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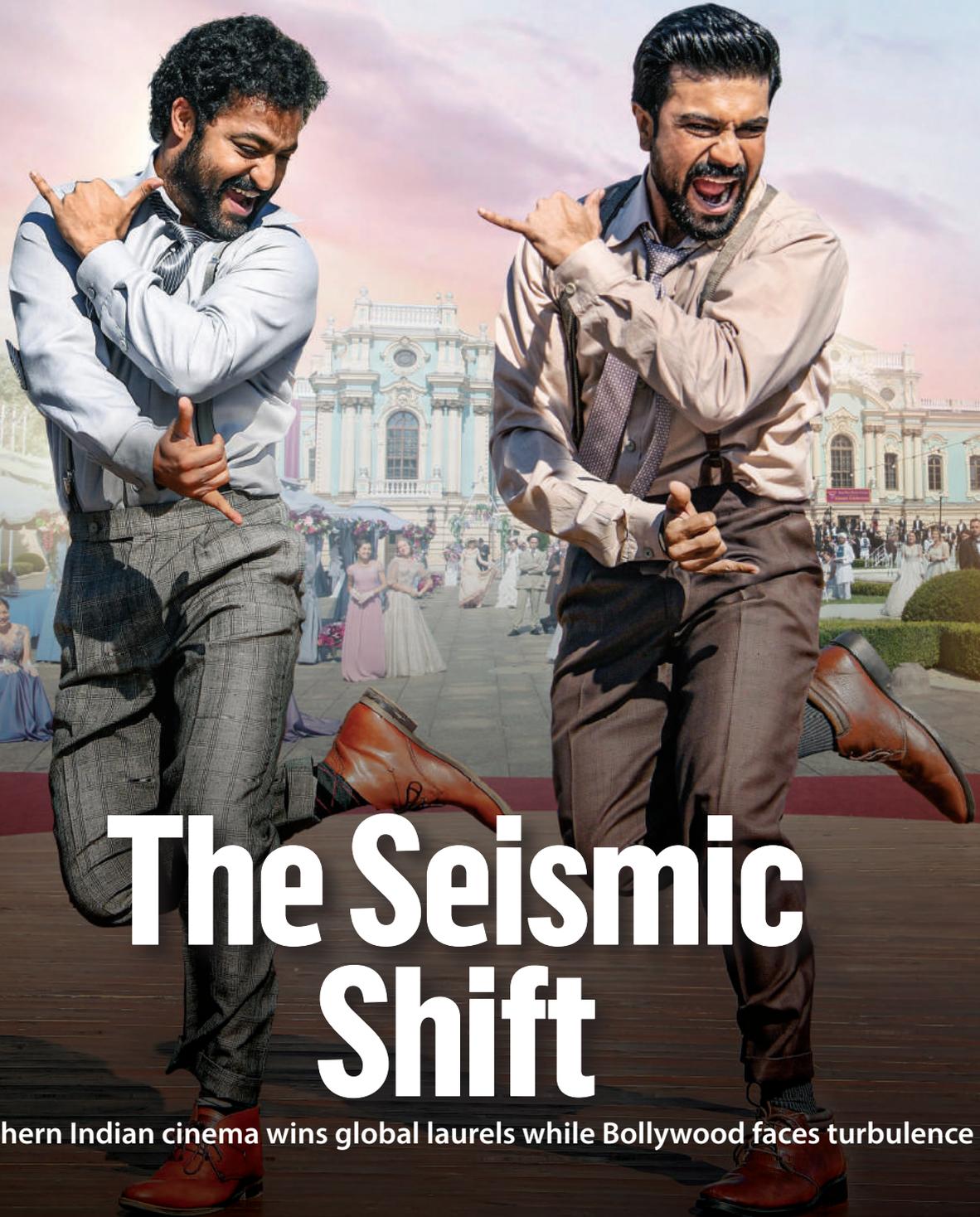
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The India Connection



The Seismic Shift

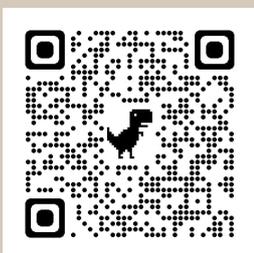
Southern Indian cinema wins global laurels while Bollywood faces turbulence



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The India Connection

January 2023 | Volume 2 | Issue 1

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LETTER FROM THE PUBLISHER

Cinema Embraces New Paradigms

The Indian diaspora and India have shown great resilience in 2022 and broken new ground in many areas. And experts predict that India will lead the way in 2023.

Our cover story this month is about the new trends sweeping across the Indian cinema. It has been one of the unheralded sources of India's growing soft power in the world. Film critic Saibal Chatterjee takes a hard look at the churn and the change in the film industry, where the boundaries between Mumbai-based mainstream commercial Hindi cinema and the cinema in Indian languages such as Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Gujarati have been broken, and today when we talk of Indian cinema it includes all the films made in different parts of India in different languages.

Kumud Das writes on the exciting development of how the Indian rupee could become a significant player in global trade as many countries are trying to break away from the pervasive dominance of the US dollar. Akash Pharande writes on what homes NRIs prefer to invest in in India, and the effect Covid had on their preferences.

In the lifestyle section, we look at that indefinable thing that marks a place and makes a celebration, a get-together, a drink, a satisfying experience, which can only be called the 'soul connection'. We rarely look beyond the proverbial big fat Indian wedding to the person who sets the ball rolling, as it were—the matchmaker. The surprise is that the matchmaker is thriving outside India too, making things happen. Rukma Saluja writes in Perspective on the many issues that should be a matter of concern for everybody. A sober think piece as we enter 2023.

We wish readers of *Pravasi Indians* an enjoyable and exciting New Year!

CEO and Publisher

We would love to hear from you. We also invite diaspora members to write for us and share their experiences

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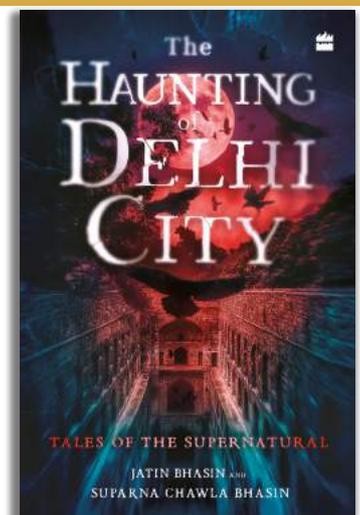


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A HOTSPOT FOR EXPATS

The UAE has never reported any kind of ethnic tension among the 200 nationalities that have made it their home, thanks to the nation's administrative network, and its unbridled support to the liberal mixing of expatriates, says **SHAADAAB S. BAKTH**

I used to think that courting money was being greedy. I was wrong. What is wrong is taking the wrong path.

We should actually work on making money because real enjoyment lies in a money-driven life and not in the abdication of it.

The abdication of flesh-and-blood enjoyment is healthy, but it doesn't satiate the taste buds of a fulsome life, which is desired by all, but admitted by some.

Because somewhere all of us are more into excess than discipline, into youthful irreverence than adult ethicality and into

stolen hours of coffee breaks than formal candlelight dinners.

That's not a stray thought. It is a conviction born of years of experience mixed with a raft of painful physical problems and a regular intake of medicines to remain afloat in an orchestration that is sounder than music.

Some decades ago I joined a company in the United Arab Emirates as part of my search for a comfortable life. Or in search of things like high-end washing machines, as a wealthy colleague had taunted. I wanted to protest, but by then I knew that rich men and beautiful women had to be allowed their space otherwise we could lose ours.

The day of my departure is something I will never forget. I was completely broken, but very hopeful. I was flying to a country which was well on its way to emulative progress. I had seen international cricket matches being played on its soil.

Eleven cars, including three taxis, came to see me off. I was leaving my mother and I was leaving my love—Kolkata. I was so miserable that I felt like skipping the flight, but couldn't have done that because I knew, and I know, that destiny doesn't give our types many chances to regulate our wishes.

By way of inspiration I was armed with my belief that when the very core of existence—life—was ephemeral, lesser issues shouldn't bother us beyond a point. Triumph or turmoil should be taken in one's stride.

In less than six hours' time I was in the UAE. I had heard great stories about the place and the roads being very hygienic and unquestionably clean and now I was seeing them. They appeared to me like a park for children. No hawkers, no cattle, no stray dogs, no political processions, extremely disciplined traffic, and of course, heavily sanitised air-conditioned public transport. Having spent months in Mumbai and having been raised in Kolkata, the entire country was bound to have a very different kind of an appeal for me. And it did.

It is absolutely understandable that Sharjah was recently declared a very healthy city. It became the healthiest city in the Middle East and Africa region with an impressive score of 88 percent, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO). The Sharjah Healthy City programme commenced in April 2012, and was registered with the WHO regional healthy city network. This initiative was part of the progressive vision of His Highness Dr Sheikh Sultan Bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, Member of the Supreme Council and Ruler of Sharjah.

It is not without reason that some of the latest surveys have also given high marks to the Emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai. A survey of 10 cities by Bayt.com, titled "Top Cities in the Middle East and North Africa", has placed Dubai and Abu Dhabi among the first two cities to live in. The ranking was

After nearly two years of working together, a Muslim woman colleague walked up to me and asked, 'Are you a Muslim, Shaadaab?' This clearly indicates that the communal amalgamation in the country is so natural and routine that the thought of my religion didn't even cross her mind—how lovely.

mainly based on economic, environmental, standard of living, socio-cultural and entrepreneurship factors.

The UAE's march of progress at the international level didn't stop at that. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) adopted December 2 as World Future's Day to coincide with the National Day of the UAE. World Future's Day, which takes place on this date every year, is an invitation to the countries of the world to embrace the future and develop their capabilities in the fields of foresight, readiness and proactive policy-making to ensure sustainable development for future generations.

The choice of December 2 is a sign of appreciation for the UAE's global role over the past 50 years to imagine and create the future, as well as its exceptional experience in anticipating economic, industrial and social change and its high readiness in future sectors.

The factors that brought home accolades for the UAE and the cities could be introduced, nurtured to their distinguishable health and fruitfully executed because of a highly responsive security system. The state-of-the-art security network can match the best in the world.

The safety that women, girls and children enjoy in the country has to be experienced to be believed. Groups of girls, in traditional and latest Western outfits, and children playing and picnicking in parks and on sea beaches well past midnight, is a common sight in the country.

A drive from Abu Dhabi to Dubai to Sharjah to Ajman to Fujairah to Umm Al Quwain to Ras Al Khaimah will make amply clear the safe environment we are talking about. The peaceful nation has no place for amorous outlaws.

The country displays a great sense of ethnic balance too. It wouldn't be out of place to mention that after nearly two years of working together, a Muslim woman colleague walked up to me and asked, "Are you a Muslim, Shaadaab?" This clearly indicates that the communal amalgamation in the country is so natural and routine that the thought of my religion didn't even cross her mind—how lovely.

In these 51 years the UAE has never ever reported any kind of ethnic tension among the 200 nationalities that have made the UAE their home. Some of them frequent the churches that dot the nation and some the temples. A beautiful temple was recently inaugurated in the capital.

It's not the laws that keep things under control because every modern country has laws against discrimination. Credit should go to the nation's administrative network, its unbridled support to the liberal mixing of expatriates and, of course, the ethos of tolerance ingrained in the leadership's psyche. The country is indeed living out Islam.

Not only does the nation believe in looking after those who walk right below its flag, but also those who live far away from it.

The UAE, under the leadership of President His Highness Sheikh Mohamed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and with the support of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, and the respected Emirati Rulers, believes in improving the lot of the poor across the universe. The country flies across the world aid worth millions of dollars each year.

Well, my experience has been fabulous and very healthy and I could write home about it daily, but love is love and nothing can take its place. And I love Kolkata. ■



Business

LEVERAGING THE RUPEE

The India-Russia arrangement to trade through rupee-rouble exchange is encouraging others like Sri Lanka to join the rupee trade settlement mechanism

BY KUMUD DAS

The writer is a Mumbai-based senior business journalist.

Russia and India have recently mutually agreed to drop all use of the US dollar and euro in bilateral settlements and replace it with rupee-rouble trade.

The idea is to promote the national currencies in trade between the two countries. True, there are challenges in realising this on the ground. However, if the roadblocks are removed it will help in several ways. For one, the rupee will become an international currency. Secondly, it will boost trade between the two countries.

Above all, by doing this, both countries will be able to do away with their dependency on the US dollar for trade.

What are the implications involved?

Even though the transition to national currencies is a fundamental decision, there is a need to strike a balance. The reason is the fact that the sales volume of Russian products in India is five times higher than the reverse.

As of now, the rupee is only a partially convertible currency, which has so far made it unattractive for use in foreign trade settlements. However, things are likely to progress faster in a positive direction. If all goes well, the Government of India may contemplate making the rupee fully convertible in the forthcoming

As of now, the rupee is only a partially convertible currency, which has so far made it unattractive for use in foreign trade settlements. However, things are likely to progress faster in a positive direction.

Budget, which is slated for presentation on February 1. Once it happens, the rupee in a full float model will acquire international currency status.

Hariharan M.V., retired DGM, SBI, puts it this way: "If many small banks like UCO and United Bank of India are able to save the government and transact with Russians by trading in the rupee, then the pressure of cross-currency on the rupee will come down. Another important thing is that the rupee will become very similar to the existing international currencies. Currently, the rupee is not fully floating. It is only partially convertible at the moment.

The government has taken the decision and it may be announced in the forthcoming Budget that the rupee is ready for full float. Then it will become an international currency. If India is able to convince Russia that its domestic purchasing power is so strong that it could withstand any attack on the currency, the rupee will become a symbol of an Atmanirbhar Bharat."

The good news is that six Indian banks have so far received permission from the Indian government to open correspondent accounts in rupees with Russian banks to facilitate bilateral trade and arrange rupee-rouble 'Vostro' account transactions. Russia and India bilateral trade turnover is also growing rapidly. It assumes significance in view of the fact that India is currently negotiating a Free Trade Agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union—a deal which includes Russia.

Bilateral trade growth, however, is not just a result of cheap oil due to the Ukraine conflict. At the end of 2021, growth was already running at 46.5 percent in non-oil trade. Here it is important to note that for a major chunk of crude oil consumption, India is dependent on Russia at present.

Again, more than 70 percent of India's imported oil comes via Gujarat, meaning cooperation is increasing besides the development of oil refining and petrochemicals, and access to the re-sale markets of the Asia-Pacific. Cooperation in this area will open doors for related Russian industries.

Other subsidiary industries are also taking off here—Indian and Russian shipbuilders are constructing new tankers, some of them with Arctic capabilities, again at the Gujarat shipbuilding yards, and cooperating in the leasing and construction of large bulk crude carriers.

If one looks at the results of the first half of the year, the trade turnover between Russia and India grew to \$11 billion, and there were already plans to increase this to \$30 billion by 2025.

Now, have a look at these statistics. India's middle class formed

31 percent of the total population in the fiscal year 2021-22, about 500 million people. The number of "super rich", on the other hand, rose to 1.8 million in 2020-21. Maharashtra was India's richest state, followed by Delhi and Gujarat. The fundamental impact on the economy of Russia will be the growth of opportunities for exporting its products to other countries, including India.

Anil Kumar Bhansali, head of treasury, Finrex Treasury Advisors, says, "India's crude oil imports will be to the tune of \$180 billion in FY22-23. Of which we are importing about 20 percent from Russia. This is about \$36 billion. If this \$36 billion is settled in rupees, it will reduce our trade deficit by that much. However, our exports will also be invoiced in rupees so that will also come down. But if we are able to do this with oil exporting countries, it will surely reduce pressure on the dollar. We will not be requiring the dollars that we normally require for our oil purchases."

There will be long-term implications as we will not be dependent on the dollar for our requirements and the pressure on one currency, which forms 80 percent of our currency requirement, will come down. This is not possible in a year or two but is something long-term. It is more like the barter system earlier. This appears one of the biggest changes that could happen in the next decade with most countries adopting this system to come out of dependence on one or two currencies, says Bhansali.

Yet another challenge is the fact that over the past five years, the rupee has fallen by about 30 percent in value—partly due to export of goods to Russia from India, as well as an increase in Russian investment in Indian real assets.

Various other schemes are being tried: the System for Transfer of Financial Messages (SPFS), the Russian analogue to SWIFT, which allows transfers to bypass sanctions and restrictions, and the introduction of the Russian MIR card system could be utilised.

