

# THE NEW FACES OF *Design*

## AARTI AGGARWAL & MALAVIKA SINGH GUPTA

INTERVIEW: SEEMA SREEDHARAN ■ PROFILE PHOTOGRAPHS: RISHABH SUD, NOUGHTS AND CROSSES LLP

The definition of Indian design is evolving. From being synonymous with craftsmanship and handicrafts to now having a distinct identity: an amalgamation of the richness of traditional craftsmanship and an experimental approach to materials and techniques. In this feature, we interact with two designers who have been instrumental in defining India's design identity and shaping its narrative. Through their designs, Aarti Aggarwal, Founder, Knock on Wood celebrates the versatility of wood; and Malavika Singh Gupta, Co-Founder, Gomaads transforms the ubiquitous concrete into objects of desire.



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# MALAVIKA SINGH GUPTA: *Concrete as her Muse*



**Seema Sreedharan (SS):** You are an interior designer and a photographer. Tell us about your journey through design, your passion for photography, your education.

**Malavika Singh Gupta (MSG):** I was always fascinated with objects and spaces, thanks to my father's camera collection, photography became a very passionate hobby. More than paintings I enjoyed photographs. The combination of the two led me to pursue a career in interior design. But of course, no classroom education prepares you for an actual site. Therefore, the biggest learning came from my first job as an interior designer, where I had found myself surrounded with very interesting design opportunities, a great mentor and my partner in crime and concrete— Gopendra Pratap Singh.

Thereafter in 2013, after our stint with architecture, we initiated Gomaads, a design studio based on the core desire to explore the infinite possibilities of concrete as a medium.

The journey so far has been incredibly enriching. Along the way, we have realized our strengths and vision for a studio that proudly makes in India.

**SS: Concrete is viewed as a construction material. What made you think of using concrete to design decor products?**

**MSG:** In most people's opinion, concrete is just an ordinary construction material, but for us, it is one with a lot of integrity, depth and character. And we want to bring this out to the world, to break concrete out of its traditional image and celebrate its delightful versatility.

**SS: Why concrete?**

**MSG:** While exploring notable works of great masters such as Le Corbusier and Tadao Ando, I fell in love with buildings and exposed concrete, unknowingly, became a favorite surface. This led to an inherent personal quest of exploring and pushing every boundary of the material. The beauty of how modifiable concrete is, despite its impermeable impression, is fascinating.

Initially, like most people, I too associated concrete with infrastructural bridges and buildings. But on a chance visit to Scandinavia, I witnessed a different and more human scale of the material through products and table accessories; and that led me to get my hands dirty, quite literally! The ascetic and minimal demeanor of the material imparted such humility, and thanks to my partner Gopendra, we found ourselves on a mission. Due to his architecture and product design background, we worked with the construction workers who were our initial teachers, explaining the know-how of the way this material behaves, seasons and quantifies.

Following a rigorous one and a half years of experimenting, we arrived at our perfect mix— Mistura (meaning mystery). We had to make our own recipe not just to address the challenges of costly premixes, but also to become one with the material and benchmark our required finishing.

Playing with various raw materials available in Delhi-NCR and across India, conducting hands-on research and watching numerous YouTube videos, we iterated until we landed the ideal mix of concrete, aggregates, sand, cement, water and catalysts. Our aim was to achieve the smoothness of the texture and the sheen on our first collection of table accessories.

This is how we got our first furniture request. Benches for BMW retail. We did it with a combination of concrete and wood. And the rest is history! The experiments got crazier and in conjunction with other materials.

**SS: Take us through the challenges involved?**

**MSG:** There is a marked difference between looking at a material's possibilities versus actually molding it, and the latter requires an in-depth understanding of the material. This took time and effort.

One had to master how it reacts to various external factors—weather, shape, size, weight—all to achieve the perfect balance in terms of thinking and creating, specific for every product with a different usage and scale.

The other, more obvious challenge we faced was explaining why concrete for this purpose. Initially, the main question that came to us was why should one use something so raw and minimal, and why not ceramic, that has more sheen and color.

