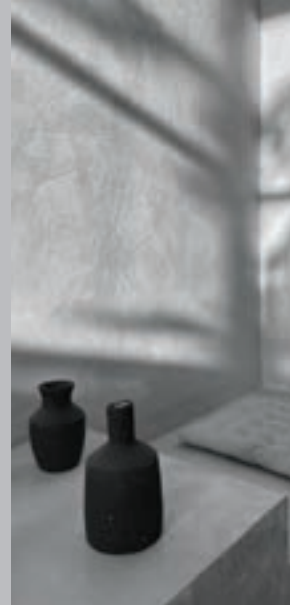
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"Seek out what you want to do, know what you have to offer, get to know yourself. Take the time, pause to ask yourself questions. Around the time of Brexit, Britain's PM Theresa May said if you think you're a global citizen then you're a citizen of nowhere. I believe the opposite is true. I am a citizen of everywhere and in that lies my strength."

-Imran Amed, Pg 015

"Khoj is a space to experiment, thrive and at the same time, it's a space also to fail. Having said that, it's not a stepping stone to success, but if you don't do something that really radically changes your practice or cements it and/or if you don't find your language here, then it's useless."

-Pooja Sood, Pg 024

"It may not sound very positive, but it actually is positive, but it's this idea that I am finite, you know, there's an idea that I am fallible, that I am breakable, that I'm not superhuman and therefore, the choices I make, the time I choose to spend on things is precious."

-Anoushka Shankar, Pg 156

"I am interested in women's stories, and in placing women at the centers of those stories. I want to make my heroines human, with human flaws. I am against whitewashing them."

- Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Pg 040

"While craft is very important, I believe that filmmaking is not just that, but the intangible ways in which each person chooses to tell the story. That is what makes one's voice unique."

-Nandita Das, Pg 048

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