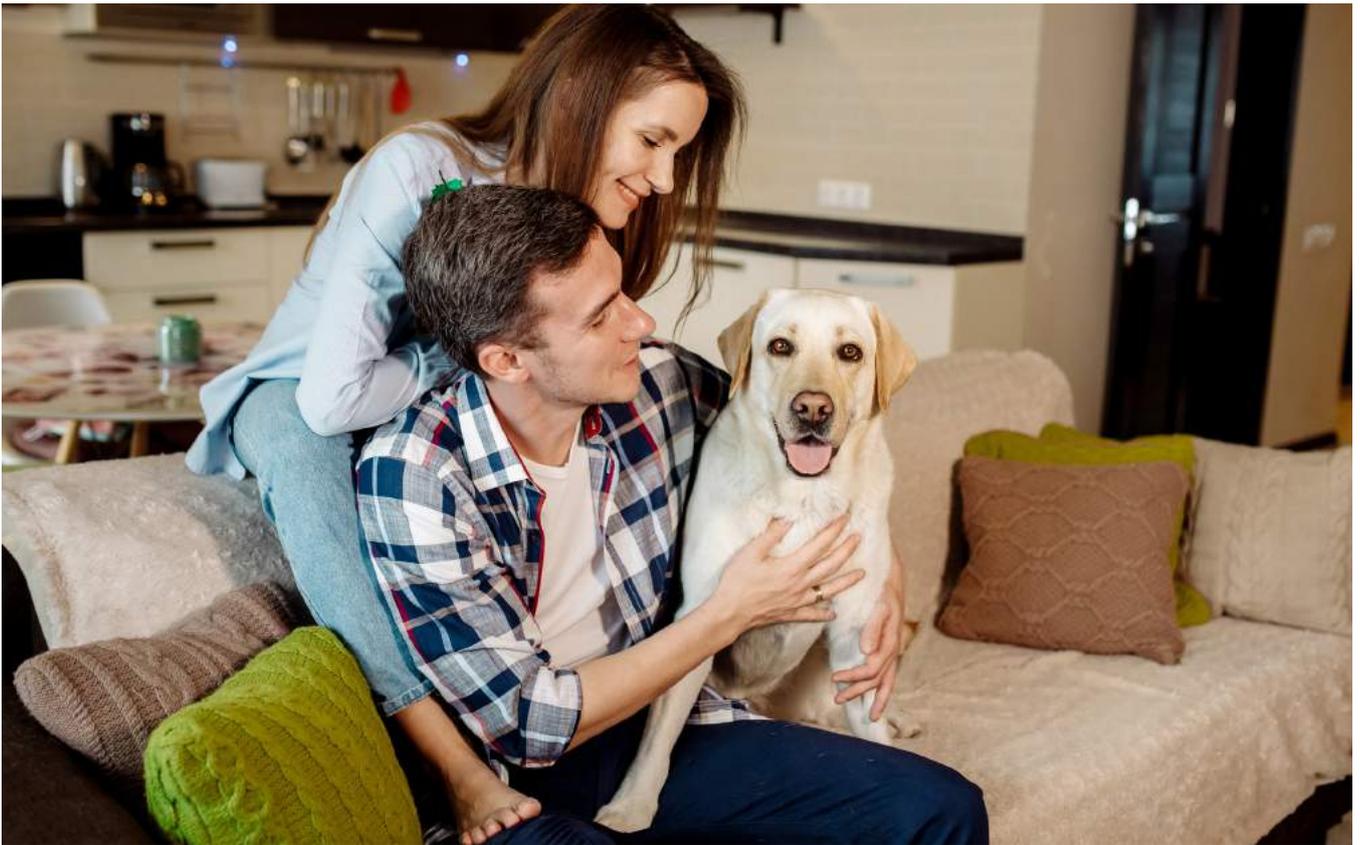
In any event, the use of the US dollar and the euro in foreign economic activity is decreasing as a result. The share of the dollar in global trade decreased by 40 percent and of the euro by 30 percent in 2022. Growth calculations are in alternative currencies, including the Chinese yuan, Turkish lira, Iranian rial, Indian rupee and other national currencies.

Using India's rupee to trade is being taken up by other countries. Sri Lanka has agreed to use it to trade with Russia, with Sri Lankan banks also reportedly opening special rupee trading accounts called Special Vostro Rupee Accounts or SVRA for trading in the Indian rupee.

This comes days after the Government of India said it is looking at ways to bring countries that are particularly short of dollars into the ambit of the Indian rupee trade settlement mechanism. The Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL) said it is awaiting Reserve Bank of India (RBI) approval to designate the Indian rupee as a foreign currency of Sri Lanka.

With the opening of Vostro accounts, people in Sri Lanka can now hold \$10,000 (8,26,823) in physical form. Also, Sri Lankans and Indians can use Indian rupees instead of US dollars for international transactions between each other. Sri Lanka also wants to buy inexpensive Russian oil and this structure will help.

India's energy needs to power its development are running at rates of 3 percent per annum in Stated Policies Scenario (STEPS) from now until 2030, according to the International Energy Agency (IEA). Russia is instrumental in this—meaning trade doors will continue to open as Russia is also looking for new markets to replace Western consumers. ■



MONEY MATTERS

WHAT HOMES NRIs WILL BUY IN 2023

They are looking for larger spaces equipped with smart home features along with health-centric amenities to balance their work and lifestyle requirements

BY AKASH PHARANDE

(The writer is Managing Director, Pharande Spaces, a leading real estate construction and development firm.)

NRIs are rightly seen as one of the most important buyer and investor segments in Indian residential real estate. They have always wielded considerable clout in the Indian housing market, but never more so than in the last three years.

A forecast issued by international property consultants JLL pegged the growth of the Indian real estate market at 12% - from \$13 billion to \$15 billion - in FY22. The consultants go on to state that NRI investors eyeing property in India will need to make timely moves if they want to cash in on the opportunity to turn their funds into lucrative investments.

Today, NRIs are young – predominantly tech-savvy millennials – and very much clued into the housing market back home. They can see through gimmicks and know what to look for. NRIs will drive a big chunk of housing sales in 2023; so, what are they looking for? Really nothing more or less than any other Indian.

The NRI Wish-list

Contrary to the incredible marketing gimmicks of yesteryears, NRIs share the same wish list in housing like other discerning Indian homebuyers. If they look for a more globally-aligned lifestyle, then not more so than the tech-savvy, well-informed homebuyers back home.

NRIs buy properties back home for one of two reasons:

1. As an investment for capital appreciation or rental income - in

which case, future buyers and current tenants are Indians with needs and expectations specific to India.

2. For their personal use once they return to India – in short, to live as Indians in India, with the same lifestyle expectations and local requirements.

This is not to say that their expectations have not changed, especially in the past couple of years. The Covid-19 pandemic was a wake-up call for all Indian homebuyers, resident and non-resident alike, and affected NRI home-buying choices. The perception of housing has fundamentally changed. Homes are no longer just where the heart lives but where health, safety, and wellbeing live – and, in many cases, where work takes place. In 2022, NRIs were buying bigger, better homes in bigger better projects. This trend will continue in 2023.

NRIs are not looking for the lowest price points, but the most spacious, safest, most comfortable, and most suitably located homes that their money can buy. What does this mean?

Larger Spaces for Work and Life

Many NRIs returning from abroad have remote work arrangements with their companies and require home offices. Those buying homes for investment know that India has accepted remote and hybrid work and that tenants and future buyers will expect office space at home.

According to a recent consumer sentiment survey by real estate consultants Anarock, 77% of the NRIs who participated in the poll stated a marked preference for bigger houses, with 23% looking to buy 4BHK flats. The survey received responses from NRIs currently living in the United States, Canada, various European countries, the Gulf countries, and various Asian countries.

Smart Home Features

The pandemic put the limelight on enabling technologies, including smart home features. However, while smart home features were primarily seen through the lens of increased comfort in the past, today they are also evaluated on the scales of safety and efficiency. Truly smart homes require less human intervention and support to run efficiently. This is still considered important at a time when memory of the destructive power of airborne viruses is still fresh.

Health-centric Amenities and Facilities

Space is the one thing that NRIs became accustomed to abroad that cannot be taken for granted in this crowded country. Space is the ultimate luxury in India, not only within our homes but also around them. The possibility of going for a bracing walk or jog, or pursue a sport in spacious, uncrowded surroundings is a must for the NRIs. Green open spaces and well-managed roads with sidewalks figure unflinchingly on every NRI's wish list.

A gymnasium on the premises used to be a take-it-or-leave-it feature in previous years. No longer. Working out in an unsecured public gym just a couple of years after public gyms were closed for obvious reasons is now unthinkable. Likewise, a hospital with a fully equipped emergency room nearby is not negotiable. Never has the possibility of timely medical attention become such a vital focus area than today.

Children's Safety

In post-pandemic times, the daily commute is still seen as Public Enemy #1, and not just for working individuals. The safety of their

children, regardless of age or current educational level, is a paramount concern for NRIs. Their regular trips to and from their education premises must be as short and secure as possible.

Daily Conveniences

Post-Covid-19, the desirability of a neighbourhood is directly proportional to how many conveniences can be accessed without breaking a sweat or burning hours and a tankful of petrol. Depending on where they live in a foreign country, many NRIs have benefited from a proactive local government to ensure a regular supply of groceries and daily staples to their homes.

This assurance is obviously not a given in India. Walkable distances are therefore a strong demand of the NRIs. They want to know what retail outlets and other day-to-day services are available in or near the project. Those looking at luxury homes will expect a well-oiled concierge service to be available.

Rational Prices

When it comes to how NRIs tackle the matter of property prices today, I am often reminded of a particular elite neighborhood in Pune that began attracting many foreigners many years ago. For a couple of years, hawkers, rickshaw drivers, and high street retailers experimented with hugely inflated rates and prices aimed squarely at these visitors to our country. Two luxury malls were set up to market haute couture apparel and other overpriced products to them.

Quite aware that they were being fleeced, these foreigners quickly educated themselves on the price of everything from water bottles to auto fares – and flatly refused to pay extra. They snubbed the malls, obviously set up solely to pull money out of their wallets, and bought local produce and goods. With some exceptions – for instance, in the case of cuisine – they were not here to live like foreigners but to participate in everyday Indian life on equal terms.

Before too long, MRP meant precisely that and no more. Along similar lines, NRIs will not pay ridiculous prices for the homes they buy in India. That said, just as resident Indian homebuyers, they are willing to pay for exceptional value. Most NRIs prefer branded builders with strong reputations for quality and after-sales service.

They do extensive online research before visiting sites in India and will inspect every project that offers what they want within their budgets. There is no element of impulse buying. They ask focused questions and expect no-nonsense, verifiable answers.

Integrated Townships - NRIs' First Preference

Looking at the qualities NRI homebuyers and investors seek in the many Indian housing options before them, it stands to reason that integrated townships have a clear edge over other projects on the market. They are the closest that the Indian residential real estate experience can come to the orderly, enabled, and dependable lifestyle of a Western city.

While none of our cities can offer such an experience across the board, integrated townships provide a generous slice of such a life. NRIs and resident Indians alike are making a conscious decision to choose quality of life above all other considerations. In the mid-to-upper-income segments of homebuyers, nobody is bargain-hunting when it comes to getting the right home.

After almost three precarious years of unknowns, there can be no room for uncertainty or compromise. And one thing has definitely not changed for NRI homebuyers – they still expect the best. ■

REVIEW

TRIFLES MAKE PERFECTION!

This first-person account of an IAS officer from a family of civil servants makes for rivetting reading on India's problems, challenges and achievements



BY
DR SANJEEV CHOPRA

The reviewer is a historian, public policy analyst, and Festival Director at the Valley of Words, Dehradun). Until recently, he was the Director of the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration, Mussoorie.

This could have been the alternate title to Deepak Gupta's autobiographical foray, *Small Things Matter*, as he takes us on the journey of his personal and professional life in a frank and candid conversation which also captures the life of a typical civil services family in India in the post-Independence era!

A caveat is in order. I have had the privilege of knowing the author over the last two decades, have worked with his elder brother, Madhukar Gupta, interacted with his Indian Foreign Service brother, Harsh Gupta, and launched the book on their legendary father, Anand Swaroop Gupta, Caught by The Police, at the very first edition of Valley of Words at Dehradun in 2017. This was the most well attended session in the festival and there was literally no space in the hall where the discussion took place. The author's book on the history of the IAS too has been a bestseller, and he has been invited to many a literature festival and discussion forum to share his thoughts.

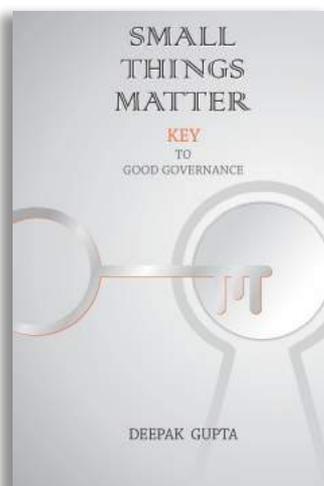
Let's now move on to this eminently readable book with the subtitle "Governance Experiences of an IAS Officer". As this was written during the

time of Covid, there is perhaps a little despondency, and a sense of not being able to do as well as China on a range of parameters—from solar energy to armaments, of not being able to achieve superpower status and about issues like employment, migration, mounds of untreated waste—but India's collective efforts at managing the Covid pandemic and the dedication and commitment of the frontline workers, especially those in health, sanitation, police and district administration should have also found a reference. That India was able to produce PPE kits and vaccines, not just for itself but also for export, speaks volumes about the ability of the nation to rise to any challenge. This does not take away from Gupta's argument that if we can pay equal attention to things which do not make headline news, then India would indeed become a paramount country. In fact, the following lines sum up the essence of the book: "...the work of government and administration takes place, and noticed in everyday transactions and exchanges. It is the small boring things that make an impact and which make for effective governance – garbage collected, road paved, drain cleaned; ATM functional; tax refunded after transparent assessment; license/passports/registration done without hassles, and so on."

The devil lies in the details and implementation. In other words, while we have to keep goals like the \$5 trillion economy as lodestars, we should not lose track of the here and now, the immediate—for it is all these trifling details which will lead us to perfection.

Dedicated to his illustrious father, Dr Anand Swaroop Gupta, a polyglot who could recite the Gita, Ghalib and Shakespeare with equal facility, the book talks of a fairy tale existence in well-appointed government bungalows—first in Shimla and then in Lucknow, family picnics and games, and the celebration of festivals.

That he was destined for the civil services comes to the fore on account of a series of coincidences: diphtheria before the IIT entrance tests, rejection of a job in a British bank with a two-year training stint in England, admission to St Stephen's College under the sports quota besides missing out on the Rhodes Scholarship and the French studies fellowship. And thus, in spite of astrological predictions to the contrary, the author joined the LBS National Academy of Administration as a probationer (as the Officer Trainees



Small Things Matter - Key to Good Governance
Author: Deepak Gupta



The storyline which weaves the book into 25 chapters is also a journey into the personal and professional life of Gupta. While most of the titles give an idea of what to expect, the juxtaposition of a stint in Belgium with the backwaters of Bihar shows how diverse, complex, uncertain and challenging the life of an IAS officer is.

were then called) and won his spurs as the best probationer of the batch of 1974!

Allotted to the Bihar cadre, he had his first brush with the 'stubborn feudalism' and complete breakdown of systems—both in the public and private sectors—on the journeys by train, bus and taxi. The positive news is that all three have turned around in the last four decades—even the Garib Rath which ferries migrant labour to Punjab is air conditioned and one can hire a cab on a mobile app in most district towns of Bihar and Jharkhand. This is not to say that all problems have been resolved but absolute poverty and deprivation are now things of the past. And all this has happened because of the 'small changes and system improvements' brought in by officers like the author, and many more. True, the administrative system could have fared better, but one has to understand that India was in a process of soil churn, and hopefully, the new paradigm of governance and public service, with its focus on delivery—from cooking gas to PDS to agriculture insurance and DBT (direct benefit transfer) —would cut individual discretion and make transactions more transparent.

To an eternal, or if one may say, wishful optimist like me, the story also marks the positive change in our ability to bring about incremental improvements in everything we do—from the syllabi of the CSE to the training at the Academy and the ongoing dialogue of ministries with the research centres at the Academy, and the transformation of NITI as a think tank, and the focus on aspirational districts. The author does well to mark out individuals like Rajeev Gauba, Cabinet Secretary; Amitabh Kant, Sherpa to PM for the G20; U.S. Awasthi, MD, IFFCO; Dr K. Kasturirangan of ISRO; and Ashok Mukhopadhyaya and Dr Shruti Sahgal from the voluntary sector for having made an actual difference on the ground. We should do

more to celebrate the individual and institutional contributions of these persons.

The storyline which weaves the book into 25 chapters is also a journey into the personal and professional life of Gupta. While most of the titles give an idea of what to expect, the juxtaposition of a stint in Belgium with the backwaters of Bihar shows how diverse, complex, uncertain and challenging the life of an IAS officer is. Reading through chapters as varied as on health systems and neglect of solar energy shows how the author puts across his views with intended pun and punch, as for example when he told the secretaries of petroleum, power and coal that although "solar got only one minute in a one-hour conversation, by 2030, solar would get fifty-nine, as the rest would have fossilized"! He talks about almost every issue that the country faces—from menstrual hygiene to the national database on pendency in judicial courts, EODB and bio-energy.

Reading his book leaves one with tremendous energy and positive vibes. India is now set to take pride of place in the comity of nations.

The fact that we have moved to a rights-based regimen in which the Rights to Work, Food, Education and Information have become the leitmotif of administration at the district level is an important milestone in the history of our nation. The contribution of the author in this transformation of the country is indeed second to none—and the book promises to be a good read, not just because of the biographical sketch but because of the issues, concerns and possible solutions suggested by him. The book will be a most valuable addition to the 'Making of a Nation' section in the Gandhi Smriti Library at the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration, and certainly makes for inspirational reading for all aspirants preparing for the civil services, and those who are a part of it. ■

NEW RELEASES

A BOOK ABOUT THE HISTORY, CULTURE, FOOD AND GHOSTS OF DELHI

THESE STORIES ARE AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE ANECDOTAL AND ORAL HISTORY OF THE LANES AND BYLANES OF THE CITY.

