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BHUTAN CALLING
A deep dive into why the region is attracting top luxury and wellness hospitality brands **P2**



Why do you now have to pay to book a *table?*

The rise in no-shows, combined with rising overhead costs, is prompting fine-dining restaurants and intimate spaces to require deposits before confirming table reservations

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A month or so ago, Chindi Varadarajulu – creative chef and partner at Chennai-based Pumpkin Tales and Zhouyu – received a table reservation for a group of 27 at her Asian restaurant. "It was for a weekday and we discussed the menu, and they pre-ordered their soups and appetisers as well," says Chindi, adding that they received a reservation enquiry for an even larger group of 45 for the same day, but "we had to turn it down as the former group booked first". When the day arrived, the whole group cancelled.

"Running a business is not glory, it's hard work with a lot of overheads. When we take bookings for large groups, more chefs and staff are called in, dishes are prepped, etc. It's upsetting when people don't show up," says Chindi, who has been vocal about the concept of table reservation deposits in India. In fact, she is one of the first to take steps in that direction in Chennai, a city that has not seen restaurants taking to the concept unlike Bengaluru (Farmlore, Homiga) and Mumbai (The Table, Circle Sixty Nine) that have several players charging diners a deposit to book a table.

"I don't know why anyone hasn't introduced it in Chennai; maybe they are nervous. But someone has to do it, and perhaps then they will follow," says Chindi, who plans to charge larger groups for a deposit (that will be adjusted to their final bill) by early next year, and has tightened existing policies over the last few weeks. "Now, if you book a table with us, you receive a WhatsApp text and SMS with the booking details. A table for four or less people gets a 90-minute slot, and for groups of six and above, it is two hours. If you need more time, you can let us know. We request diners to be on time and if they are late by say 10 minutes, it gets reduced from their dining slot," explains Chindi. "From movies to flights, everything gets cancelled if you are late. So, why not a restaurant reservation?" she asks.



Eyes on Bengaluru

"The idea is not to militarise dining, but to hold diners accountable for a reservation made," says Kavan Kuttappa of Bengaluru's infamously tough-to-reserve Naru Noodle Bar. He has had a prepaid system in place, ever since he launched the restaurant. "We started as a takeaway service in 2022, and ran that for six months before opening the restaurant the same year. As we were cooking during the lockdown we did not want to deal with people backing out at the last minute, and the concept stuck," he says of the 20-seater restaurant where he charges diners a redeemable ₹1,000 deposit for individual counter seats. "It is a small space, and a few empty seats really impact revenue. This is unlike a 200-300 seater restaurant, and even one cancellation pinches. Any experience is ticketed nowadays, and this concept will catch on," adds Kavan.

A sentiment common among most restaurateurs in the Garden City, that has a high percentage of restaurants that charge a table-reservation deposit. At Wine In Progress, the wine bar that was launched in April this year at Courtyard, founder Akhila Srinivas started charging diners a ₹1,000 deposit a month after they opened. "After the first few weeks, we had many no-shows, which is a big deal for a 14-seater bar. It is an entire day's loss. As it gets controlled and smaller from our end, we had to ensure filling up the seats. We still have people who don't show up, but the blow has lessened," says Akhila, who also helms The Conservatory where several ticketed pop-ups and events are held.

"For a la carte pop-ups, we make a reservation against a fee of around ₹1,000-₹2,500 depending on what the offering is. For example, a burger shop would cost you less than a pop-up that has a range of small plates, and the idea is to get people to try more dishes. For a tasting menu with six to eight courses, it is above ₹3,000," explains Akhila, "There are ovens running, lights on... these are all hidden costs for the customer but real for us. Larger spaces have the capacity to absorb these costs, but we may not have that luxury."

"In Bengaluru, traffic is an easy excuse for no-shows. We hear it all the time!" says Akhila, "We are located in the heart of the city, and people need to realise that the convenience of attending events or dining in these areas comes at a price," she says, adding that diners in Mumbai understand this better, as taking local transport is commonplace. Unlike Bengaluru, "where everyone wants to come in cars".

(Clockwise from left) Guests at The Bombay Canteen; the food at Inja; a snapshot of the restaurant; and food at Bengaluru Oota Company. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT







But how do these policies go down with diners? Shweta Ravi (name changed), a Bengaluru-based professional in the food industry, believes reservation deposits for restaurants "are fair". "However, when it comes to bars, I'm not fully in favour yet, since they traditionally haven't charged deposits. Another concern is that in group settings, often one person pays the deposit, so if others don't show up, that person ends up absorbing the cost," she says, adding that she makes a booking only if she is a 100% certain she can go. "I know people who let go of a reservation of ₹8,000 and it doesn't matter to them. But I don't think that is the majority."

Instilling customer habits

Sameer Seth, founder and CEO, Hunger Inc. Hospitality (The Bombay Canteen, O Pedro, Bombay Sweet Shop, Veronica's, and Papa's), charges only groups of eight or more a deposit of ₹5,000 at Mumbai's The Bombay Canteen and O Pedro.

"This is to ensure reservation commitment, and the amount is adjusted in the final bill," he says. At Papa's, which is a 12-seater chef's counter, a full payment policy has been in place from day one. "When making a reservation, guests are required to pay the full amount upfront (₹5,600-plus tax for the vegetarian tasting menu, non-vegetarian tasting menu at ₹5,800-plus tax). We plan your menu with careful attention to your dietary preferences, so it is only fair that there is a level of commitment from guests," adds Sameer.

