

The Pioneer

# EXOTICA

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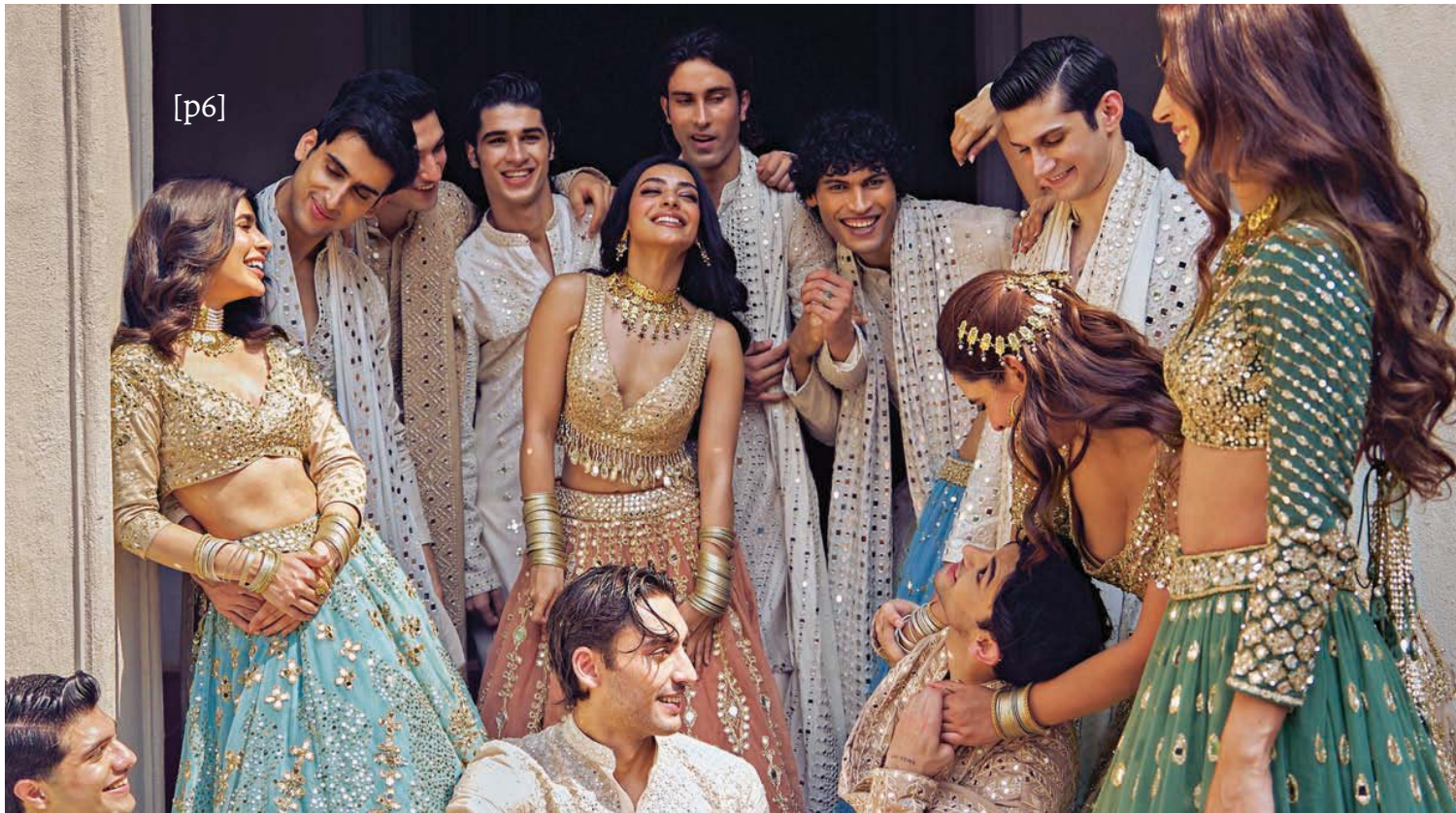
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# I N S I D E

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COVER: ABHINAV MISHRA'S ONE LOVE CELEBRATES CROSS-BORDER LOVE, AND BRIDAL ELEGANCE THROUGH INTRICATE DETAIL AND POWERFUL CULTURAL EXPRESSION.

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# Draped in Love

Love, culture and style come together in a collection made for real meaningful celebrations, says **SAKSHI PRIYA**

**W**hat if love could cross borders and timelines - boldly, visually and with the power of design? What if clothing could carry the weight of shared stories, traditions and a collective longing for connection?

**ONE LOVE**, Abhinav Mishra's latest collection, speaks of unity and individuality. In a time when identities are often boxed in, this campaign opens its arms wide. Shot at a destination with talent from both India and Pakistan, the collection brings together people and narratives - where race, religion and nationality give way to shared joy.

CREATIVE DIRECTION & CONCEPT - ABHINAV MISHRA  
PHOTOGRAPHER - HORMIS ANTONY THARAKAN  
STYLING - BHARAT KUKREJA  
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MARKETING - QUIRK BRAND CONSULTING





From the very first look, *ONE LOVE* evokes deep emotion. Signature mirror-work spans lehengas and tailored kurtas, reflecting light and mood. Each piece carries emotion, memory, and meaning. There's a rhythm in the fabric, a quiet message in every detail.

The silhouettes are fluid- delicate yet confident, regal with ease. The womenswear includes bold blouses with plunging necklines, layered textures, and lehengas designed to move. There's structure, but it never feels rigid. Whether it's a dupatta with floral motifs or a skirt decorated with geometric beadwork, each look feels created for significant moments.

THE LEHENGA, WITH ITS DELICATE PINK AND GOLD ACCENTS, EXUDES ELEGANCE. INTRICATE FLORAL AND GEOMETRIC EMBROIDERY, DORI, PEARLS AND ABHINAV'S SIGNATURE MIRROR-WORK CREATE A MAGICAL EFFECT. EACH PIECE SHINES AT WEDDINGS AND INTIMATE GATHERINGS, FROM PLUNGING NECKLINES TO STRUCTURED KURTAS, PERFECTLY CAPTURING THE BRIDE'S SMILE IN THE SHIMMER OF GOLD



Menswear speaks with equal strength. Embellished kurtas in deep hues are layered with embroidered Nehru jackets and accents that honour heritage while reflecting individuality. Mishra's approach is inclusive — everyone has a place in the celebration.

The colour palette transitions between romantic ivories, strong blacks, soft pastels, and jewel tones. The shades feel rooted in memory while looking to the future. Silks, wool blends, and tactile fabrics carry each garment with depth. The pieces are designed to flow with real movement and real life.







And what brings this vision alive are the people. Pakistani stars like Ayeza Khan, Mawra Hocane, Kinza Hashim, Danyal Zafar, and Indian talent come together to shape a story of shared expression. Mishra doesn't describe connection - he shows it. The energy, the ease, the sincerity - it's all there in every frame.

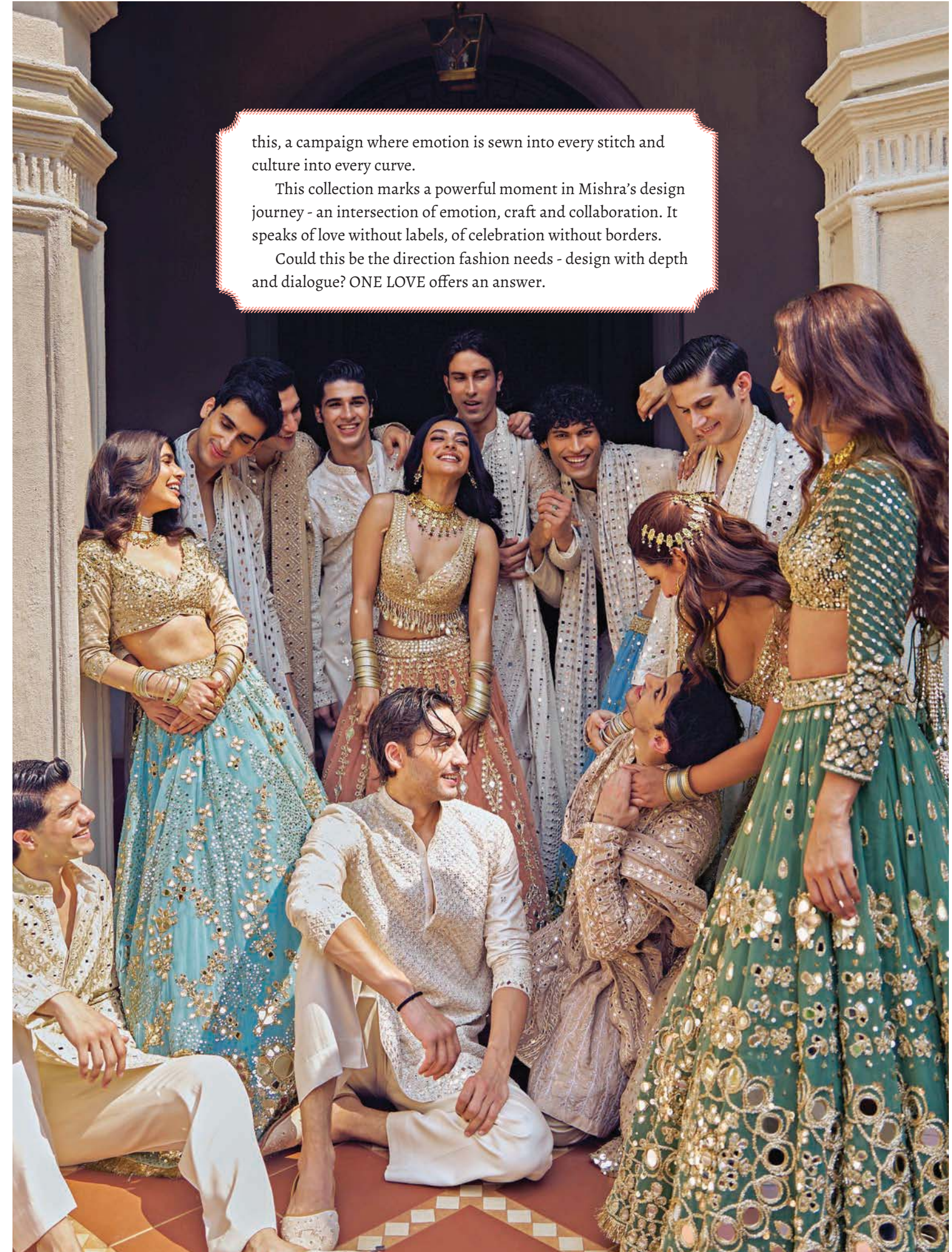
"There's a piece of my journey in this campaign," Abhinav says. The honesty in that sentiment is visible in the design, the casting, the narrative. ONE LOVE feels like a conversation - quiet, layered, and meaningful.