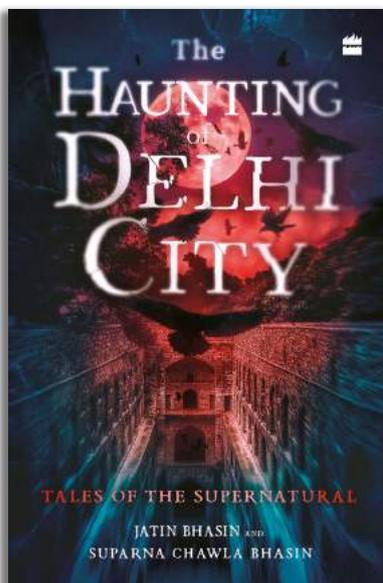


Jatin Bhasin and Suparna Chawla

BY RUKMA SALUJA

The stories in *The Haunting of Delhi City* are set in a Delhi we think we know well, but don't. This is a Delhi that reveals the presence of the supernatural at every corner—ghosts as real to us in stories as they are in our imagination. Exquisitely chilling, each of these tales holds a piece of the city and its people—especially the ghosts. Oh, these are just stories, you say. But are they?

A conversation with authors JATIN BHASIN and SUPARNA CHAWLA BHASIN



The Haunting of Delhi City by Jatin Bhasin and Suparna Chawla
HarperCollins | ₹399

Jatin Bhasin is a management consultant, and a Dilliwalla at heart. Delhi is his obsession—its culture, food and especially its ghosts and djinns. He keeps the ghosts of Delhi alive on his Twitter handle @TheDilliMirror, where he tells short, fast-paced tales of hauntings in Delhi, interspersed with nostalgia for the Delhi of the 1980s and '90s, and its pop culture.

Suparna Chawla Bhasin is a writer, editor and content specialist. She holds a master's degree in English literature from the University of Delhi. An avid cinema lover, equally passionate about Tollywood and Bollywood, she feels language is not a barrier to cinema.

Excerpts from an interview with the authors:

Writing about the ghost stories of Delhi! What an unusual idea! How did you hit upon it?

Growing up in a government colony in Delhi's Sarojini Nagar in the late 1980s and early '90s, our summer nights were spent under the stars with uncles, aunties, kids, and babies sleeping on charpais in the open. Setting the stage for sleeping outside was an experience in itself. Water was sprinkled to settle the dust and cool the scorched earth, electrical connections were set up from the nearest electricity pole for table fans to work, and water bottles were wrapped with a wet cloth. The last thing we did was to set up the charpais. When we had settled down, the stories would begin—stories of resilience, of rebuilding lives post-Partition, Lutyens' Delhi, the fate of erstwhile villages, stories of khandani pakode wala of Sarojini Nagar and of Nagpal's *chole bhature*. Those nightly sessions always ended with ghost stories—stories that were rooted in the havelis of Mehrauli, in the abandoned houses of Greater Kailash, or the minar opposite the Green Park market.

This is where our love for this city started. Over 20 years, we absorbed the tittle-tattle and hearsay about the abode of the supernatural. Stories told by a paanwala whose stall was near a haunted house in GK, by the cab drivers who dropped us home after our late-night shifts, or by the guards outside Mehrauli's Archaeological Park.

During the Covid-19 lockdown, we began tweeting these stories and they went viral. People from around the globe messaged us their experiences and stories. These stories (on the ghosts of Delhi) do not find place in any books on the city, in the research papers of mainstream or purist historians. We, however, believe they are an integral part of the anecdotal and oral history of Delhi.

This is a book about Delhi—its history, culture, food and, yes, its ghosts.

Now that you've done your research—can we really believe in ghosts?

Our intent in writing this book is not to prove the existence of ghosts. Belief is a very personal thing. We once asked a famous scientist and his response was apt: "Just because I do not understand something does not mean it does not exist."

People shared personal stories with us. There's one of a woman murdered by robbers whose ghost would visit their home to cradle her little daughter daily at 1 am, the time of the intrusion and robbery. The family would find the sleeping five-year-old levitating in a cradling position.

A rationalist might argue that shock and grief could have caused the family to hallucinate but that's not for us to judge. We merely collected the stories.

Interestingly, though, a 2019 poll suggests that 46 percent of Americans believe in ghosts, and surprisingly, atheists report a higher belief in the paranormal than religious folks. The General Social Survey found that as religious affiliation declined over four decades, belief in the afterlife remained relatively steady: In 1978, about 70 percent of those surveyed believed in the afterlife, and about 74 percent in 2018.

What sort of haunted places did you visit?

Over the years we have visited pretty much all the places in Delhi that were said to be haunted. Our stories, however, did not come from visiting those places; they came from people from paanwalas whose shops were located near a haunted house in Greater Kailash; from cab drivers who dropped us home after our late-night shifts; the guards outside Mehrauli's Archaeological Park. There are stories of occult practices in Sanjay Van, the deals people make with djinns for fulfilment of their desires and the price paid; abortion clinics of yesteryears.

Which was the spookiest?

As you can imagine, it takes a lot to spook us as we were either collecting spooky stories or writing them. So, we are going to answer this question from the point of view of our readers about places in Delhi people find spookiest.

I think most people would say Jamali Kamali tomb is one of the spookiest places in Delhi. Jamali Kamali is both a mosque and a tomb situated near the Qutab Minar. Jamali was a famous Sufi saint but no one knows about Kamali. Some say they were brothers, others say he was a servant; some books claim he was a gay lover. A famous haunt of djinns, the tomb and its surrounding area are said to have an eerie feel, particularly after sundown. People report a presence next to them; they see shadows and apparitions, even the strange sound of an animal growling. They see faces peeking from behind the pillar of the tomb but on investigation find no one. The haunting is said to be the reason Friday prayers are prohibited inside this mosque.

Rajon ki Baoli in Mehrauli, a stepwell built during the Lodhi era, also has an eerie vibe. At one time, it had murky black water and as you stepped closer to the bottom of the well voices would encourage you to jump into the water to drown.

There is a tree outside the Sector 9 Metro station at Dwarka near which many people don't feel comfortable.

Then there is Bhuli Bhatiyari ka Mahal, a 14th-century hunting lodge of Feroze Shah Tughlaq, said to be named after Bu Ali Bakhtiyari, a Sufi saint who lived there during the Tughlaq dynasty reign. Others believe a Bhatiyarin, or a tribal woman from Rajasthan, forgot her way and ended up here. The place subsequently became famous as Bhooli Bhatiyari. Her ghost now is said to occupy the mahal.

How can you tell if a place is haunted?

Interestingly, I too posed this question to people and the consensus is as follows:

There's a feeling of being watched, and sometimes you are certain you actually saw someone, but there is no one. Also, one gets these really bad vibes.

Phantom smells. Such places have an unusual smell that seems out of place or don't seem to have a source e.g. the smell of talcum powder in an old abandoned house or monument.

Cold spots. There are sudden and sharp drops in temperature. It is believed that ghosts draw energy and take heat from a place they visit or inhabit. ■



BOLLYWOOD

LOSING THE PLOT

With films from the south reaping big commercial success as well as critical acclaim, Hindi cinema needs to break free from the beaten track and reliance on overpriced fading stars



BY SAIBAL CHATTERJEE

The writer is a reputed film critic and columnist.

Indian cinema is in the middle of a major churn. Like any major churn, this one is exciting and full of possibilities. But as with all things exciting, the seismic shift is also riddled with uncertainties. The ground beneath the feet of our filmmakers, especially those in Mumbai, has been swaying one way and then the other, leaving the industry in a state of confusion.

Take the case of *Kantara*, a lively drama rooted in the folkloric traditions of coastal Karnataka. It tells the story of one pugnacious man's fight to protect the physical and spiritual core of the forest that is home to him and his people. Coming from nowhere, the film has turned out to be one of the biggest hits of 2022.

That isn't the end of the *Kantara* phenomenon. In the span of a few months, Rishab Shetty's film has gone from being one of the best reviewed releases of 2022 to popping up on yearend lists (albeit only a few) of the most overrated Indian films of the year. But that is the nature of the beast. The rough and the smooth are two sides of the same coin.

THE FESTIVAL CIRCUIT

At the recent 27th International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK), two new Malayalam films—Lijo Jose Pellissery's *Nanpakal Nerathu*

Mayakkam (Like An Afternoon Dream), starring Mammooty, and Sanal Kumar Sasidharan's *Vazhakk (The Quarrel)*, with Tovino Thomas and Kani Kusrutt in lead roles—received an overwhelming response from delegates.

At every screening of these two films, there were probably more people outside the hall than inside it. Does this groundswell indicate that *Nanpakal Nerathu Mayakkam* and *Vazhakk* will be money-spinners when they play in the theatres sometime in the near future?

Filmmaker Ranjith Sankar, director of *Njan Marykutty*, *Sunny and 4 Years*, isn't so sure. "I wonder if people will be queuing up quite like this when these films are released theatrically," he says in an informal conversation. Sankar was on the committee that selected films for the IFFK's Malayalam Cinema Today section.

Indian cinema is definitely changing its contours and dimensions as Mumbai movies spearheaded by Bollywood's male megastars bite the dust with alarming regularity. The script is perforce being rewritten as much by the filmmakers themselves as by the audiences they cater to.

It is no longer good enough for a movie to stick to the tried and tested. Taking risks is the name of the game. *Kantara* threw caution to the wind and went out on a limb into uncharted territory. It has as a result soared to heights that medium-budget, starless films rarely do.

The sleeper hit was initially released in a limited number of theatres. Word of mouth on social media triggered a giant buzz. As a result, Shetty and his team had to add screens and release dubbed versions of the film for audiences nationwide.

BREAKING BOUNDARIES

"No language is regional anymore," says Shetty. "The talk of pan-Indian films is, to my mind, misplaced. Every film today has the potential to break geographical boundaries, not just within the country but also across the world." That is exactly what *Kantara* has achieved.

"The more regional you are the more universal you are likely to be. Hyper-local themes are the way forward for cinema," says Shetty. Interestingly, Shetty, besides his acting and directing duties, has produced festival favourites such as Natesh Hegde's *Pedro* and Jaishankar Aryar's *Shivamma*, winner of the New Currents Award at the 27th Busan International Film Festival.

Shetty is also bankrolling Hegde's sophomore venture *Vagachipani* (*Tiger's Pond*), which will be filmed in and around the part of the Western Ghats in Karnataka where *Pedro* was shot. Hegde continues to live and work in his native village.

"Kannada indie films have of late been making a mark in film festivals," says Hegde. "Unfortunately, that isn't translating into good OTT or theatrical distribution. I strongly believe that the acceptance of indie films in their own states will result in many more such films."

Hegde is of the opinion that the success of *KGF* and *Kantara* will lead to more big-budget extravaganzas in the Kannada movie industry. "If producers are sensible enough, they will realise the importance of a varied approach, which, thankfully, a few of them are already working towards," he adds. However, he is worried that as a consequence of the monster hits that the south industries are delivering, independent films will be increasingly sidelined.

SUPERSTARS CHANGE TRACKS

Rishab Shetty is one of the few who straddle the distance between commercially-oriented cinema and arthouse films. His approach is indicative of another change that is sweeping through cinema in south India. The line between the two kinds of moviemaking is being blurred by adventurous producers and directors, something that Bollywood has thus far been unable to see value in.

Take the example of actor and producer Fahadh Faasil. The Malayalam movie superstar constantly experiments with his roles and films, employing his popularity to boost the profile of unusual projects that require a hand up. In doing so, he has created a niche for himself and

the kind of cinema he champions as a producer. Mahesh Narayanan's *C U Soon*, made during the pandemic, and two other Fahadh Faasil starrers that landed on Amazon Prime Video in 2020-21—Dileesh Pothan's *Joji* and Mahesh Narayanan's *Malik*—have bolstered his nationwide fan following.

In 2019, Faasil produced and acted in Madhu C. Narayanan's *Kumbalangi Nights*, which was among the films that started a phase that saw him push in new directions. There are no lead actors in the Mumbai industry who possess the vision of a Fahadh Faasil or a Dhanush, one of Tamil cinema's most bankable stars who moves freely between commerce and social relevance. That probably is one of Hindi cinema's biggest problems.

BOLLYWOOD MALADIES

Amit Khanna, veteran film producer, screenwriter, lyricist, author and media columnist, blames the Bollywood star system for the way things have panned out in recent years. "Filmmakers in Mumbai," he says, "did not lag behind in reinventing themselves, but the reinvention was subverted by the huge stardom of the actors."

Khanna points out that before *Laal Singh Chaddha*, six to seven of Aamir Khan's releases had scriptwriters of proven quality. *Laal Singh Chaddha* is Aamir's first film without a professional writer. "He took too much upon himself. His stardom led him to believe that he could be everything," he adds.

Overreach, Khanna fears, could be the undoing of *Pathaan* as well. He asks: "What business does Shahrukh Khan have to become an action star? I am not saying *Pathaan* might not become a big hit, but he has played a romantic hero all his life." The shift, says Khanna, does not stand to logic. "Who are you trying to satisfy, not your loyal fan base for sure?"

Conversely, one cannot keep doing the same thing again and again, he says. Khanna, who began his career with Navketan Films in the early 1970s, adds: "We saw it with Devsaab, too. He had the most loyal fans. However, after the 1980s, though the fan base survived, he kept making bad films. When you do that, the fans might continue to love and admire you but they will stop queuing up for movie tickets."

Therein lies the rub. "Stars tend to mistake crowds for ticket buyers.



Rishab Shetty is one of the few who straddle the distance between commercially-oriented cinema and arthouse films. His approach is indicative of another change that is sweeping through cinema in south India.



‘With the advent of multiplexes, there is a need to constantly feed the 4,500-plus screens across India. These screens can facilitate a pan-Indian release irrespective of language,’ says filmmaker and columnist Amit Khanna.

Burnouts are inevitable in stardom,” says Khanna, who is currently writing a book, *Alchemy of Fame*, which looks at how movie actors can lose the adulation of the public when they stop playing their cards right.

SOUTHERN FRESHNESS

On why films from the south are doing infinitely better than those from Mumbai, Khanna says: “In spite of the universality of their films, there is a fundamental freshness in how the South Indian directors treat their subjects. Plus, they have a new set of actors who have the wherewithal to carry a film on their shoulders.”

Khanna adds: “That (the rise and rise of the southern stars) has changed the competition base. Now suddenly there is a level playing field and you are not competing anymore with 10 people but with 20 or 30.” Bollywood stars trapped in old habits are inevitably going to struggle in the new scenario, he feels.

An overconfident Mumbai movie industry had expected fans to rush back to the multiplexes once the pandemic ended. Hordes of them did return for the theatrical experience but they did so more for movies from the south. Big-budget Bollywood films fell by the wayside. The industry was plunged into disarray.

ALERT AUDIENCE

Witness what transpired after the October release of the *Adipurush* teaser. Based on the *Ramayana* and starring Prabhas and Saif Ali Khan as Rama and Ravana, respectively, the mythological extravaganza, reportedly the most expensive ever made in India, promised jaw-dropping visual effects. What it proffered in the teaser was tacky computer-generated imagery. Viewers gave vent to their disappointment on social media.

Alarmed at the flak that the teaser drew, *Adipurush* director Om Raut decided to postpone the release of the film by over five months—from January 12 to June 16. A salvage operation is currently on. Raut has admitted as much.

He declared on Twitter: “*Adipurush* is not a film but a representation of our devotion to Prabhu Shri Ram and a commitment towards our *sanskriti* (heritage) and history. In order to give a complete visual

experience to the viewers, we need to give more time to the teams working on the film.”

The move demonstrates two key changes in the Hindi movie industry. One, the audience now has ways to express itself aggressively for better or for worse even before the release of a film, which, in turn, has led to a boycott culture. And two, filmmakers can no longer be secure in the belief that the presence of A-listers in the cast will guarantee a bumper opening.

One of the reasons why Hindi cinema has lost some of its lustre is the steady dilution of its primary purpose—entertainment. It now panders to the whims of overpriced stars and, worse, bends over backwards to serve up expedient propaganda.

CINEMATIC PIZZAZZ

At the other end of the spectrum, consider two recent Tamil films—*Karnan*, directed by Mari Selvaraj and starring Dhanush, and *Jai Bhim*, helmed by T.J. Gnanavel and fronted by Suriya. These films dived into the real struggles of marginalised communities to tell gripping stories of exploitation and resilience with remarkable cinematic pizzazz. Especially striking were the visual flourishes of *Karnan*, a film rich in metaphoric cross-references.

Karnan and *Jai Bhim* were 2021 releases that in significant ways redefined the parameters of commercial cinema. Pa. Ranjith, maker of *Kaala*, *Kabali* and *Sarpatta Parambarai*, says: “It is not easy to consistently articulate a specific social consciousness in mainstream cinema. But mainstream cinema, thanks to its reach and appeal, is the best vehicle that there can be for spotlighting stories of communities that have faced exploitation and marginalisation for centuries.”

The focus has understandably moved appreciably. On the global stage, Indian documentary makers continued to strike gold. The year 2022 began with *Writing With Fire*, directed by Sushmit Ghosh and Rintu Thomas, earning an Academy Award nomination in the Best Documentary Feature category.

