

currents

In India, it's IKEA without the assembly

By INDRANI SEN
CONTRIBUTOR

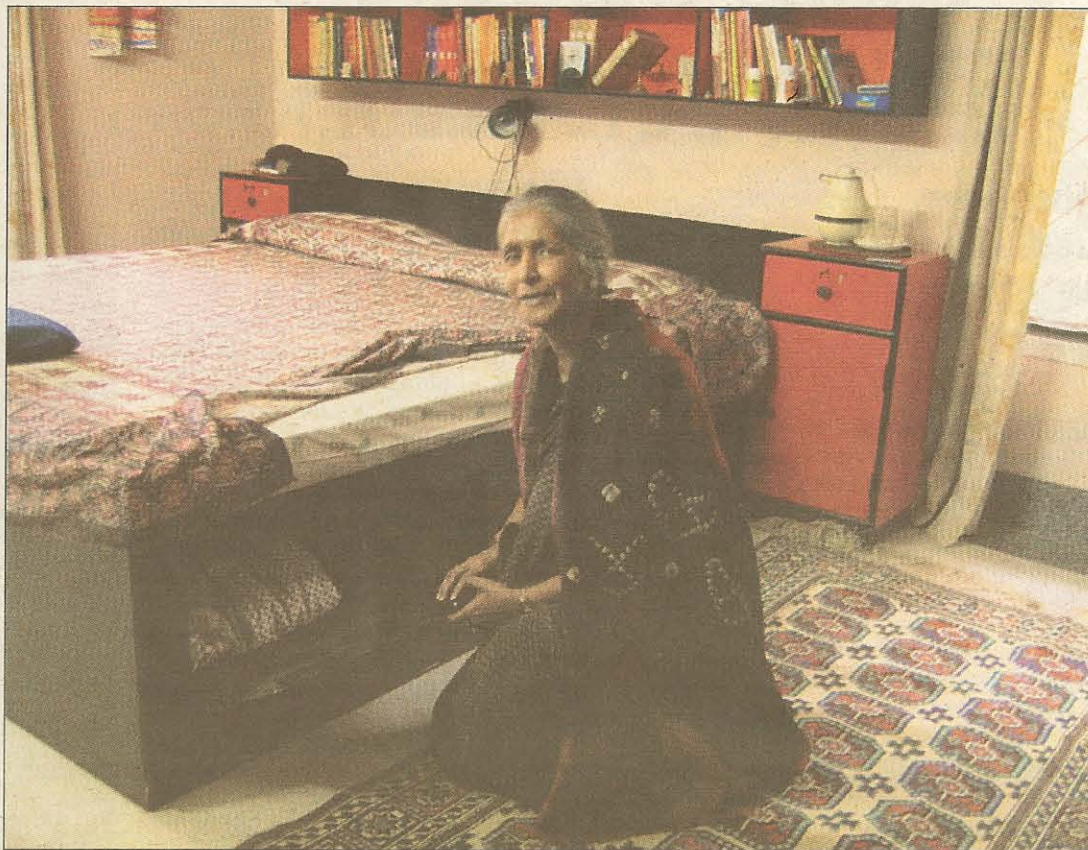
CALCUTTA, INDIA

Stop at a traffic light in Delhi or Bombay (Mumbai), and magazine hawkers descend, pressing against your car window a fan of Bollywood gossip rags, newsweeklies, and ... the IKEA catalog?

India, like most of Asia, has no IKEA outlet. The Swedish superstore, known for its inexpensive yet stylish home furnishings, has swept across Europe and North America — but not here. Indians who buy the catalogs aren't interested in mail order. Instead, they do what middle-class Indians have always done — have local carpenters make the furniture.

"Whenever we think of doing something for the house, one of the things we always hope we can get our hands on are a few IKEA catalogs," says Arundhati Ray, a consultant who works with non-governmental organizations in Calcutta. "It's shameless pirating," Ms. Ray adds, showing off an elegant wrought-iron chandelier she commissioned from a local artisan, based on an IKEA picture. Ray also had dining-room chairs and a CD rack copied, though the rack now holds various spices and masalas.

Locally made knockoffs of IKEA pieces are ubiquitous in the homes of professionals in India's rapidly modernizing big cities. Educated and westernized, many of them prefer IKEA's minimalist Scandinavian style to homespun Indian handiwork or the clunky



'I like the big colonial furniture fine in big houses, but I don't like them in modern houses.'

— Tripti Bose (pictured at right) in Santiniketan, India. She hired a local carpenter to make her furniture based on photos in IKEA catalogs.

design

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Getting furniture made from scratch is nothing new in India, where labor is cheap and mass-produced products are often low quality. But the changing aesthetic reflects changes in the lifestyles of middle-class Indians over the past decade. International companies opening offices and call centers in India, combined with astronomical growth in the information-technology industry, have created a lucrative urban job market for a tech-

(even with its bargain prices), and it's affordable for most middle-class Indians.

For the richest Indians, IKEA has become a stylistic stepping-stone toward higher-end European design, says Vikram Phadke, co-owner of Evoluzione, a Madras store that specializes in imported furniture.