What does it take for fashion to become more than just fabric and form? Perhaps it's

this, a campaign where emotion is sewn into every stitch and culture into every curve.

This collection marks a powerful moment in Mishra's design journey - an intersection of emotion, craft and collaboration. It speaks of love without labels, of celebration without borders.

Could this be the direction fashion needs - design with depth and dialogue? ONE LOVE offers an answer.





# Into the Clouds

In the peaceful beauty of Ziro, Arunachal Pradesh, **PANKAJ KUMAR** captures the heart of its people. Their smiles, stories, and deep bond with nature come alive in every shot



**Rituals:** Apatani tribe's wedding ceremony showcases unique rituals, intricate tattoos and traditional attire.



**Harvest:** A Ziro farmer graciously offer rice, a symbol of gratitude and prosperity, during harvest time.



**Blessing:** In wedding ceremony, the bride's family offers baskets of grains to the groom's home, symbolising prosperity.



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\*Dilute 1 part Savlon in 15 parts clean water. Basis lab study on sample microbes.





# Fashion

## FINDS THE SELF

*Young designers translate resilience, love, and meaning into garments that speak to the soul, says SAKSHI PRIYA*

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In a world where fashion reflects the inner landscapes of the mind, soul and society, it's heartening to witness collections that go beyond surface — level aesthetics. The latest student showcase from Pearl Academy did exactly that, offering garments as deeply personal expressions of identity, purpose, and emotion through their presentation titled *Find Your Self*.

There was nothing tentative about these creations. The collections felt mature, arresting

and rooted in a contemporary sense of self, one that values introspection alongside innovation. This was fashion as a statement, delivered with confidence and clarity.

### Passion from the Ground Up

The first act, *PASSION: "Make Nothing from Scratches"*, set the tone with its bold use of upcycled materials. DeadStock fabrics were given new life in daring designs that felt both raw and

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A SOULFUL,  
EVOCATIVE  
SHOWCASE THAT  
TOUCHED THE  
HEART — EACH  
ACT SPOKE TO  
OUR SHARED  
NEED FOR  
MEANING,  
CONNECTION,  
AND IDENTITY

intentional. These pieces celebrated the courage to start from nothing and create something entirely one's own. The silhouettes had edge, the energy was rebellious, and the message was clear: creativity begins from within.

### Purpose rooted in Craft

The third act, PURPOSE: "Reimagine", brought the spotlight to craft and cultural identity. Designers used Indian pattern-cutting techniques in unexpected ways, blending them with global silhouettes. This created a collection that was both grounded and forward-looking, showing how design can reflect personal meaning while still speaking to a wider audience. There was a deep sense of care in the construction, and the pieces had presence without shouting.

### A New Language of Fashion

What stood out throughout was the strength of vision and execution. Each collection posed questions and invited the audience to reflect on personal journeys, without prescribing answers.

These designers approached their work with sensitivity and skill, building collections that spoke with quiet authority. This was a fashion presentation rooted in meaning.

It marked a significant moment for the students involved, an opportunity to define their voice, engage with real-world ideas, and present fashion as a form of thoughtful storytelling.

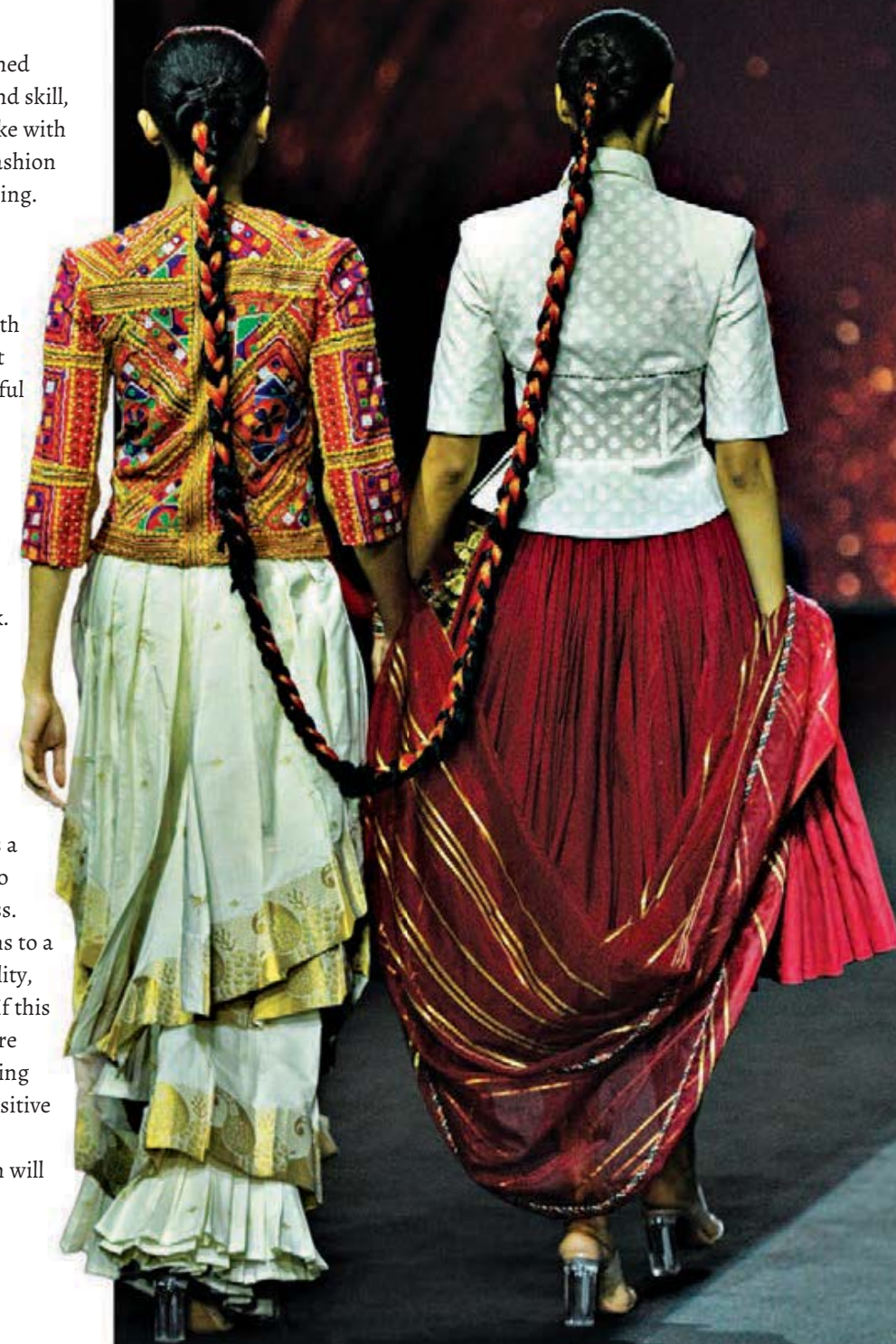
The collaboration across fashion design and styling made the collections feel cohesive and considered, from concept to garment construction to the final look.

### The Future is Already Here

'Find Your Self,' was a collective offering from a new generation of designers who view fashion not only as a creative outlet but as a way to process, question and express. From new, innovative designs to a growing focus on sustainability, fashion is always changing. If this is a glimpse of what the future holds, Indian fashion is moving into a space that is bold, sensitive and refreshingly real.

As we look ahead, fashion will continue to mirror society, showcasing creativity, modernity and inclusivity.

