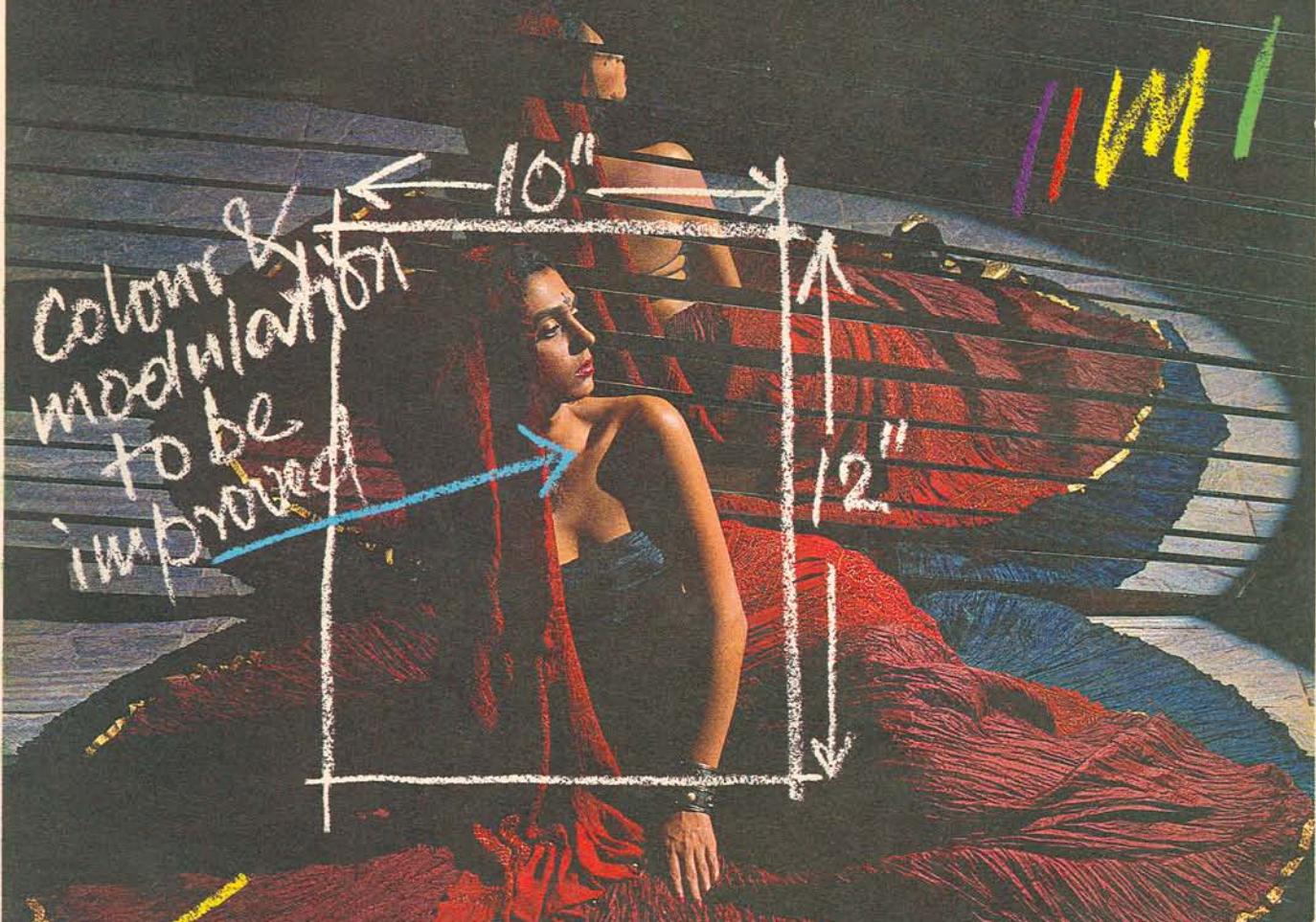


EXCLUSIVE: INSIDE BURMA'S REBEL HIDE-OUTS

# SUNDAY



## THE YEAR OF THE DESIGNER

There's riches in rags and gold in graphics as the design revolution hits India

# THE·YEAR·OF·THE DESIGNER

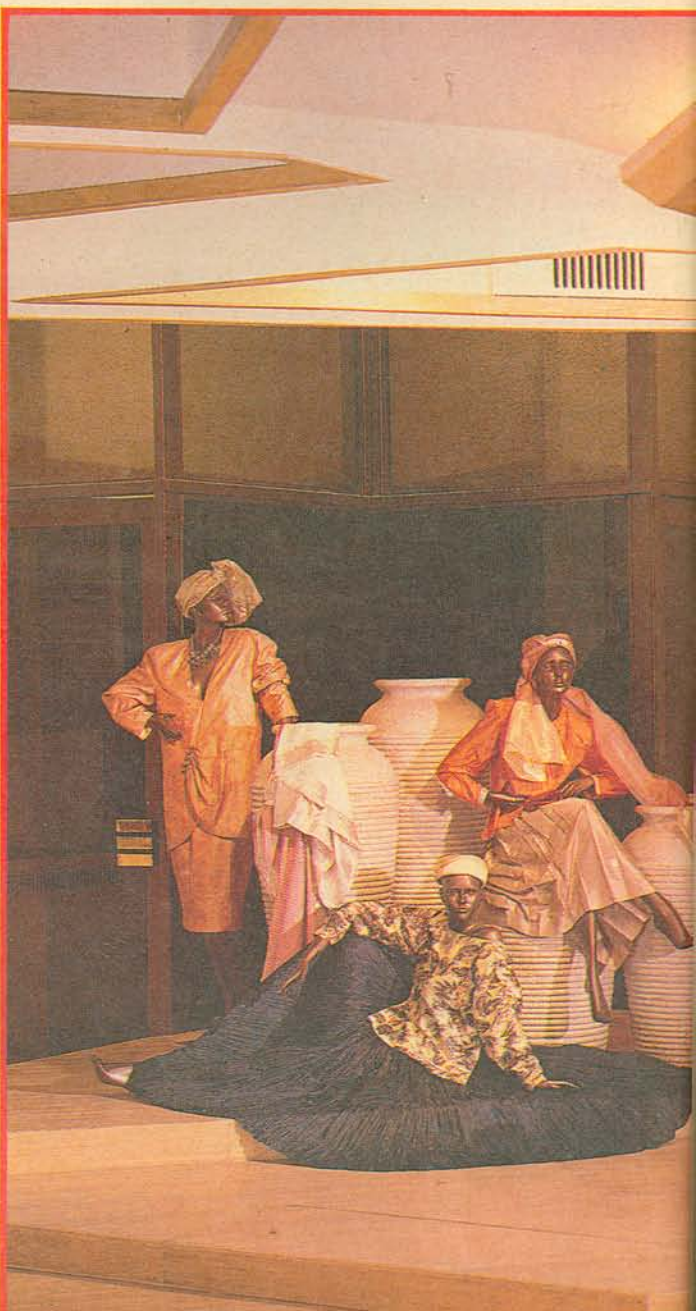
*There's riches in rags  
and gold in graphics  
as the design  
revolution sweeps  
India. But is it all just  
one big con-trick?*



**I**t is either the triumph of the artist over the hack or it is the con-trick of the decade. But whichever way you look at it, India has suddenly been mesmerised by the cult of the designer. We may not have our own Calvin Kleins and Yohji Yamamotos yet, but the influence of the designer can be felt in every sphere of Indian life. No longer do we simply buy clothes, we buy labels; either from Rohit Khosla, Asha Sarabhai and the other high-priced couture wizards or from a host of other 'names' ranging from Delhi's S. Paul to Bombay's 'Designer Mike Kirpalani'.

In interior design too, the conventional wisdom that you hired an architecture graduate is dead. Some of the most striking homes in Delhi have been conceived by painter Satish Gujral, who has no formal architectural training. And in Bombay, the top names are Sunita Pitambar and Parmeshwar Godrej who, having designed the swanky China Garden together, have now separated to tackle a variety of high-priced assignments.

