

PIRANHA MAN

Photographs by BANDEEP SINGH

Cannibals are welcome to his home as long as they have fins. SHEFALEE VASUDEV meets the man who breeds and breathes fish.

Sounds simple. It isn't. Sounds fluid.

It is. Aqua-crazy, 35-year-old Faiz Dadarkar breeds and breathes fish. Ever since he was a small boy, he says, he wanted fish. The most unusual and exotic fish to keep at home in large aquariums so that he could give them a life—plenty of swimming room, happy vibes and an environment that was,

if he could help it, better than their natural habitat. Ten years ago, when the UK-returned Dadarkar, now a successful business consultant, came to live with his parents in Mumbai, he got himself a small fish tank. "After every five days I would bring in yet another tank and soon I had more than five,"

he says. But before the number of tanks could become too much for their Mumbai house to hold, Dadarkar left for New York to work there. "Oh, I kept lots of fish there too, as well as a ball python," he says fondly.

Now, at his chic Jaipur home, with its deep mahogany coloured wood work, modern and minimalist design, a high ceiling with an imposing slim

window that travels up to the roof, Dadarkar's fish seem more than happy in their awesome tanks. He dotes on his two dogs, a Great Dane and a Golden Retriever, brought up like two spoiled children, but his fish have literally gilled him. They live in luxury with a quiet but perceivable sense of style—much like their master. Like all other things that adorn this striking

house, they too have been carefully handpicked. Indulgent Dadarkar, an articulate man with a racy sense of humour, treats them like royalty. Unless distracted by the sight of his lovely wife Nikita, a glowing young woman with a dazzling smile, he can gaze at, chat and laugh with his fish endlessly. He brings them food and medicine from across the world and makes sure

that they don't get into petty fights or politics inside the tanks. "It's not only about fish, it is about the kind of fish," insists Dadarkar, emphasising that these are not fish you can find just about anywhere.

Dadarkar has chosen and imported them from different parts of the world—South America, Africa, Singapore, Thailand and wherever it may be—and reared them at home, altering their life and lifestyle forever. He has paid not only for the best fish but also for their comfort and luxury during their journey to their new home. He knows that most of the fish food he gets from the US is perishable and may not last till it reaches his waterbabies, but he takes his chances and more often than not, the fish feast on American tetra flakes and frozen algae.

The fish aren't complaining. Even the 5-6 silver blue piranhas look handsome and beguilingly harmless as they swirl around in their sleek private tank. Piranhas, cannibalistic fish known to reduce their prey to bones in a matter of seconds, have been put into a smaller aquarium with a tastefully done aqua bottom piled with orange, black and white coloured pebbles. They are fed beef heart painstakingly minced by Dadarkar's old and loyal domestic help. "Earlier, we put the piranhas with the others, but in a matter of minutes they ate the eels and the tiger sharks," says Dadarkar a bit ruefully.

Not every fish enthusiast will keep piranhas. Their notoriety as aggressive and bloodthirsty fish has been traced to US President Theodore Roosevelt's 1914 book *Through The Brazilian Wilderness*, in which he described seeing shoals of piranhas attacking a bleeding cow that was thrown into the water by a tour guide. Throw a human body inside a piranha tank and a skeleton is all that will be left. Nikita reacts like most people would: she doesn't like the piranhas. For the others, she has obviously developed a very soft corner. For someone who never ever thought of fish till she got married to Dadarkar three years ago, it is amusing to hear Nikita share funny

Dadarkar prides in pampering exotic fish

Dadarkar, wife
Nikita with their
aquarium

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Faiz Dadarkar

anecdotes about her husband and his other love.

Dadarkar may be deeply in love with his fish but he also understands fish politics and respects their hierarchical concerns. Which is why one of his larger tanks, a huge aquarium with more than 850 litres of water and one of the most exotic and colourful collection of fish inside,

has been filled with three layers of fish. Colour, power and the natural habits of these aquatic busybodies determine these layers. There are African black ghosts, cichlids like the firemouth, paradise fish, blue danio, tinfoil barbs, albino catfish, blue botia, tiger loaches and monodactylus besides snails living in what is indisputably an upmarket aquatic neigh-

bourhood. “If you choose different layers of fish keeping their natural instincts in mind, the tank looks full and beautiful and the fish are not frantically fighting or hustling each other,” says Dadarkar, adding that he earlier had a whole lot of guppies and zebra sharks.

Now, with due concern for a pregnant angelfish, he has put her with her male spouse in another tank and a Siamese fighter in a big vase that holds a blooming bamboo plant. “Angelfish have 1 per cent chance of survival out of water, but my fish don’t die. They are bigger and better than in the wild,” he says. His angelfish are truly angelic—agile and cheerful.

The inevitable question whether Dadarkar eats fish does not zap him. “Not at home but I love to eat fish when I am travelling, particularly in Mumbai,” he says without batting an eyelid.

Back home, Dadarkar’s dedication to the fish is not enough. A tank like this costs him about Rs 5 lakh annually to maintain. That includes bringing in the fish from the home country, feeding them, giving them good living and nursing them if they fall ill. A reverse osmosis unit as well as a water-softening unit have been installed inside his home because Jaipur has hard water which is not good for the fish. The smaller tank, home to the piranhas, costs Dadarkar between Rs 1 lakh and Rs 2 lakh to maintain. All the tanks put together contain more than 1,500 litres of water. “All the money put into this is not just for the cost of the fish, it is for the way they are bred and brought up,” says Dadarkar. “Both a Ferrari and a tractor will take you to office but it’s about the difference,” he adds.

The difference is stark as Dadarkar refuses to fish for compliments on an enviable collection of beautiful bonsai plants and guitars from different parts of the world.

It is without his aquariums that he would be a fish out of water. 🌸