WHAT STOOD OUT THROUGHOUT WAS THE STRENGTH OF VISION AND EXECUTION. EACH COLLECTION POSED QUESTIONS AND INVITED THE AUDIENCE TO REFLECT ON PERSONAL JOURNEYS, WITHOUT PRESCRIBING ANSWERS







*Mountains test you, then they teach you. Up there, the sky feels closer and so does silence, writes ABHI SINGHAL*

## Serenity after the Climb



**I** always keep telling myself, *Apne aap ko itna fit to rakho ki zarurat padne par tum pahad ka bhi ghamand tod do.* (Keep yourself barely that fit that if needed, you can break the pride of even a mountain by climbing up) That's what we say when we love or are more into *trekking*. Also, the views above are worth the hiking and the pain you give to your physical body.

Trekking is like giving yourself the discomfort to see the beautiful, soothing and peaceful views that await you at the altitude.

Trekking is a major part of your adventurous side while you travel. Visiting travel hotspots, famous markets, and staying in a hotel is one part of travel. But hiking, camping, cooking in the mountains, and meeting the second part of your soul is a completely different and underrated part of the same travel. Trekking elevates travel beyond mere sightseeing. It's an immersive journey, a physical and mental test yielding profound rewards. The joy lies in conquering personal limits, each step a victory against gravity. Panoramic vistas, earned through exertion, offer a unique, soul-stirring satisfaction. The camaraderie forged on trails, the shared meals under starlit skies, and the raw connection with nature create lasting memories. Trekking strips away the superficial, revealing the authentic beauty of a place and oneself. It's a travel experience that resonates deeply, leaving an indelible mark on the spirit.

Indeed, trekking isn't for everyone, and that's precisely where its unique appeal lies. It's an embrace of the path less traveled, a deliberate



choice to venture beyond the well-trodden tourist routes. This conscious decision to explore the quieter corners of the earth rewards the trekker with an unparalleled sense of discovery and solitude. The trails, often less crowded, offer a more intimate connection with nature and a welcome escape from the hustle and bustle of conventional travel.

India's diverse terrain offers a plethora of trekking adventures, each with an allure of its own. There are a lot many treks that people enjoy doing, and there are treks that even take more than one day, because it is always said the more the merrier. *The Hampta Pass trek in Himachal*

*Pradesh*, a crossover trail, presents varied landscapes from lush valleys to glacial terrains, culminating in beautiful views of the Pir Panjal range and the stunning *Chandratal Lake*. *Uttarakhand's Brahmatal trek*, a winter wonderland, offers a different charm with snow-covered trails and frozen alpine lakes, providing breathtaking Himalayan vistas. The *Chandrakhani Pass trek*, also in *Himachal Pradesh*, blends cultural immersion and natural beauty, traversing through traditional villages and offering majestic mountain views. These treks, cater to different preferences, promising unforgettable experiences and a deeper connection with the majestic Himalayas.

## HAMPTA PASS TREK

**Location:** Himachal Pradesh  
**Distance:** 24 Km.  
**Base Camp:** Manali  
**Season:** Monsoon  
**Month:** July | August |  
**Country:** India  
**Altitude:** 14100 Ft.  
**Grade:** Moderate  
**Stay:** Camping  
**Trail Type:** Cross-over trail | Start in one valley, traverse the pass, and end in another valley.

5  
DAYS



### MOTIVATION TO CLIMB UP

**High Altitude:** Reaches 14,100 ft in the Pir Panjal Range.  
**Diverse Landscapes:** Glaciers, streams, meadows, forests, and rocky terrain.  
**Jobra Start:** Begins in Himachal Pradesh, showcasing its natural beauty.  
**Varied Vegetation:** Pine, maple, birch, and rhododendron forests.

**Hampta Pass Views:** Panoramic Pir Panjal Range views.  
**Challenging Descent:** Steep, rocky downhill to Shea Goru.  
**Chandratal Lake:** Glacial lake with changing colors.  
**Stream Crossing:** Chilling, but safe, stream crossing near Shea Goru.  
**Chhatru Finish:** Pastureland walk to final campsite.  
**Chandratal Visit:** Short drive to the stunning lake.  
**Manali Return:** Drive back to Manali from Chhatru.



## CHANDRAKHANI PASS TREK

**Location:** Himachal Pradesh  
**Distance:** 20 Km.  
**Base Camp:** Manali  
**Season:** Summer | Monsoon  
**Month:** May | June | July  
**Country:** India  
**Altitude:** 12100 Ft.  
**Grade:** Easy to Moderate  
**Rail Head:** Pathankot is the nearest rail head to the base camp  
**Stay:** Camping  
**Trail Type:** Circle trail | Camping in various locations, starting and ending at the same point.

### MOTIVATION TO CLIMB UP

**Rumsu Start:** Experience Himachali culture and architecture.  
**Malana's Mysteries:** Discover unique customs and folklore.  
**Rich Biodiversity:** Himalayan flora and fauna for nature lovers.  
**Thrilling Ridge Walks:** Breathtaking valley and mountain views.  
**Majestic Peaks:** Views of Pir Panjal, Dhauladhar, and Parvati ranges.  
**Stunning Sunrises/Sunsets:** Memorable scenic moments.  
**3,700m Pass:** Rugged beauty connecting Kullu and Malana.

5  
DAYS



## BRAHMATAL TREK

**Location:** Uttarakhand  
**Distance:** 26 Km.  
**Base Camp:** Lohajung  
**Season:** Spring | Autumn | Winter |  
**Month:** March | April |  
**Country:** India  
**Altitude:** 12300 Ft.  
**Grade:** Easy to Moderate  
**Stay:** Guest house/ Camping  
**Trail Type:** Circle trail | Camping in various locations, starting and ending at the same point.

### MOTIVATION TO CLIMB UP

**Winter Wonderland:** Magical snow-covered landscapes.  
**Frozen Alpine Lakes:** Brahmatal and Bekaltal offer mystical beauty.  
**Stunning Himalayan Views:** Peaks like Trishul and Nanda Ghunti.  
**Mythological Significance:** Linked to Lord Brahma's meditation.  
**Diverse Natural Beauty:** Oak, rhododendron forests, and meadows.  
**Moderate Difficulty:** Ideal for beginners and experienced trekkers.

6  
DAYS



# FIND YOUR WAY BACK

*Beyond biennales and  
beaches, Sharjah hides  
wonders that slow  
time and stir the soul,  
writes ABHILASHA  
OJHA*

**W**alk slowly and the 'rain' won't fall on you," says our guide shortly after we enter Rain Room. This permanent art installation found its way to Sharjah in 2018 under the aegis of Sharjah Art Foundation, a contemporary arts institution behind the facelift of the emirate that's

increasingly being viewed as one of the most important art destinations around the world. The installation, a crowd-puller for those visiting Sharjah, allows people to walk through a downpour without getting wet through a complex technological system that uses 2,500 litres of self-cleaning recycled water.





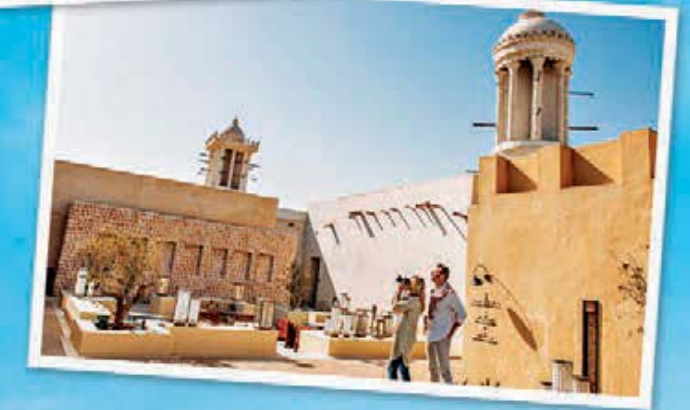
Some of us are drenched; the installation is unable to grasp the movement through the darkened space that's only lit with what looks like a lone floodlight. While some in our group giggle that they can't walk slowly, others wonder if the business of busyness in hectic cities has made us anxious and impatient. A trip to the Rain Room, then, becomes a journey into inwardness, with every step taken mindfully. It's the Buddha walk that allows us to experience the installation for what it is: being dry — well, almost — while around you the pitter-patter of the rain continues unabated. It's a moment to be experienced, especially given that there isn't another permanent installation like this one anywhere else in the world.

In the four days spent in *Sharjah*, Rain Room is just one of the many blissful moments to soak in during our four-day trip to this emirate that is bursting with tourist attractions: art galleries, museums, butterfly parks, picturesque safaris, centuries-old fossil mountains, beaches, mangroves, hiking trails, archaeological sites, and more. While the *Sharjah Biennale's* 16th edition continues drawing in tourists with its compelling art — over 650-plus works by 190 artists across 17 venues in *Sharjah* — the emirate's continuing impetus on all the arts makes for a compelling, chock-a-block cultural calendar, be it music, literature, photography, and various other festivals.