Three years ago, when Mr. Phadke opened his store, \$500 was the most retailers in India dared charge for any piece of furniture, he says. Now, Evoluzione has nurtured a small but growing clientele that

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Locally made knockoffs of IKEA pieces are ubiquitous in the homes of professionals in India's rapidly modernizing big cities. Educated and westernized, many of them prefer IKEA's minimalist Scandinavian style to homespun Indian handiwork or the clunky British colonial pieces they grew up with.

"It's the need to break away from the traditional," says Gita Rana, owner of a high-end home accessories company based in Bangalore. "IKEA furniture represents modern design. It's easy to maintain.... It's the



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Instead of living at home with parents until marriage, many young Indians are moving into their own apartments, postponing marriage, and even cohabiting. Real estate is booming and city living is getting more expensive, so many find themselves squeezed into tight quarters with a need for modern, space-saving furniture.

"I like the big colonial furniture fine in big houses, but I don't like them in modern houses," says Tripti Bose, a retired psychologist who divides her time between Washington, D.C., and India. "If something's so ornate and heavy, it better go in a palace."

When Ms. Bose built her Indian house 10 years ago, she cut pictures from an IKEA catalog and brought them to a carpenter, who furnished her entire two-bedroom bungalow with pieces modeled after them.

King-size beds provide extra storage with built-in drawers. A wall-sized wardrobe has closets, shelves, shoe racks, and a dressing table. A desk, bookshelves, tables, and other pieces of furniture were made with plywood and painted in Bose's favorite colors — red and black. "The design is IKEA, but this is all pure wood," she says, referring to IKEA's use of particle board.

The price was right — about \$2,250 for everything. That would be an unimaginable cost for the 80 percent of Indians who live on \$2 a day, but it's a fraction of what IKEA would sell all that furniture for in the West

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Three years ago, when Mr. Phadke opened his store, \$500 was the most retailers in India dared charge for any piece of furniture, he says. Now, Evoluzione has nurtured a small but growing clientele that wants the best in European design and will spend \$10,000 to \$15,000 on a sofa.

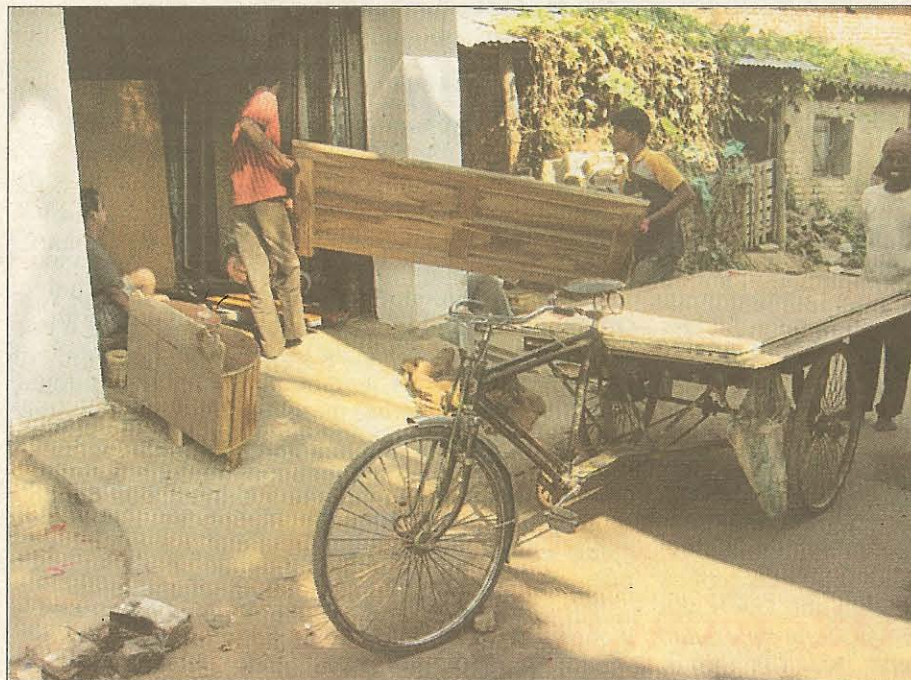
"In the last two years, it's a sea change in attitude, in purchasing power," Phadke says.

IKEA is aware of the copying, but has no plans to open stores here. "We take copying of our products seriously," says IKEA spokeswoman Tracey Kelly in a prepared statement. But, she adds, "We are happy that the Indian people like IKEA design."

Part of the reason IKEA doesn't have plans to open stores in India, she says, is India's strict licensing laws for foreign-owned companies.

IKEA, which started in a small Swedish village in 1943, now has stores in 33 countries with nearly \$19 billion in sales last year. But its retail operations are confined to the world's wealthier countries — mostly in Europe, North America, and Australia. With its reliance on mass marketing and efficient transportation of its assembly-required products, the IKEA model probably would not work in India or other poor countries, says Abhijit Banerjee, an economics professor at MIT. "Its prices would not be a bargain for most Indians, and those who could afford real IKEA products are too few."

For now, Indians say they are happy to hire locals to make knockoffs — and avoid the hassle of putting furniture together. If you buy from IKEA, Bose says, "then who's going to assemble it for you?"



PHOTOS BY INDRANI SEN

BICYCLE PICKUP: Carpenters in Bolpur, India, near Calcutta, make furniture for clients based on photos in IKEA catalogs. There are no IKEA outlets here.