In early 2022, Delhi-based filmmaker Shaunak Sen’s *All That Breathes* won the Grand Jury Prize in the World Cinema Documentary competition of the Sundance Film Festival. In May, the film took home the Cannes Film Festival’s Golden Eye Prize for the best documentary.

Pan Nalin's Gujarati-language *Chhello Show* (*Last Film Show*), an ode to cinema of the pre-digital era, has deservedly been picked as India's official submission for the best international feature Oscar. Its tale of a village boy discovering the magic of cinema is a work that appeals to both the heart and mind.

Shimla-based filmmaker Siddharth Chauhan's *Amar Colony* has bagged a Special Jury Prize at the Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival. The young writer-director ended the year with another triumph at the IFFK—the Federation of Film Societies of India's K.R. Mohanan Award for the best debut director.

INDIE FILMS SCORE

So independent Indian cinema, as distinct from the star-driven films that Mumbai produces, did enough in 2022 to keep the flag flying. Chauhan and his ilk embody the new spirit of adventure in the choices that he has made as a filmmaker.

"Himachal Pradesh has no filmmaking infrastructure," he says. "But I have a small group of friends whose support I bank on to keep making films out of Shimla." Chauhan cut his teeth on several critically acclaimed short films before beginning work on his feature-length debut, *Amar Colony*.

When *Adipurush* hits the screen in mid-2023, it might prove the detractors wrong, but the storm that it has run into and the filmmaker's response to the hubbub bear testimony to the uneasy relationship between the industry and the constituency that keeps it alive.

Consider the fate that befell *Samrat Prithviraj* and *Ram Setu*, both starring Akshay Kumar. They arrived in the multiplexes amid great fanfare but did not create so much as a ripple. The makers of the two films learnt the hard way that it is far easier to play fast and loose with history and peddle pulpy myths than to get audiences to buy into unabashed claptrap, especially when it is aggravated by incompetence.

Akshay Kumar, who delivered other resounding duds in 2022 (*Bachchan Pandey*, *Raksha Bandhan*) was by no means the only A-list Mumbai movie star who suffered such massive debacles. Ranbir Kapoor's *Shamsher* sank without a trace, Ranveer Singh's *Jayeshbhai Jordaar* was a non-starter, Ajay Devgn's *Runway 34* hit turbulence and nosedived and Aamir Khan's *Laal Singh Chaddha* found the going tough.

The massive vacuum created by the underperformance of the Bollywood biggies was exploited to the hilt by blockbusters from down South—*Pushpa* (released in December 2021), *RRR*, *KGF 2* and *Kantara*. These pan-Indian hits changed the rules of the game. Bollywood suddenly realised that hyper-local themes were the order of the day.

Says Khanna: "This was coming. The newer set of directors in filmmaking centres other than Mumbai is now much better-equipped. Many of them are film school grads. Many no longer have the parochial approach that was the case 25 years ago and earlier. With their modern, global sensibilities, their creative and production practices are of the highest order."

GLOCAL CINEMA

The change is yielding dividends and the four south Indian cinemas are no longer content to serve audiences in their own respective languages. In the past, the likes of Rajinikanth and Kamal Haasan were names to reckon with across the nation but when they needed to reach out to an audience outside their immediate sphere of influence, they had to do Hindi-language films. Today's south Indian stars can work in their own language and still connect with audiences all over India.

"With the advent of multiplexes, there is a need to constantly feed the 4,500-plus screens across India. These screens can facilitate a pan-Indian release irrespective of language," says Khanna.

Not that the aforementioned south Indian films, barring the Kannada-language *Kantara*, had any intrinsic merit beyond their surface gloss, star power and technical razzmatazz. One might argue that the Telugu-language *RRR* is all the rage in the West today and that its maker, S.S. Rajamouli, has been adjudged best director of 2022 by the New York Film Critics Circle and has also bagged a Golden Globe nomination. Truth be told, it is a manipulative, cheesy, crass Indian potboiler, only flashier and louder than any Hindi movie of a similar timbre has ever been.

PULP FICTION

In *RRR*, history is a big casualty. The epic scale of the movie is impressive, no doubt, but it expends an inordinate amount of energy on the trivialisation of the under-documented history of tribal



It is no longer good enough for a movie to stick to the tried and tested. Taking risks is the name of the game. *Kantara* threw caution to the wind and went out on a limb into uncharted territory.



resistance against the British Raj and other forces of exploitation about one hundred years ago.

The nuances of the battles that marginalised communities wage or any meaningful detailing of time, place and character are beyond the ken of *RRR*. So, what was it about the movie that made the very elements that undermined the likes of *Samrat Prithviraj* and *Ram Setu* the reason for its enviable commercial success? Hard to put a finger on it.

In mythologising the real struggles of real personages, *RRR* appropriates the struggle of forest dwellers and tribals and uses it as a mere pretext for an SFX-laden, power-packed cinematic blitzkrieg that obviates all possibility of a genuinely empathetic account of the rebellion of oppressed people.

Nagraj Manjule's *Jhund*, with Amitabh Bachchan and a host of amateur actors, played a very different game. Unsurprisingly, the three-hour film failed at the box-office, but it showed exactly how the theme of caste and class oppression can be handled without turning it into a pretext for stuffy spectacle.

Jhund is a story of the walls that the socially marginalised run into, and are thwarted by, at every turn. It does away with two mythologies that form the foundation of mass entertainment in this country: one springs from the Hindu epics, the other from the dominant idioms of Indian popular cinema.

With both given a wide berth, what emerges in *Jhund* is a structure and a style that are embedded in the very nature of the struggle that the dispossessed are engaged in on a daily basis merely to keep their heads above water.

Jhund puts one of the biggest stars of Hindi commercial cinema front and centre and, drawing upon true events, constructs a narrative that captures a motley group of marginalised youth who, through a mix of good fortune, bold assertion and daring action, seek to break free from the life of petty crime, drug addiction and privation that they are condemned to due to social ostracism, poverty and lack of education.

Big-budget Bollywood is paying a high price for underestimating an audience that has evolved since the coronavirus outbreak thanks to its exposure via the streaming services to cinema of all kinds and from diverse geographies.

Be that as it may, it isn't all doom and gloom for Bollywood. It did have a few success stories in the year gone by. *Bhool Bhulaiyaa 2*, a horror comedy, and *Brahmastra Part One: Shiva*, a superhero fantasy that enabled Ranbir Kapoor to live down the abominable Shamshera, found takers at the box-office.

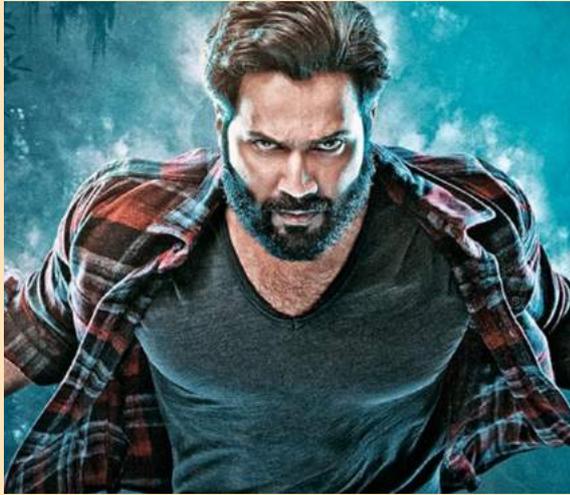
DETHRONING MASCULINITY

Brahmastra, which kicked off Bollywood's first-ever proposed superhero trilogy, has dashes of originality to go with its sweep, scale and style. That is not to say that it is perfect. Parts of it are rudimentary, others could have done with some pruning. Overall, *Brahmastra* tweaks the conventions of the superhero movie somewhat. As a result, it isn't slavishly derivative.

For one, *Brahmastra* abjures the kind of hypermasculinity that films of this nature usually perpetuate. The screenplay does not celebrate unbridled machismo. The male protagonist willingly acknowledges the centrality of the woman in his life, played by Alia Bhatt.

Bhatt spearheaded another of the year's better commercial movies, Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Gangubai Kathiawadi*. Women of the world's oldest profession plying their trade and fighting for justice in Bombay's Kamathipura in the Nehruvian era are at the heart of the film.

Factual accuracy isn't the period drama's strong suit. But Bhansali, aided by a gifted female lead, squeezes every ounce of dramatic effect out of the script. The result is an immersive film that does not feel overly stretched even though it runs a little over two and a half hours. Meant to be a satire on patriarchy, *Jayeshbhai Jordaar* is one of many recent Yash Raj Films (YRF) releases that failed to connect with the masses. *Samrat Prithviraj*, also a YRF production, is, expectedly, a purveyor of fanciful history draped in the glossiest of Bollywood finery.



Two inventive Mumbai movies that have made amends to a certain extent for all the low-grade stuff that Bollywood foisted upon its fans were Amar Kaushik's *Bhediya* and Anirudh Iyer's *An Action Hero*.

It is colourful, action-packed and laced with music but spectacularly soulless.

Another YRF dud, *Shamshera* was an excruciatingly bad action flick. Set in the second half of the 19th century, an era in which the heroine is allowed to be draped in new-millennium fabrics, it throws a bundle of things into a cauldron that turns everything to ash and dust.

Laal Singh Chaddha, a reworking of the 1994 Hollywood hit *Forrest Gump*, wasn't half as bad. The principal strength of *Laal Singh Chaddha* stemmed from its stress on the power of hope in a time of violence and venality. Unity in diversity isn't a particularly original idea, but its reiteration, no matter in what form, had never been more necessary. Unlike *Laal Singh Chaddha*, Aanand L. Rai's *Raksha Bandhan*, a film without any redeeming features, is set in contemporary times. But it could be mistaken for a 1950s film, given the shockingly regressive ideas it embraces.

Raksha Bandhan would have us believe that girls are worth nothing if they are not married and domesticated. Headlined by Akshay Kumar (Bollywood's poster boy of all things *sanskar*) who plays big brother to four girls incapable of finding their way in the world.

Raksha Bandhan, *Shamshera*, *Ram Setu* and the rest sum up the redundancy of Bollywood's old ways. It was hard to believe that anybody would make a film such as these in 2022. The girls of *Raksha Bandhan*, like the film and the industry, were caught in a time warp.

MANI RATNAM'S MAGIC

One of the high points of the past year was *Ponniyin Selvan – Part 1*. Shrinking a complex five-volume novel into a two-part movie was no mean feat. Mani Ratnam pulled it off in style. The sprawling, spectacularly mounted film is an ambitious, near-flawless adaptation of a much-loved work of Tamil literature.

Needless to say, the tale makes huge technical and artistic demands on Ratnam and his cast and crew. They prove equal to the onerous task of attaining the magnitude, the pacing and the stylistic flourishes that the story demands and available image-making technology allows.

Ratnam does not resort to sensory or visceral overdrive, drawing strength instead from the smart script written by him, B. Jeyamohan

and Elango Kumaravel and from a cast of actors at the top of their game. *PS-1* is a treat for the eyes as much as it is for the mind.

History and mythology coalesce purposelessly in *Ram Setu*, a cinematic abomination of epic proportions. The film occasionally cites books and other sources of knowledge to draw a convenient conclusion about the Ramayana, Lord Rama and *Ram Setu* that smacks of brazen mendacity.

Parts of *Ram Setu*, based on a story by creative producer Chandraprakash Dwivedi (who helmed *Samrat Prithviraj*, which was designed to feed into a largely similar narrative) pretend to be science fiction.

NEW STUFF

Two inventive Mumbai movies that have made amends to a certain extent for all the low-grade stuff that Bollywood foisted upon its fans were Amar Kaushik's *Bhediya* and Anirudh Iyer's *An Action Hero*. The former, filmed entirely in Arunachal Pradesh, subverted the body-horror genre to craft a tale about the man-animal conflict and the need to protect indigenous cultures and reverse the denudation of forests.

The latter tapped into the conventions of a revenge tale to construct a lively and entertaining commentary on notions of heroism, the nature of movie stardom, the scourge of media overreach and distortions of reality in a world where truth is invariably buried under an avalanche of noise, images and hysteria.

In the guise of a thriller, *An Action Hero* held up a meta-mirror to Mumbai movies and the masses that consume them. The relationship between the two has been fraught, of late. Repeated box-office failures have compelled complacent film producers to shed dead habit and return to the drawing board.

As filmmakers from the south make dramatic inroads into the pan-Indian market and some of them also earn critical hosannas in the bargain, Hindi cinema can ill afford to rest on its oars and let fading superstars keep holding it to ransom. It desperately needs to break free from its methods of yore and seek fresh avenues that lead into the future. If not exactly a now or never situation, it is a call to action that Bollywood can ignore only at its own peril. ■



The heart of Incredible India



KHAJURAHO Dance Festival



Blend of dance, art and culture

At this festival MPTB has introduced activities like heritage walk, nature visits, e-cycle tour, and soft adventure sports by catering to the needs of all types of tourist

Located in the Chhatarpur district of Madhya Pradesh, the UNESCO site of 'Khajuraho Group of Monuments' is famous for its Nagara-Style architecture and graceful sculptures of nayikas and deities.

The temples of Khajuraho are India's unique gift to the world, representing life in every form and moods that has been captured in stone, testifying not only to the craftsman's artistry but also to the extraordinary breadth of vision of the Chandela Rajputs under whose rule the temples were conceived and constructed. The Khajuraho temples were built in the short

span of a hundred years, from 950-1050 AD in a truly inspired burst of creativity. Of the 85 original temples, 22 have survived till today to constitute one of the world's great artistic wonders.

Every year in February, tourists witness Khajuraho Dance Festival in Khajuraho. This grand cultural extravaganza is a stunning blend of art and architecture. One gets to experience a wonderful symphony of mesmerising classical dance performances being performed by renowned artists coming from different cities and towns in India.

This mega festival is a spirited celebration of classical dance forms, art, and culture wherein renowned exponents of Indian classical and folk dances are performed throughout the week. Apart from the graceful dance performances, there are also other highlights that can be enjoyed simultaneously.

Activities and events like art exhibitions, panel discussions, interactive sessions, adventure sports, village tours and much more keep tourists

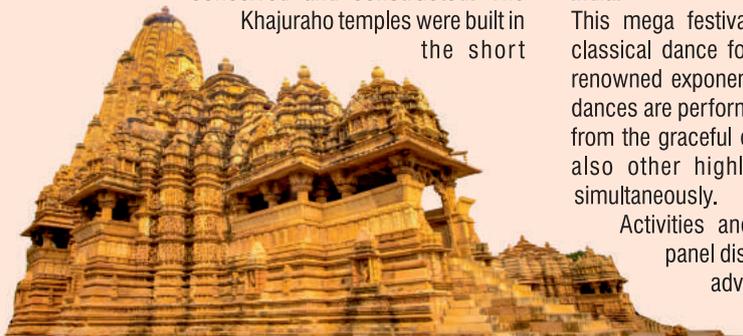
entertained throughout. The choice is yours to opt from a wide range of multidimensional activities.

Khajuraho dance festival is not only a festival of dances; it has been transformed into a wholesome festival of dance, literature, fine arts and everything. The celebration of art has been all along linked with the tourism in Madhya Pradesh. Madhya Pradesh Tourism Board (MPTB) has taken several initiatives to publicize and engage the tourists during the week of the festival.

At this festival MPTB has introduced activities like heritage walk, nature visits, e-cycle tour, and soft adventure sports by catering to the needs of all types of tourist. Be it a dance enthusiast or an adventure lover.

Screening of movies, documentaries, along experimental cinema of famous artists are also displayed to help viewers understand the dynamics of arts, music, literature, vocals, dance instrumental music, and various art forms.

One can also indulge in mouth-watering Bundeli recipes. Enjoy the widespread dishes and feel the goodness of Bundeli food.



Tourists, who visited Khajuraho and Panna during the dance festival, can also explore these activities



Camping : at Bear Valley Camp - Village Jhinna, District Panna: Luxury Tent (Swiss Tent also available for 15 person), Alpine tent for 18 persons, Team Games, Stargazing Trek to the hill of Panna, Bonfire, Night Jungle Safari, Live Music, Boat Safari

Village Tour : Old Khajuraho Village Tour: Start from Jawari Temple end in Brahma Temple, Demonstration of Old Panchayat System, Durga Mandir

E-Bike Tour : Visit of Khajuraho – Western group of Temples- Gol Market- Chaturbhuj Temple- Vaman Temple- Archaeological Museum

Segway Tour : Sunrisetour to Datla Pahad (2hours), Sundet tour to Dalta Pahad (2 hours),

Khajuraho by night – A joy ride (1.5 hours), Farm tour (2 hours), Trail Joy Ride (15 mins)

Water Sports : Speed Boat, Banana Ride, Shikara Boat, Raft Boat in Kutni Water Body and rafting in Ken River

A visit to Panna

If you are mulling to explore Khajuraho, do not forget to visit Panna National Park, situated just 32 km away and a mere 30-minute drive from Khajuraho. The jungles harbour many species of wildlife. The tiger can be glimpsed here, with other rare species such as the leopard, wolf and gharial.



Things to do in Panna

Explore wellness tourism at Kairali Ayurgram, Jeep Safari in Panna National park to explore wildlife in MP.