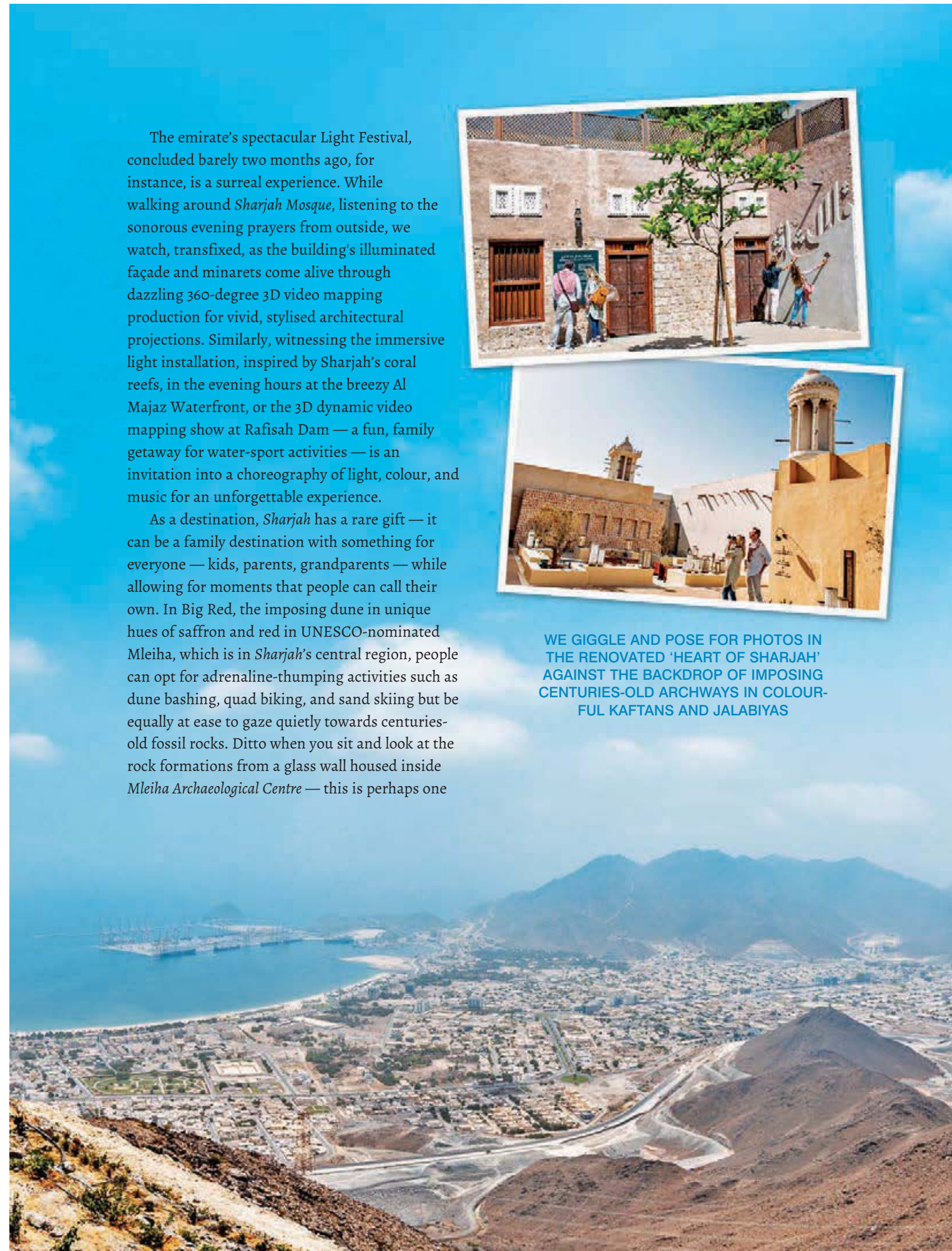


The emirate's spectacular Light Festival, concluded barely two months ago, for instance, is a surreal experience. While walking around *Sharjah Mosque*, listening to the sonorous evening prayers from outside, we watch, transfixed, as the building's illuminated façade and minarets come alive through dazzling 360-degree 3D video mapping production for vivid, stylised architectural projections. Similarly, witnessing the immersive light installation, inspired by Sharjah's coral reefs, in the evening hours at the breezy Al Majaz Waterfront, or the 3D dynamic video mapping show at Rafisah Dam — a fun, family getaway for water-sport activities — is an invitation into a choreography of light, colour, and music for an unforgettable experience.

As a destination, *Sharjah* has a rare gift — it can be a family destination with something for everyone — kids, parents, grandparents — while allowing for moments that people can call their own. In Big Red, the imposing dune in unique hues of saffron and red in UNESCO-nominated Mleiha, which is in *Sharjah's* central region, people can opt for adrenaline-thumping activities such as dune bashing, quad biking, and sand skiing but be equally at ease to gaze quietly towards centuries-old fossil rocks. Ditto when you sit and look at the rock formations from a glass wall housed inside *Mleiha Archaeological Centre* — this is perhaps one



WE GIGGLE AND POSE FOR PHOTOS IN THE RENOVATED 'HEART OF SHARJAH' AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF IMPOSING CENTURIES-OLD ARCHWAYS IN COLOURFUL KAFTANS AND JALABIYAS







of Earth's earliest formations with rocks being millions of years old and portions of the palaeo formations getting compared by experts to the surface on Mars. To gaze out at this wonder is a reminder of both, the permanence and the temporariness of nature. It's a similar feeling when we walk through the mangroves to see trees that are hundreds of years old, still standing tall and magnificent, with roots that, despite being old, are still strong.

Though weeks can be spent discovering gems in the lanes and bylanes of any destination, in a short period in *Sharjah* we get a sense of the emirate's spirit with its vibrant culture and art. We become excited children when we spot birds and beasts in *Sharjah* Safari, the largest in the world outside of Africa. We giggle and pose for photos in the renovated 'Heart of Sharjah' against the backdrop of imposing centuries-old archways



and intricately carved doors in colourful kaftans and jalabiyas (traditional Emirati attire before abaya started getting worn by women). We playfully compete in the "who's-bateeth-is-'most'-round-in-shape" competition, strike poses in Khor Kalba Mangrove Centre, eat from food carts, and chat away nonstop while also shopping in 100-plus-years-old renovated souks. Eating traditional Arabic meals in some of the iconic, legacy-brand restaurants; buying saffron and dates, and unwinding in the prettiest of properties, we do it all in Sharjah.

#### WHERE TO STAY:

**Sheraton Sharjah Beach Resort & Spa:** A well-located luxury hotel with a private beach.

#### Al Badayer Retreat by Sharjah Collection:

Inspired by caravanserai, this place has a choice of private tents and traditional home accommodation, making it ideal for couple getaways or family holidays.

#### Najd Al Meqsar Hotel by Sharjah Collection:

Restored and renovated, this is a homage to the centuries-old site in Sharjah with seven rooms with modern amenities. [Avoid if travelling with elderly]

#### WHERE TO EAT:

Try the restaurants at Chedi Al Bait Hotel offering traditional and global cuisine

**Hosn Khorfakkan, Khorfakkan:** Specialising in traditional Emirati food, its Majbous chicken, shwarmas, grills and kebabs are popular.

**Kalba Kingfisher Retreat:** A great place to stay, the restaurant here offers interesting eating options and beverages

#### WHERE TO GO:

**Rain Room:** A permanent 'rain' art installation like no other

**Butterfly Park, Al Noor Island:** Teeming with various species of butterflies, don't miss the imposing art installations spread across

**Sharjah Mosque:** The largest mosque in Sharjah known for its architecture

**Dr Sultan Al-Qasimi Centre:** Housing the personal collection of the current and 11th ruler of the Emirate, the works here range from vintage maps, artworks, rare photographs, artefacts, books and much else

**Al Majaz Waterfront:** A fun destination with several dining and shopping options

**Buhais Geology Park:** Housing marine fossils from over 65 million years ago, spectacular mountain ranges, and ancient burial sites from the Stone, Bronze, and Iron Ages.

