

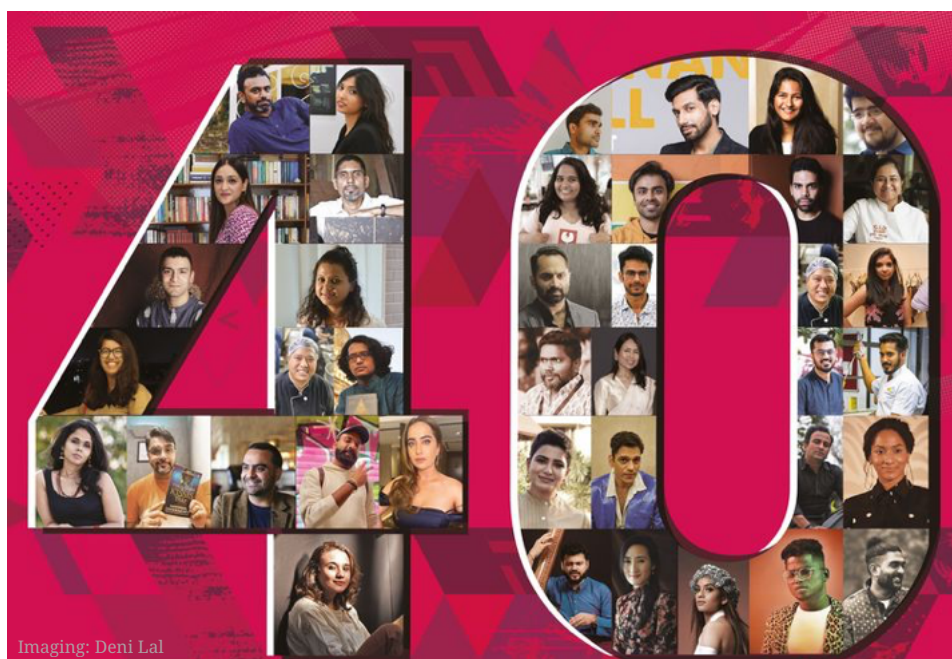
India's arts economy can be major driver of growth and innovation

THE WEEK picks 40 under 40 sharpshooters of 2022 across eight creative categories



(<https://www.theweek.in/authors.sneha-bhura.html>)

By Sneha Bhura (<https://www.theweek.in/authors.sneha-bhura.html>) | Issue Date: December 25, 2022 | Updated: December 18, 2022 06:27 IST



A 40-under-40 list is the most visible way to acknowledge the achievements of young and outstanding individuals in the public domain. They celebrate endeavours in business, research, philanthropy, cinema, activism, sports and what not. They are associated with “bright young entrepreneurs”, “influential leaders”, “disrupters”, and definitive “change-makers”, making it all look very slick, efficient, suited-booted corporate chic. But few have attempted to conduct a magisterial survey of list-makers entirely in the arts. Food, books, fashion, cinema, visual art, music, comedy and theatre are creative categories as old as history and coalesce together to form the culture industry. If harnessed and nurtured well, our creative economy will become the vital force in turbocharging human development.

“ The creative economy is

Everything from arts and crafts to design, architecture, entertainment and advertising are meant to bring about socio-economic

expected to reach a global valuation of \$985 billion by 2023, according to the think tank, G20 Insights. ”

progress, innovation and job creation. The creative and cultural industries (or the CCIs, in formal parlance) are now one of the most compelling and fastest growing sectors in the world economy. “The value of the global market for creative goods more than doubled from \$208 billion in 2002 to \$509 billion in 2015. It is among the most rapidly growing

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sectors of the world economy, generating nearly 30 million jobs worldwide and employing more people aged 15–29 than any other sector,” states a paper published for UNESCO in April 2022, called *The Creative Economy: Moving in from the Sidelines*. Colombia, for instance, has had an “Orange Economy” policy since 2018—an economic movement which encourages the private sector to invest in CCIs across the arts, crafts, festivals, heritage, music, publishing, and fashion. The creative economy is expected to reach a global valuation of \$985 billion by 2023, and is likely to constitute 10 per cent of the global GDP before 2030, according to the think tank, G20 Insights. Today, India is among the top 10 countries stimulating global trade in creative goods and services. We are the world’s largest producer of films. Creative content from this industry, experts say, may become the country’s greatest export.

The importance of framing CCI-friendly economic policies becomes all the more relevant as the arts industry emerges from a long spell of Covid-induced shutdowns of live and public performance venues, which had affected artist mobility, revenues, livelihood and creative freedom itself. The need for a 40-under-40 arts list has to be viewed in the context of the complete disruption that CCIs suffered in the last three years, thanks to a raging virus. Our standout performers of 2022, despite closures and distancing measures, persisted and played on. And they represent a set of professionals who push the boundaries of their craft in unusual ways as necessitated by the times.

“When you look at the creative economy, unfortunately in India we have no policy framing the sector in its entirety,” says Rashmi Dhanwani, founder of the Art X Company, a strategic consultancy for the cultural sector. “So, while there are certain pockets of very enthusiastic industries, like film and music, you can’t call theatre a creative industry in India, unlike in the UK where it is formalised; there is a profit orientation and the sector contributes actively to the overall health of the economy.”

But this list could not have come out at a better time. Although much later than most other industries, the culture industrial complex is now coming back to life, unleashing in its wake a crop of standout creative acts. “It is only this year that tourism picked up, and festivals and concerts are coming back,” notes Dhanwani. “These are extremely positive feelers. People are really coming out and saying, yes, we want to attend, we want to be a part of things, we want to perform, we want to create. Brands and sponsors are still tight-fisted, because there is also this talk of a looming recession. But on the other hand, what is interesting to notice is how art philanthropy has gone up in India.”



Now that we can experience the arts in a physical format again, the Indian art territory is fertile ground for producing some very exciting work. There are supportive enablers at play to make it happen. “Post the pandemic, we saw a resurgence of physical exhibitions and art fairs,” says Bhavna Kakar, founder and director of Latitude28 in Delhi and publisher-editor of *Take on Art* magazine. “In terms of audience engagement and from personal experience, we saw a great response at exhibitions. Collectors and art enthusiasts were eagerly waiting for the physical formats to open. Apart from galleries and artist residencies across India, there are foundations and organisations which are very supportive. There is the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA), India Foundation for the Arts, Sarmaya Foundation and Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art (FICA). Other arts programming festivals such as the Kochi-Muziris

Biennale, Serendipity Arts Festival and India Art Fair enable site-specific artist commissions and projects while working with non-profit organisations and providing a platform to upcoming talent in the region.”

To be a musician anywhere in the world is tough. But to be a practitioner of classical music in India comes with its own peculiar set of challenges, notes Shubha Mudgal, one of our experts for the music category, which is a mix of independent, playback, rap and classical. Her choice included a hindustani vocalist and a harmonium artist! While we could not make space for technicians and instrumentalists this year, her shortlist is indicative of the ground that needs to be covered and the inadequacies of lists to fully do justice to all.