This frankly motivated us even more—that something so ordinary could also look and feel glamorous and beautiful when applied in the right material context. The fine lines and air bubbles were an inherent property of concrete, and to the market, it was a defect. There was a time when we wanted to do away with those imperfections, however, that would not be staying true to the material and as such our design philosophy.

It therefore cemented the idea in our heads that concrete's honest outlook is its strength not weakness. It was a beautiful awakening to truly accept the material as it is, and work with its restrictions as possibilities, to change the narrative of concrete.

**SS: Is it sustainable?**

**MSG:** Concrete is handmade, resource-efficient, reusable and long lasting. There have been many arguments on the sustainability of it, regarding the use of chemicals in the mix. However, it is also the industry that has had the biggest reduction of harmful substances.

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***I usually find my fuel and dose of inspiration when I travel. Attending fairs, visiting modern architecture icons, always trigger and provoke the mind. Even larger brands like Hay & Muji, are able to carry a basic philosophy to the general audience. It is noteworthy.”***

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We treat it just like one would treat architecture and building industry—strive to enable reduced resource consumption, by making our processes efficient.

**SS: What do you like about concrete as a material?**

**MSG:** I love that concrete has chips and cracks in it, but can be readily mended. If a piece of furniture chips while being handled or is damaged by the customer, we may quickly repair it by applying the same mix and buffing it to the same finish. It would gradually blend into the same product, something that glass or stone cannot do. If it chips or cracks, it's gone forever.

We now have the confidence that it will take some time but we'll almost always get a 98% match.

Repair work in large and smaller pieces is something very doable with concrete which is a huge restriction with other materials because it is difficult to match colour, texture, or feel once repair work is done. With concrete this gap can be closed as concrete ages with you, adapting to surroundings that react to the environment becomes even more graceful with time.

I am also in awe of the strength of the material. It is not readily breakable or weak, especially when used in outdoor furniture or facade panels; rather, it strengthens with the passage of time and day.

Its appearance and feel may require retouching in places of heavy use, and you may need to recoat it every few years to extend its aesthetic life, but its strength never diminishes. We therefore offer this service for interior or exterior cladding when the panels are shipped out of the factory.

**SS: Tell us about the genesis of Gomaads. What's next for Gomaads?**

**MSG:** Our first collection was table accessories because we wanted to create physical objects that completely disrupted the scale we were used to seeing— buildings. We developed products that were easy to carry and move, and less bulky. Gradually we shifted into lifestyle furniture and now have offerings at an urban design level as well—from pavers and street furniture to outdoor dustbins and walkway curbstones—all scales, under one roof.

**SS: What's the craziest thing you've made with concrete?**

**MSG:** It was the first piece we created when we began, fuelled by our limited knowledge on how to prepare moulds at the time. Little did we know that we were designing our signature bestseller, the award-winning clock— Twistik. It was cast in a CD (compact disc) case! We poured concrete inside a 6-inch-diameter plastic cover, and the result was stunning. Then added a small

twisted metal brightly coloured leg and clock gear. Because the base had a twisted leg, we termed the product a 'twistik'. It was a successful and enjoyable experiment. Thereafter, we mastered the art of making moulds and casting and are able to work with any and every crazy request by our clients.

**SS: What and who inspires you?**

**MSG:** Every day, the mundane always inspires as it poses beautiful challenges. It is motivating to address the basic issues with simple functionality for daily life.

Also, collaborations are inspiring. We have collaborated with a number of interesting studios and brands like IMAD, LDA, Brujin, Archohm, Outback Asia, Takshila, Mangrove Collective, AVA Architects, among others. The cool part is that while creating something, unknowingly one draws inspiration from the collaborator and comes up with something that is unique.

I usually find my fuel and dose of inspiration when I travel. Attending fairs, visiting modern architecture icons, always trigger and provoke the mind. Even larger brands like Hay & Muji, are able to carry a basic philosophy to the general audience. It is noteworthy.