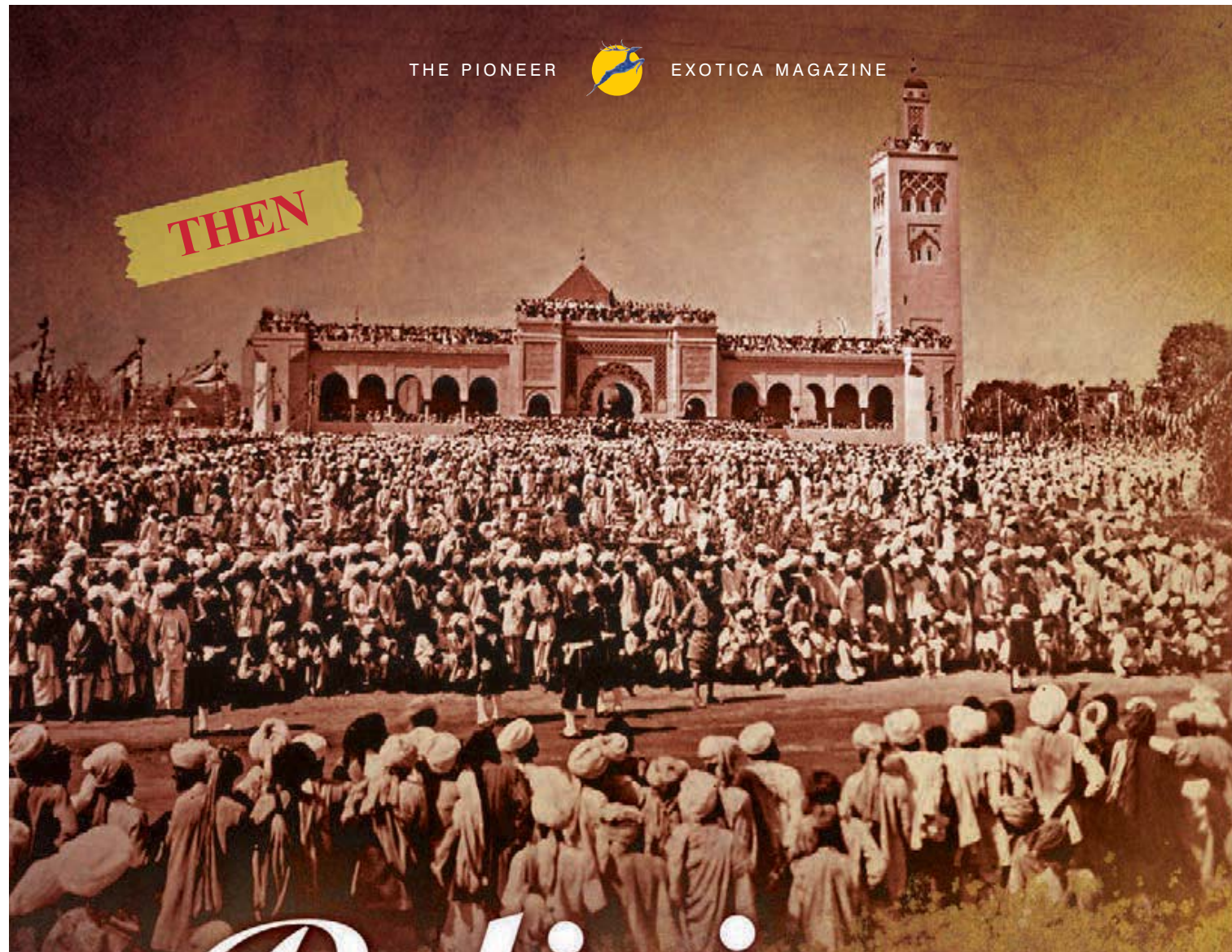
**Mleiha National Park:** Home to stellar views of red sand dunes, you can indulge in glamping, star gazing, dune bashing

**Sharjah Safari:** The world's largest safari outside of Africa is home to spectacular scenery and animals. The pre-recorded commentary in vehicles is informative and fun





THEN



# Reliving a Glorious Past

*Explore the grandeur of Kapurthala's Moorish Mosque and State Darbar Hall, revealing its glorious past, writes*  
**SEEMA ANAND CHOPRA**

To follow the trail of *Kapurthala* monuments, unveiling the mysterious past can prove to be an exhilarating experience. This led to the drive past the luxuriant green fields of wheat Rabi-crop though the food bowl on India - Punjab; with thoughts immersed in the life of Francophile Maharajah of Kapurthala - Jagatjit Singh who penned down his personal diary in French!! While going through a Kapurthala catalogue dated 1900 AD, I

NOW



decided to take a trip to the 18th century Jat-Sikh Kingdom of Kapurthala in Punjab to unveil its glorious past.

## Moorish Mosque- Morocco to Kapurthala

I drove towards the impressive Moorish-mosque, which is very stylized and Moroccan in form. It stands as a symbol of secular views of Maharajah Jagatjit Singh. A run-down garden with few walkers and huddled group of cards players could not dampen my spirits. I admired the minimalistic yet remarkable architecture of the famed replica of the Qutbya Grand mosque of Marrakesh in Morocco; which is the signature structure of Morocco! We were surprised to see the façade with no traditional domes and a solitary cuboid Minar on the right of the entrance which certainly is

different from the usual Indo-Islamic domed Mosques.

I walked through the entrance recalling that the Moorish Moroccan mosque was constructed by the order of Maharajah Jagatjit Singh in 1926 and completed four years later at a cost of Rupees 4 lakh! Right then, I stood at the same momentous spot where in the year 1930, His Highness Maharajah Kapurthala Jagatjit Singh stood with His Highness Nawab of Bahawalpur – Sadiq Mohammed Khan Bahadur facing a congregation of one lakh people who had gathered for the ceremonial opening of the reproduction of the Grand Mosque of Marrakesh in Kapurthala, there was no reliving the moment but I was spellbound.

Subsequently, I entered a vast compound laid with pearl white Indian marble and walked across it to the main Mosque through tens of double rows





THEN



of horse-shoe arches to reach the 'hall of tranquility'. Exquisite floral Muslim-art in shades of faded mustard and bluish-grey which was once turquoise, dispersed from the floor to the ceiling; greeted our eyes. Mentionable is the beautiful magnificent floral decoration of the inner dome, once created by the artists of the Mayo School of Art, Lahore. The plasterwork patterns are blackening slightly.

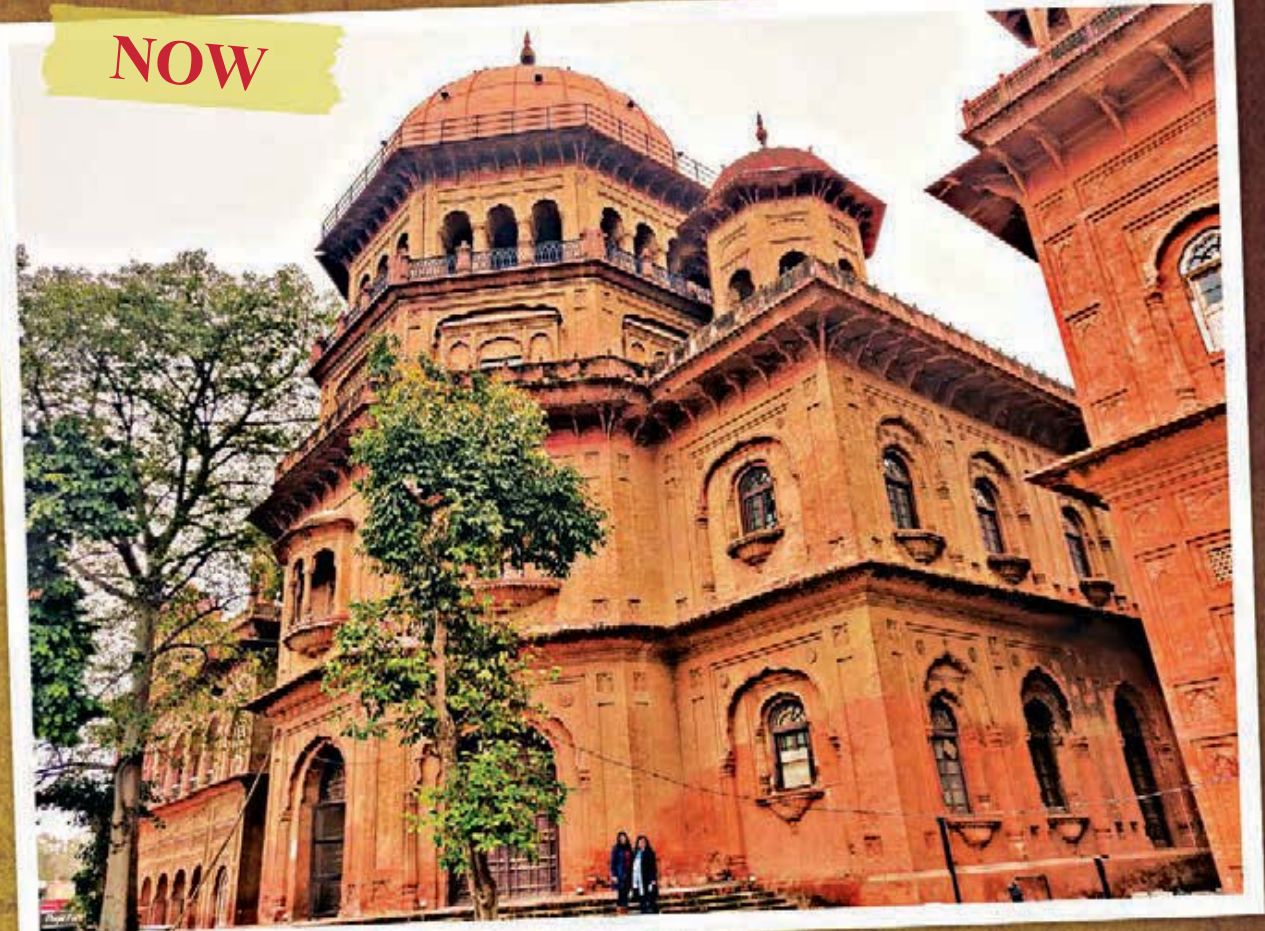
Keeping in sync with the French characteristics of the State of Kapurthala it was designed and built by a French architect Monsieur Manteaux. According to Maharajah Kapurthala- Brigadier Sukhjot Singh, the Moorish Masjid is a unique and exclusive monument of South East Asia. Moreover, with specialized assistance from bodies such as

UNESCO and INTACH, it is being restored to quite a bit of its former glory after years of neglect though cleanliness can be tough.