THE WEEK’s 40-under-40 arts list is a labour of love comprising a core team of four reporters constantly going back and forth with hectic rounds of debates and discussions. Our long-lists have been further processed and pruned by experts who are masters of their domain. The final 40 is not the last word; they only represent a bunch who have been incredibly proactive in the last one year and produced a major new film, book, performance piece or album. Namrata Zakaria, our resident expert for all things fashion, firmly believes that younger designers today are much more exciting than the previous lot. “While the ‘seniors’—those who have been designing for 25 years or more—have built mini empires making bridal wear, the younger designers are so much more fashion forward,” she says. “Their sensibilities are more personal, they want to reflect an India of today, that wears an interesting mix of traditional heritage, but in contemporary clothing. You will see shift dresses, pants-suits, and modernised saris, all in fabulous textiles and clever textures. The young guns are far more professional, too. They come armed with international degrees, CEOs and PR teams.”

In the hope that CCIs in India are taken more seriously at the policy level, THE WEEK’s 40-under-40 brings forth a constellation of creatives who birthed something of consequence in the most uncertain of times and reminded us how the arts can save us.



FILMS

Small-town girl

In 2018, Village Rockstars, directed, edited and produced by filmmaker Rima Das, became India’s first official selection from Assam for the Oscars. The film was about a young girl, Dhunu, who dreamt of owning a guitar and forming a rock band. It bagged the national award for best film that year. And that was just her second film in two years as a filmmaker. Her next, Bulbul Can Sing (2018), conveyed a powerful message, and her latest is Tora’s husband (2022), which tells the story of a loving father and a kind neighbour who struggles to keep his small-town business afloat amidst loss and lockdowns. It was produced by her own production company, Flying River Films, and premiered recently at the Toronto International Film Festival. Next on Rima Das’s bucket list is to rope in some of the biggest Bollywood stars for her upcoming projects. And she sees it happening soon!

- Pooja Biraia Jaiswal

FILMS

The Midas touch

American actor Lauren Bacall once said, “Stardom isn’t a profession; it is an accident.” But Bollywood’s undisputed queen and its reigning superstar Alia Bhatt has proved it wrong. Donning multiple hats at the same time—that of an actor, producer, investor and entrepreneur



—Bhatt has shown that her fame is no accident. She is the first actor to have delivered two 0100 crore blockbusters back to back this year with RRR and Brahmastra. Through ‘Eternal Sunshine’, her recently-launched production company, she brought to the fore women-centric narratives in Hindi cinema, the kind we have rarely seen among Bollywood’s commercial offerings. She made a great beginning with Darlings, a dark comedy by screenwriter Jasmeet K. Reen, centred around domestic violence. “It is the kind of narrative we want to build,” she said in an interview. “We want to give new writers and directors an opportunity.” As she was expecting her first child with husband Ranbir Kapoor, a restless and “hugely ambitious” Bhatt launched her homegrown maternity wear line, alongside the existing Ed-a-Mamma, her kidswear line which turned into a 0150 crore business within a year of its launch.

In a career that marked a decade this year, Bhatt has consistently delivered hits year on year, with Gangubai Kathiawadi (2022), Gully Boy (2019), Raazi (2018), Badrinath Ki Dulhania (2017), 2 States (2014), and Humpty Sharma Ki Dulhania (2017). As filmmaker Sanjay Leela Bhansali once said, “Every time I throw an ace at her, I get two aces thrown back at me. She is too special. I tell her, ‘You have the potential to go global and make India proud’.”

- Pooja Biraia Jaiswal



FILMS

Caste conversations

If there is one person who can take credit for kick-starting the conversation around anti-caste politics and social exclusion in mainstream Tamil cinema, it is Ranjith Pandurangan, popularly known as Pa Ranjith. Ten years and seven films are all it took for this ace filmmaker to shake the very consciousness of a society which had for long glorified the life and culture of upper caste feudalism. A deep desire to combine activism and entertainment came as a result of his own experiences as a dalit. As he says, “For a long time there was no one telling stories about me and my community. Cinema was only upper and middle caste, and there was no point in waiting. I had to resist.”

His success started right from his debut film, Attakathi (2012), a light-hearted romantic comedy which was critically acclaimed. His next two films, Kabali (2016) and Kaala (2018), with Rajinikanth in the lead, talked about oppression and land rights. Both films hit it big, with Kabali grossing 0650 crore in the box office. Over the years, Sarpatta Paramparai (2021), the anthology film Dhammam (2022) and his latest, Natchathiram Nagargirthadhu, in which he explores the politics of love, were all attempts to give equal space to a diverse set of voices and gender perspectives. A graduate of Fine Arts College in Chennai, Ranjith, 39, continues to tell stories with a difference.

- Pooja Biraia Jaiswal



FILMS

Bird's eye view

All That Breathes, a 'mood' documentary based on two brothers who devote themselves to rescuing migratory black kites in Delhi, even as deteriorating air quality and stifling social issues continue to make headlines, was the only film from India to win the Gotham awards, the 'L'Oeil d'Or' (Golden Eye) at Cannes, and the World Cinema Grand Jury Prize at Sundance this year. Basking in the glory is the film's director, Shaunak Sen, 34, who is known to possess a keen interest in "the visceral, heavy, opaque, greyness of the air in Delhi and a philosophical interest in the figure of a grey, monotone heavy sky in which birds float like tiny dots...."

An alumnus of Jamia Millia Islamia who is currently pursuing his PhD at JNU, Sen is not new to awards. His first documentary film, Cities of Sleep (2016), bagged six international awards. For All That Breathes, he did not use the usual telephoto lens to film birds in the sky, instead focusing on long takes with slow, languorous tilts and pans to juxtapose some elements of urban life in the film. Non-fiction to him is "more hospitable and accommodating of personal interests and smaller budgets", while he finds "the Bollywood behemoth" intimidating. As someone who watches a lot of fiction, Sen's next is most likely going to be a fiction film, though he is not clear yet on the subject.

- Pooja Biraia Jaiswal



FILMS

Magic in his moves

In these high-stress, cut-throat and competitive times, Jitendra Kumar, the hero of *The Viral Fever* (TVF) classics like *Kota Factory* and *Panchayat*, comes across as a breath of fresh air. The IIT-Kharagpur graduate with the boy-next-door looks fits perfectly into the “chase-your-dreams-follow-your-passion” mould. His parody of Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal (which impressed Kejriwal himself) became the stuff of millennial legend. His *Tech Conversations with Dad*, a comedy sketch where he explains Twitter, Facebook and online shopping to his tech-challenged dad, soon made it to canteen conversations in colleges. He can make you laugh, think, scoff, frown or smile. Kumar came to Mumbai when YouTube really took off and in that way, he says, he “never had to struggle”. He wanted to act and he got to act from Day 1.

Things really kicked off when a senior from IIT, Biswapati Sarkar, invited him to join TVF in 2012. Ever since then, he has made inroads into Bollywood through *Shuruaat Ka Interval* (2014), *Gone Kesh* (2019) and *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (2020). His latest, *Jaadugar* (2022), is a heartfelt, slice-of-life dramedy in which he plays a village magician who turns footballer to impress his lady love. Its magic worked well for the 32-year-old “method actor”. Having firmly established himself in Bollywood, he is now eyeing bigger projects.