**SS: Your view on the design scenario in India?**

**MSG:** The design scenario in India is happening. There are so many interesting things coming out of our country; there are designers who are changing the narrative by experimenting with things that one could not even have thought of five years back. When one attends a design event or skims through a magazine, one can see how more contemporary things are being designed and made in India. Thanks to COVID, our dependency on China has reduced and induced the Indian design fraternity to take the reins of quality production at scale and speed.

It's an unbelievably beautiful time to be in the design sector.

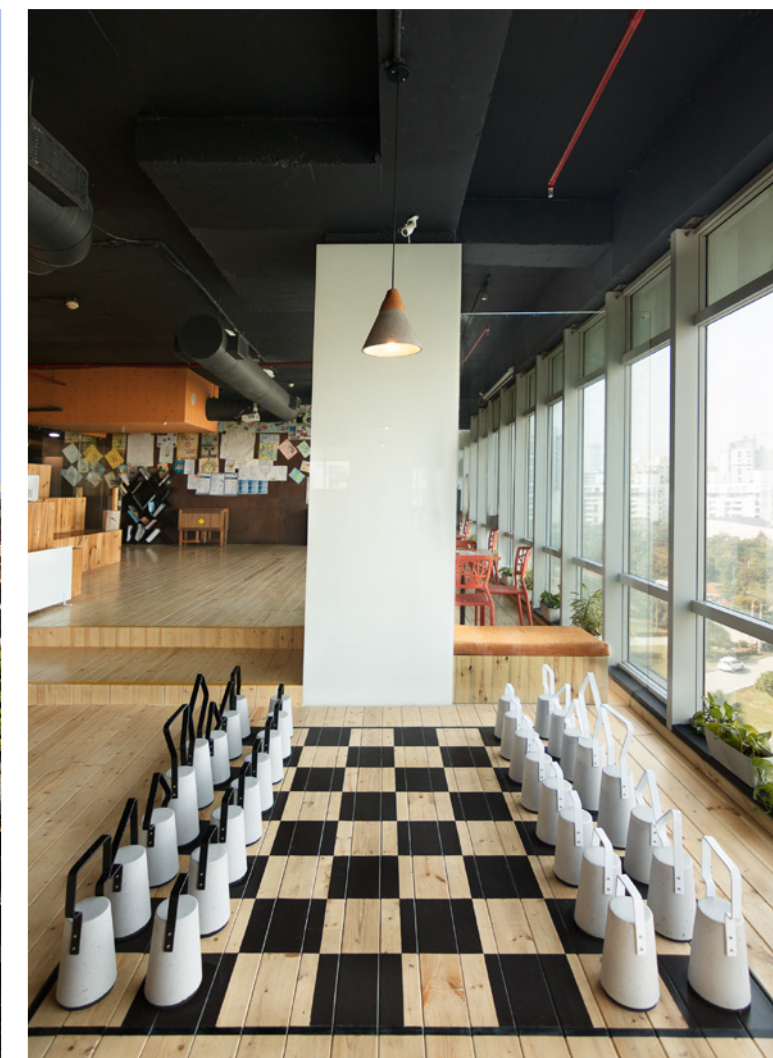
**SS: Which other material speaks to you? Why?**

**MSG:** Ceramic, wood, and until recently, even metal. They all work so beautifully yet so differently with concrete. They bring out the best in each other whenever used in tandem.

The contrast of the sheen and the brilliance of metal against the subtle and minimal concrete, is a combination to look out for. The neutrality and the minimalist properties of concrete enhances everything and anything we use with it.

**SS: Who would you like to collaborate with?**

**MSG:** I would love to collaborate with studios and designers who work in the aforementioned material palette, and/or





maybe even materials I am not even aware of, that are being worked with right now in the world. I feel like that the door should always be kept open.

**SS: You are married to an architect; you are surrounded by creatives and budding creatives all day long. Take us through your day. What does your day look like?**

**MSG:** Married to an architect who is so passionate has been a blessing on the work front for me. Undoubtedly, he has been instrumental in encouraging me to pursue my inquiry in concrete. Our life has a layer of architecture and design and it is fantastic to have explored and travelled extensively as a family for the same. His enthusiasm for architecture and design really rubs off on all those who come in contact with him and therefore, there is never a dull moment in our lives! I'm surrounded by aspiring and established designers who I meet all across India and overseas on our travels. Every day gets inspiring for me because I am exposed to the work of some amazing designers on a day-to-day basis. Surrounded by such colleagues I am amazed at how people around me have such easy solutions to big problems.