But what happens when a diner cannot show up? While most establishments like WIP and Naru follow a strict no-refund policy, a few have made room for rescheduling. At Bengaluru Oota Company, founder Divya Prabhakar says she started charging a booking amount a year ago.

"We launched in 2016, and with people having more options to dine at, a reservation policy became necessary as we buy fresh ingredients each morning and follow a strict zero-waste policy. Our reservation policy is client-friendly and flexible, and it is okay for a diner to cancel as long as it is not on the day of," she says. Diners are charged a deposit of ₹1,000 per person that is redeemable, and this helps "us plan our shopping". "If you cancel a day earlier, we issue a full refund. Our priority is to ensure that there's no wastage."

At Papa's, diners get a full refund or can reschedule if they cancel 24 hours prior. "If there's a genuine reason for a last-minute cancellation, we're happy to offer an alternative date," he says. "Cancellations or no-shows is a trend we've noticed in India. In many cities like New York, it's practice to share your credit card details to guarantee a reservation, and we feel this helps ensure the right balance between guest convenience and business needs."

The cancelling squad

Five months after the Indo-Japanese restaurant opened its doors in the capital early this year, Panchali Mahendra, global CEO at Atelier House that helms Inja and 35 other restaurants, took the reservation deposit route.

"We are a 50-seater restaurant located in a part of the city that you need to plan well in advance to visit. Initially, we were overbooked, and when someone cancelled, there was no waitlist. We can't do walk-ins as our location is not a high footfall area," says Panchali, who now charges a ₹1,000 deposit per head for groups of six or more.

"We do this because people need to keep the sanctity of their word. If they can't make it, we don't issue refunds unless it is a bereavement, or emergency. But 90% of the time it's because they've overbooked themselves," says Panchali, admitting that initially, the concept did not go down well with diners "as we weren't established yet, but I was just safeguarding myself and changed the policy to charge only larger groups."

Despite such stringent policies that diners are aware of, cancellations are not uncommon. "We charge a ₹5,000 deposit for a table of four, and every week we have two no-shows," says Kavan, who opens bookings for Naru every Monday for the week ahead. While he is aware booking in advance is not always possible, and a majority of diners at Naru are first-timers, Kavan feels charging a deposit is the only way forward for small seater establishments. "I know that older people can't book online, but I suggest getting your children or family to do it. My parents would never be able to book at my restaurant!" laughs Kavan.

At WIP, "cancellations are rare, but they do happen," says Akhila, who shares how people have paid even ₹4,500 and not show up. "Which is why we have a strict no-refund policy. For tasting menus, the chef had been informed, food has been prepped, etc. If we have a waitlist, we pass on the reservation but don't guarantee a refund. People have been insistent, but we cover our basis by having our terms laid out in advance," she says, explaining that the trend is here to stay.

Panchali says with dining concepts changing across the country, a table deposit is a way of "safeguarding interest". "Indians can pay abroad for a reservation, so why not here? The more restaurants open, more the no shows, and people will be compelled to take on the policy," she says.

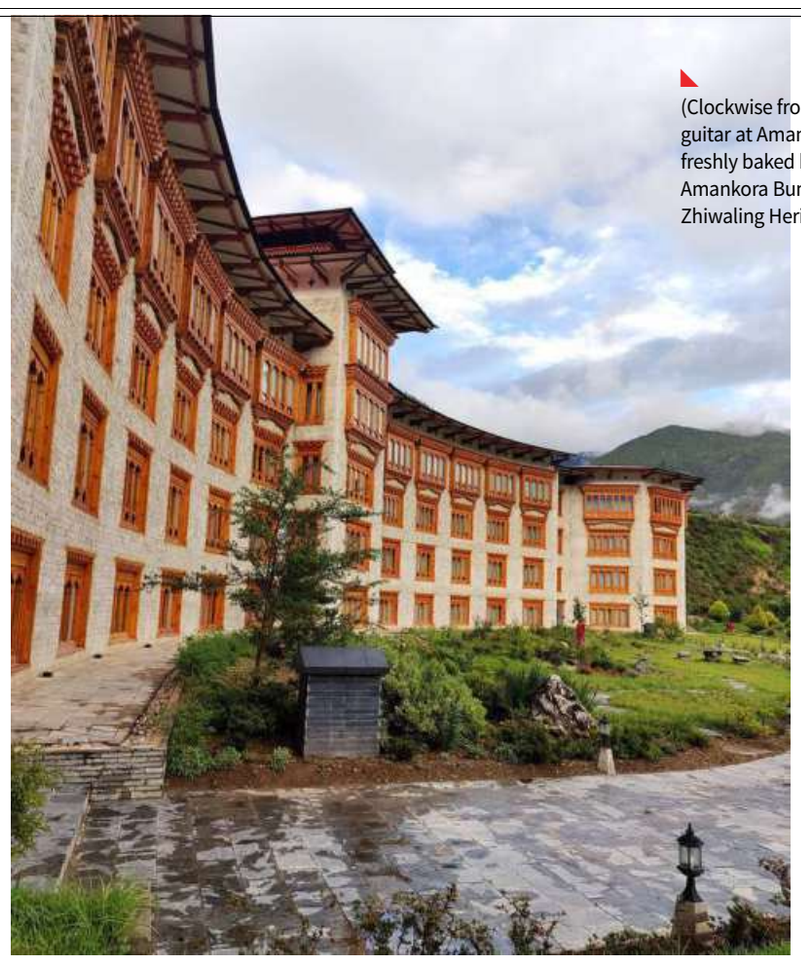
So how have diners responded to Chindi's dining policies in Chennai? "99% of our customers have been cooperative. A few who come late do get angry and threaten us with bad reviews when we pass on their reservation to those waiting, but there's nothing we can do about it. Even smaller groups who make a reservation and don't show up end up dodging our calls. I think diners today feel very entitled, and don't understand why we have to put such systems in place."