- Pooja Biraia Jaiswal



FILMS

Rogue in vogue

Nearly 15 lakh people follow him on social media. According to his bio, he is ‘living a jedi life’. In other words, he belongs to the mystical knightly universe of *Star Wars*, where knowledge replaces ignorance, passion gives way to serenity, harmony replaces chaos and love triumphs over crime. These lines of poetry and philosophy seem incongruous with the onscreen image of the Hyderabad boy, who has become famous for his flawed and devious characters—be it the crooked street hustler of Zoya Akhtar’s *Gully Boy* (2019), the wicked-yet-charming drug dealer of Imtiaz Ali’s *She* (2020) or the abusive and remorseless roadside romeo of Jasmeet K. Reen’s *Darlings* (2022).

The desire was always to be a hero, but the passion to do his work well was more important. Deep inside, he knows that the opportunity to essay the “masala film ka romantic hero” will come by soon enough. First noticed as a rookie cop in the neo-noir action thriller *Monsoon Shootout* (2013), Varma’s talent was reportedly spotted by Irrfan Khan, who recommended the FTII graduate to several film producers. After nearly a decade as an actor, Varma now has an exciting roster of upcoming releases—from Sujoy Ghosh’s *The Devotion of Suspect X* with Kareena Kapoor Khan to Reema Kagti’s *Dahaad*, opposite Sonakshi Sinha. In a complete role reversal, he voiced the lead, Morpheus, in the Audible adaptation of Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman* in Hindi, alongside Tabu and Manoj Bajpayee.

- Pooja Biraia Jaiswal

FILMS

Soft power

In Malayalam cinema, there have always been “hero-dyads”: one who represents the masculine, patriarchal order and the other who is the fragile, feminine and romantic boy-next-



door. This trend manifests through male star duos like Sathyan-Nazeer, Sudheer-Raghavan and Mammooty-Mohanlal. Faasil belongs to the Nazeer-Raghavan-Mohanlal lineage in that sense, says celebrated film critic C. S. Venkateswaran. “Faasil also represents the hero figure of the post-1990s or post-globalisation generation in Malayalam cinema,” he adds. “He plays the hero who is most often fragile and impotent, someone who is unable to take control of the world and women. He represents, in many ways, all the uncertainties and ambivalences of the post-political era that we live in, where everything is fluid, changeable and uncertain.” A deep sense of vulnerability marks his star persona. It is one that is dominated and threatened by the outside world, as evidenced by his characters in *22 Female Kottayam* (2012), *Mareshinte Prathikaram* (2016), *Thondimuthalum Driksakshiyum* (2017), *Joji* (2021) and *Varathan* (2018). His roles can take on a very diabolical turn when pushed to the wall, but mostly invite sympathy and identification. “I tend to get bored of what I am doing very quickly,” Faasil once said in an interview. “I set out on long drives and a few hours into it, I change my destination.”

- Pooja Biraia Jaiswal



FILMS

Southern delight

Other than being a gifted performer who sizzles onscreen, Prabhu, 35, is one of the few actors who is known for her sharp, tongue-in-cheek humour. Recently in news for undergoing treatment for myositis, an autoimmune disease, Prabhu told some overly curious fans not to worry too much, as she is not “dying anytime soon”.

On the recently-concluded seventh season of *Koffee With Karan*, a glamorously-attired Prabhu called out Johar for hypocrisy. You are, on some level, the reason for unhappy marriages, she told him. Because you have marketed this idea of marriage, wedding attires and wedding songs. From our youth, you have portrayed life to be K3G [Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham] when, in fact, the reality is K.G.F.

In 11 years, she has to her credit over 40 Telugu and Tamil films, most of which have gone on to be blockbusters. These include Dookudu (2011), Eega (2012), Neethaane En Ponvasantham (2012), Mersal (2017), and the period action film Rangasthalam (2018), which is her highest grossing film. Post her treatment, she has got a line-up of several glossy, high-budget films. Her latest item number, 'Oo Antava', in Pushpa became viral and topped the charts here and abroad.

- Pooja Biraia Jaiswal



FOOD

Going local

Thomas Zacharias's passion for understanding informed food choices has been shaped through experiences as diverse as memories of his home kitchen, his stint as a chef with Le Bernardin in New York City and his years of exploration of Indian cuisine at the Bombay Canteen, Mumbai, where he worked until 2020, earning multiple accolades for his innovation as head chef.

In 2022, Zacharias started The Locavore, a venture which raises the right kind of questions for someone who wants to take the first step towards eating healthy and practising sustainability in a world trying to tackle the effects of climate change. Bringing farmers, producers and entrepreneurs together, Locavore is an online platform for sharing stories related to sustainable food production, India's food markets and culinary memories.

A recent Locavore initiative, in association with OOO Farms, involved documenting wild food that grows naturally in our forests and marshlands and the communities they feed. Called The Wild Food Project, it saw 15 Mumbai-based individuals from different fields spend three months in Maharashtra's Palghar district and study the flavour and texture of the wild food harvested during monsoon as also the culinary tradition of the region.

Just as some of us are learning to unthread the binaries of home-cooked food and exotic dishes on the menu of fine dining restaurants, Locavore's effort to champion regional gastronomies and encourage social and cultural exchange on food and farming is truly life-sustaining.

- Sneha Bhura

FOOD

The trailblazer

Born in Mumbai, Aditi Dugar grew up surrounded by food from her mother's and grandmother's kitchens. She started to cook at 16 and discovered a passion for baking. After the birth of her first child, Aditi left a career in finance to launch a niche catering company called Sage & Saffron. A self-taught cook, Aditi refined her baking talents in London at two Michelin starred restaurants, Le Gavroche and La Petite Maison. Working with one of the city's best flower companies, Aditi was inspired by the level of creativity and finesse in event décor—something she felt was lacking in India's culinary scene. Aditi soon ventured out of London to study with other chefs around the world. This led her to Chef Prateek Sadhu, who shared the same vision of using purely local ingredients to create seasonal and sustainable dishes. After almost two years of R&D, setting up supply chains with farmers across India, as well as the restaurant's own farm, Masque opened its doors in the heart of Mumbai in September 2016.

Masque has blazed its own trail through India's culinary landscape, garnering a reputation for



constant innovation and numerous accolades along the way. In March 2021, Masque was ranked 32 on the list of Asia's 50 Best Restaurants, and in 2022, ranked 21 on the same list, as India's Best Restaurant. While Sandhu is no longer with Masque, Aditi acts as founder and director of the company, simultaneously running her catering company, Sage & Saffron, a newly launched bakery this year called TwentySeven Bakehouse, as well as the kitchens at ARAKU Café in Bengaluru and Seesaw in Mumbai.

- **Sneha Bhura**



FOOD

Gin doctor

There was a time not so long ago when the only Indian gin we knew was the Blue Moon. People willing to shell out more would opt for “foreign” brands like Beefeater, Bombay Sapphire or Tanqueray. The birth of Greater Than in 2017 revolutionised gin drinking in India, with several new craft companies following in its wake. Today, almost 900 bottles of Greater Than are consumed every day on an average.