Places to visit in and around Khajuraho

Adivart Museum, Dhubela Museum, Kandariya Mahadeo temple, Chaunsath Yogini temple, Chitragupta Temple, Vishwanath Temple, Lakshmana Temple, Lakshmana Temple, Matangeswara Temple, Parsvanath Temple, Ghantai Temple, Adhinath Temple, Duladeo Temple, Chaturbhuj Temple, Sound & Light Show, State Museum of Tribal and Folk Arts, Adivart Tribal and Folk Art Museum, Dhubela Museum

Places to visit in and around Panna

Wildlife, Fort of Ajaygarh, Mahamati Prannathji Mandir, Pandav falls, National Museum, Panna Diamond Mines

Plan a trip to this picturesque destination in Madhya Pradesh and be a part of the Khajuraho Dance Festival where all these multi-dimensional segments are waiting for you to explore.



‘The connections that we make are based on value systems, mindsets and personality fits. We don’t arrange marriages; we arrange introductions. I make it very clear that we are not a dating service but for those genuinely interested in getting married’

LOOKING TO **WED**

Dating and mating are a natural instinct but sometimes we need a nudge to get there. And yes, even the *global desi* needs matchmaking! Meet ANURADHA GUPTA who runs a New York based service for the Indian diaspora

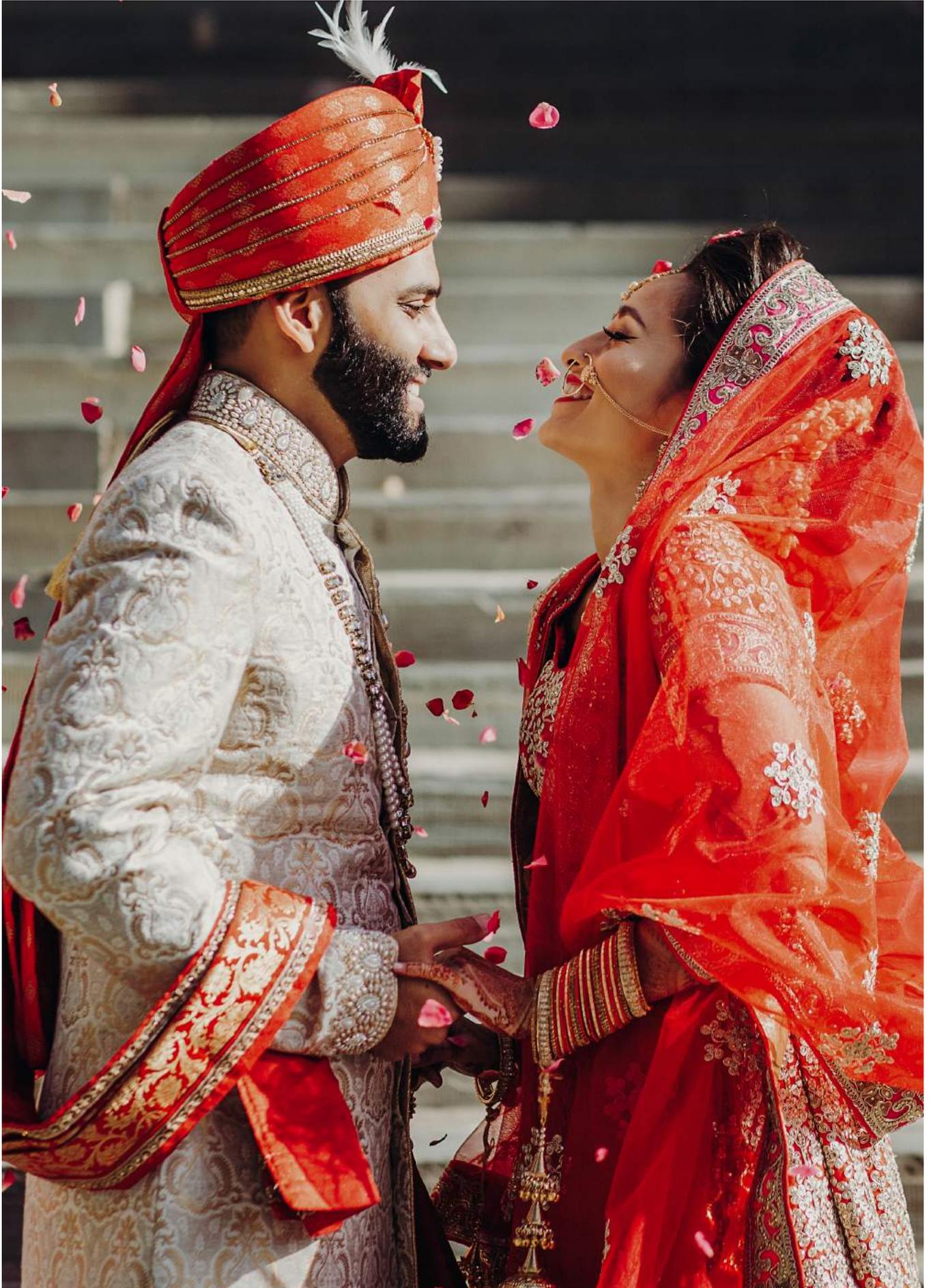
BY RUKMA SALUJA

From the times of *Dulhan wahi jo Pathakji dilwayein*, and jewellers matchmaking across cities a la the Rajshri Productions produced film *Vivah*, we have come a long way to online matrimonial services, refined by caste, community and professional preferences of a future spouse. It remains a surprise for me to find that not only do these services exist in lands foreign but are thriving. *Indian Matchmaking* on OTT was a hit, showing that there’s a huge market out there for this among the Indian diaspora.

Vows for Eternity, a New York-based offline service, started in 2012, is one such. When Anuradha Gupta was ready to settle down, her parents began to introduce her to potential life partners. “The ‘bio-data’ or the profile that is shared just doesn’t tell you anything, and

everybody loves music and travel,” she said during a recent visit to Delhi. “The CVs online don’t capture the most important thing, that is, the person. Marriage is about two individuals, it’s not about degrees or qualifications.” Years later, when she thought about starting such a service, her own experience formed the basis for what would be included in the services provided.

To begin with, there’s a massive questionnaire that offers the first insight into the mindset of a prospective member. Anu, as she’s called, who has studied five years of psychology, then spends several hours over days and weeks chatting with and trying to gauge a person’s personality and psyche. This, she says, is often an ongoing process. She’s of the firm belief that childhood informs a large part of a person’s





overall character. "Apart from education and profession, I try to understand a person's life journey and childhood. It's from there I'm often able to understand what makes a person tick. Childhood trauma and how it's been dealt with tells you a lot. Love, loss and how they shape us." It's true that it's the tough times that define us rather than the good times. Equally important is to figure out what each person wants from life. While two people may have had a similar journey, if their goals are not compatible, the result wouldn't usually be a happy one.

Understanding the psychology of a potential member is a novel approach to an age-old institution, and perhaps the reason for the 35 percent success rate that she claims. When I ask why the figure is so low she's quick to tell me the industry average is a mere 7 percent. (We have not verified these figures). VFE tries as much as possible to introduce people they think will make a match of it after a careful study of profiles. They encourage people to consider more than physical attributes and think about the sort of person they would be happy with. There's a Wellness Panel that includes therapists, life coaches, yoga and fitness instructors if required. Some of these services come automatically with the Signature membership that sits atop the entry and mid-tier levels. The average age of members is 26 to 42 but there are older members, one even 69. "I make it very clear VFE is not a dating service but for those genuinely interested in getting married," Anu said.

About 40 percent of candidates don't make the cut for membership at VFE. The level of education could be a reason; more often than not it's intangibles like attitude, world view and opinion.

The change over the years, she's found, is that divorce is no longer the taboo it was once. "People are open to meeting with those who are divorced or have come out of a long-term relationship and are ready to give the chance at love another shot." This falls into place when you consider that with education taking more years to finish and career taking centre stage, by the time one is ready to settle into marriage there have been a few misses along the way. What Anu takes

care to understand about such people is how well they have healed from the break. She sees no reason for that emotional baggage to carry into the new relationship and is careful to probe whether there has been complete healing.

Anu has also found that the lines between gender roles have blurred a bit, also a result of career-driven adults. "It makes sense to divide responsibilities inside and outside the house based on aptitude and availability rather than on rigid gender roles." These are not absolutes, of course, rather a slow evolution of us humans and an adaptation to our circumstances, also a willingness to adjust and think of the spouse in the making of a successful marriage.

Accepting children from a previously broken marriage brings in a level of complexity. Anu is emphatic that this shouldn't be a matter of mere acceptance. A child needs to be nurtured. "A person should be willing to embrace another's child. Acceptance is not enough." The nuance of this notwithstanding, members are indeed open to looking at profiles with children but this is still a 'work in progress'.

The stringent checks have thrown up that at the end of the day what people continue to look for is acceptance, compatibility, friendship, love and understanding. What's the use of all the qualifications and demands if you can't have that in a marriage, Anu wonders.

That those born and raised in other countries, who constitute the Indian diaspora, would still need help for such intimate decisions is intriguing. For Anu, "it's because half the job is done. We do the background check." That's a huge task, and a time saver for busy people whose lives are largely centred around work. They really don't have the time and are normally exposed to a limited network of people. Agencies offering matchmaking services offer a broader gamut in terms of geography and types of people. Romance is largely frowned upon at the workplace. So, where's the time and scope to meet someone? She's found it takes from 10 to 18 months for matters to fall into place. This is enough time for the couple to meet and fall in love. "More often than not it is not merely an arranged marriage by the time the couple takes that step to marriage." ■

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REIMAGINING THE SHADES OF BLUE

This holiday season, Rajasthan's historical city, Jodhpur, is moving beyond its majestic forts and structures to include for its tourists some never-seen-before experiences

BY ABHILASHA OJHA

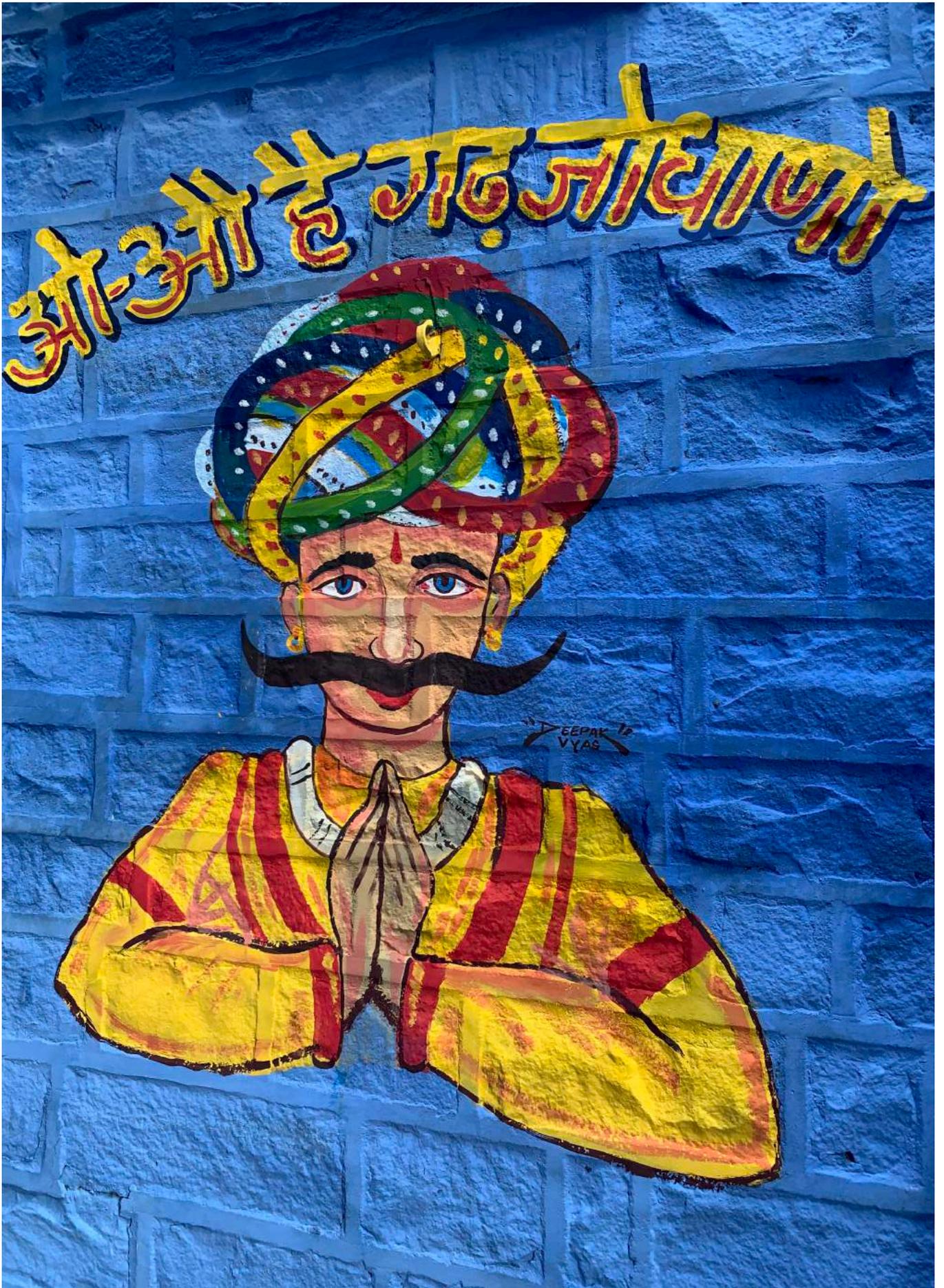
In the book, *1001 Walks You Must Experience Before You Die*, editor and author Barry Stone writes: "We need to walk if only to shift our attention away from screens and switches, to pull ourselves out of our self-made technological cells.... [Walking] helps us to solve our problems. It sets the mind free to the rhythms of its reveries. It is life stripped bare."

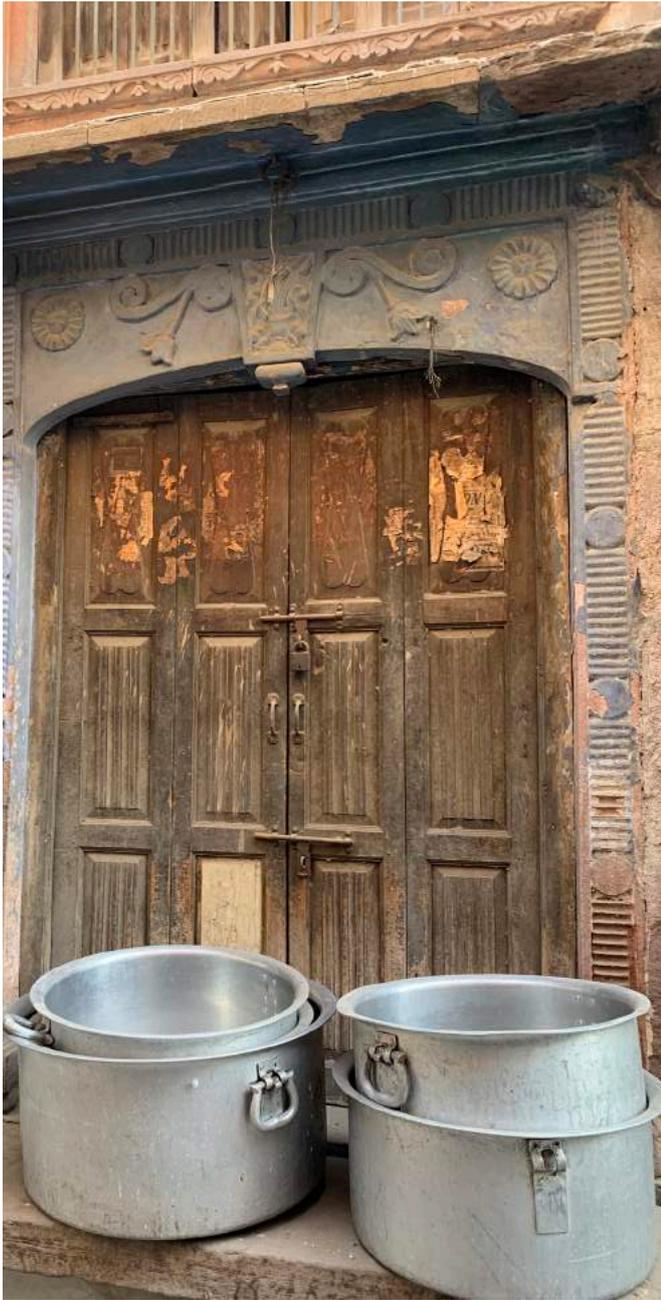
It is impossible not to think of Stone's

essay in the book while going through the labyrinth of lanes and bylanes of the old city of Jodhpur that is bathed in a characteristic blue colour, thus giving this second largest city of Rajasthan its distinctive character, its *métier*.