But as Sameer says, in the end, it is a two-way process. "We put in a lot of effort to make your time with us memorable, and we ask for a little commitment in return to ensure our operations run smoothly. At the heart of it, we're here to make your dining experience wonderful," he concludes.

From movies to flights, everything gets cancelled if you are late. So, why not a restaurant reservation? Chindi Varadarajulu — creative chef and partner, Pumpkin Tales and Zhouyu







(Clockwise from far left) A musician playing the Bhutanese guitar at Amankora Gangtey; Le Meredien Paro Riverfront; freshly baked breads and preserves at breakfast in Amankora Bumthang; and Bhutanese architecture at Zhiwaling Heritage Hotel in Paro. KALPANA SUNDER

Exploring the last *Shangri-La*

It has been 50 years since Bhutan opened the country to tourists. We explore how their high-value, low-volume tourism policy makes journeys here memorable

Kalpana Sunder

Whitewashed monasteries, pine forests, misty mountains and glacial rivers, Bhutan is the last Shangri La. A small country of eight lakh people, economic progress here is measured in terms of happiness.

It has been 50 years since Bhutan opened up the country for tourism, admitting just 300 travellers in 1974, and although five-star luxury hotels may not be the first thing that come to mind when one thinks of Bhutan, the policy of high-value, low-volume tourism has worked in its favour with top luxury brands like Aman, Six Senses, and Como Hotels, establishing business here.

At Six Senses Thimphu, on my first day in the kingdom, I am blown away by the glass-walled lobby offering views of the mountains and valley. Situated amidst apple orchards and pine forests, it has a strong emphasis on wellness – from the healthy shots served for breakfast to holistic spa treatments, yoga and meditation sessions in a prayer pavilion. They have four other lodges across the country, and offer diverse experiences from lighting butter lamps to horoscope readings. My best experience here is a traditional hot stone bath in a wooden basin filled with river water and bushels of healing khempa (*Artemisia*) herbs.

Aman was the first luxury brand that entered the country almost 20 years ago and now has five luxury lodges across the country. "Having been Bhutan's first and most-trusted international travel partner since the kingdom opened to the world, Aman has spent nearly two decades fostering a profound connection to this landscape. Bhutan has since truly come of age as a premier destination, offering a unique and rare blend of Nature, culture, and spirituality that fascinates luxury travellers," says Theo Cromhout, general manager, Amankora. (Combining Aman, Sanskrit for peace, with kora or circular pilgrimage in Dzongkha, the Bhutanese language, Amankora is a series of lodges in Bhutan's central and western valley.)

Theo adds, "The kingdom's commitment to preserving its cultural heritage has made Bhutan desirable to discerning travellers seeking quiet luxury and exclusive, tailored itineraries. Amankora's five lodges, inspired by Bhutanese architecture, offer a circuit of Himalayan sanctuaries that invite guests to embark on enriching journeys through Bhutan's valleys – Paro, Thimphu, Punakha, Gangtey, and Bumthang."

Unique ecosystem

About 72% of the country remains forested and Bhutan boasts of being the only carbon-negative country in the world with protected areas larger than 1,000 acres. The Bhutanese government also sets a minimum nightly visitor tariff, the bulk of which is passed on to the national health and education systems. Typically, the fee levied amounts to ₹1,200 per day for Indians and $100 per day for foreign guests. Generally, group and private tours are the norm in Bhutan.

"As we aim to welcome two lakh visitors this year, with around 60% from India, Bhutan's blend of pristine landscapes, culturally immersive adventures, and world-class hotels offers an unmatched combination of authenticity and depth," says Carissa Nimah, chief marketing officer, Department of Tourism, Bhutan.

Along with luxury hotels the country also promotes homestays, that offer a taste of everyday Bhutan and benefit the local communities.

In Phobjika valley known for its black necked cranes which migrate here in the winter from Tibet, a stay at Aman Gangtey, an intimate eight-room lodge, with Aman's trademark minimalism meeting Bhutanese architectural elements, elevates the experience of being in this remote valley.

Most flights land and depart from Paro, which has its share of top end luxury properties starting with Como Uma Paro located on a hilltop, built around a reconstructed home, with large suites decorated with hand-painted Bhutanese designs.

If you are looking for a home-grown Bhutanese luxury hotel that celebrates Bhutanese heritage, with many artisans engaged in its creation, then the stone-and-timber Zhiwa Ling Heritage hotel in Paro – that opened in 2015, set among tall cypress trees on 10 acres of land – is your best bet. It offers breathtaking views of the mountains and even its own private temple. Its Royal Raven suite with its own shrine room has hosted royalty and celebrities from across the world.