Anand Virmani, as cofounder and CEO of Nao Spirits that brings out Greater Than and Hapusa, represents possibly the most inventive and successful gin company in India. Having previously worked with Perch Wine & Coffee Bar, Rémy Cointreau and Moët Hennessy, Virmani, along with co-conspirators Aparajita Ninan and Abhinav Rajput, has brought out limited edition gins infused with cold brew coffee and juniper berry and has won medals at the International Wine & Spirit Competition. This year, they commissioned five artists to create their own modern and more relevant interpretation of William Hogarth's famous painting Gin Lane, which once argued against the merits of drinking gin. To chime with the T20 World Cup, they also launched Broken Bat, a limited edition gin aged with cricket bats made of Kashmiri willow.

Moreover, Diageo India announced an investment to acquire a 22.5 per cent stake in Nao Spirits. The company is now set to place Indian gin on the world map. “Gin is one spirit that is made with spices, herbs, botanicals, all of which are at the heart of the spice trade,” says

Virmani. “So when we start talking that ‘hey, we are a craft gin company from India’, people actually sit up and listen.”

- Sneha Bhura



FOOD

Momo maverick

It is fair to say that Kolkata’s love affair with momos really started with The Blue Poppy in Sikkim House. Started in 2003 by Doma Wang, it is the city’s beloved outpost for Tibetan food. With the restaurant being reborn as The Blue Poppy Thakali, all eyes are now on Wang’s eldest child Sachiko Seth—head chef since 2018. For Sachiko, who prefers he/him as pronouns, momo is an emotion when others peddle the Asian dumpling as a highly saleable business proposition. If one momo is wrapped lopsided—be it from crescent to leaf to the potli—the entire batch goes out of the window in his kitchen.

With an illustrious heritage to carry—from a noodle-maker grandfather, a Tibetan-Chinese mother who is also the bona fide momo queen in Kolkata, and a Bengali father who grew up in Bihar—Sachiko is ready to offer an exciting blend of the tried and true along with something less obvious and new. Going beyond chilli chicken and fried rice, he wants a change-averse Kolkata to heartily embrace Nepali thali with its paraphernalia of choila, aloo ka achar and Sel roti—almost like a love child between a donut and malpua. He stuffs his aloo cheese momos, a hit even among pork momo mavericks, with spicy Kolkata aloo dum instead of the regular boiled-and-mashed potatoes. Working with his mother since class 10, he never really required any hotel management or culinary school training. After opening an Asian bakery last year with a friend, inspired by their love for K-pop, Sachiko is ready to spread his wings beyond the city of joy. New outlets of Blue Poppy Thakali are in the offing in Mumbai and Delhi.

- Sneha Bhura



FOOD

Survive and sustain

Chef Vanshika Bhatia has been cooking and baking since she could reach the stovetop. “Home food” is a profound sentiment for this culinary star whose family ancestry goes back to pre-partition Bannu in what is now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In India, the Bannuwals have preserved their distinct linguistic and culinary heritage, and Vanshika uses the language of food to bring it front and centre. Bannu as a region was characteristically arid. In many ways, Bannuwal food evolved in response to both climate and circumstances, revolving around the use of simple grains and grain flours, dry spices, or pickling as a preservation method.

Taking inspiration from the survival-driven ingenuity of her grandparents’ generation, Vanshika wants to elevate her sustainability story in cooking by reviving anecdotes that could soon be lost in the dusty corridors of time. In 2012, she pursued her formal training in culinary arts from Le Cordon Bleu, London. As soon as the course concluded, she began working in some of the world’s best restaurants: Noma (Copenhagen), Gaggan (Bangkok) and Junoon (Dubai). Her first professional role upon her return to India was with none other than the iconic Olive Bar and Kitchen, New Delhi, after which she was made head chef at Ek Bar, one of the restaurants under the Olive umbrella.

During lockdown, Vanshika found herself working with baking recipes. This sparked the initial ideas for the award-winning Petite Pie Shop, a bistro with Parisian flair. She was also cofounder and head chef at Together at 12th, Le Meridien, Gurugram. This year, she became chef partner at OMO, a “soul food community” serving contemporary vegetarian cuisine. She recently opened a second Petite Pie Shop in South Delhi, and plans on making the brand national very soon.

- Sneha Bhura



ART

Postcards from home

When artist Saju Kunhan was a child growing up in Palakkad, Kerala, he would hear stories of his ancestors’ migration from north Kerala during Tipu Sultan’s time. Fear propelled them to escape in the middle of the night, and eventually settle in the remote forests of central Kerala. During the pandemic, when Kunhan spent time in his village, he had plenty of time to recollect these stories. Using materials like red oxide floor pieces from his ancestral home, he recreated them in his second solo exhibition, Home Ground, which was held at TARQ, Mumbai, earlier this year.

In fact, it was at the first Kochi-Muziris Biennale in 2012, when he was part of a group show on 100 years of Malayalam periodicals, that his interest in history was sparked. He spent hours scouting for old books and magazines at flea markets and researching with a friend at the archival library in Thrissur. Since then, he has participated in several group shows and held his first solo show, Stained Geographies, at TARQ in 2017. Now, he wants to dig deeper into his ancestors’ history in his show at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2022-2023. But, as he emphasises, his art is not solely concerned with the historical or the factual. As an artist, he does not merely chronicle the past; he imagines it into being.

- Anjuly Mathai

ART

Show master



Art curation, for Premjish Achari, goes much beyond art. He wants to bring together different stakeholders, explore the political, economic and cultural ramifications of a theme and make it a layered experience. “Curation is like research,” he says. “If I have an important question that I want to ask, I turn it into an exhibition.”

That is why he started Future Collaborations in 2015, a curatorial platform aimed at “politically and theoretically informed curation”. “The dependency on the market was big then,” he says. “Artists were leading individualistic lives with isolated art practices. There was no community feeling in Indian art. I wanted to create a platform where artists and curators could work in a collaborative way to share resources, ideas and insights. I wanted to develop a third voice.”

The Delhi-based curator and writer, who also teaches art history and theory at Shiv Nadar University, played a seminal role in bringing about a paradigm shift in the idea of curation in Indian art. As a result, he was awarded with the Art Scribes Award by the Prameya Art Foundation in 2018 and the Pro Helvetia Art Writers’ Award in 2021.

Achari is currently working on a number of shows, including a trilogy of exhibitions themed on the concept of chaos for the 25th anniversary of The Guild, an art gallery in Mumbai.

- Anjuly Mathai



ART

Soul stirrings

A terminarch is the last known individual of a lineage, species or sub-species. Once the terminarch dies, the species or sub-species becomes extinct. It is a concept that fascinated artist Divya Singh. So, she created a set of videos that looked at this theme through a poetic, philosophical and spiritual lens. “The project starts from the notion that the earth might not go on forever,” she says. “I am thinking of death as the final act. What about all the knowledge we have gained, all that we have achieved? There is so much emotional charge in being the last and then to fade away.”

In fact, death, mortality and the vagaries of time are recurring motifs in the work of the 27-year-old artist, ever since her first solo show—Notes for Tomorrow—at Shrine Empire, Delhi, in 2021. Since then, she has participated in several group shows and art fairs, including the India Art Fair (2022), and the Artissima International Fair of Contemporary Art (2021) in Turin, Italy. She is a recipient of the Space118 Fine Arts Grant in 2021.

In many ways, there is both youth and age in her work. In the way she multitasks through technology and experiments with mediums like photography, writing, cinema and painting, she is a product of her generation. Yet, in the way she addresses age-old traditions and post-human spirituality, she skids close to immortality. Age, in fact, loses its relevance in the universality of her universe.