A group of us, huddled in an auto, start laughing while reminiscing about schooldays, remembering how as kids we got into these very vehicles and rode all the

way to school, the cold air slapping against our faces. While a deep dive into nostalgia allows for the best engagement with a city, reaching the entrance of Rao Jodha Desert Rock Park gives us a glimpse of what lies ahead. According to an article in *Financial Times*, Rao Jodha Desert Rock Park was restored to its former glory by Pradip Krishen, a filmmaker-turned-tree conservator and an expert in the restoration





Top things to do in Jodhpur

1. Visit Mharo Khet, an experiential farm, producing more than 80 varieties of nutritious crops—a gamut of exotic and native herbs, fruits, and vegetables—grown naturally without any chemicals. Don't miss the immersive walks, the seven-course meal, the sundowner, along with the folk music of Rajasthan by the locals.
2. Take a Bluecity Walks tour and wander through the fabulous narrow lanes of the old city with its blue houses, visit the Mehrangarh Fort, and the Rao Jodha Desert Rock Park, among other places of interest.
3. An evening of drinks at Old Loco, the bar in Daspan House – we pick Jodhpur Mule and Nambu Achaar Margarita as our favourites. Don't miss the traditional Rajasthani thali served as part of the chef's table experience.
4. Forget jalebis, eat jaleba at Jodhpur Sweets, gulab jamun at Chaturbhuj Rameshchandra, and mirchi vada and lassi at Janta Sweet Home.
5. Breakfast atop one of the old houses of Jodhpur, getting an aerial view of the Blue City.
6. Visit Jaswant Thada, the historical royal cenotaph, built in the early 19th century, also described as the 'Taj Mahal of Marwar'.
7. Check out the Clock Tower and old city markets to purchase saris, bangles, handicrafts, and spices, among other mementoes.
8. With more than 400 big and small step-wells located in and around Jodhpur, don't miss a visit to the historical Toorji Ka Jhalra step-well, an ode to the storage system of water and irrigation tanks in an area that copes with water scarcity.
9. Ziplining by Flying Fox Tours is organised in Mehrangarh Fort. The six-line tour over the lakes and battlements of Mehrangarh Fort lasts two hours, including 20 minutes of training.

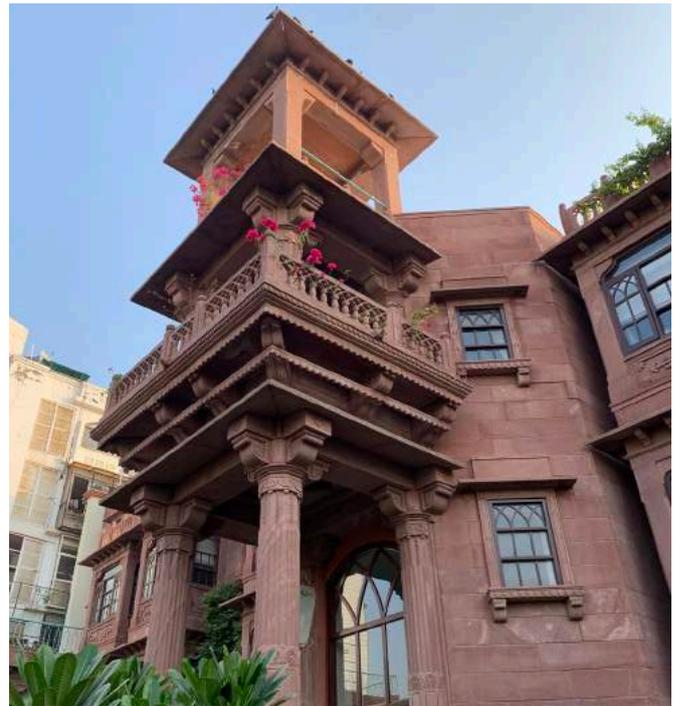
of desert ecosystems. Named after the 15th century founder of the city of Jodhpur, Rao Jodha, the work for the park began in 2006 and opened to the public in 2011.

Our very upbeat, sprightly guide, Laxmi Bhati, is the quintessential Wikipedia, if you will, of Jodhpur, telling us all about the 400-plus native plants and trees that are housed in this park. Besides talking about plants with healing properties, Bhati tells us about the babool tree, originally a native of the Americas that was brought in by the royalty of the Marwar region. It is believed that though it doesn't need constant watering, the tree, which draws

nutrients from other trees, destroys every other plantation and vegetation in its wake. "Plant one seed and 50 will sprout from it," says Bhati about the baavaliya or mad tree, as it's called, even as we navigate a bend on a rocky path to inch a little closer towards the view of the iconic Mehrangarh Fort. Interestingly, cacti, an integral part of the ecosystem of the region, one learns, were brought in by the British to safeguard their homes from thieves and burglars. To be sure, the ecologically restored park boasts of distinctive volcanic rock and sandstone formations.

Walking, wandering: In the heart of the city

The walk in itself is a charming one and if one listens and observes closely, there are the soothing sounds and sights to give you company—the birdsong; a gentle whistle of the breeze as you cross the walled area of the park; the silent ripples of the water in a canal that's over 400 years old; the enigma of the architecture that you keep staring at, gobsmacked at how the experts of the time ended up creating these marvellous palaces and forts, keeping in mind not just the aesthetics but also security for the kingdom, designing in a



manner that threats from enemies were minimised. Consider the small alcove-like structures on the walls surrounding the fort. On the face of it, these were resting places for birds but Bhati explains how these tiny areas were actually a natural alarm system for guards if anyone tried to intrude into the fort. "You couldn't climb the walls without sending the birds out in a flurry, thus awakening the guards," Bhati explains.

Depending on where we are, our location, and our walk changes—think about it. When you're in a busy marketplace, you navigate your way through the bends with a sense of purpose, a busyness that permeates your mind, allowing you to rarely stop. It's what we do when we go through the winding streets of Vyapariyon Ka Mohalla in Pungal Pada. This is where, among other places, lies the famous Chaturbhuj Rameshchandra, its sweet gulab jamun a favourite with tourists. You move around quickly here to avoid mishaps—a scooter can almost collide with you if you're not careful or stray dogs and cows might take you by surprise if you're not alert. Then there are people going about the daily grind—women cleaning the outer areas of their homes with broomsticks; a worker cleaning oversized utensils; people huddled inside an ancient temple offering prayers of hope and better days to the deity; a gentleman reading his newspaper while sipping chai and watching the world

go by; a pack of dogs huddled near the shops that are serving food and sweetmeats... you see the weathered wooden doors along with the faint blue walls, and far from looking beaten and worn out, it's almost as if it's a passage into time, into the rich legacy and history of Jodhpur.

Compared to these narrow streets where you walk purposefully at a hectic pace, the walk along the Mehrangarh Fort area is both contemplative and mystical. Staring at the silhouette of Mehrangarh Fort in the morning hours just when dawn has broken is an experience to savour. Staring at this historically imposing structure, which was built in 1459, it is tough not to gasp in wonder as the sky starts to change its colour—the amber glistening finally to reveal the splendour of the iconic fort. Just gazing at this historical structure becomes an exercise to pause, reflect, and move one step at a time while soaking in the sights and sounds of the city. And no matter how hard we try, capturing the beauty of it all in our phone cameras just doesn't work. All you want to do then is hum a favourite melody, quieten the mind, and watch the sunrise.

While Mehrangarh Fort is considered the "starting point of Jodhpur", the fact is it doesn't quite matter, simply because there is immense joy in wandering about the city. As we soak in the views from atop the terrace of a 300-year-old home, which is run by Chandrakala, a widow

who, after the death of her husband, supplements her income by serving simple but delicious local fare to tourists, Jodhpur appears like a city that's been dyed in shades of indigo. We have besan (gram flour) and dhaniya (coriander) paranthas with pickle, delicious poha, all of this scrumptious breakfast washed down with masala chai.

It's quite an experience to sit around, take deep breaths, and look at the deep blue shades of the houses for as long as your eye can travel. From the terrace, which offers a bird's eye view of the place, the haphazard but compelling designs of Jodhpur city look like an enigma, waiting to be unravelled. It's a rich feeling, just staring at the maze of these houses, all of them blending some shade of the blue of one home with the other, almost as if someone has taken a blank canvas and painted it in a predominant shade of this colour.

If there are stories galore as to why Jodhpur has so many of these teal and sapphire-shaded houses, one can't help but think of Chefchaouen, the famous Moroccan city also famous for its blue hue. Interestingly, Chefchaouen, founded in 1471, got its distinctive colour in the 1490s, when it received an influx of Jews escaping the Spanish inquisition, the former bringing with them the tradition of painting their buildings in a blue colour. ■

For more information, visit the website: <https://www.daspanhouse.com/>



ट्विटर और एनडीटीवी का भविष्य

२०२२ में दो बड़े बिजनेस संस्थानों - एक ग्लोबल, दूसरा लोकल - का अधिग्रहण और नये निजाम के नियंत्रण को लेकर ये दोनों मामले चर्चित रहे

शिवेन्द्र कुमार सुमन

लेखक एक वरिष्ठ पत्रकार हैं।

२०२२ में दो बड़े बिजनेस संस्थानों के अधिग्रहण देखने को मिले। ये दोनों मामले चर्चित रहे। पहला ग्लोबल स्तर पर, दूसरा लोकल यानी भारत के स्तर पर। टेस्ला प्रमुख एलन मस्क ने ट्विटर का, वहीं भारत के सबसे अमीर बिजनेसमैन गौतम अडाणी ने एनडीटीवी का अधिग्रहण किया। इन दोनों कंपनियों में एक समानता है। ये कंपनियां मीडिया के अलग-अलग विधा में काम करती हैं। ट्विटर जहां लोक. प्रिय माइक्रो ब्लॉगिंग साइट है वहीं एनडीटीवी भारत का एक विश्वनीय मीडिया प्लेटफॉर्म है। अब सवाल उठता है कि दोनों कंपनियों के नए मालिक इसे कैसे आगे बढ़ाएंगे? क्या कंटेंट को

लेकर कंपनियां निष्पक्ष रहेंगी? इन तमाम सवालों का सही जबाब आने वाला समय देगा फिलहाल अब इन्हें अपने नए हुक्मरानों (मालिकों) के तहत काम करना है।

इन दोनों कंपनियों के बदले निजाम को लेकर हम विस्तार से चर्चा करते हैं।

पहले ट्विटर की चर्चा कर लेते हैं। ट्विटर का अधिग्रहण बिल्कुल फिल्मी अंदाज में हुआ। एलन मस्क में इसे खरीदने के लिए ४४ अरब डहलर का ऑफर दिया। फिर वह मुकर गए। उन्होंने बड़ी संख्या में फर्जी अकाउंट रखने का आरोप लगाया। ट्विटर ने उन्हें कोर्ट में घसीट लिया। लेकिन डेडलाइन के पहले उन्होंने नाटकीय अंदाज में इसके अधिग्रहण की घोषणा की।

अपने चिरपरिचित अंदाज में मस्क ने आते ही हंगामा मचा दिया। कंपनी के कई टॉप अधिकारियों को बाहर का रास्ता दिखा दिया। इसके सीईओ पराग अग्रवाल भी इसमें शामिल थे। खुद

ही कंपनी के सीईओ का काम भी संभाल लिया। बड़ी संख्या में छंटनी की। एक के बाद एक कई नए फैसले लिए। उन्हें तेजी से लागू भी करवाया। कुछ की प्रशंसा हुई लेकिन ज्यादातर नीतियों की आलोचना हुई।

उन्होंने ट्विटर के अधिग्रहण के पहले कहा था कि इसे एक आदर्श लोकतांत्रिक सोशल प्लेटफॉर्म के तहत डिवेलप करेंगे। लेकिन इसके विपरीत उन्होंने कई अकाउंट सस्पेंड कर दिए। इसमें कुछ पत्रकारों के अकाउंट भी थे। इनको लेकर यूएन महासचिव एंटोनियो गुटेरस ने आलोचना भी की। हालांकि, चंद घंटों बाद ही अकाउंट फिर से बहाल कर दिया गया। मस्क ने ८ डॉलर प्रति माह पर ब्यूटिक वेरिफिकेशन प्लान की पेशकश की। लेकिन तुरंत इस योजना को सस्पेंड भी करना पड़ा। इस योजना की आड़ में दिग्गज फार्मा कंपनी एली लिली के नाम से एक फर्जी अकाउंट बनाया गया और ट्वीट किया गया कि 'ईसुलिन अभी



प्री है। फिर क्या था इस कंपनी को एक झटके में 9.20 लाख करोड़ का नुकसान हो गया।

ये सब घटनाएं हैं। अब देखते हैं ट्विटर का क्या भविष्य है? हालांकि, एलन मस्क कई बार यह कह चुके हैं कि वह बेनिफिट की जगह सोशल बेनिफिट पर ज्यादा ध्यान देंगे। लेकिन सवाल उठता है कि क्या उनका शुद्धांती रवैया देखकर इसके बारे में आश्वस्त हुआ जा सकता है? वह सोशल कॉज को लेकर गंभीर हैं? अभी तक इसके लक्षण नहीं दिख रहे हैं।

लोग उनके बारे में क्या सोचते हैं इसका अंदाजा ट्विटर पर ही उनके एक हालिया ट्वीट से आप लगा सकते हैं। उन्होंने एक पोल करवाया कि क्या मुझे ट्विटर के सीईओ पद छोड़ देना चाहिए। पोल में उन्हें सीईओ पद छोड़ देने की सलाह देने वालों की संख्या ज्यादा थी। पोल के रिजल्ट के बाद वह नए सीईओ की तलाश में भी लग गए हैं। लेकिन उन्हें इन सब चीजों से ज्यादा कंटेंट को लेकर निष्पक्ष रहना होगा। आलोचनाओं का सम्मान करना होगा। छोटी गलतियों पर लोगों के अकाउंट को

सस्पेंड करने से बचना होगा। फेक कंटेंट और फेक न्यूज से इसे बचाना होगा। उसे रोकने के तरीके ढूँढने होंगे। आजकल सोशल मीडिया फेक न्यूज का बड़ा अड्डा बन गया है। अगर एलन मस्क ऐसा कर पाएंगे तभी जाकर ट्विटर उनके सपनों का लोकतांत्रिक सोशल प्लेटफॉर्म बन पाएगा।

अब एनडीटीवी की चर्चा कर लेते हैं। एनडीटीवी भारत का एक प्रमुख मीडिया प्लेटफॉर्म है। सत्ता के साथ उसके विपरीत संबंध जग जाहिर हैं। इसी बीच एक ऐसे व्यक्ति द्वारा एनडीटीवी का अधिग्रहण किया गया जिसके बारे में कहा जाता है कि वर्तमान सत्ता के गलियारों में उसकी मजबूत पैठ है। अब इस घटना की चर्चा होना और तमाम सवाल उठने लाजमी भी हैं।

अब एनडीटीवी देश के सबसे अमीर शख्स गौतम अडानी के मालिकाना हक वाली कंपनी अडानी इंटरप्राइजेज लिमिटेड की स्विसडियरी कंपनी एमएमजी मीडिया नेटवर्क लिमिटेड की हो गई है। वैसे तो शायद कोई ऐसा बिजनेस जिसमें अडानी काम नहीं करते हों लेकिन मीडिया फील्ड में यह उनकी पहली एंट्री है। जैसे

ही यह कन्फर्म हो गया कि एनडीटीवी अडानी की हो गई, चौनल के कई बड़े चेहरों ने इस्तीफा दे दिया। देशभर में इस चौनल के संपादकीय स्वतंत्रता को लेकर बहस छिड़ गई।

अधिग्रहण के बाद पहली बार इस मुद्दे पर गौतम अडानी ने खुलकर बोला है। उन्होंने एक इंटरव्यू में कहा कि एनडीटीवी मैनेजमेंट और संपादकीय के बीच एक स्पष्ट लक्ष्य रखा होगा। यह एक विश्वसनीय, स्वतंत्र, ग्लोबल नेटवर्क होगा। उन्होंने कहा कि मैं इस पर ज्यादा कुछ नहीं कहना चाहता हूँ। जज करने से पहले आप हमें कुछ समय दें।

अब सवाल उठता है कि जिस व्यक्ति के पोलिटिकल पार्टीज पहलिकल पार्टियों से रिश्ते जगजाहिर हैं उससे निष्पक्ष संपादकीय नीति की अपेक्षा की जा सकती है? इसका जवाब अभी नहीं दिया जा सकता है। इसका जवाब आने वाला समय ही दे पाएगा। वैसे हम उम्मीद करते हैं एनडीटीवी की संपादकीय विश्वसनीयता बरकरार रहेगी। ■



THE BEST OF THE BEST

As we start a new year, here is an ode to the oldies, the favourites and some restaurants that feel like home. Our readers from across the world share the foodie places that give them comfort and joy

BY RUKMA SALUJA

A compilation of favourites, suggestions that may help you discover something wonderful on

your travels, domestic or international. Some are favourites for comfort, others because they are cosy, some for great

drinks, some are loved for the hospitality and ambience and some, of course, for great food.



We tell you where to find the fluffiest of pancakes in Belgium



Find a little brewery in Amsterdam to gorge on authentic Dutch food and guzzle a slew of Dutch beers in our list.

LONDON

Amazonico / Mayfair Gardens, London

Rub shoulders with celebs at Amazonico at Mayfair Gardens in London. A mixed menu offering Asian, Mediterranean and Brazilian food in a jungle setting.

SINGAPORE

Hai Di Lao / Bayfront Avenue, Singapore

For a Chinese hotpot when in Singapore head to Hai Di Lao. With 18 outlets, one in the buzzing Clarke Quay area, you're spoiled for choice. Here's where you get to sample traditional Sichuan style hotpot in a contemporary ambience in a grand pairing of the old and the new. Always a good idea to try the house specials. Established in 1994, the group is experienced and finds a place in a whopping 786 outlets including foodie cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Seoul and Los Angeles.