Pemako Bhutan is the latest home-grown Bhutanese luxury brand to be launched, owned by Dasho Wangchuk Dorji, chairman of Bhutan's largest private conglomerate, the Tashi Group, which has hotels and lodges in Thimphu and Punakha. The erstwhile Taj Tashi has been rebranded by them as Pemako Thimphu and the Punakha property has luxury tents with Bhutanese design. The Postcard Hotel, India's luxury chain has also opened its first property in Thimphu – the Postcard Dewa, with 15 rooms nestled in a forest.

Many of these properties do their bit towards being environmentally friendly and sustainable. Amankora's lodges help in the restoration of old dzongs and support local schools through community service. The King of Bhutan's latest ground-breaking project is the Gelephu Mindfulness City in the South of Bhutan, touted to be a spiritual lifestyle destination. This special administrative zone will embody Buddhist principles and operate with its own currency and legal system. The aim is to invite select international businesses to establish themselves within the zone, with various privileges as well as hotels and homestays.

"My definition of luxury is undeniably shaped by my Bhutanese DNA," says Dorji Dradhul, former DG, Tourism Council of Bhutan & Department of Tourism. He adds, "Here, luxury is found in the serenity of Nature, the warmth of our people, and the richness of our culture."

Money matters

- You can fly into Paro from Kolkata or Delhi on Druk Air or Bhutan Airlines. Return fares cost around ₹34,000.
- Indians do not need a visa but need to carry their Voter's ID or passports.
- Local currency: Bhutanese Ngultrum (BTN), Indian Rupee (INR).
- You have to travel with a guide and driver that can be organised in advance.

The cost of luxury

- Six Senses with its lodges in five places in Bhutan with spas and gourmet meals as well as activities, costs a ballpark figure starting around $1,450 USD per night **(₹1,20,000)**
- Amankora, a set of five lodges across the country offers secluded luxury and comfort with a spa and dining. Rates start at around $1,760 per night. **(₹1,47,000)**.
- Como Uma Resorts has luxury lodges in Punakha and Paro with wellness spas, and rates start at around **₹70,000** per night.
- Le Meridien Paro, Riverfront has luxurious river facing rooms, restaurants and a spa. Doubles start at around **₹55,000** per night.
- Zhiwaling Heritage Hotel, Paro is a homegrown Bhutanese hotel with traditional architecture, an in-house temple and great views from the windows. Rates start at around **₹75,000** per night.
- Pemako is another Bhutanese chain that has two properties in Punakha and Thimphu with great food, and rates start at around **₹1,20,000** per night.
- Andbeyond is the latest luxury offering with tented suites that has opened up in Punakha with rates starting at around $890 per night. (around **₹75,000**).



No more shots, please

Once associated with wild parties and regretful hangovers, agave-based spirits like tequila and mezcal are getting an image makeover in India

Suman Mahfuz Quazi

The evident swell of agave cocktails on menus, the mushrooming of Mexican joints, and the emergence of bars dedicated to the category, all point towards the definitive proliferation of agave-based spirits in India, such as mezcal, and more popularly tequila.

Now though, a combination of factors is helping reposition spirits under the agave category as slow-sipping and cocktail-forward distilled beverages. Owner of Passcode Hospitality, a pan-India restaurant label and homegrown agave brand Pistola (that added two new expressions Añejo and Extra Añejo to its portfolio in May), Rakshay Dhariwal, says, "Historically, one of the highest-selling cocktails of all time has been the margarita. But in most restaurants and bars, if you ordered a margarita, you would probably get it with a 51% agave spirit; you know... a pouring brand, basically, which is a mix, most often, between either a cane or a corn spirit. Or, unaged bourbon and rum, with some gold colouring. Now, you've got a range of 100% and additive-free spirits in India. That's helped drive people to consume agave in the way that it's meant to – on the rocks or, in spirit-forward cocktails," adding that he observed an upward tick in agave's popularity from 2016-2017.

Rakshay clarifies that the practice of diluting pouring agaves/tequilas is dissipating, with the increased availability of genuine agaves, like his and DesmondJi, India's first agave brand launched in 2011. Alongside these homegrown spirits, global variants like El Camino, El Blanco, Patrón, Jose Cuervo and Don Julio are available in India too.

"Agave is a romanticised spirit. It's labour-intensive," Rakshay observes about the 14-17 year-long process – from harvest to double distillation – within which the agave plant alone takes about 13 years to grow. The success of craft brands such as Don Papa, Four Pillars, and Del Maguey Vida in the West might have catalysed the trend further on our terrain, he adds.



(Clockwise from left) Bar manager at Room One, Arnold Hou; Pomparita at Pompa; Margarita at Gigi, Mumbai; and Room One Represent made with mezcal, aperol, green chartreuse, and lime acid. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Get an upgrade

Goa-based Room One's bar manager, Arnold Hou, gets specific requests for hard-to-find Mexican beverages like sotol, a distilled spirit from the Chihuahuan desert. At the modern speakeasy, you can sample inventive libations like Room One Represent, made with mezcal, aperol, chartreuse – an out-of-reach French herbal liqueur made by Carthusian monks – and lime acid.