- Anjuly Mathai



ART

Inheritance of loss

In 'Waiting', artist Sudipta Das's mixed media work that was recently exhibited at the Delhi Contemporary Art Week, a group of people wait in a single line. The scene has no historical context; these could be people anywhere, anytime. This adds to its poignancy; it is redolent with the sense of loss and isolation that is common to the exiled everywhere.

The tableau might be historically unmoored, but it has its origins in Das's past. Her ancestors migrated before partition from Sylhet in Bangladesh to Assam's Barak Valley. She grew up listening to stories of migration from her grandparents, which left a deep impression on her.

Her medium of choice—paper—moulds itself to her art. Although she started with watercolour on paper at Santiniketan, she soon shifted to the Dakojee doll-making technique that she learnt at her residency in South Korea in 2017. A merit scholar from Visva Bharati, she is a recipient of the Kanoria Residency at Ahmedabad, the Saavad Residency at Santiniketan and Khoj at Kolkata.

In a world beset by war, violence and climate change, it is not just physical displacement that Das's work speaks to. It is the sense of unbelonging that is increasingly becoming common to the human condition. It reminds us that we are all sojourners in this curious planet we call home. And that sometimes, as English writer G.K. Chesterton says, it is possible to feel homesick at home.

- Anjuly Mathai

ART

Through the looking lens

Taha Ahmad's photographs in In Search of an Oasis, the recent exhibition at the India Habitat Centre—of people caught in the cross-hairs of climate change—beautifully captures life in Lucknow, Chitrakoot and Kanpur. That is Ahmad for you; he goes the extra mile to get the photographs he wants. It usually takes the documentary photographer years to complete a project. His first project, Swan Song of the Badlas—on the mukaish badla embroidery artists of Lucknow—took him two years to complete. The one on the superstitious beliefs of people being exploited by god-men (A Displaced Hope) was completed in five and a half years.

Ahmad is one of the 150 photographers to be featured in Dr Paul Lowe's book, Photography Rules: Essential Do's and Don'ts from Great Photographers. He was listed in the 'Regenerative



List' of 100 next-gen and current leaders compiled by Gucci, the United Nations and Irregular Labs in 2020. Currently, he has his hands full with projects on partition, life along the Yamuna and Gomti rivers, and the Sunni-Shia conflict in Awadh. "All my projects are an exploration, not just of my subjects, but of myself," he tells THE WEEK. "My roots, why I do what I do, my experiences on the field...."

- Anjuly Mathai



BOOKS

Engineering a bestseller

At 27, Anirudh Kaniseti relishes the weight of centuries. *Lords of the Deccan: Southern India from Chalukyas to Cholas* (2022), a sweeping history of the medieval south, took him three years to write, but made him an instant hit. An engineer, Kaniseti pivoted—a word that has been embraced by his generation not just as a verb but very much as a quality to possess—to making history accessible. His blog on history is wildly popular and now he has two podcasts—one on the medieval sultanate and another on military history.

Breathlessly told, *Lords of the Deccan* is history for binge-watchers. This is no sanitised version of history; there is plenty of drama, blood, ambition, betrayal and family feuds to keep readers hooked. But it is not just the writing—which Kaniseti certainly has the gift for, describing the landscape and battle scenes in cinematic detail—it is the sheer depth of scholarship. The elaborate notes at the end of the book are testimony to his research.

Popular history in India is dominated by the north. Apart from the very capable Manu S. Pillai, who, too, found his niche with his first book, there are very few others who have ventured south for history. Kaniseti not only fills in a geographical vacuum, but also a historical one. He will be a name to be watched and read for a long time.

- Mandira Nayar

BOOKS



Rebel, rouser

There are no empty words in her writing. For Meena Kandasamy, words are weapons and she writes to stir revolution and incite rebellion. She battles the demons of patriarchy, caste and inequality to win. She was awarded the Hermann Kesten Prize 2022 for being “a fearless fighter for democracy and human rights”.

Writer, poet, translator, activist—these labels are political for her. She believes that dissent is at the heart of being a writer. She was 12 when she started her career in activism. Her mother spent two decades fighting for the reservation policy to be implemented in the mathematics department of IIT Madras. Her father belongs to a nomadic tribe, and was the first graduate from his village near Trichy. Their marriage was considered anti-caste. A witness to their battle against caste, Kandasamy chose words to fight.

Her first book of poetry—Touch—came out in 2006. In the powerful Ms Militancy (2010), she uses mythological women to attack patriarchy. “I do not write into patriarchy,” she writes in its preface. “My Maariamamma bays for blood. My Kali kills. My Draupadi strips. My Sita climbs on to a stranger’s lap. All my women militate. They brave bombs, they belittle kings. They take on the sun, they take after me.”

Kandasamy experiments with form in each book. But it was her second novel, When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife (2018), inspired by her brief and abusive marriage, that spiralled her into fame. She is back to poetry—audiences got a taste of a poem at the Jaipur Literature Festival.

- Mandira Nayar



BOOKS

Verse worth

Akhil Katyal straddles the worlds of academia and Instagram. He spends his day teaching creative writing at Dr B.R. Ambedkar University in Delhi, and also frequently posts his poems on social media. Katyal is one of the strongest and most loved voices of his generation.

Accessible and contemporary, he turns the mundane poetic.

Katyal grew up in Lucknow. His grandparents crossed over from Pakistan during partition, and his poetry reflects this milieu or the aab-o-hawa. A poet of the city, Katyal captures the arrogance of Delhi, its snobbery, its ugliness but also aspiration and hope. He also captures the language of the city—whether Hindustani, Urdu, Hindi or English.

The World That Belongs to Us: An Anthology of Queer Poets from South Asia (2020) that he edited with fellow poet Aditi Angiras, is a mammoth project. Each poem is carefully chosen and reflects desire, loneliness, love, vulnerability and heartbreak.

Be it capturing the universal appeal of actor Shah Rukh Khan at a time when son Aryan was in jail or writing about cricketers Babar Azam and Virat Kohli or the Wagah border, Katyal may be popular but he is also political.

- Mandira Nayar



BOOKS

Memory keeper

Books are in her bones. Aanchal Malhotra grew up in her grandfather's bookstore, surrounded by books and soaking in the story of how Bahrasons came to be. In a city littered with stories of partition, Balraj Bahri Malhotra, a 19-year-old refugee from Pakistan, and the bookshop that he started—which went on to become a landmark—is the story that has paved Delhi's history and defined its spirit.

It was natural that Malhotra was drawn to the story. Yet, what makes her special is that she has managed to breathe fresh air into the much-told partition story. It is very difficult to break new ground in a space that has been documented extensively. Yet, Malhotra has done that—and very well.

Her first book, Remnants of a Separation (2017), grew out of a picture exhibition of the one object that her family carried across the border. In the Language of Remembering: The Inheritance of Partition (2022) is monumental. The Book of Everlasting Things, out in December, is her foray into fiction. A love story between a Hindu perfumer and a Muslim calligrapher set during partition, the book is vividly written.

And, at 32, Aanchal has only started out.