Din Tai Fung / Bayfront Avenue, Singapore From the cooking oil business to a successful foray into the food business, Din Tai Fung remains a popular hangout for the current generation, continuing its successful stint from its humble origins with homemade steamed pork dumplings back in 1972. Word of mouth contributed to its success and spread so that it continues to hold sway over diners across generations. Needless to say, you will find steamed pork dumplings and steamed chicken soup on the menu. Its 161 outlets are spread over several countries, largely in Asia but also Australia, the UK and the US.

AMSTERDAM

Neni Stadionplein, Amsterdam

Neni offers a sophisticated night out. Food prepared by lovers of cooking and sharing dishes translates to a relaxed evening. Enjoy Eastern Mediterranean fare in a warm ambience and warm hospitality.

Inspired by all things Tokyo, at the Duke of Tokyo, a popular bar, you can liven up your night out by taking to the stage and singing your heart out in private karaoke rooms.

Browerij 't IJ / Funenkade, Amsterdam

Browerij 't IJ, a little brewery next to an old bathhouse in a 300-year-old windmill, is where you get to gorge on authentic Dutch food and guzzle a slew of Dutch beers. For beer lovers this is a heaven where you can taste a slew of craft beers made here.

Van Stapele / Heisteeg, Amsterdam

If you have the patience to stand in a queue that stretches miles, you can check out why it's worth the wait to sample the chocolate cookies at Van Stapele. You must really love cookies and chocolate because that's what you'll get after your long wait—chocolate cookies. Also keep in mind, there's barely enough standing space for two.

Market 33 / Zuidas District, Amsterdam

If you'd like to see how the Dutch unwind after work, go to Market 33 where all of Zuid (the corporate district) descends for a drink after work. A food court, it serves food made by the local food enthusiasts.



From Goan chicken xacuti to various pork dishes, we tell you where you can dig in and chill out on Anjuna Beach

MUMBAI

NHO Saigon / BKC

For a slice of Vietnam, it must be NHO Saigon at BKC. This is where you can sample classic Vietnamese fare along with French influenced bastardised versions of it that evolved into a new culinary sub-cuisine after the French war in that country. A mead taproom allows you to check out that sweet wine-like drink you didn't even know you wanted to try.

Bayroute / Juhu

How about getting Egypt, Turkey, Morocco, Lebanon and Greece on your plate? Bayroute in Juhu offers delights from these countries in a casual setting.

GOA

Toro Toro / Baga Arpora Creek Road

There's Asian, continental, and Goan (but of course!) food here. It's pet-friendly so watch out, non-pet lovers! It goes without saying that you can dance the night away and watch the sun rise over the Naga river before stumbling back home.

Pisco by the Beach / Anjuna Beach

While you can get a taste of dishes from around the world here, it would be a shame not to sample every single Goan item on the menu. From the braised chicken caffreal to the various pork dishes on offer, here's where you can dig in and chill out.

GHENT, BELGIUM

O'yo

The best pancakes in town. They are super light and super scrumptious.

Umamido

A ramen chain, and so of course, here's where you can get all sorts of ramen. Do check out kara Tonkotsu. It beats what you get at any ramen joint anywhere.

Julie's Cafe

For a cosy place for gup shup over cakes and coffee.

BENGALURU

China Pearl

When you want the comfort of something familiar. You know the old favourites in Indian-Chinese food you want are going to taste just as you remembered them.

Memories of China at the Taj

This is where you could go for great ambience in five-star surroundings, and also for some great dimsums.

SWITZERLAND

Demi Lune / Geneva

From tapas to Moroccan tagine, there's something to satisfy every palate with a glass (or many) of wine or an interesting cocktail. Beware, though, you might end up spending more time here than you intended. More than the food, perhaps, it's the lovely environs that are seductive.

Mulligan's Irish Pub / Geneva

Music and endless pints of beer. What else would you need in your downtime?

Elsie's wine and Champagne Bar / Zermatt

Wine lovers, this is the place for you. An impressive wine list makes you spoilt for choice. That's not to say you won't find a good selection of local beers. ■



LAND OF RED RIVER AND BLUE HILLS

The northeastern state, with the mighty Brahmaputra flowing through it, offers scenic and historical wonders to the curious visitor

BY PRASANTA J. BARUAH

Assam is known as the land of the Red River and Blue Hills. The Brahmaputra river is intrinsic to the socio-cultural life of Assam. It is one of the largest rivers in the world in terms of discharge and sediment. Originating in the glaciers of the Kailash range of the Himalaya, the 288-km river travels 1,625 km in China, 918 km in India and 337 km in Bangladesh. In ancient Sanskrit literature, it is called Lauhatiya, meaning Red River. Brahmaputra also means son of Brahma, the Hindu god of creation. The name Assam immediately brings to mind

the aroma of the internationally acclaimed 'Assam tea,' grown in over 1,000 lush green tea estates of this premier state of Northeast India, located close to India's international border with as many as four countries—China, Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh.

Along with the most rejuvenating beverages, Assam tea, the state is globally known for its one-horned rhinoceros, whose number has increased from just about 20 or so to more than 2,000 in about 100 years, often described as the most successful conservation story of the past

century.

Assam was annexed to British India in February 1826, after the invading Burmese forces were defeated. Earlier, the Burmese had taken control of Assam after overcoming the Ahoms who ruled Assam for 600 years from 1228.

According to Madhumita Bhagawati, Director, Tourism, Govt. of Assam, "Assam is much more than just tea and the rhinoceros. The Kamakhya Temple dedicated to the Mother Goddess, the mighty Brahmaputra river and the historical



relics dotting its bank, the half-a-dozen or so national parks, the golden muga silk, the world's largest inhabited river island (Majuli), the earthen pyramids (Maidams) of Charaideo, the colourful people representing almost all races of the human species, the springtime Bihu festival—all make Assam one of the most compact tourist destinations in the world."

Gateway Guwahati

Guwahati, the capital city, is the gateway to Assam and the entire northeastern region of India. One can fly to the Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport in Guwahati from any part of the world. It is connected with all major cities of India by railway. Luxury buses ply from Guwahati to the capital cities of all the northeastern states. In ancient times, Guwahati was known as Kamrupa. The Chinese scholar, Hieun Tsang, who visited Kamrupa in AD 640 wrote glowingly about King Bhaskar Barman and Kamrupa. Guwa in Assamese means betel nuts and haat means market. Guwahati is said to be the second oldest continuously inhabited city in India. The majestic Brahmaputra flows through the city. Visitors and tourists can enjoy luxury cruises and see the captivating reddish sun set on the verdant hills surrounding the city, blessed by the Mother Goddess, Kamakhya, atop the Nilachal (Blue) Hill.

Kamakhya Temple

The Temple of Mother Goddess Kamakhya

atop the Nilachal Hill is an important place of pilgrimage for lakhs of people every year. The Mother Goddess is also called the Goddess of Shakti (power). The temple is as old as ancient Kamrupa. The present temple was built by Koch King Naranarayan in AD 1565. There is no idol in the sanctum sanctorum; instead, it is the divine yoni that is worshipped in the garbhagriha, which itself is a cave. There are nine other temples of the Mother Goddess near the main temple, besides five Shiva shrines in Nilachal. One can get a beautiful view of the mighty Brahmaputra as also of Guwahati city from Nilachal Hill.

Christ Church

Guwahati has one of the oldest churches of the region, Christ Church, which was founded in 1844 and consecrated in 1850. It was totally destroyed in the great earthquake of 1897, and was rebuilt in 1901. At Kamarpatty, about a km away, is the Guwahati Baptist Church—established in 1845. The structure of the churches is a reflection of early 20th century colonial architecture, with inspiration from local design.

Burha Masjid

At Ambari is the Burha Masjid or Burra Masjid, the oldest mosque in the Assam capital, said to have been built between 1663 and 1667, when the city was under Mughal occupation briefly. While the original structure was destroyed more than

once due to earthquakes, the present structure came up in the early 1980s.

Kalakshetra

An important destination in Guwahati is the Srimanta Sankardeva Kalakshetra, a centre of art and culture. A sprawling complex, it has become a meeting place for artists, poets, authors, musicians, actors and singers. Visitors to Kalakshetra can watch a play or a dance performance and see artisans, sculptors and painters busy in their creative activities. Adjoining Kalakshetra is the first film archive of the Northeast, established on the premises of the Assam Film Finance and Development Corporation. It currently has over 130 films. At Khilipara nearby stands Jyoti Chitran, the country's first state-owned film studio.

State Museum

The Assam State Museum stands on the southern side of the Dighali Pukhuri. Established in 1940, the museum's collections include royal garments, paintings, sculptures, stone and copper inscriptions. Some memorabilia from World War II is also on display. A visitor can learn a lot about the history of Assam here.

Heritage Tila

On the Barphukanar Tila, a hillock beside the Brahmaputra in Panbazar, is the Mahabahu Brahmaputra River Heritage Centre, with the old Kamrupa Deputy Commissioner's residence being converted



into a museum of sorts. During the reign of the Ahoms, Lachit Barphukan, the great general who defeated the Mughals in the Battle of Saraighat (1671) in Guwahati, was its most illustrious occupant. It has on display the heritage of Assam's boats and vessels, a rich collection of fishing equipment of different communities, rare photographs and artifacts related to Guwahati.

Ropeway across Brahmaputra

While in Guwahati, one should not miss crossing the mighty Brahmaputra by the ropeway. The 1,820-m ropeway, which connects Panbazar on the south bank to Rajaduar near Doulgovinda Temple on the north, takes only 436 seconds to cross the river.

Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary

For the nature lover, about 38 km from Guwahati is the Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary. It has the highest concentration of rhinos (107 as per the 2022 census). Described as a microcosm of Kaziranga, it is ideal for visitors to Guwahati with little time to spare.

Mayong Magic

Less than an hour's drive from Guwahati is Mayong, a village that literally weaves magic. Mayong is an occult village where live at least 100 practising wizards and witch doctors—*oja* or *bej* in local parlance.

War Cemeteries

Assam has two major World War II cemeteries where lie in peace 686 soldiers who died fighting the invading Japanese forces. The Guwahati War Cemetery has 486 graves. The other cemetery is at Digboi.

Basisthashram

In the southeastern part of Guwahati is Basisthashram, dating back to the Vedic

ages. It was here that Sage Basistha regained his physical form after removal of a curse through rigorous penance. A Shiva temple stands at the juncture of three mythical rivulets—Sandhya, Lalita and Kanta.

Navagraha

Atop Chitrachal Hill is the Navagraha temple of nine planets, one of only two such temples on earth. It is an ancient seat of astronomy and astrology, and the sanctum sanctorum has a stone imprint of the solar system as depicted in ancient Indian astronomy.

Sualkuchi—the Textile Town

Assam silk is famous all over the world. About 25 km west of Guwahati is Sualkuchi, the textile town of Assam. Several thousand men and women work round the clock on their looms to produce muga—the exclusive golden yarn available only in Assam—and paat silk. Sericulture is said to have flourished here as early as the 4th century BC.

Lachit—the Great Hero

On the Brahmaputra in Guwahati stands a 35-foot statue of Lachit Barphukan, the greatest hero of Assam. The great Ahom general inflicted a crushing defeat on the Mughals in the Battle of Saraighat in 1671. A statue of Lachit Barphukan also stands at the entrance of the National Defence Academy at Khadakvasala.

Assam State Zoo

The largest zoo in the entire Northeast, the Assam State Zoo has about 30 species of mammals, 41 species of reptiles, 173 bird species, 227 species of butterflies and moths, over 150 species of insects and 610 species of plants and orchids. It is located in the Japorigog area of Guwahati and is spread over an area of 175 hectares.

Delicious food

Guwahati has a number of restaurants which specialise in local ethnic food, be it from Assam or other northeastern states. Traditional Assamese food—both vegetarian and non-vegetarian—has been a favourite with visitors.

Warm hospitality

Guwahati has close to 600 hotels, from five-star to budget category. While most budget hotels are located at Paltanbazar and Panbazar, close to the railway station, the three-star to five-star hotels are located on the outskirts of the city.

Sivasagar—the royal capital

For lovers of history, a visit to Sivasagar, 360 km from Guwahati, is a must. The nearest airport is at Jorhat, a two-hour journey. It was a part of the ancient capital of the Ahom kings.

One can see here the Talatal Ghar—the royal palace—the largest among the Ahom monuments. Nearby is the 18th century Rang-ghar, said to be the first amphitheatre in Asia. Sivasagar also has several important temples, all built during the Ahom era. Of them, the Shiva-doul, built during 1714–1744, is said to be the tallest ancient Shiva temple (32 m) in the country. The Sivasagar Barphukhuri is said to be the largest man-made tank on earth, covering an area of 257 acres. It attracts thousands of migratory birds during winter. One can also enjoy the sunrise and sunset on Barphukhuri.

About 13 km east of Sivasagar is the Kareng-ghar, the royal Ahom palace at Gargaon, which used to be the capital of the Ahom kingdom for more than four centuries. It was built in 1752.

Majuli—heritage island

Majuli is said to be the largest inhabited river island in the world with an area of 525



sq km in the middle of the Brahmaputra. It is a centre of Assam's Vaishnavite monasteries or Sattras. The over 40 monasteries located on the island are a hub of art, culture, dance, music, theatre and literature. Assam's 16th century saint reformer, Srimanta Sankardeva, and his disciple, Madhavadeva, embarked upon a massive socio-cultural renaissance from this island that took them to various parts of the Brahmaputra valley and beyond.

Sattriya dance, developed by Sankardeva, is today recognised as one of the classical dances of the country. Traditional bhaona plays are very popular. Located about 350 km from Guwahati, the nearest airport is Jorhat. One has to cross the Brahmaputra by boat to reach the island.

Raas-leela, held in November, is the largest festival of Majuli.

Kaziranga—gift of nature

Assam is famous for its flora and fauna. Swami Vivekananda described Assam as the most beautiful place in India after Kashmir.

Assam at present has seven national parks and 20 wildlife sanctuaries. The seven national parks are Kaziranga, Manas, Dibru-Saikhowa, Orang, Nameri, Dihing-Patkai and Raimona.

About 190 km from Guwahati, Kaziranga National Park, with an area of 858.98 sq km, today has over 2,600-plus one-horned rhinos—a conservation success story when one recalls that the figure had gone down to 20 a hundred years back. It also has the highest concentration of the world's Royal Bengal Tigers: 121 in 2021. Home to a number of primate species, the purest breed of Asiatic water buffaloes and one of the largest herds of Asian elephants, the Brahmaputra flows through it.

It is also a UNESCO World Heritage site and a tiger reserve. Elephant safaris, jeep

safaris, hill trekking are activities available here. The nearest airport is Jorhat.

Manas National Park

A World Heritage Site, Manas National Park is about 150 km northwest of Guwahati. The 500-sq-km park is a Tiger Reserve, Elephant Reserve and Biosphere Reserve and is contiguous to the 1,057-sq-km Royal Manas National Park of Bhutan. It derives its name from the Manas river flowing through it.

It is home to Royal Bengal Tigers (latest count 48), leopards, clouded leopards, wild water buffaloes, elephants, rhinos and red pandas, among other animals.

Pyramids of Assam

At Charaideo—30 km from Sivasagar—lie the royal burial grounds of the Ahom kings. Surrounded by tea estates, one can see here several Maidams—earthen pyramids—where lie in peace several Ahom kings including Sukapha, who founded the Ahom dynasty in 1228. The nearest airport is at Dibrugarh.

Rampur—treasure house of sal trees

About 125 km west of Guwahati, just south of Goalpara town, is Rampur village of the Rabha tribe. It has shot to international fame for its unique theatre festival called "Under the Sal Tree" held every December since 2008 inside a forest of sal trees. Organised by Badungduppa, a registered society, the festival attracts artistes from across the globe. There are homestay facilities available.

Digboi oil refinery

India's first commercial oil well was struck at Digboi in October 1889 and in 1901 Asia's first oil refinery came up here. The refinery is a heritage site today, being the second oldest refinery and at present the

world's oldest running oil refinery. One can visit the Centenary Heritage Park and Museum, and Discovery Well No 1. The nearest airport is at Dibrugarh.

Heritage bungalows

Assam's 1,000-plus tea gardens are dotted with hundreds of heritage bungalows built during the British era.

Some of the best heritage properties for tourists are the Burra Sahib's Bungalow, Mistry Sahib's Bungalow, Banyan Grove, Thengal Manor, Chameli Memsab Bungalow, Purani-Bheti Bungalow (all in Jorhat), the Mancotta Chang Bungalow (Dibrugarh), the Balipara Bungalow and Wild Mahseer (both near Tezpur). The nearest airports are at Jorhat and Dibrugarh.

Tea-tees

Assam's tea-tees—golf courses on tea estates—are a big attraction for tourists.

There are 20 tea-tees, natural and almost all with nine holes. Some of the estates have airstrips for tourists to arrive and leave in chartered aircraft. The 18-hole Digboi Golf Course and the Kaziranga Golf Resort Course are major attractions. The nearest airports are at Jorhat and Dibrugarh.