Bar menus are now upgrading classics like margaritas, picantes and negronis. Bengaluru-based Mexican joint, Sanchez, for example, has an earthy and savoury, Mezcal-based negroni, as well as Mezcaltini, a smoky, mezcal-laced riff on the classic. Whereas Mezcalita, a cantina-inspired diner in Mumbai has an entire segment on "Mezcalised Classics", that "introduce guests to the bold flavours of agave spirits," says partner, Vicky Singh, referring to their smoky negroni and tequila-infused Old Fashioned.

The menu of Los Cavos, which has outlets in Mumbai and Bengaluru, plays host to cocktails such as The Mexican Reviver, which combines tequila with the lesser-known, Liqueur Cocalero, a Latin-American spirit. Pune's first tequila bar, Juju, too, offers high-quality agave spirits and celebrates the classic tequila shot via their 'Juju Bomb', prepared with beer, Mexican hot sauce and lime.

The sprouting of focussed tequila and agave bars like Juju, Goa's Barfly, and The Ritz-Carlton, Pune's agave lounge, Aasmana – which has unique experiences, including an in-house tequila sommelier, bottled cocktails, and a personalised agave cocktail trolley – is contributing to the distilled liquid's image makeover.There is also Gigi, in Mumbai, which has dedicated its island bar to the spirit with offerings like a Paloma Community Cocktail: a fusion of tequila and rose that only comes in pairs (ie two glasses). At its helm is restaurateur Pawan Shahri, who also launched the Mexican diner Lyla in March this year.

"Today's consumer is not someone you can lure with molecular gastronomy," he quips, adding that craft spirits are likely to continue being in demand as ingredient-forward approach in dining grows.

"Mixologists and bars are changing the common perception of tequila as only suitable for shots," he adds, pointing towards one among the many reasons underscoring tequila's reincarnation. Celebrity endorsements fuel the trend. Think, Kendall Jenner's 818 Tequila launched in India in August to American TV show *Breaking Bad*'s stars Aaron Paul and Bryan Cranston's mezcal brand Dos Hombres. "George Clooney, The Rock and the Kardashian family invested in tequilas or became brand ambassadors... their entire promotion angle was around sipping tequila on ice. And this has translated into a global phenomenon," says Keenan Tham, whose pan-India hospitality chain, Pebble Street, added a Mexican diner in Mumbai called Pompa to its portfolio last December.

Agave has experienced a similar trajectory in India as it did in the West, where it started blowing up a little less than a decade ago, slowly losing its trope as a shot.

But one wonders if the greater lesson in America's reclamation of the Mexican spirit lay in its clever premiumisation of an indigenous spirit. And then, begs the question if we could have been more derivative. Could the combined weight of our F&B industry and Indian tastemakers be deployed to promote and champion our very own repository of indigenous spirits instead? Certainly. And while there is a quiet discourse brewing around local spirits, one hopes that we do not have to wait for New York to make the noise about it first.

Malayalam

A cleverly written thriller



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For prying eyes, the most innocuous action might seem suspicious. Priyadarshini (Nazriya Nazim) is the nosy one in the neighbourhood in which *Sookshmadarshini* is set. At times, she almost behaves like the kind of neighbour that no one would ever wish to have. We get an interesting character detail that she is a Microbiology graduate, for whom a *Sookshmadarshini* (microscope) is a part of her trade. Just that her lens is trained more on her neighbour, rather than on microbes.

The inherent curiosity of this character and her suspicions of the newly arrived neighbour Manuel (Basil Joseph) drive the narrative of MC Jithin's film. Manuel is not a typical suspicious character unless you look too closely as Priyadarshini does. He takes care of his ailing mother, hosts his new neighbours to a sumptuous feast and appears to be generally well-mannered. But there is always something peculiar about his behaviour, something on which one cannot exactly put a finger on.

Screenwriters Libin TB and Athul Ramachandran never let you get a complete grasp of this character or the happenings around him, until the end as they throw us off at various points with well-placed diversions. Only in a few junctures are we a step ahead of Priyadarshini, who is joined by a couple of equally bumbling neighbourhood detectives (Akhila Bhargawan and Pooja Mohanraj), connected perpetually through WhatsApp. It is in managing this sense of intrigue around Manuel's household almost till the end that the writers turn *Sookshmadarshini* into a gripping watch.

Sookshmadarshini

Director: MC Jithin

Cast: Basil Joseph, Nazriya Nazim, Sidharth Bharathan, Akhila Bhargavan, Pooja Mohanraj, Merin Philip

Storyline: When Manuel arrives with his mother to stay in a new locality, his nosy neighbour Priyadarshini senses something amiss in his behaviour

Some of this is achieved through what might appear contrived writing in parts, but the way it is pulled off on screen makes us ignore such minor failings. What throws you off is also the unexpected humour in tense situations, which makes one wonder whether all this is a clever build towards a laugh-out-loud reveal, and not something sinister as one suspects all along. The writers really up their game in the latter half when they bring together all the elements planted along the way to deliver a satisfying high. The screenplay in the end accounts for all the minor details, right from a random dent on Priyadarshini's car to a red cloth that Manuel ties to a pole.

Just when Basil Joseph appeared to be getting a little typecast as the jovial guy next door, he picks a role that lets him explore effectively his not-so-likeable side. In her comeback after four years, Nazriya Nazim's role is almost in the zone of her most popular bubbly characters, but there are points where her performance hits a notch higher than required. The supporting cast, especially Sidharth Bharathan in an uncharacteristic role, keeps the journey engaging all along.

