



Banalata Bipani

Choosing that bag

A handbag is much more than just that. As an essential fashion accessory, it can lend that edge of chic and classic style to an outfit in much the same manner as a well-coordinated pair of shoes or a colourful scarf. And yet, more often than not, we tend to go in for handbags as an after-thought. That Indian bags are known internationally for their understated elegance and value for money somehow seems to escape us. We are not even aware of the options available.

Mumbai-based designer Sangeeta Chopra is particularly ecstatic about Indian bags: "They are truly terrific," she says. "The look is simple in soft leather during daytime and for the evening, it is definitely the embroidered variety. Nothing can beat our jewelled, handmade purses."

Arjun Khanna points out that selecting a bag for an outfit is serious business. "The importance of this accessory cannot be undermined," he emphasises. "Anju Jani Rinaldi has definitely carved a niche in this area. Her coordination of clothes and accessories is just perfect."

Anju Jani explains that unlike most other designers, she has always considered accessories to be as important as the main dress. "You cannot divorce the two," she says. "This is where international labels like Versace, Gucci and Prada score over us."

In India, purses are the contemporary expression of designer bags. Classic examples are the *batwas* and draw-string pouches, currently being repackaged as "evening bags" in a variety of colourful silks with gold-thread embroidery.

These bags are *de rigueur* for ethnic wear — particularly, *salwar-kameezes*, *ghagra-cholis* and *sarees*. You get them in beautiful brocades, tussars and gold, with or without embroidery, depending upon whether they are meant for a festive occasion or not.

Leather bags carry a formal air about them, and can be matched with both western and Indian outfits. These "day bags", with their multiple compartments, are supposed to be more capacious than cloth purses, much as they are mere adaptations of the vanity bags of yore.

Says Jitu Rana of Hideskin: "Indian leather bags are comparable to the best of global labels. The best part is these bags can be coordinated not only with clothes, but also with the shoes and belts... Such accessorising goes very well with western outfits."

Rana recommends delicate pastels, blended with rich embroidery and beadwork for formal wear, while there are simple crocheted, knitted and nylon bags, ideal for a casual look. Either way, the options range from virgin whites to powerful reds and exciting blacks.

And then, there are those smart and stylish slings with little coloured stones, especially popular with teenagers. "College girls fancy these bags because they have a nice sporty look and can go with any outfit," Rana points out.

Superstar Bipasha Basu feels that a handbag reveals a great deal about the taste, mood and attitude of its owner. Just as you can size up a man from the shoes he wears, the shape, colour and size of a bag would mirror the personality of a woman, she explains.

"I would prefer simple, elegant leather bags for the day," she discloses. "For the evening, it is definitely the beautiful, hand-embroidered clutch or smart sling bags embellished with sequins, mirror-work or studded with semi-precious stones."

For Namrata Baruah, hand-embroidered Indian clutches are ideal for sarees and ethnic wear. But for western dresses, it is better to go for established brands like Gucci and Fendi in leather, simply because of their high quality of finish.

Baruah reveals that logos of western brands like Gucci, Versace, Jane Shilton and Prada are the season's "latest fashion-defining items". A nylon bag with any of these logos would, in fact, sell better than the best of Indian leather brands.

As a bag buff in a Mumbai college points out: "All my friends dress alike. We all have the same look, the same happy-go-lucky attitude... But it is my Fendi Denim that makes all the difference. It makes me feel special."

At the other extreme, there are those who are least brand conscious. "I would carry a purse that adds appeal to my outfit," says a popular veejay. "Vibrant colours go well with traditional clothes, and greys with silver handles coordinate well with day wear. I never look at labels."

MAHARAJA FEATURES

Going to visit Nasim Akhtar on one of the coldest days of the new year gives it a significance I had not thought of till I was sitting in her warm and cosy living room, with its tasteful velvet sofas, a chaise lounge, pictures on the walls and a beautiful antique Kashmiri jug of burnished silver gleaming in a corner. As expected, she is not wearing socks, nor too many warm clothes either, while I was bundled up like a bear, and shivering in spite of it. Warm and smiling, she had me seated and promptly switched on the heater, more for my benefit than hers. When I looked at her, I knew it was easy to slot her as an outgoing, single school teacher, someone who was house-proud, liked everything in its place, frankly speaking her mind, absorbed in the womanly interests like cooking, crocheting, gardening perhaps, and dressing up. She did not at all look sad to be single, or melancholy at the absence of a spouse or children.