- Mandira Nayar

BOOKS

Phrase turner

At 23, Himadri Agarwal has two translated books under her belt. She translated Banaras Talkies (2022) by Satya Vyas—a bestselling writer in Hindi—into English. A campus novel, the book is a coming-of-age story about friendship, love, cricket and bad mess food. Agarwal grew up in Kolkata, a city that breathes books. The first book she translated was Three Stories by Rashid Jahan in 2020.

Yet, Banaras Talkies was not an easy book to translate.

Written in the characteristic Banarasi style with humour, plenty of colour and hint of politics, the biggest challenge was translating the humour and the colourful bits. Agarwal ensured that



the translation lived up to the punch.

The power of translation may be evident with Geetanjali Shree's International Booker win, but it is still very much a grey haired-profession. Agarwal is on the right side of 20, and is now doing her PhD in English Literature from the University of Maryland in another continent. You will probably find her lost in translation.

- Mandira Nayar



BOOKS

Word weaver

Avinuo Kire's luminous book, *Where the Cobbled Path Leads*, was published this year. The book that weaves in Naga folklore and spirit stories—stories that Kire grew up listening to—is magical, evocative, eloquent and deeply felt.

An English teacher in Kohima, Kire dabbles in poetry, too. She burst onto the literary scene with her short stories collection—*The Power to Forgive*—by Zubaan in 2015. The title story of the collection is told through a rape survivor just at the threshold of her wedding looking back at the moment that changed her life and her relationship with her father. Powerful, the story offers a glimpse into Kire's talent.

Her short story has made it to David Davidar's *A Case of Indian Marvels: Dazzling Stories from the Country's Finest New Writers*—very much an endorsement of her talent.

And, at 35, Kire has many stories to tell.

- Mandira Nayar

BOOKS

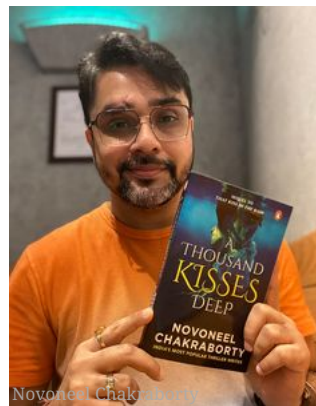
Commercial hit

It is a two-book year for Novoneel Chakraborty. In July came *A Thousand Kisses Deep*, a sequel to *That Kiss in the Rain* (2009). And come Christmas month, there is *Heart on the Edge*. Chakraborty is the wunderkind of commercial fiction, a writer who has churned out 17 books—many of them bestsellers. This is no small feat.

He is referred to as the Indian Sidney Sheldon, but for a generation that has not grown up reading the master of twist, Chakraborty's specialty is that he often explores the genre through the prism of love. It is difficult to keep an audience glued to the page, and Chakraborty has done so consistently, like with *The Stranger* trilogy, which was acquired by Goldie Behl for a web series. He emerged onto the publishing scene when commercial fiction was not embraced with enthusiasm by big publishing houses. His first book, *A Thing Beyond Forever* (2008), published by Shristi Publications, became a hit. Chakraborty's success ensured that he soon found the biggest publishers on the block—Penguin—where he is very much at home.

His books have been translated into many languages. His fans adore him—and he has plenty. And that is what it boils down to.

- **Mandira Nayar**



FASHION

The Italian job

Fashion designer Dhruv Kapoor is the love child of the two countries that have shaped him—India and Italy. His design ethic is shaped by the maximalism of his Indian heritage—the colours, patterns and embellishments—and the minimalism of his Italian training—the cut, finish and precision of tailoring.

Kapoor had moved to Milan in 2011 and completed his master's degree at the Instituto Marangoni. After a brief stint at ETRO, he moved back to India and showcased his first capsule collection in Mumbai in 2014. Nine years after he started his eponymous label, he became the first Indian to show a menswear collection at the Milan Fashion Week this year. "Dhruv's clothes are usually exaggerated tailoring, oversized jackets, pop colours as well as neutrals," says fashion expert Namrata Zakaria. "I remember when I first saw his collection, around eight years ago. I went up to his mother and hugged her in congratulations. I thought he was so slick."

Whether it is his asymmetrical empire line dress, embellished tile print shirt or midnight bloom co-ord set, there is power in his designs. There is also playfulness. Together, it is an irresistible combination.

- **Anjuly Mathai**

FASHION

Flawed & fab

Masaba Gupta wears many designer hats—she debuted her collection at the Lakme Fashion Week in 2014, soon afterwards established her eponymous label, starred in *Masaba Masaba*, a



Masaba Gupta | Getty Images

semi-autobiographical Netflix show, in 2020, and then launched a beauty and wellness brand cheekily named Love Child (she is famous for being the love child of actor Neena Gupta and West Indies cricketer Viv Richards). This year itself, she acted in the Amazon Prime Video anthology series, *Modern Love: Mumbai* and the second season of *Masaba Masaba*.

The best part about this whiz kid is that she is real—there is nothing gimmicky about her. She does not put up a front; instead, she proudly flaunts her flaws. Her Instagram post about living with acne was humble and brave at the same time. Known for her colour, bold designs and “kitsch sensibilities”, she has designed for Bollywood’s crème de la crème—from Katrina Kaif and Kareena Kapoor Khan to Priyanka Chopra and Karan Johar. While the rest of us in our 30s are plodding forward with flailing careers and wailing babies, Masaba accomplished all this before she turned 35.

- Anjuly Mathai



Rimzim Dadu | Arvind Jain

FASHION

Cord queen

If a material has a character or personality, what happens when you play with that personality? Ask designer Rimzim Dadu, who has made a career out of it. The material—whether leather, cord or paper—becomes putty in her hands. She turns steel soft and chiffon, grunge. It is not easy. The silicon jamdani sari she made for the Devi Art Foundation in 2015 took her two years to complete. Her steel sari, launched the following year by Sonam Kapoor Ahuja at Cannes, has become a signature piece. “Rimzim has to be among India’s most iconic designers,” says fashion expert Namrata Zakaria. “I always say her work is more art and less fashion, especially in the way she twists, turns and manipulates cords as surface textures. Her clothes are a new bridge between premium and couture.”

In fact, this is a milestone year for the young designer. Her label completes 15 years in 2022, to celebrate which a fabulous show was held in August, at Delhi’s Kiran Nadar Museum of Art. Interestingly, Dadu, though a rebel in her fashion, is a recluse in life. Her silence, however, is compensated by the spectacle in her couture. It is both regal and plebeian. How? That’s a

puzzle she does not try to solve. She cruises along the contradiction. Wearing her feels like wearing an enigma.

- Anjuly Mathai



MUSIC

Viral fever

Unfettered by expectations and traditions, Dhee has carried forth that uninhibited attitude that has seen her become one of India's most distinctive voices with viral hits like 'Rowdy Baby' and 'Enjoy Enjaami'. Born in Colombo to Carnatic musician and singer Meenakshi Iyer, Dhee grew up in Sydney with sounds of music all around her. At home, she spent time watching her paati (grandmother) and mother teach Carnatic music. With friends, Dhee fell in love with hip-hop and jazz. Her summer trips to Chennai presented Dhee with an opportunity to work with music directors like A.R. Rahman and Yuwan Shankar Raja, and kickstart a career that has seen chartbusters and critically acclaimed hits. 'Rowdy Baby' from Maari 2 won her the best female playback singer award at the 8th South Indian International Movie Awards in 2019. As the accolades increased, so did Dhee's desire to become an artiste in her own right. Her debut single as an independent artist, 'Enjoy Enjaami', featuring rapper and lyricist Arivu, was the first step in that direction. Dhee is currently working on her debut album, slated to release early next year.