Sookshmadarshini is a cleverly written thriller that turns what could easily have been a run-of-the-mill film into an elevating experience. It becomes yet another addition to Malayalam cinema's unrelenting run this year, both in quality and variety.

Sookshmadarshini *is currently running in theatres*



Abhishek Bachchan sells resilience

Caught between moments of introspection and inertia, Shoojit Sircar's human drama on the impermanence of life and relationships struggles to find its bearings

Hindi

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Someone who loves exploring the intricate relationship between bodily functions and life's larger purpose, after *Piku* and *October*, director Shoojit Sircar turns to a real-life cancer survivor to tell a middling tale of resilience and reform.

A hot-shot marketing man, Arjun Sen's (Abhishek Bachchan) career comes to a sudden halt when he is diagnosed with multiple malignancies. After initial bouts of denial, he doesn't surrender to fate, refuses to become a statistic, and enlists himself in a long-drawn battle with the disease. Soon, we discover his relationships are not in the best of health either. At work, he is cut-throat. At home, he is divorced and has a daughter (Pearle Dey/Ahilya Bamroo) to raise who suspects him of indulging in some sort of drama to evoke empathy. In the hospital, he comes up with diagrams and googled information lest his doctor (Jayant Kriplani) take him for a ride.

Arjun is no hero. In fact, it is hard not to dislike him but he is real for we find many around us or inside us. When the doctor removes a large part of his stomach, he describes himself as "gutless". He indeed seems one for a while. After a poor prognosis, he turns his body into a project and starts employing his marketing skills to fix his organs and stitch a bond with his daughter Reya. Shoojit also takes on a similar task of making us feel for Arjun's struggle but along the way, a truthful story starts feeling like a manipulative setup, ironically, a word Arjun abhors.

I Want To Talk

Director: Shoojit Sircar

Cast: Abhishek Bachchan, Johny Lever, Jayant Kriplani, Ahilya Bamroo

Synopsis: After a medical diagnosis brings his hi-flying career to a halt, Arjun Sen decides to mend his body and his bond with his daughter

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Based on the life and book of Arjun Sen, the screenplay, written by Ritesh Shah, suffers from the problem of how to keep it interesting and introspective without revealing everything about the subject. One misses the deft touch of Juhi Chaturvedi, a long-time collaborator of Shoojit, to make it more evocative and wholesome. The film seems to address audiences more concerned about the side effects of anaesthesia than the financial burden of fighting the disease with a great recall value. We see a photo of Ramakrishna Paramahansa in Arjun's living room and at one point he says that pain is a promise that life always keeps but somehow the depth in writing and imagination doesn't seep through enough. The writer plucks low-hanging fruits perhaps to turn them into something like the adventures of 'Surgery Sen', a title the marketing honcho gives himself after more than a dozen surgeries.

Abhishek is the right choice for a role that demands constant scraping of the stubborn perhaps self-seeking exterior to give an insight into a persistent, unrelenting soul. The actor sheds the last ounce of vanity to embrace a complex character wholeheartedly. He not only looks the part but makes a sincere attempt to convey what is not on the page. As a daughter torn between parents, young Ahilya provides him with a spirited company. The film breathes life when the daughter struggles to raise her father. Johny Lever as the helpful maintenance worker, Kristin Goddard as the genial nurse, and Kriplani as the affable surgeon have been strategically placed to provide some lively counterpoints to Arjun's point of view of the world around him.

Shoojit once told this journalist that whatever subject he chooses to delve into, he does a doctorate in it. But the beauty of research-driven art lies in its understated expression. Here either it is muted or screams for attention. After a point, *I Want To Talk* assumes the tone of R Balki's writing where self-awareness comes in the way of honest storytelling and the film starts talking like a self-help guide with illustrations.

I Want To Talk *is currently running in theatres*

Ravi Teja Mullapudi and Vishwak Sen save the best for the last

Telugu

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Mechanic Rocky, right from its title to the romance and comedy in the initial scenes, has the markers of an entertainer that plays to the gallery. It takes up a pressing issue (to discuss it here might be a spoiler) that makes headlines frequently and presents a thrilling drama disguised as an entertainer featuring a smart alec protagonist (Vishwak Sen in the title role) who throws both punches and 'punch dialogues'. The Telugu film directed by Ravi Teja Mullapudi aims to blend mass action with a smart thriller. While some portions of the film evoke interest, others are middling.

Ravi Teja Mullapudi narrates his story through the character of Rakesh aka Rocky, who works at a car garage established by his father, Ramakrishna (Naresh). The father thinks the son is worthless, and the reason is rooted in a satirical backstory in Rayalaseema. The story initially proceeds along expected lines. With the garage doubling as a driving school, it sets the stage for the arrival of Maya (Shraddha Srinath) who wants to learn to drive. The comedy in the Rayalaseema portions, as well as Maya's driving gaffes (the confusion between turning left, right and so on) unfortunately lack the spark.



Meanwhile, Rocky also recounts his romance with his college sweetheart Priya (Meenakshi Chaudhary).

There are subtle indications that *Mechanic Rocky* is not what it appears to be at the surface level; like the prologue and the choice of actors who play pivotal characters – particularly Vishwadev Rachakonda and Naresh. Even though the film would like to convince its audience of the events unfolding on the screen each moment, I viewed some of their portions with disbelief but convinced that there is more.