But Nasim Akhtar is far from an ordinary lady. She is the one who broke tradition, the iron hold of her community, to venture into a field that called for almost superhuman courage and endurance. Her memories are not of meals cooked and flowers embroidered, but of tramping through a blizzard in zero visibility, dangling from a sheer rock face tethered to a slender nylon rope, her crampons digging into unyielding ice, the ominous rumble of an avalanche, the terrifying depths of a crevasse, the lungs screaming for air, every muscle of the body aching and sore, and then, the last triumphant step on the summit, the stunning view of range upon range of mountains lit up by a rising sun, a silence so perfect it was like a symphony. Nasim has experienced all this, victory and heartbreak, elation and despair. This little *tete a tete* in her pretty sitting room is only a lull between her struggle to strive, to conquer. Her place is truly there, among the snow and whistling winds. The mountains have long ceased to intimidate her. But, she continues to be inspired by them.

When did it begin, this wanderlust, answering the call of the mountains? "I was born in Guwahati", she says. "My parents were Majida Begum and Abdul Haque. I lost my father, an army contractor, when I was only two. My mother had to bring up three daughters, I was the youngest, and a son single-handedly. I admire my mother not only for the courageous way she took up her responsibilities, but also the staunch support she gave me when I ventured into this field. She had faith in my dream and encouraged me to cross all the boundaries society and our faith imposed on me."

Nasim was different from other girls of her age. Unlike her sister, she had no interest in playing with dolls or dressing up in pretty frocks, trinkets and ribbons. She did not like sour fruits, and was teased about being like a boy. She was a hyperactive tomboy, chasing balls, climbing trees, and fishing in the shallow ponds near her home. The Guwahati of her girlhood was a thinly populated, open spaced rustic place where Nature waited just outdoors and Nasim insists on saying, "I was born in Guwahati village."

All that running around was mainly a

preparation for the real thing. In school, the Ulubari High School, her favourite subject was, not surprisingly, geography. It was a subject which whetted her appetite for knowing about the world. She was intrigued by the chequered maps, the endless shift of climates and water cur-

about that trip was magical — the drifting powdery snow, the dilapidated house where we took shelter for the night. It was then I felt that first hypnotic spell the Himalayas cast on me. I began to write letters to Baba, the Himalayas becoming a God to me, someone who

there were lots of examples in history that people opposed anyone who tried to do something new. She said I needed strength to overcome all challenges and ignore all that criticism. Interestingly, my mother was also familiar with all the climbing gear and equipment I used and could identify each item by name. She had a premonition and told me that if anything happened to her while I was doing something related to my climbing, I was to go on as if nothing had happened. And on the day of Idd, when recruits were to report for a national rock climbing meet in Guwahati, she passed away.

"I continued to test my limits, climbing in Kashmir, Garhwal, Kumaon, Nepal. But then, I realised I also needed to bring more women into this field. I encouraged many to train and in 1986, a team of seven women, myself included, went on an expedition to Leh. We climbed the 21,132 ft Kangyisay Peak. We were the first all-women team there. Very few Indians visited Leh, and there we were, climbing a mountain. The army gave us free rations, the Air Force gave us walkie talkie sets and sent a helicopter to the base camp. Mountaineer Magan Bisha said he was eager to meet me as I had persuaded the armed forces to grant us all these concessions. We were warmly felicitated and interviewed on radio."

In 1987, Nasim led a group of eight Assamese girls to the White Needle Peak of the Kashmiri Himalayas (22,000 ft). From Kargil, the girls went to the Zangskar range, travelling in trucks, staying in tents and crossing rivers on horseback. The stunning landscape and Nature's fury left a lasting impact.

Many such feats followed and Nasim gained respect and recognition at the national level. She became the first NE member of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation in 1993. In 1998, she became one among the thirteen governing council members for ten years. Talks are on to set up two mountaineering institutes, one by the Army and one by DoNER.

Today, Nasim is upbeat about an Everest expedition she will lead in March 2011. Selections will begin in June this year. Men and women have already undergone training to gear up for this challenge. They will be sent to Kanchenjunga first to acclimatise themselves. Some team members include experienced climbers like Colonel Neeraj Rana, Lavraj Dharmashutra, Kushang Sherpa, Tempa and Pranoy Bordoloi.