(Top) An Urshilla Kerkar visual: design as a marketing tool



If you have designer saris and designer homes, then can designer magazines be far behind? Ever since Aurobind Patel gave *India Today* its slick new look a few years ago, publishers have chased the top graphic artists. Frequently, the results have been sensational. Preeti Vyas changed *Cine Blitz*'s image almost overnight with a deft design overhaul and then revolutionised *Sportsworld*'s look. (Alas, this was not enough. *Sportsworld* folded last month.) Urshilla Kerkar and Dhun Cordo have made striking innovations with *Mega City* and *Movie* and Amiya Bhattacharya has transformed the formerly staid *Businessworld*. Sometimes though, the design overkill can be just that—fatal—as anybody who's seen *The Times of India*'s special issues will readily attest.

It would be unfair, however, to conclude from all of this that the design boom only affects luxuries and elitist preoccupations. It isn't just lavish interiors that Gujral specialises in, his trend-setting buildings (especially Delhi's Belgian embassy) have revolutionised the way urban Indian architects think about their profession. Some designers such as Rashmi Bhagwati (a qualified architect) specialise in kitchens, seeking to merge beauty with practicality. Others are breaking down the barriers in the world of industrial design, encouraging manufacturers to rethink time-tested products so that they become functionally more elegant. And still others specialise in packaging, adding a dash of flair to the most mundane carton.

Says Dr Saryu Doshi, the distinguished art historian and perceptive observer of aesthetic trends: "Indians have never ever been as design conscious as they are now."

But is it all a con-job, an extension of the American principle whereby a \$10 denim jean meets a \$30 Calvin Klein name tag and promptly begins to sell at \$40? There are those who think so. Says Rajeev Sethi, one of the first Indians to train with a Paris couturier (he worked with Pierre Cardin): "Designers? What designers? Not a single Indian designer can stand up in the western world. We are a nation of suppliers incapable of creating and marketing a brand name!" Sethi is particularly incensed by the new breed of high-profile textile designers. "They are parasites," he says, barely disguising his contempt. "Parasites who live off the gloss of Indian textiles, not on structure and design."

Even those who do not share Sethi's views concede, that in many cases, the whole design boom has got slightly out of hand. Explains Saryu Doshi: "There comes a stage when people cease to be

concerned with the design of a particular product. They begin to regard the fact that it has been designed by a 'name' as a guarantee of aesthetic quality. That's dangerous because you then substitute celebrity for aesthetics."

Within each profession, there are those who are scathing about the calibre of recent big-name designers. Says Zarine Khan (wife of actor Sanjay), one of Bombay's busiest interior designers: "Nowadays, even furniture mak-



(From top to bottom) New carrier bags: a packaging revolution; Delhi's Belgian embassy: Gujral's first triumph; a David Abraham dress: discriminating buyers



ers call themselves designers and find work!" Agrees Baburao Sadwelkar, Maharashtra's director of art: "Too many of those involved in industrial and product design have no idea of practicality or functionality." And nearly every architect you meet smirks a little about Hafeez Contractor's crescent balconies, cylindrical lines and round windows. "Gimmickry which is impractical," goes the refrain.

Much of this is unfair. Design is inextricably linked with fashion and therefore with the exploitation of the gullible—or 'fashion victims', as they are known in the trade. As Martand Singh, Pupul Jayakar's successor as India's premier culture person, readily admits: "Media articulation is needed for the responsiveness of society. In fashion, hype is always 80 per cent of the game."



Exhibition showcase for the design culture

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# THE VAMA CHIC

## BOMBAY'S DESIGNER SARIS

five-star chains and won. While professional restaurant designers claim that China Garden's acoustics are all wrong and the lighting too harsh, they have been forced to concede that all the rules of restaurant design have now been rewritten. One instance: you'll never again see a five-star Chinese restaurant with red wallpaper and silly paper lanterns.