The Jatinga mystery

About nine km from the hill town of Haflong in the Barail range of central Assam is the village of Jatinga, known the world over for its mysterious phenomenon of birds committing suicide under particular conditions. On moonless nights from September to November, when the breeze blows from south to north, there is moderate fog and drizzle, birds flying over or past Jatinga drop towards any powerful light—some dying after hitting the ground, others killed by people. ■

(With inputs and photographs from Assam Tourism)



Sanjyt Singh

TICKLED PINK WITH VIVA MAGENTA

Find inspiration to accent your home with
Pantone's colour of the year



Ajay Arya



Pramod Group



BY
MALATI K. VIJAY

The writer is a Bengaluru-based freelance journalist and content consultant. Formerly with the *Times of India*, *Economic Times* and *Livingetc* India, she writes primarily on design, art and lifestyle. She also enjoys giving a healthy twist to various cuisines

Every turn of the year, the design world wakes up to new trends. Pantone Colour Institute has anointed Viva Magenta as the colour of 2023, and we are hoping to see lots of rose-tinted interiors. It's a daring and expressive shade that is also warm, feminine and playful. It will be exciting to see all the new interior aesthetics it will throw up.

Calling it an unconventional shade for an unconventional time, Pantone describes it as "brave and fearless, and a pulsating colour whose exuberance promotes a joyous and optimistic celebration".

Belonging to the red family, Viva Magenta is a balanced mix of warm and cool tones, and coaxes one to be adventurous. As a hybrid colour, it also corresponds to the physical and digital

worlds that we straddle today. Boldness with colours comes naturally to Indians, and this trend is set to spur some surprise experimentation on the home front. We scrolled through the portfolios of some designers and were struck by the imaginative way the tones of Viva Magenta have been used in their projects.

It's a colour that excites maximalists and minimalists alike. You may choose to make a splash by painting a wall or a ceiling with it, or you can just rouge your clean interiors with it. It is impressive both as the hero of your interiors, or as an accent tone. It's a versatile shade that is uplifting, glamorous, playful and vivacious.

And no space is off-limits for it. You can use it across the home from entryway to living and dining, bedrooms to bathrooms, and even walk-in closets.

You will find bold strokes of Viva Magenta in the projects of designers Shabnam Gupta of Orangelane and Sanjyt Singh of Sanjyt Singh: Spaces + Objects. Both design houses display their love for colour brazenly and beautifully in their projects, each in their uniquely individualistic styles. Kolkata-based Ajay Arya of A Square Designs and Delhi-based Ritu Gupta of Pramod Groups have also used the tone in their projects, though in a more measured quantum.

While magenta has been a popular shade in the Indian context, the opulent tone of Viva Magenta presents a more rich and exuberant emotion. Its incorporation into your spaces is bound to bring a sense of joy and charm.



Shabnam Gupta, Orangelane

Some ideas to include the trendy tone in your interiors

All-out bold

If you are looking to make a definitive statement with the colour, use it to paint a wall to create a stunning design feature. Go a step ahead and cover two adjoining walls or even an entire room with the shade to evoke a gorgeous maximal mood. You could also outline doorways and arches by painting them with Viva Magenta. Known for audacious use of colours, Shabnam Gupta has used the shade to highlight a layered doorway—creating a captivating feature. Never one to shy away from exploiting the power of colour in his projects, albeit in a very sophisticated and stylish manner, Sanjyt Singh uses the tone for upholstering furniture pieces, including headboards and the insides of a closet.

As an accent tone

An accent chair, a few cushions and décor accessories in Viva Magenta are enough to create an eye-catching feature in any space. The organic shaped carpet designed by Sanjyt Singh with Lipstick written on it in pink is a case in point. Floral cushions featuring a pink shade from Ajay Arya's restaurant project add a pleasant touch to the overall scheme. Ritu Gupta employs the shade for the headboard and a statement chair, carefully balancing them with the base palette.

Textiles are your best bet

Introducing a desired colour through fabrics is a more permanent way. Use the fabric to upholster furniture pieces of all sizes and shapes, and for covering the walls. Cladding walls or headboards with a textured fabric adds another dimension

to your interiors. Luscious velvets and shimmering silks help elevate this shade instantly. You could also use luxurious fabrics like chenille or fine quality cotton and linen. Just a hint of pink used in napkins and cushions in Arya's Jalsa restaurant project electrifies the dark, magnetic atmosphere.

A luminous finish

Being a warm and rich shade, Viva Magenta is at its best when used with a luminous finish. When you paint a wall or furniture with the tone, go for a lacquered finish that imparts a smooth and shiny look. Applied on wood or metal, lacquer gives it a luxe, sophisticated edge.

Contrasts

There's no doubt that crisp white and beige set off Viva Magenta in the most flattering way. You can explore other contrasting shades like bright yellow or mustard, and warmer tones such as red, purple and orange. Gold and silver work well too as they enhance its regal quality. Singh pairs it with deep blue with great success, creating a striking combination.

Flower power

There are so many ornamental flowers in this colour wave that introducing Viva Magenta in your decor becomes easy. A bunch of pink oriental lilies, orchids, carnations, tulips or roses mixed with other shades is a simple way to bring the flavour of the trendy colour into your spaces. Be inspired by the al fresco dining set-up curated by Singh to embrace the colour of the season. A bit of the pink tone in the table runner, along with the flowers, enlivens the entire scene. ■



THE ART OF INTERROGATION

SHAURYA KUMAR, a Chicago-based art teacher who passed out from Delhi Art School raises issues of history through his art works shown at a recent exhibition in New Delhi

BY PARSA VENKATESHWAR RAO JR

It was deeply stirring to view Shaurya Kumar's solo exhibition provocatively titled "There is no God in the Temple"—a line taken from Rabindranath Tagore's poem—at Gallery Threshold in New Delhi over November 2 to December 21, 2022. It was not about viewing the paintings and installations and admiring the aesthetics of it. Kumar, who teaches at the reputed School of the Art Institute of Chicago, grapples with questions of art and art history through his paintings and installations. His art can be termed 'conceptual art', where he is keen to express ideas and questions more than just colours and figures.

There are two Rajasthani-style paintings showing episodes from the stories of Rama and Krishna. Kumar has collaborated with a

Rajasthani-style painter to convey his ideas. There is the painting showing Rama, Sita and Lakshmana going to the forest. What we see in the paintings are three trees. What is not there are the figures of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana. This should not be taken to mean that the trees represent the three figures. We know that in early Buddhist art, the Buddha was shown through the symbolic tree, meditating under which he had attained Nirvana, or the wheel showing the 'dharma chakra'. In this Rajasthani painting, Kumar is indicating the plain absence of the three figures.

Similarly, there is the painting showing Yashoda with a rod in her hand ready to chastise boy Krishna for stealing the butter from the homes of the Gopikas or the milk-maidens. Krishna in this picture



is out of the frame, and Yashoda with the rod in her hand is looking outside the frame, and the milk-maidens are standing in a group at this end of the frame. The concept is clear: the absence of God. To convey his idea, Kumar collaborated with an artist who was adept in the Rajasthani style of painting while the ideas were his own. He adopts an unorthodox approach.

There is a sculptural frame with broken limbs. Kumar says that when he went to the National Museum, he saw parts of broken or missing sculptures in the warehouse of the museum and was trying to reconstruct the lost or broken sculptures of which the remnants were a part, and it leads one to connect with the history of art, where through the ravages of time and history, art objects have been left denuded. Kumar is contemplating the history of art through the assembly of the limbs in a single sculptural frame, and is inviting the viewer to do the same.

Then there is the installation showing the ancient board game of dice, and in some of the squares are placed sculptures. And there is a dice next to the board. The throw of the dice raises the question of who possesses the art piece, of those who lost the pieces through the throw of the dice. It is a stark reflection of the antiques bazaar where the pieces stolen and smuggled are sold and purchased. And those who come to possess the antique piece assert their own power. It is a comment on how so many of the

Indian and eastern art pieces are found in different countries, either in museums or private collections, and which were not acquired in a straightforward fashion.

Kumar thus sets up a different kind of conversation between the artist and the viewer. It is not a passive act on the part of the viewer, appreciating the work of art and through it the artist's creativity. It is interesting that Kumar is an art teacher and he seems to be continuously motivating his students to get a debate going in the classroom. And he seems to adopt the same pedagogical style through his art exhibition.

An alumnus of the Delhi School of Art, 43-year-old Kumar says that he was mentored by the well-known artist, Anupam Sood, and though he moved to the United States in 2004, living in New York for many years before he moved to Chicago, where he has spent more than a decade, he has not lost interest in issues concerning Indian art. He curated an exhibition of Indian artists living in the United States in Chicago, which was on from September 2021 to March 2022. He said that though the number of artists whose works were on display in the exhibition was not too many, the talent that was showcased was immense and diverse. He is engaged in teaching at the reputed School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he is also the Chair of Faculty in the Office of the Dean of Faculty. ■



Young
&
Restless

NEW YEAR NEW SHENANIGANS!

Happy New Year, dear readers! What's on your wishlist for 2023? A new job? A new relationship? A fancy home? Your dream car? Or your dream of having a house filled with spirited children? Whatever it is, may it all come true. And if it doesn't, here's hoping you find something else to assuage yourself with.

By the way, it isn't just a new year but also my twelfth column. Yes, a whole year has gone by since you and I embarked on this journey to discover the bed, bath and beyond of the youth of today. Although, I'm not one for clichés, it truly feels like yesterday when I wrote the first piece in this series. Time flies, and how!

Which is why, this month, I'm doing things a tad differently.

No, this is not a '10 New Year resolutions you could keep' type of list—that's more passé than candlelit dinners on Valentine's Day. What I'm doing, instead, is listing a few things that might happen to you, or, around you, sort

of a things-that'll-be-hot-and-happening-in-2023 list.

Ethical Non-Monogamy

Simply put, ethical non-monogamy or ENM is leading a non-monogamous life with your partner's consent. How's it different from an open relationship? This one isn't just limited to sex but could lead to a full-blown relationship(s). Per a 2016 survey in the United States, one in every five adults admitted to having engaged in ENM at least once. And that number is on the rise, across the globe. How are things in India? As per a 2017 survey by Bangalore Polecules (full marks for that name, by the way!), 72 percent of Indians had

informed their partners before indulging in a non-monogamous way of dating. Basically, things are only getting more adventurous going forward, so expect lots of non-monogamous trysts in 2023. Having your cake and eating it too has never been more ethical!

Not-So-Straight Parents

In the words of Delhi-based interior designer, author and columnist Sheena Arora (name changed), "Women, especially financially independent ones, are fed up of heterosexual men and don't see them as ideal partners with whom to have a child." Which is why they're seeking the sperm of their gay friends to have a child they can raise on their own. "It even



helps evade society's taunts regarding the presence of a biological father, and one still gets to enjoy life on their own terms!" Adds thirty something Mumbai-based advertising executive Mehak Sharma (name changed), living life queen-size as a single woman, "Also, gay men are so much more understanding and caring than their heterosexual counterparts!" Such an arrangement bodes well for gay men looking to have a child as well, and it's getting increasingly popular in urban settings, especially now that homosexuality is no longer a crime, and IVF a credible fertility solution.

The Rise of the Single Woman

Speaking of women not needing men, things will only get more challenging for straight men. According to a report by IndiaSpend, over 73 million Indian women claim to be single by choice. These women include not only those who've never been married but also those who're divorced, widowed and those belonging to the LGBTQ+ community. "When a woman is making enough and more to take care of herself, she doesn't need a man to be a saviour or provider. What she wants is an equal partner who is willing to be emotionally vulnerable and sexually committed. And she won't settle for anything else!" Palak Kapadia (name changed) is one of Bengaluru's most admired young entrepreneurs and has expressed her take on marriage rather publicly in the past. "Unmarried and alone is always better than being married and miserable!" And those who have been married in the past just aren't in the mood for another round. "Been there, done that, and been miserable. Indian men have still not evolved enough to understand the nuances of marriage—there's no sharing of responsibilities,

no treating their wives as equals. Why would I get married again? I have Tinder whenever I crave some action!" says Mumbai-based ad filmmaker Ankita Agarwal (name changed). Why should boys have all the fun, right?

Love in the Time of Working

While there's a lot of chatter about work-life balance online, the fact remains that young people spend more time working than doing anything else. Especially with everyone now pursuing their entrepreneurial or influencer dreams, the divide between personal and professional has never been more blurred. And how has that altered their dating lives? Well... they've learnt to mix the two. Per a 2015 survey by CareerBuilder India, one in three office-goers admitted to having an affair with someone at their workplace. And while that number did see a temporary decline thanks to #MeToo, the ever-hectic working hours in India have forced millennials and Gen Z folks to look for love wherever they're working. "It's convenient, to be honest. You spend so much time together, so it's also easier to get to know each other," admits Delhi-based graphic designer Sahil Verma (name changed) of one of Delhi's most popular advertising agencies. Sahil is currently dating a client-servicing executive at work and their dates are either during lunch hour or for post-work drinks at a nearby watering-hole. According to his girlfriend, Sahiba (name changed), they're "living in the moment and happy with the way things are!"

Longing for Long-Distance

Just when you thought the debate on long-distance relationships had well and truly settled, here come the Gen Z men and women,

eager to make it happen again. A recent Bumble survey showed one in three people on the app admitted to being open to dating someone not living in their city or country. And 12 percent of the respondents admitted to finding it easier to navigate dating in another country. "We're all online all the time, anyway. And FaceTime has made long-distance dating way easier than it used to be," shares Mumbai-based fashion stylist Aakriti Khandpal (name changed). Her boyfriend has been living in Sydney, Australia, for the past four years and their equation is stronger than ever. What about meeting in person often enough? "It's not like our fast-paced lives and hectic work schedules allow us to meet anyone that often!" It's a tale of two cities and it's working perfectly fine.

So there you have it, folks. Everything to watch out for in 2023. Though life and love never came with a manual, here I am, giving you all the dope.

It's a new year so make the most of it. Needless to say, I'll be watching! ■

Who AM I?

Think of me as someone who knows the minds, hearts and bedrooms of the young Indian today. I have a social life across cities that allows me access to coveted parties, people and positions (pun absolutely intended!). Through this column, I aim to keep you abreast of how the young people of India go about their personal lives. I promise to keep it honest and to-the-point. No judgements, no prudishness.

THE OLD ORDER CHANGETH

GIVING WAY TO THE NEW



Out with the old, in with the new is all very well but are we throwing the baby out with the bath water, asks RUKMA SALUJA

Gazing into the crystal ball can be iffy at the best of times. Building on what has gone by to figure out what lies around the corner needs AI, for sure. Artificial Intelligence is everywhere today, be it in so little as the auto correct on your cell phone. Imagine, then, its use on a larger scale and in other spheres.

Building military hardware has shock value and use of it leads to the loss of human life. Artificial Intelligence is insidious but just as deadly as the breakdown of systems at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi, showed recently. While not confirmed, speculation is rife that it was a cyber attack. The cost is always human life, human life that is the fodder for megalomaniacal ambition every single time. Saving life falls to medical professionals, and activists, whichever side of the ideological divide they find themselves on. So, the pro-lifers want to save lives in the womb but are happy with advanced warfare technology and lethal standing armies. Saving embryos in the womb takes precedence over stopping insurgencies around the globe.

Women fight for the right to be a part of the millennia-old patriarchy that has bedevilled humankind. The fight for equal rights has led to an attempt to do away with a gender divide. The push to side-step natural biology has resulted in androgyny becoming the buzzword. What one feels defines gender. Feminism demands equality, patriarchy pushes back, but the urge for political survival gives in and so we head to a genderless future. Celebrating womanhood or manhood pushes you to irrelevance and the edges of mainstream thought. Heroes of the past who laid down their lives for causes they believed in are to be cancelled, history rewritten to accommodate new ideologies based largely on feelings. A moment lived can be deleted and undone because it was not convenient for current thought.

And yet a thought released on the internet remains there forever, the digital imprint that can come back to bite you years later when you might have matured from the time you held certain views. Can one then never hold a different point of view? Freedoms, particularly of speech, are under threat, journalists have steadily been losing bite,

slowly falling in line with the inclines of political power. When even North America, the bastion of free speech, succumbs to totalitarianism with Julian Assange incarcerated, journalists suspended, however temporarily, by Elon Musk's Twitter, the future we head to looks like a dystopian nightmare. But as with the frog in the well of warm water turning hot, we too are slowly accepting, and thus mutating into robots. Little is known of North Korea, but what leaks out points to a pliant population. Could that be a blueprint of what awaits us all?

The breakdown of gender barriers puts men on the back foot. Man the bread-winner, man the provider, man the protector has to re-orient what has been in his DNA from the dawn of time to match pace with this advanced version of feminism. Dating and relationships come with hitherto unforeseen pitfalls. Relating to each other has to be learned afresh. Grandma's advice holds water no more. But we can expect big pharma to come up with what we couldn't imagine. The entire Covid episode was like a giant screenplay, post which even naysayers admitted to what earlier were held as mere conspiracy theories. Master puppeteers hold the strings to the unimaginable.

Could these drastic turnarounds have been avoided if men had toned down extreme behaviour just a little, been more considerate of women, more inclusive? What is this gender-fluid society towards which we are headed? Are oestrogen and testosterone to be tamed to parity, can their functions be diluted to neutrality? Will we become like the pointy-faced aliens depicted by Hollywood's imagination?

And through all this, nature is making its presence felt rather violently. But we are on a roller coaster ride with no breaks. Geologists will tell you warming and cooling are in the natural lifecycle of the earth. Be that as it may, can we really truly go back to a more natural way of life? Can we really stop using fossil fuels when they have penetrated every single aspect of our lives? The origin and manufacturing of any random household article will give you the answer.

And so, what does the future hold? I'm sorry, my crystal ball is unclear, it's throwing up more questions than answers. ■



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