At an age when most women would choose to put their feet up and live a life of quiet leisure, Nasim readies for yet another challenge, tuning her mind and body like an instrument before a performance. She does yoga, eats the right foods and believes that a never say die spirit is what keeps her going. Like Aideo Handique of *Joymati*, who could not get a groom because of her acting in films, Nasim, too, has to lead a single life. But she is very much a mother, a deeply caring one at that, to a number of girls who live and study at her home. She yearns to go back to her beloved mountains and nothing can stand in the way. It is not just her calling, but her salvation as well.

email: indrani.raimedhi@gmail.com



Climb every mountain

rents, the people, crops, forests, plains and mountains of different lands. All that became real before her fascinated eyes, arousing a restlessness to venture beyond the four walls of her home. Then began her college life in Handique Girls' College. By that time, she was climbing the hills around the city, enjoying the physical exertion and sense of accomplishment when she reached the top.

Then, in 1972, she went trekking to Sandakphu, in Darjeeling, with a team led by the legendary Rohini Bhuyan, who had first brought mountaineering to Assam. It was a team of twenty-six members, and only five were women. It was then that she met Tenzing Norgay, who had climbed the Everest with Edmund Hillary. "He told me the Himalayas would be the love of my life. I came to understand his words only later. Everything

solved my dilemmas, gave me the courage to go on, who, with His permanence and vastness, revealed to me what was petty and fleeting in life. That is why mountaineering is much more than a sport. It is nothing short of a pilgrimage.

"Now, convinced of my true calling, I enrolled for a basic and advanced course in climbing at the Western Himalayan Mountaineering Institute (WHMI) at Manali. I learned how to walk on snow wearing crampons, climb down from a vertical cliff top, emergency steps to take in the advent of an avalanche, how to set up and dismantle a tent, how to use an oxygen tent and a hundred other tasks.

"When I came back, I discovered that all around me, people were laughing at my pursuit of this goal. They just did not know what to make of me. But my brother, sisters and mother stood solidly behind me, protecting me from all that scorn and animosity. My mother said that

3rd eye

Indrani Raimedhi

Leap Year

Cast: Amy Adams, Matthew Goode, Adam Scott.
Director: Anand Tucker.

Amy Adams and Matthew Goode star in *Leap Year*, a romantic comedy that follows one woman's determined quest to get married to the perfect guy... despite what fate has in store for her.



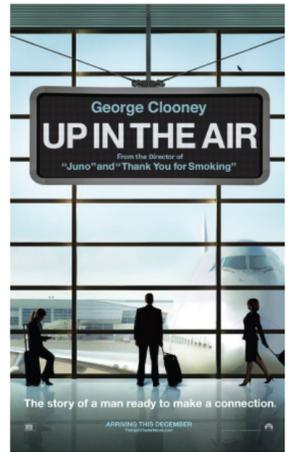
When their four-year anniversary passes without a marriage proposal, Anna (Amy Adams) decides to take matters into her own hands. Investing in an Irish tradition that allows women to propose to men on February 29th, Anna decides to follow her boyfriend Jeremy (Adam Scott) to Dublin and get down on one knee herself.

But airplanes, weather and fate leave Anna stranded on the other side of Ireland, and she must enlist the help of handsome and surly Declan (Matthew Goode) to get her across the country. As Anna and Declan bicker across the Emerald Isle, they discover that the road to love can take you to very unexpected places.

Up In The Air

Cast: George Clooney, Vera Farmiga, Anna Kendrick.
Director: Jason Reitman.

After getting Oscar attention for *Juno*, director Jason Reitman turns to this



adaptation of Walter Kirn's comic novel. Academy Award-winner George Clooney stars as Ryan Bingham, a businessman on the verge of reaching five million frequent flyer miles when his company decides to cut back

on travel. But his goal isn't the only thing just out of reach: he now won't be able to see a fellow frequent traveller (*The Departed's* Vera Farmiga) who has caught his eye.

MOVIE WATCH
Vikram Baskarati

TOP 10 Hollywood

- Avatar
- Sherlock Holmes
- Alvin and the Chipmunks: The Squeakquel
- It's Complicated
- The Blind Side
- Up in the Air
- The Princess and the Frog
- Did You Hear About the Morgans?
- Invictus
- Nine

FORECAST

JANUARY 18 - 24, 2010



ARIES (MAR 21-APR 19)

You're going to get the support and assistance you need on Monday, as a friend who can be of help is ready and waiting. Tuesday and Wednesday, luck is slightly less on your side, so try not to let frustration get the best of you, and remember that not everything can go your way all the time. Things will be going your way again by Thursday. The fun to be had on Friday is of the spontaneous, unexpected variety, but Saturday and Sunday are more satisfying.