Nothing, I believe, can inspire me as much as individuals.

**SS: Take us through your design process.**

**MSG:** We aim to move beyond just the manufacturing of a concrete piece. Coming from a background of architecture, interiors and structure, I think we now have the ability to offer solutions beyond the expected. As we grow and shift into a bigger facility, we now have the ability to create and manufacture all pieces in-house giving us the ability to tweak the design down to the smallest detail as per the client's requirement.

When we had first started out, we often used to outsource some of the patterns and mold making to specialized professionals, however with our ever growing of almost 45 people, we are well equipped to handle the process through all stages— designing the pattern, creating a mold, casting, curing, packing and now even installing. Every day we come closer to achieving the dream of creating a one stop shop for all things concrete.

We are now more than open for other designers and architects who would want us to create designs and patterns that they have come up with. It's a great high getting to work with such people and help bring their dreams to reality. We try to keep our interventions in these cases to a minimum, only stepping in during the shop drawing process and during the finishing stages, where some minor changes would need to be

done while demolishing a piece. We are always happy to step in and aid anyone interested in this process, through design to even helping in cutting the costs for a piece.

**SS: What do you do when you are not designing?**

**MSG:** I love to be around people. I am a people's person, I feel alive meeting new people and old friends, catching up with them and listening to their stories. For me there is nothing better than being in the company of the people who keep me warm and happy.

My husband has always enjoyed traveling, and I think he has transferred that to me. Any opportunity that I can get to travel, both with or without him, I grab it. It's always so fascinating to go to new places and see new things, all the while interacting with people who you meet there. I feel like everybody you meet in life teaches you something, and as cliché as it may sound, we never meet somebody who's a waste of our time. I firmly believe that some people come into your life to give you lessons, and some to give you joy, and it's essential to meet both spectrums.

A lot of my time also goes into music, I think a day without music is a day wasted. The biggest stress buster for me is driving while listening to music and singing at the top of my voice, and just having a great time all by yourself. Music is something which has been a very integral part of my day.

**SS: How would you describe your style?**

**MSG:** Minimal. Solving a problem without the clutter, with the least (not the easiest) amount of resources. The saying goes that it is so difficult to be simple. This is our absolute quest. You can make it function by adding 10,000 things, but can you make it work by removing 9,800 things?

**SS: Design to you is...**

**MSG:** Design is something that makes you smile and warms your heart, even if you don't express it out loud. The most appealing feature of the design is its simplicity.

**SS: Three things you can't live without.**

**MSG:** Most important to me would be time alone. I think it's very important to sometimes leave everything and do your own thing. It is okay to tell yourself that I can't do this today, and let some things go.

The family and support system that I have built around me, is another thing that I absolutely cannot do without.

Lastly, my relationship with music—that helps me to zone out as and when. ✚

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***My dream project would be to one day have a store which provides a comprehensive solution for anything and everything that can be done for a space, be it a house or an office. I would like for it to cover everything ranging from flooring, walls, tiles, furniture, and maybe someday even the ceiling from inside.”***

—MALAVIKA SINGH GUPTA, Co-Founder, Gomaads

# AARTI AGGARWAL: *Crafting Stories in Wood*



**Seema Sreedharan (SS): How did design happen to you?**

**Aarti Aggarwal (AA):** The seeds were sown very early in life. While I was growing up, there were always carpenters in the backyard. It was fascinating to watch logs of wood turn into beautiful pieces. There were moments when I would pick hammer, nails and few pieces of wood and try and put them together in strange ways.