Mechanic Rocky comes into its own in the last hour when it reveals its cards by and by. Until then, one has to sit through uninteresting segments of romance, song and dance, and clashes between Rocky and a certain Ranki Reddy (Sunil).

When the conceit unravels, the smartness comes to the fore. The credit goes to the screenplay that keeps revealing twists before the final picture emerges. Some of these twists can be guessed a few minutes in advance but still manage to impress. However, the final portions do not capitalise on this cat-and-mouse game in its zealousness to create a crowd-pleasing mix of humour, action and drama.

The last hour is also when its key actors, both Vishwak Sen and Shraddha Srinath, get to shine. Vishwak is given a role tailored to his image. Sample this: There are references to Rocky's 'loose tongue', as though addressing the social media trolling that targeted Vishwak for being overtly gregarious in his speeches. He plays Rocky with effortless ease, making even the Rayalaseema portions somewhat entertaining. There is also a reference to a popular fun conversation in *Ee Nagaraniki Emaindi* between him and Jeevan Kumar, who appears in a cameo.

Mechanic Rocky

Director: Ravi Teja Mullapudi

Cast: Vishwak Sen, Meenakshi Chaudhary, Shraddha Srinath, Naresh, Viva Harsha, Raghu Ram

Storyline: A car mechanic is pushed to the wall by land sharks and is in dire need of money, but there is a larger gameplan

Shraddha's character is the surprise package in the film. She plays the final portions with all the required chutzpah. Meenakshi is sincere in her portrayal as the leading lady who carries the burden of personal trauma. Her damsel-in-distress role does not have much room for surprise but she manages to evoke empathy. Naresh and Viva Harsha are dependable as always. *Roadies* Raghu Ram appears in a brief part that benefits from his persona.

If *Mechanic Rocky* had done away with some of the stereotypical humour and song and dances and leveraged on its thriller portions, it could have been far more engrossing.

Mechanic Rocky *is currently running in theatres*



Blitz

Director: Steve McQueen

Cast: Saoirse Ronan, Elliot Heffernan, Harris Dickinson, Benjamin Clementine, Paul Weller, Stephen Graham

Storyline: Determined to return to his family, nine-year-old George embarks on a journey back home to his mother in Second World War London

A contrived war drama

English

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Steve McQueen's *Blitz* arrives as a curious confluence of contradictions – a Second World War epic that both adheres to and subverts the conventions of its genre.

Blitz meanders between sprawling spectacle and tightly wound intimacy, taking aim at weighty themes: race, resilience, and survival amid the ashen wreckage of 1940s London. Though the ambition is undeniable, the film seems to misfire somewhere along its execution, leaving its lofty aspirations gasping in its smoke-choked ruins.

The story centres on nine-year-old George (Elliott Heffernan), a biracial boy whose mother, Rita (Saoirse Ronan), reluctantly places him on a train evacuating children from the city to the safety of the countryside. George, however, refuses to abandon the world he knows. Before the train can reach its destination, he leaps off, determined to find his way back to London and reunite with his mother. From there, *Blitz* unfurls as a Dickensian odyssey – with George encountering a rotating cast of characters ranging from kindly protectors to outright villains – rendered with McQueen's characteristic visual rigour but tethered to a narrative that often feels uninspired.

As George, Heffernan shines with a luminous naivety, his boyish innocence running headlong into the wreckage of war-torn England. This tension is perhaps most evident in George's encounters with a ragtag band of thieves led by Stephen Graham's Albert, a cartoonishly Fagin figure who teeters on the edge of caricature.

George's journey is interspersed with scenes of Rita's parallel struggles, as Ronan imbues her character with a tender fortitude, navigating the drudgery of factory work. Rita is the film's aching heart. In one standout scene, she performs a ballad for a live BBC broadcast, a moment that aches with longing and the bittersweet hues of the film's soul. *Blitz* falters in its uneven balance of these twin narratives.

Steve McQueen has long mastered the alchemy of turning sweeping historical tides into something that feels achingly personal. *Blitz* tries to follow suit, but its compass wavers.

Where *Blitz* does succeed is in its refusal to whitewash history. McQueen challenges the sanitised myth of wartime solidarity, exposing the fractures beneath the veneer of "keep calm and carry on." From racist bullies on the evacuation train to the casual slurs hurled in passing, *Blitz* paints a picture of a nation grappling with its own prejudices even as it faces an external enemy. In these moments, the film feels most alive.

And yet, *Blitz* never fully coalesces. McQueen appears torn between his auteurial instincts and the weighty expectations of an Oscar-baity war drama. His attempt to critique nostalgia while luxuriating in its glow creates friction the film never entirely smooths over. It's far from his most polished effort, but it still pulses with the urgency and humanism that define his oeuvre.

Blitz is currently streaming on Apple TV+

Snippets



Shah Rukh Khan, Netflix announce Aryan Khan's debut series

Aryan Khan, son of superstar Shah Rukh Khan, is making his directorial debut with an upcoming Netflix series. Set against the backdrop of the film industry, the multi-genre untilted series will tells the "story of a charming, ambitious outsider navigating the glitzy yet tricky world of Bollywood," and will stream on Netflix in 2025. Produced by Gauri Khan, the upcoming Bollywood series will mark Netflix and Red Chillies Entertainment's sixth outing together, including titles like *Darlings, Class of '83* and *Bard of Blood.* Shah Rukh Khan said in a statement, "We are excited to present this new series with Netflix that offers a refreshing look into the glamorous cinematic world."