### State Durbar Hall

We drove a little further ahead to the remarkable and historic regal *State Darbar Hall*- a beautiful red-brick construction completed in the year 1889; with impressive domes, grills and stone lattice work that reflects East European style. The door and window-frames are in Islamic style. The interiors are white with magnificent royal palace look- Chandeliers, massive pillars and fabulous ceiling pattern in gold. In the derelict garden outside, I chanced upon a great spot for photography near the regal bronze statue of

NOW



Maharaja Randhir Singh with the once magnificent Darbar Hall and its massive wooden door entrance, in the background.

The present Maharajah Kapurthala comments that the splendid Bronze Equestrian statue of the late Maharajah Kapurthala has been fully restored by experts from INTACH in New Delhi.

Further, he has placed suggestions for restorative initiatives and re-adaptive use of the Durbar Hall before the State government to assign this majestic building to house the Punjab State Historical Archives, which will make it immortal in times to come. Also, his proposal envisages the separation of the State Revenue and Historical Archives and prefers the latter to be housed in this heritage complex that will then lend itself to

providing adequate accommodation for each of Punjab's district, for ease of research. Additionally, the new Archives should be air-conditioned to preserve the brittle records and will be a superlative Research and Library cum Exhibition Hall; together with on site reprographic and preservation facilities, all within one complex – thus is the Maharajah's vision.

Forlornly, I compared its lost grandeur with the original photos in the Kapurthala Catalogue of the year 1900. Unquestionably, lots more needs to be done after the initial restoration, infrastructure to attract visitors being the priority.

— The author is a travel writer, community leader and researcher





**PAWAN SONI**

**COLUMNIST**

**Food critic and founder of the Big F Awards**

## SPICE, SOUL, AND SURPRISE

*Bridging generations with bold flavours and classic comfort, one inventive plate at a time*



In an age where the young crave fusion and the old yearn for familiarity, family outings often fall victim to culinary conflict. Sensing an opportunity, *Masala Synergy* — formerly a premium cloud kitchen brand — has launched its

first dine-in restaurant at IFC, Gurugram, promising to bridge this generational divide.

The restaurant, located on the ground floor, comfortably seats around 70 guests. Its menu is split into two parts: Masala, which celebrates



timeless Indian classics, and Synergy, which experiments with regional Indian flavours fused with global influences. Naturally, I sampled a few dishes from both sides.

From the Masala menu, the *Tandoori Chicken* is a standout — succulent meat marinated in a spicy rub, grilled to perfection, and served with a thick, flavourful mint chutney that elevates each bite. *Tandoori Aloo*, stuffed with raisins, offers a sweet-savoury balance that's both comforting and indulgent.

From the Synergy section, the *Avocado Tokri Chaat* impressed with its clever construction: a crisp kataifi tart filled with creamy guacamole and drizzled with tamarind chutney. It's modern, playful, and utterly delicious. The *Thukpa Ravioli* brings Arunachal and Italy to the same table — shiitake and portobello mushroom-stuffed ravioli floating in a miso-pepper broth, delivering warmth and umami in every spoonful.

For mains, the *Butter Chicken* — a boneless, mildly sweet version — is comforting and familiar, while the *Pindi Chana* (made without onion, garlic, or tomato) could benefit from a touch more anardana for added zing.

The Synergy mains push boundaries. *Chokha Ala Kiev* is a masterstroke — *chicken keema* stuffed like Bengali chops, served with matar nimona and placed on a bed of mustard oil-kissed potato chokha. A *sattu-filled kulcha* on the side and melting

butter at the centre complete this earthy, inventive dish. *Chelo Kebab Makhani* is a clever take on the Iranian classic, featuring a juicy seekh kebab (not the traditional koobideh), a sunny-side-up egg, and a rich Punjabi makhani sauce — comfort food with flair.

But what truly sets *Masala Synergy* apart is its dessert menu. In most restaurants, desserts are an afterthought. Here, they steal the show.

The *Mohabbat-e-Sharbat Tart* is an ode to the iconic drink of Old Delhi. A buttery tart base topped with phirni, strawberry compote, and a delicate sugar dome, all drizzled with rose syrup — it's both artistic and indulgent. Equally impressive is the *Fatelli Coffee*, a deconstructed take on your after-meal cup, featuring chai custard pudding and a soft-yet-crunchy mawa cake rusk.

*Masala Synergy* is a welcome addition to Gurugram's dining scene. Whether you're chasing nostalgia or craving something new, this is one place where generations can finally agree on what's for dinner.





# Yuvi's Debut at *Fine Dining*

*From childhood favourites to global fusion, KOCA is a heartfelt culinary journey specially curated by Yuvraj Singh, writes ABHI SINGHAL*

The Indian cricketers are on a culinary journey of launching new ventures already with Virat Kohli, Suresh Raina, and so many more on the line. To the list is the addition of *Kitchen of Celebratory Arts* (KOCA),

spearheaded by none other than Yuvraj Singh in the bustling city of Gurugram. KOCA has officially opened its doors on at Golf Avenue 42 for the foodies and ambience lovers with a chill and a homely vibe!

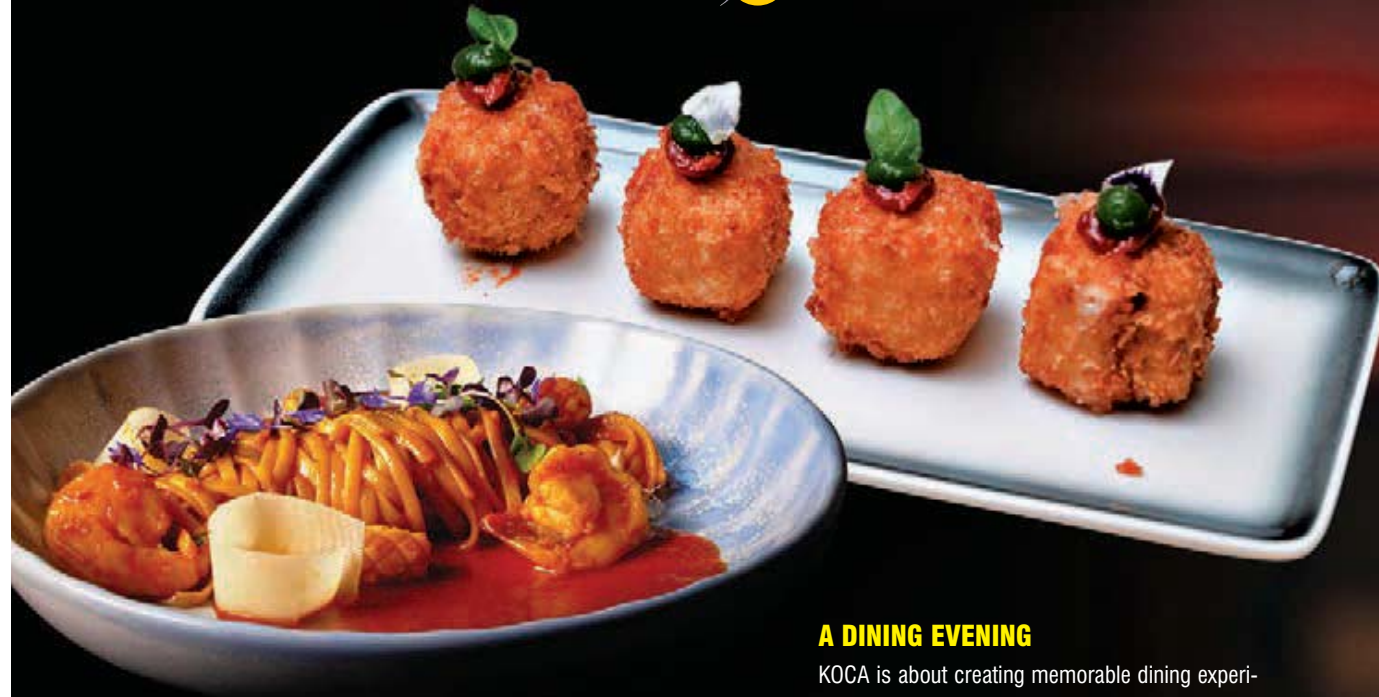
## A FEAST FOR THE SENSES

KOCA is more than just a restaurant — it is a space where food therapy meets artistic culinary craftsmanship. The restaurant has been designed to cater to a variety of moods, whether you want to celebrate with friends, enjoy a cozy dinner with family, or simply unwind over a comforting meal. The interiors reflect a fine balance between elegance and comfort.

The menu at KOCA is a celebration of global flavours while staying rooted in the concept of comfort food. Yuvraj Singh, known for his passion for food and fitness, shared his personal story of how food has always been a barrier while he travelled across the world for tours. So, the cricketer has personally ensured that the menu features a curated selection of healthy and vegan options, alongside indulgent delicacies. His vision for KOCA is to create a dining space where people can relish the nostalgic flavours of home-cooked meals, reimagined with a modern, innovative twist.







### A DINING EVENING

KOCA is about creating memorable dining experiences that connect people through food, conversations, and celebrations. With a menu designed to cater to diverse tastes with wholesome, nutritious options, KOCA is now redefining the dining in *Golf Avenue, Sector 42, Golf Course Road*.