TAURUS (APR 20-May 20)

It's almost as if you've awoken in a cartoonist's rendering of your life on Monday — everything seems basically familiar, but skewed. Tuesday and Wednesday, if you're feeling like a lone pilot on a rocket ship to Mars, nudge a friend and get them to bring you back to Earth. It is not in your nature to be rash, but a hurried feeling defines Thursday and Friday for you. Everything else will be back to normal (actually, better than normal) this weekend.



GEMINI (MAY 21-JUN 21)

You find yourself radically influenced by someone else at the start of the week, and you, inspired, spend the middle of the week considering radical changes to your life. By Thursday and Friday, you're an advice-collecting machine, leaving no stone unturned and exhausting your friends. By the weekend you've achieved a higher degree of focus than you've had in a while.



CANCER (JUN 22-JUL 22)

You exert emotional influence on the people around you, but don't go for emotions on Monday, go for ideas. Rationally is your terrain right now. Tuesday and Wednesday leave you more time for letting your mind wander, and you may decide to wander literally too. Thursday and Friday, everyday concerns return you to a more practical mindset. Saturday and Sunday are crowded with people — maybe there's a party planned? If not, maybe there should be.



LEO (JUL 23-AUG 22)

Your pride is a wise thing to swallow on Monday. Tuesday and Wednesday provide ample opportunities for you to listen — to others, as well as to yourself. You don't need to pretend like you have answers you don't have. You'll enjoy learning something new on Thursday, and having your opinion about something challenged (and changed) on Friday. As clear as everything once seemed to you, the weekend brings the news that nothing is black and white — a crucial point, and a good thing to be reminded of.



VIRGO (AUG 23-SEPT 22)

On Monday, you are optimistic and happy to be so organised. Others around you may be less so but they're no less directed. Rather than criticise their methods, revel in what you have in common. Resources are tight on Thursday and Friday. Compatibility and philosophical depth make the weekend interesting.



LIBRA (SEPT 23-OCT 22)

No matter what you wear on Monday, the day is going to be blazingly fun — so, you might as well wear something outrageous. Even midweek, as the world's more mundane aspects threaten to drive your gaze toward the ground, the icicles that hang off rain gutters will remind you uncannily of carrots and medieval weaponry and other strange objects — in short, the natural beauty of the world will amaze you. Thursday and Friday are what you make them, and the weekend is an extended, harmonious reverie.



SCORPIO (OCT 23-NOV 21)

Recent tension around the house may explode in the form of an emotional outburst on Monday — but take it lightly. Tuesday and Wednesday will be so full of activity completely outside the home realm, that you may forget about everything else, at least for a short while. Thursday and Friday, you're at your happiest helping other people. By Saturday, you've narrowed your attention to a certain single someone — spend Sunday focusing on this relationship.



SAGITTARIUS (NOV 22-DEC 21)

Nothing is more thrilling to you on Monday than the simple exchange of ideas — it hardly matters with whom the ideas are exchanged, everyone brings aspects of their own lives into a conversation, and everyone's lives are different. Listening to someone else reminisce about their past in the middle of the week may lead you to thoughts of your own past, but the romantic events of Thursday and Friday ground you once again firmly in the present. Saturday and Sunday, communication is good, and so is the food. Don't overeat, but don't be shy.



CAPRICORN (DEC 22-JAN 19)

No matter how much you try to make Monday go your way, it's just going to be a crazy day, and at a certain point, it's wise to opt for a more passive role. Tuesday and Wednesday, your fun comes from creative pursuits — art, music, poetry — but toward the end of the week, you take your fun wherever you can find it. Worry is more the order of the moment. Until Saturday, that is. Saturday and Sunday are glorious days.



AQUARIUS (JAN 20-FEB 18)

Your excitement is infectious on Monday. Tuesday and Wednesday are too muddled with financial concerns for you to feel like you're having much of a positive effect on the people around you, but on Thursday, money is the last thing on your mind — except as far as altruism is concerned. Friday sees you pondering such high-minded subjects as humanitarianism and freedom, but the weekend returns you to much smaller concerns. Express yourself eccentrically on Sunday.



PISCES (FEB 19-MARCH 20)

With everything running through your head on Monday, it's hard to see straight, so focus on one thing and do it well. Tuesday and Wednesday are more conducive to experimentation — transformation and rediscovery. Thursday and Friday, whatever discoveries you made earlier in the week will suddenly be called into question. Ground yourself this weekend. Put on some music and take off your shoes.