Enola Holmes 3 in the works at Netflix from director Philip Barantini

Netflix and Legendary Entertainment's hit franchise *Enola Holmes* is gearing up for its third installment, with director Philip Barantini set to helm the sequel. While deals are still being finalised, sources indicate that Millie Bobby Brown is expected to reprise her role as the titular sleuth, according to *Deadline*. The previous films followed Enola, the younger sister of Sherlock Holmes (played by Henry Cavill), as she solved mysteries across Victorian London. Based on Nancy Springer's beloved book series, the franchise has become a Netflix mainstay since its debut during the pandemic in 2020.



Charlize Theron latest to join Christopher Nolan's untitled next

Academy Award-winning actress Charlize Theron has been announced as the latest addition to Christopher Nolan's highly anticipated upcoming film. The project already boasts a star-studded cast, including Matt Damon, Zendaya, Tom Holland, Robert Pattinson, Lupita Nyong'o, and Anne Hathaway. Universal Pictures has set a release date for July 17, 2026, though details about the plot remain tightly guarded. Nolan wrote and is directing the film, which he is producing alongside his longtime collaborator and wife, Emma Thomas, under their Syncopy banner. This marks Nolan's second collaboration with Universal Pictures.



Gravity-defying extravaganza

The singing, dancing, intricately detailed physical sets, comedy, action and emotion make this revisionist look at the Wicked Witch of the West from *Oz* a 360-degree blast

English

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She did not eat grass as a child nor is she seasick, insists the green-skinned Elphaba (Cynthia Erivo) in *Wicked*, the movie adaptation of the Broadway musical which in turn was inspired by Gregory Maguire's 1995 novel, 'Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West'.

After *Maleficent*, which looked at the Sleeping Beauty story from the antagonist's point of view, here is another revisionist look at the famous wicked witch from the other side of L. Frank Baum's 1900 novel 'The Wonderful Wizard of Oz'.

For those who came in late (like in all those Phantom comics), director Jon M. Chu (*Crazy Rich Asians*) provides a précis of events where Dorothy liquefied the Wicked Witch of the West and went home to Kansas down the Yellow Brick Road with her dog Toto, The Cowardly Lion, The Tin Man and The Scarecrow. As the people of Oz celebrate the death of the Wicked Witch, the Good Witch, Glinda (Ariana Grande), joins in.

When one of the good people of Oz asks her about the Wicked Witch, Glinda admits to knowing her and it is time for a flashback. Elphaba was the daughter of the Governor of Munchkinland, Thropp (Andy Nyman). The colour of her skin, thanks to her naughty mum (Courtney-Mae Briggs), meant Elphaba was always rejected and made fun of by those around her.

She feels responsible for her paraplegic younger sister, Nessarose's (Marissa Bode) condition too. When she comes with her father to drop Nessarose at the stately Shiz University in Oz, her father insists she stay to see Nessarose is properly settled in. The Dean of Sorcery, Madame Morrible (Michelle Yeoh), sees Elphaba's power and proposes to teach her to control her magic. Glinda or Galinda as she is known then, is pretty, pink and popular. While she wants to study sorcery under Madame Morrible, she is not prepared to have Elphaba as a roommate as suggested by Morrible.

Despite the initial hiccups, the two very different girls become friends, bonding over a wild party at the Ozdust Ballroom. Elphaba is sensitive to the undercurrents at Oz including the fact that animals are being excluded and losing their voice as the history professor, a goat named Doctor Dillamond (Peter Dinklage) reveals. The campus is in a tizzy when the handsome and determinedly shallow Winkie prince, Fiyero Tigelaar (Jonathan Bailey) joins Shiz. Though Elphaba dreams of meeting and impressing The Wonderful Wizard of Oz (Jeff Goldblum), so that she can ask him to change her skin colour when she finally does meet him, that is not what she asks for.

Wicked works wonderfully well on so many levels. It is a study of what makes people do the things they do, or think the way they do. It is a look at what is considered normal and what creates a villain, all the while celebrating the joys and tears of being different.

Wicked is a musical, with gloriously choreographed songs and an action film with breathtaking stunts. The sets, physical and CGI, are eye-popping, especially the library with its books (rare and medium rare as Glinda helpfully points out) stacked in gigantic wheels – wish Fiyero did not step on books though. The girls' room, the Ozdust Ballroom, the Emerald City, the weird and wonderful train that takes Glinda and Elphaba to Emerald City, and many more, are all glorious sonnets to the imagination.

Erivo and Grande own their roles, singing, dancing and dueling with gusto while Bailey is delightful as the callow, charming Prince. Yeoh is grandly inscrutable and there is special joy in watching Goldblum do a jig. The 160 minutes of *Wicked* slip by in a Technicolor flash and the fact that there is Part II, coming out in 2025 puts a jolly song in one's heart.

Wicked is currently running in theatres

Wicked

Director: Jon M. Chu

Cast: Cynthia Erivo, Ariana Grande, Jonathan Bailey, Peter Dinklage, Michelle Yeoh, Jeff Goldblum

Storyline: The story of how a misunderstood little green girl became the all-powerful Wicked Witch of the West