Food lovers and casual diners alike can look forward to a unique dining experience that pays homage to the richness of home-cooked meals while embracing the innovation of modern gastronomy.

It is designed to be the perfect blend of high-energy parties with friends and relaxed family evenings; it offers an ambience that feels like food therapy with a chill vibe. Spread across two floors, with the top one being a rooftop caters to the mood. Whether you want to celebrate or unwind, KOCA promises an experience that's as memorable as it is delicious.



### Journey across Cultures

KOCA's menu is an exciting fusion of international influences and nostalgic Indian flavours, with chefs from Dubai too. The *Spicy Mango Picante*, a refreshing yet bold-flavored drink that set the tone for the evening. The starters showcased a delightful mix of textures and flavors, including: *Tandoori Avocado Hummus* — a creative take on the classic Middle Eastern dip, *Mozzarella Bites with Tomato Jam* — combining creamy cheese with a tangy twist, *Chipotle Chicken Tikka* — a smoky, spicy treat that seamlessly blends Indian and Mexican flavours, *Rajma Avocado Galouti* — a signature fusion dish with comforting homestyle rajma and Beetroot *Mascarpone Salad* — a refreshing choice for the health-conscious diner.

Vegetarian options shone just as brightly, with *Smoky Paneer Tikka* and *Tofu Teriyaki Skewers*, while meat lovers indulged in the *Chicken Yakitori*, a Japanese-inspired delicacy grilled to perfection.

The section with the *Rajma Avocado Galouti* and *Kadhi Chawal Risotto* is personally Yuvraj's childhood favourite, and is highly recommended by him.







A NEW  
CHAPTER OF

# Dishes

*Somewhere between a laid-back hangout and a full-sensory culinary voyage, Dos Delhi is shaking up the city's bar culture with one cocktail at a time, says TEAM EXOTICA*



Into the lively corner of Lodhi in New Delhi, *Dos Delhi* is a mood. It has a high-energy vibe, an aesthetic ambience, and a menu that's tasty and savoury. This hotspot is redefining what it means to dine and drink in the capital. Now, the creative minds behind the concept — Chefs *Jatin Mallick* and *Julia Carmen De Sa* are raising the bar with the launch of a brand-new *Beverage & Bar Snack Pairing Menu*.

This isn't just about snacks that accompany your drink. It's a thoughtfully curated sensory experience where bold cocktails and inventive bites combine in a masterful balance and contrast dance.

A sleek glass of *Truffle Spy*, made with gin, Martini Extra Dry, Cointreau, Campari, and a touch of truffle, paired with golden, crispy *Truffle Parmesan Fries*, makes a day. What is refined, decadent, and almost too good to share is the fiery *Dos Me Up*, where tequila combines with wasabi, sour cream, cilantro, and basil. Its punch is balanced by the earthy calm of *Charcoal Grilled Snack Peppers with Yam Hummus*.

THE AMBIENCE AT DOS DELHI IS AS MUCH A PART OF THE EXPERIENCE AS THE FOOD AND DRINK. SPREAD OVER TWO FLOORS, THE SPACE PULSES WITH A WELCOMING ENERGY







Each pairing feels like a little world of its own. The Smirking Cacao, with its heady mix of dark rum, vanilla liqueur, spiced vermouth, and cacao nibs, is like dessert in a glass. It is perfectly complemented by *Buttered Edamame with Thai Herbs* and *Lemongrass Ketchup*.

Then there's the refreshing *Hot Russian Zombie*, a vodka-apple-citrus-based drink that comes alive with Potato Lavash topped

with Avocado, Salsa Macha, and Chipotle Cheese Sauce. And if tropical and smoky is your flavour, the *Sexy Lady Stunner*, a blend of whisky, Martini Bianco, and roasted pineapple, pairs beautifully with Mustard Marinated Fish Belly Fingers and lemon marmalade.

However, Dos Delhi isn't only about the drinks. The bar snack menu is a genre of its own — part street-style comfort, part global fusion, and entirely packed with surprises. Take the *Guntur Chilli Glazed Crispy Chicken Wings* for instance, bold and spicy, and ideal with whisky. Or the *Flash-Fried Sweet & Sour Green Candy Tomatoes* served with *Yoghurt Tahina* and *Flour Crispies*, which offer a tangy, crunchy contrast to citrus-forward



cocktails. If you love bold umami flavours, the *Dos Magic Spiced Cassava Chips* with *Sriracha Cheese Ketchup* deliver a satisfying punch. And of course, there's the ever-popular cheese garlic bread, which is warm, gooey, and comfortingly familiar — especially when enjoyed with red wine sangria or a smooth whisky spritzer. Contemporary artwork adds visual intrigue, while live DJs set the tone, with music that shifts seamlessly from laid-back evening grooves to weekend party anthems.

The ambience at Dos Delhi is as much a part of the experience as the food and drink. So whether you're winding down after work or

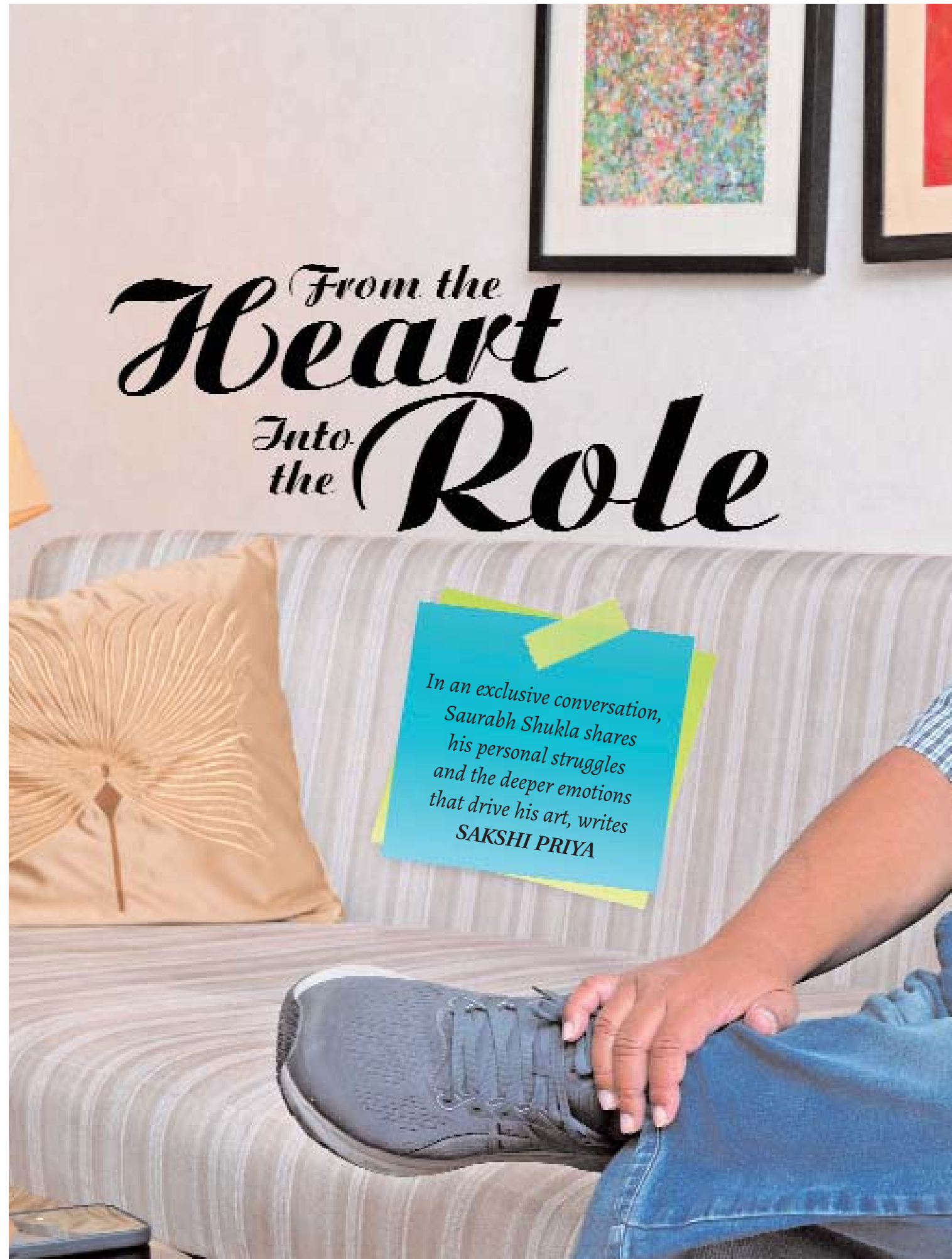
reconnecting with friends, *Dos Delhi's* new *Beverage & Bar Snack Pairing Menu* invites you to sip, savour, and explore one bold flavour at a time which is mouth watering.