Over the last three years, the Godrej-Pitambar team has split, but both are inundated with work. Godrej's assignments include Bombay's Willingdon Club and Paran Jamuna, a small hotel owned by some Sindhis in Juhu. Her answer to China Garden has already opened: the visually stunning Khyber with paintings by Anjolie Ela Menon and old faithful, Husain.

There are many other outsiders who have taken the interior design world by storm. Next to the Godrej-Pitambar team, Zarine Khan and Neetu Kohli have been most successful in Bombay. Says Khan: "I became a designer because I wanted my identity back." While a desire to escape from Sanjay Khan's shadow is as good a reason as any to turn to design, the Khan-Kohli team has not received universal approbation from architects, many of whom are sniffy about what they see as the duo's *filmi* chic. The Khan-Kohli new look at Bombay's Gaylords, for instance, has provoked many sniggers. Nevertheless, Khan's furniture business flourishes. She will open shops in the Middle East soon and England is the next stop.

Delhi's most influential designer is Sunita Kohli, a distinction that she earned after the Rajiv regime invited her to redo parts of the Prime Minister's office (wisely, she let Lutyens' vision prevail) and to conceive several rooms in the new Prime Minister's house complex at Race Course Road.

The concept of the designer, of course, derives essentially from the world of fashion. And our design boom, too, is largely powered by the hype of the rag trade. It is entirely in keeping with the character of this boom that India's single most successful designer should be an outsider.

Asha Sarabhai qualified as an economist from Cambridge and could, if she had wanted, have gone on to teach at the university. However, she met Suhrid Sarabhai, scion of the well-known Ahmedabad family, married him and returned to India. Because of the Sarabhai family's historic links with the textile industry, she became interested in fabric and discovered a flair for design. Some of her work came to the attention of Issey

**E**thnic chic is what they market at Vama, perhaps Bombay's most prestigious sari store. Run by two sisters, Jaya Patel and Sudha Chowgule, the shop sells handwoven saris from all over the country—Paithanis from Maharashtra, Patolas of Gujarat, Tangails from Bengal and much more. Patel testifies that the general public is much more aware these days of the beauty of a good weave. "No longer do we have people saying, 'Why should I pay thousands of rupees for a cotton sari?'" she says. Adds Chowgule, "The trend really started after the Festival of India and the Vishwakarma exhibition, when people got to know what went into making a good handloom sari."

Tradition is the catchword where handlooms are concerned and valuable work is being done by such people as Martand Singh, who travel

**Vama saris:  
a triumph of  
tradition**



around the country reviving old weaves and motifs and encouraging the master craftsmen to work on them. They also encourage traditional dyeing techniques, such as the *telia rumal*, which impart a distinctive sheen to the fabric. "But," says Patel, "consumer appreciation is essential, because such time-consuming techniques end up making the sari much more expensive." Innovations go on alongside. Both Patel and Chowgule tour the country, meeting weavers and encouraging them to adopt modern motifs and non-traditional colours.

Vama caters to the current fad for contrasting blouses with handloom saris. To meet this demand, Patel and Chowgule have increased the yardage of the sari, so that the extra material can be used to make the blouse. Services extended to special customers include a helping hand when it comes to choosing a sari for a special occasion, helping them decide on accessories such as matching bags and blouses (also sold at Vama) and tailoring.

Prices of saris at Vama range from a few hundreds to over twenty thousand. Saris at the top end (Patan Ki Patolas, for instance) are not on display but stashed away in cupboards. They are brought out only on request. The mark up on such saris is very little. Says Chowgule: "We treat them like works of art, not trade objects."

Why has the village woman switched over to wearing synthetics when her urban counterpart has gone into handlooms? Patel ascribes this to "wrong advertisement policy", though she admits that it is more difficult and expensive to maintain cotton saris.

It is now 18 years since Vama started and after the initial publicity drive, the shop has hardly felt the need to advertise, relying instead on consumer goodwill and loyalty. Until recently, that is. Since last year, the Vama ad campaign has begun to be splashed around. As sales hardly warrant such marketing, perhaps Vama is now concerned about building a national reputation.