"Dhee's voice is an incredible tool that she adapts so effortlessly for rambunctious songs like 'Rowdy Baby' or 'Enjoy Enjaami' and emotional songs like 'Anbarey'," says Ruhi Batra, independent music publicist based in Delhi. "She sounds unlike anyone else. And when people listen to her upcoming English album, they will be introduced to a completely new side of her as an artiste."

- Sneha Bhura



MUSIC

Chasing the raga

Being the grandson of the famed Marathi music director and classical vocalist, Pandit Ram Marathe, Bhagyesh had an early tryst with music—he started learning tabla at four. For 15 years, he was tutored by several illustrious gurus before he decided to embark on a serious music career while pursuing information technology in college. Inspired by his grandfather's gayaki, he took up singing as a profession and started learning under the guidance of his father, Pandit Sanjay Marathe, and later under Pandit Kedar Bodas of Dr Gangubai Hangal Gurukul in Hubli. Today, he is a fixture at sangeet mahotsavs and recipient of several youth awards, gradually carving a niche in khayal gayaki while also being social media savvy. “His taaleem/training is of sterling quality, but that alone would not be sufficient to make him stand apart from the many who enjoy the same privilege,” says Shubha Mudgal, well known for a specialisation in the Hindustani classical genres of khayal and thumri-dadra. “Along with the excellent taaleem and riyaz he must surely be committed to it. There is an expressive, communicative quality in his music that shows the promise and potential of a vocalist who may soon find his own voice. This individual quality of finding one's own voice while being steeped in tradition and being deeply reverential towards it is not one that every talented youngster is blessed with.”

- Sneha Bhura



MUSIC

Hitmaker of the heart

Hailed as one of the leading singer-songwriters of our times, Prateek Kuhad is an indie darling easily accessible to a wide audience for his syrupy sweet ballads on love and longing. In less than a decade, he has carved a unique space for himself and birthed in his wake a legion of musicians who want to sing like him, almost like a formula. Originally from Jaipur, Kuhad, who sings in Hindi and English, ditched his corporate job in the US to become a full-time musician. When he entered Barack Obama's annual playlist in 2019, the world sat up and noticed this rather quiet and unobtrusive prodigy. Earning comparisons to stalwarts like Sufjan Stevens and Jose Gonzalez, Kuhad has generated universal praise and accolades for his pop and folk-driven songs.

His debut album *In Tokens & Charms* was gold, earning him an MTV Europe Music Awards win, Indie Album Of The Year honors from iTunes, and the title of Best Pop Artist at the Radio City Freedom Awards. The album's opening track, 'Oh Love', captured first place in the prestigious International Songwriting Competition, which previously helped launch artistes like Gotye and Passenger to global audiences. Kuhad has sold out auditorium and amphitheatre dates across India, landed arena support slots with the likes of Alt-J and Mike Posner, and travelled the world for headline and festival performances. He announced his signing with Elektra Records in 2020, making history as the first solo Indian act to join the storied label.

His third studio album, *The Way That Lovers Do*, arrived in 2022 and featured 11 brand-new tracks about human love, friendship, and connectivity. Recorded at Seattle's secluded Bear Creek Studio with Ryan Hadlock (The Lumineers, Vance Joy), the pop titan is now on a world tour with the album; the India leg across 15 cities is wrapping up on December 18.

- Sneha Bhura

MUSIC



Rap rules

Music was nowhere on his radar when he grew up in his village near Arakkonam in Tamil Nadu. As both his parents were teachers, all Arivu heard and read during his childhood were the writings of Periyar and Dr B.R. Ambedkar and songs of Arivoli Iyakkam (a Tamil literary movement). He was raised by his grandmother, whose bedtime stories had a touch of social justice and equality. His ‘entertainment’ was reading his father’s research papers on dalit icons and the magazines, Dalit Murasu and Kodangi. All of this later became fodder for his music, which found a way out during his engineering days. A rap in a play during a cultural event earned him a place in the college band. The poetry in his lyrics was widely appreciated. Music had finally found him, and it was to be his medium. But neither work nor recognition came quick. Even as he looked for opportunities, he did his MBA and prepared for civil service exams.

And then Arivu met filmmaker Pa Ranjith, who helped him become a band member of The Casteless Collective and later a lyricist for film songs. He rapped his way to fame with ‘Enjoy Enjaami’, which has elements of R&B and oppari (a Tamil folk music style) and is a tribute to his grandmother and “landless tea plantation slave ancestors”. It became the most popular indie Tamil rap song, its video garnering millions of views on YouTube within days of its release. It epitomises his music in a way—political yet catchy and celebratory. This year, he came out with another political song—‘Ceylonkaar’—on the protests in Sri Lanka.

Today, at 27, music rules Arivu’s world. As he rises to the top, he remains rooted. For, he is ‘Therukural’ (voice on the street).

- Lakshmi Subramanian



Sid Sriram | Courtesy: Instagram@sidsriram

MUSIC

Carnatic magic

Carnatic musician, playback singer, music producer, R&B songwriter, Sid Sriram is a rage machine capable of churning out back-to-back hits in Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Hindi, Marathi and English. A wunderkind whose soul is deeply wedded to Carnatic music, the California resident trained in the Berklee College of Music and was picked up by A.R. Rahman quite early in his career. Anthemic, hypnotic numbers like 'Adiye' from Kadal and 'Inkem Inkem' from Geetha Govindam cemented his standing in cinema music. The 32-year-old is also a fixture in the December Margazhi music season in Chennai and is responsible for converting his massive fanbase into appreciating Indian classical music.

Highly prolific, Sriram's discography is a chockful of smash hits year-on-year and 2022 was also no stranger to near-constant work under several big-banner productions including 'Theethiriyaai' and 'Deva Deva' in Brahmastra. When Swedish streaming giant Spotify released its annual Wrapped report on December 1 to track the most streamed artistes and songs for 2022, it was not a surprise to find Sriram on it alongside Arijit Singh, AP Dhillon, Shreya Ghoshal and Sidhu Moose Wala.

- Sneha Bhura



THEATRE

Common Man's Champion

On September 20, a spiffily dressed Palawat posted a picture of himself on Instagram—with thick black-rimmed glasses and a patchy beard. The caption, "I'm imperfect and that is perfection in itself", captured the essence of the man, his moods and his methods in one line. In Palawat's diverse characters one can find the common man whose identity gets lost somewhere in the din of a humdrum life. He breathes life into the mundane and ebullience into fringe roles, say those who know him well. It is evident from the variety of characters he has essayed so far in over 40 plays. His role as conflicted ACP Harsh Pradhan in Hotstar's Criminal Justice, or as Sundar Raja in Netflix's Aranyak helmed by Raveena Tandon, lingers in the mind long after.