**SS: Your journey so far...**

**AA:** I grew up in a small town in Haryana. After graduating from Lady Shri Ram College, New Delhi, the next logical step was to do an MBA and then sit behind a desk for eight to ten hours a day for the rest of my life. The idea was not appealing at all. I decided to pursue design instead. I got through University of Arts, London where I studied domestic design. My time in London changed the way I looked at things. Life was one endless possibility. I came back to India worked for two years and then went to the Danish Skole of Design, Denmark. The course in Copenhagen taught me the intricacies of the craft and importance of detail.

**SS: Did you always want to be a designer?**

**AA:** I don't remember wanting to be anything as a kid. The first recollection is of wanting to be a designer.

**SS: Your first project?**

**AA:** My first project was to design a cot for my to-be born niece. This is what initiated me into children's design.

**SS: Your fascination with chairs. Tell us more.**

**AA:** The fascination was with Scandinavian design, and after doing the masters I realised that making a perfect chair is one of the toughest projects. The ergonomics, slope of the back, height of the armrest and the seat, the relationship between the two, the height of the back, etc— to get all of it right in one go is not an easy task. No wonder all of us have a favourite. Hence, the need to study chairs.

**SS: Who and what inspires you?**

**AA:** There is no dearth of inspiration. A need, a question, a shape anything can inspire me to design a new product or a full collection.

**SS: Three things you love about your profession?**

**AA:** 1. Every day is a new day, with a different set of challenges and different rewards. We don't know the meaning of the word boring.  
2. The entire process from drafting board to a tangible product is exhilarating.  
3. The different people one meets from peers to designers in other fields, clients and the collaborations, and the endless learning.

**SS: Three things you can't live without?**

**AA:** My pencil and paper, a book to read and a good cup of coffee.

**SS: What inspired your brand name Knock on Wood?**

**AA:** Our love for wood and the connotation of the name and the pun on the craft. It seemed extremely befitting.

**SS: Which has been your most challenging project?**

**AA:** Maybe the next one...

**SS: Design to you is...**

**AA:** A way of life... not a theory or philosophy but an integral part of a person's everyday life.

**SS: Your definition of good design.**

**AA:** Something that feels just right. It has to be obvious and simple.

**SS: What according to you is the India's design identity?**

**AA:** We are making one. We are still considered a country where handicraft happens. We still need to prove our design prowess.

**SS: Why is wood your chosen material?**

**AA:** Wood has a mind of its own. It breaths, grows, shrinks. It demands respect and invites a crafts person to know its secrets before using it. I love the challenge it presents, I love the character, grain, the smell...I basically love everything about wood.

**SS: What is your dream project?**

**AA:** A chair.

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**Knock-down products. The pandemic has changed the way people purchase things. Furniture was something the entire family went to a shop to purchase but now it's bought online. Our focus is to make products that can be bought knock-down, put together easily and have the same look, feel and quality of a store-bought fixed product.**”

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**SS: What do you think of collaborations in the world of design? Who would you like to collaborate with?**

**AA:** Collaborations lead to expansion. Expansion of minds, personalities and practices. Working with designers from other streams helps learning of new techniques and materials. Among the many I would like to collaborate with are Stephanie Housley (Coral and Tusk), Nicholas Lees (Ceramic), and if I were lucky enough to be in the same room as Tadao Ando.

**SS: What has changed in the past 20 years?**

**AA:** I have cleaned up my act, yet remained quirky. I have become a firm believer of cutting out the unnecessary detail. But love for craft and the excitement remains the same.

**SS: What next?**

**AA:** Exports under our own banner. We want to be the

‘Made in India for the world’ story.

**SS: What are you currently working on?**

**AA:** Knock-down products. The pandemic has changed the way people purchase things. Furniture was something the entire family went to a shop to purchase but now it's bought online. Our focus is to make products that can be bought knock-down, put together easily and have the same look, feel and quality of a store-bought fixed product.

**SS: What do you think needs to change in the way Indian design is perceived?**

**AA:** We have no dearth of talent in our country. A few steps like a better design education and industry interactions will go a long way in shaping the next generation of designers. While design is a serious business, it will help if the designers don't take themselves so seriously. ✚



Man Friday

Translation

Allies

Valet

Three wise men

Pristine Lotus



Sutli



Ketch