In the last 15 years, ever since he graduated from the National School of Drama, Palawat became a renowned face in theatre, with Kavalam Narayana Panicker's Shakuntalam, Anuradha Kapur's Virasat and K.S. Rajendran's Vikramorvashi, among others. "His versatility and energy, coupled with a great sense of timing, make him a very gifted actor who is an absolute delight to work with," says Rajit Kapur, a renowned veteran who has worked with Palawat. With the coming of OTT, it seems as if life has transformed into a prismatic palette, full of opportunities and grander projects. At the moment, as he juggles both theatre and OTT, Palawat says he has never been so busy in his life.

- Pooja Biraia Jaiswal

THEATRE

Stage might

Early on, it was inculcated in me that one must do a full-time job and think about the arts only as a hobby," says Pune-based Nipun Dharmadhikari, who just turned 35. "I was given the examples of veterans of Marathi theatre such as Shreeram Lagoo, Dr Mohan Agashe and Dr Jabbar Patel, all of whom are well-educated and pursued the arts only later in life. So, I never thought I would ever pursue films and theatre on a full-time basis." He took a leap of faith and dropped out of his chartered accountancy course to pursue theatre full time. There was no

godfather to guide him and no Plan B to fall back on. Yet, at 18, he made his first commercial play and soon shifted to Marathi musicals and films.

Today, he is an established name in Marathi films and theatre, with a production company (Sixteen by Sixty-four) to boot. Of late, he has successfully made inroads into Hindi cinema. His directorial debut, *Ishq Vishk Rebound*, is set to release in 2023. Dharmadhikari—best known for directing the first season of the Netflix franchise *Mismatched* and the Marathi film *Mee Vasant* (2021), which won two national awards—commands a huge fan following. One day, he hopes to complete his chartered accountancy, “even if just for the heck of it”. But he knows in his heart that the arts will always remain his first love.



- Pooja Biraia Jaiswal



THEATRE

Let there be light

Train yourself to be spontaneous”—that’s the mantra by which Gurleen Judge, theatre writer, director and light designer, lives. At 30, she has directed six full-length plays, and has lent her lighting expertise to several others. A while ago, she got the Vinod Doshi and Tendulkar-Dubey Fellowship for Performing Arts for her “investment and dedication to the field of theatre”. In 2019, Judge directed *The Hunger Artist*, a play based on Franz Kafka’s eponymous short story. “Inside a steel cage, the hunger artist makes a living by fasting. Outside, we, the well-fed, watch on”, reads the play’s synopsis. Known for her peculiar knack for translating thoughts into compelling narratives, Judge says she lives and breathes theatre. She calls it her oasis.

An army kid, Judge’s journey into direction began with Tennessee Williams’s hauntingly provocative work, *The Two-Character Play*. Post that, she directed *Ambu* and *Rajalakshmi* in 2015, which was staged at the Centrestage Festival of Mumbai’s National Centre for Performing Arts (NCPA). This year she has been focusing on light designing, with Akvarious Productions’ *There’s Something in the Water* and *A Small Family Business*, and Gillo Repertory Theatre’s *The Ghost of the Mountains*. Besides, Judge has to her credit *Postcards from Bardoli*, *The Boy Who Stopped Smiling*, *Dohri Zindagi* and *Chuhel*. “I have just about started,” she tells THE WEEK. “It is a long journey.”

- Pooja Biraia Jaiswal

COMEDY

The multi-hyphenate

Sumukhi Suresh does not do ‘knock, knock’ jokes. It is more effective to kick down the door to the boys’ club. Earlier this year, she launched *Motormouth*, a content company based on three words: ‘Flawed, female, funny.’ Think *Fleabag*, but desi. The company is already writing two movies and a series for an OTT platform. Suresh is also part of BAFTA Breakthrough India, a programme that promotes talent in the country.

A few years ago, she created *Pushpavalli*, a comedy about a female stalker that waded into



some uncomfortable territories. It was refreshing and popular, and came back for another season. She also won a Filmfare for the show in 2020.

A better actor than a stand-up, Suresh is sort of a mother hen to upcoming female comics and is making footholds for others in her flock. “There are a thousand men for one woman who make horrible things,” she had told Firstpost in 2018. “Let us at least come ahead and start doing things.... I used to be a food inspector, and now I am a comedian. If I can do it, lots of other girls can.”

- Anirudh Madhavan

COMEDY

Techie who tickles

How many software engineers does it take to change a lightbulb? None, it's a hardware problem. Kanan Gill might not make that joke, but he is a former techie from Bengaluru.

The 32-year-old hit internet gold when he, along with Biswa Kalyan Rath, started making fun of trashy old Bollywood films in a YouTube series called Pretentious Movie Reviews. Almost a decade on, Gill now has two specials—one each on Amazon Prime Video and Netflix—and is one of the more cerebral comics on the scene. Which is why you will hear applause and guffaws in equal measure when he is on stage. He recently toured Europe, and he also hosts the hilarious No New Notifications podcast with friend Manek D'Silva.



Kanan Gill | Courtesy: Instagram@kanangill

Gill's comedy and audience are both urban. He likes surreal humour, or stuff that does not fit into a structure, which tends to make it even funnier. Incisive and reflective, Gill seems like a comedian who will only get better with age.

- Anirudh Madhavan



Kusha Kapila | Courtesy: Instagram@kushakapila

COMEDY

Glam and the 'Gram

What do you call an infection that promotes shampoos online? An Instagram influenza.

During the pandemic, anyone with a phone and a little confidence became an influencer. Kusha Kapila, though, was an early bird. A fashion writer, Kapila first started making comedy videos impersonating South Delhi women. She would take digs at the elite, and her audience lapped it up. As the view count grew, Kapila added more characters. Having written clickbait-y articles earlier, she knew what worked online. And she built on that to make a career that spans social media, OTT, television and cinema.

She has hosted Comicstaan, acted in a Karan Johar short film and is working on expanding her YouTube presence.

"I talk about body positivity, about loving yourself, about sexism, about feminism, I speak about all the issues that must be spoken about, but obviously infuse them with my humour," she said in a Vogue interview. "But I do attract a lot of hate from men. If you are getting offended with the work that I am doing, I think I am making a difference."

- Anirudh Madhavan



COMEDY

Lawyer with the laughs

A stand-up comic walks into a bar.... Only, Anubhav Singh Bassi actually did. Not to tipple, but as an advocate. A lawyer before picking up the mic, the Meerut-born comedian has found his fans in what you would call the "launda" (brat) crowd. An anecdotal artist who prefers Hindi, Bassi draws on his own experiences as a boy from Uttar Pradesh, a UPSC aspirant and a man of the law to extract belly laughs from his audiences.

Whether he is talking about getting his hairy back waxed, cheating in an exam or throwing a water cooler off a hostel balcony, he does so with a chuckle himself, as if to say it is absurd these things are happening to him.

Though his first four YouTube videos have a combined view count of 233 million, Bassi prefers live shows—he has toured many cities in India and was recently on the road in the US. "Live shows are more fun," he says in an interview. "And anyway, there are no good movies nowadays. You might as well come watch us."

- Anirudh Madhavan

TAGS

40 Under 40 (<https://www.theweek.in/Tag.theweek~Package@40Under40.Html>)