#### FACT SHEET:

**Name:** Dos Delhi  
**Address:** Shop No. 9 & 10, Fourth Avenue Road, Lodhi Colony, New Delhi  
**Price for Two:** ₹2,500/-  
**Timings:** Mon - Thu, Sunday: 12:00pm to 12:00am  
 Fri - Sat : 12:00pm to 01:00am







# From the Heart Into the Role

In an exclusive conversation,  
Saurabh Shukla shares  
his personal struggles  
and the deeper emotions  
that drive his art, writes  
**SAKSHI PRIYA**



PHOTOS: PANKAJ KUMAR





Saurabh said to his younger self, “Bravo! You led a great life! I look back at my younger self, and I would say I feel pride.” There comes a moment in life when we stop, not to bask in success, but to hold the hand of our younger self and whisper, “You made it through.” For Saurabh Shukla, that moment isn’t about fame, nor is it about the applause that follows his name. It’s about the battles no one saw, the choices that shaped him, and the art that

saved him. As we sit down for this conversation, he looks at me, his voice steady yet filled with depth, and says, “I don’t become the character, the character becomes me.” And in that moment, I understand, his craft isn’t about acting, it’s about surrender. He doesn’t step into roles; he lets them find a home within him. The pain, the joy, the silent suffering, every character breathes because it borrows from his soul.

A playwright, a director, a storyteller, and an actor whose eyes have carried the weight of unspoken stories - Saurabh isn’t just the man who made us laugh in Jolly LLB or left us moved in Raid. He is the soul of every role he touches, turning characters into raw human emotion. But beyond the

WE OFTEN PERCEIVE FAILURE IN THE MOMENT, WHEN A FILM DOESN’T ACHIEVE THE NUMBERS WE EXPECTED OR WHEN A PROJECT FALLS APART, BUT IN THE LONGER ARC OF LIFE, WE REALISE THAT WHAT SEEMED LIKE A FAILURE WAS ACTUALLY A BLESSING IN DISGUISE. AND WE SAY, ‘THANK GOD, AISA HUA?’

silver screen, beyond the theatre lights, who is he when the world isn’t watching? It’s easy to measure success in awards and accolades. But what about the silent nights of doubt? What about the sacrifices? The moments when he questioned if he was enough? When he wondered if the world would ever understand the fire in his heart?

As I sit across from him, I don’t just see an actor. I see a man who walked through storms yet never lost his way. A man who turned pain into poetry and struggle into strength.

And in this moment, I realise, his greatest role wasn’t on screen. It was the one he played in his own life — the role of someone who,

despite the odds, chose to rise each time life knocked him down, to rebuild and to heal. It was the role of someone who showed up for himself, day after day, no matter how fierce the battle raged.

And in this moment, I realise — perhaps the most powerful performance we ever give is the one where we are true to ourselves, no matter the odds. Could there be a more deep act of courage than that? The story of Saurabh Shukla is not just one of fame and recognition; it is a story of persistence, passion and the relentless pursuit of a purpose that extends far beyond the applause of the world.



## IN CONVERSATION WITH

You once mentioned that acting was never your first love, you initially wanted to be on the directorial side. So how did a man who never intended to act in films become such a celebrated figure on screen? As for acting, it’s not a solo art. An actor alone is nothing. You need a writer who gives you the lines and ideas, a director who tells you how to interpret them; a light designer who creates the right mood, a set designer, a costume designer, the entire team makes a performance great. People often make the mistake of saying, ‘You’re a great actor,’ but in reality, they are also praising the writer, the cinematographer, the director, and the co-actors.

I was always more interested in theater direction, in putting up productions. But when you explore different aspects of an art form, you start understanding acting better, too. I believe that if you want to be an actor, you should first try directing. And if you want to be a director, at some point, you should act, so you understand what an actor goes through. Art in isolation is nothing. The beauty of this art form is that it brings together many arts - dance, music, acrobatics, and acting.

You wanted to stay behind the scenes, yet







life pulled you into the spotlight. When you stepped on stage for the first time, what did you feel?

I remember that feeling, it's what they call 'butterflies in the stomach.' It was a wonderful experience, yet there was so much innocence in it. There's a saying, 'The world is your oyster,' and it felt exactly like that. Back then, whatever I said, people were generous, they shared their experiences with me. One person advised me, 'Don't try to memorise all the lines. Instead, understand them. What you truly understand, you'll never forget, but what you try to memorise might slip away. If you grasp the meaning instead of just mugging up the lines, it'll be much better.'

You have played intense roles in films like 'Raid' and 'PK'. What excites you more, intense roles or lighter ones?

I don't think emotions come in boxes. They are fluid. From an actor's perspective, we don't think in terms of 'genres.' We simply want to depict life as it is, in whatever medium or text we are working with. If you look carefully at my roles, they have never

been one-dimensional. Even in *Raid*, which was an intense role, there were moments of humour. In *Jolly LLB*, the film had a certain tone, but the character had different shades. That's what interests me, roles that are layered and complex. Personally, I feel very comfortable with realism, it's my comfort zone. So, I enjoy realism more than any other style. But that doesn't mean I limit myself. If a role is thrown at me as a challenge, I get even more excited to do it.

Is there a particular role you are still waiting for?

I'm not waiting for a role. Truly speaking, I never wait. Because it's not the role that matters, it's what you do with it. That makes all the difference. I enjoy most of the roles I play, as long as they are directed well and allow me to discover something new.

Have you ever had a moment on stage where you felt so vulnerable, so exposed, that you were shaken by your own performance?

If that moment ever comes, it will be time for me to exit. What drives me is the feeling that

there is always something more to achieve. If I ever feel I have done my best performance, I might lose the motivation to continue. But yes, there have been moments that have surprised me. In *'Jolly LLB 2'*, there was a courtroom scene where I improvised a reaction. After the scene, there was complete silence on set. When the director called 'cut,' he burst out laughing, saying, 'Where did that come from?' That was a moment where I surprised not just myself but also my director and co-actors.

You have done films, written scripts, directed projects, yet you always return to theater. What is it about the stage that no camera or grand production can replace?

People think I have a spiritual connection with theatre, but that's not the case. I am a firm believer that I have one life, and I will do whatever I want to do, as long as it doesn't harm anyone. I don't see one as superior to the other. The idea that theatre is 'pure' while cinema is 'contaminated' is a romanticised view. Theatre is just as pure and just as contaminated as cinema. Contamination and purity are like siblings, they exist together. That is the law of nature.

Many actors say they 'become' their characters. Have you ever played a role that stayed with you even after the director said 'cut'?

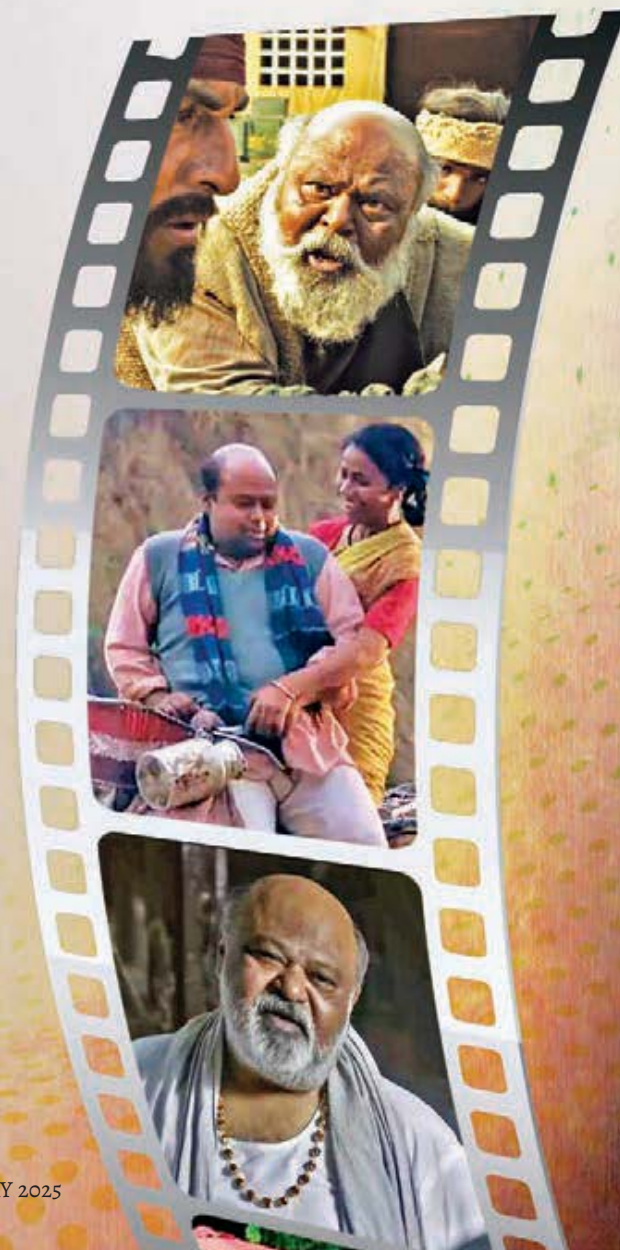
I have a different take on this. I have never played a character that isn't me and that has never stopped me from playing any role. I don't become the character, the character becomes me. I don't try to understand a character as an outsider. Instead, I relate it to

my own life. That's how I approach it. I don't step into a role; I find the role within myself. I don't try to transform into someone else, I try to find the character within me, to connect it with my own experiences. That's how I do it.

As an artist, what scares you more, failure or being forgotten?

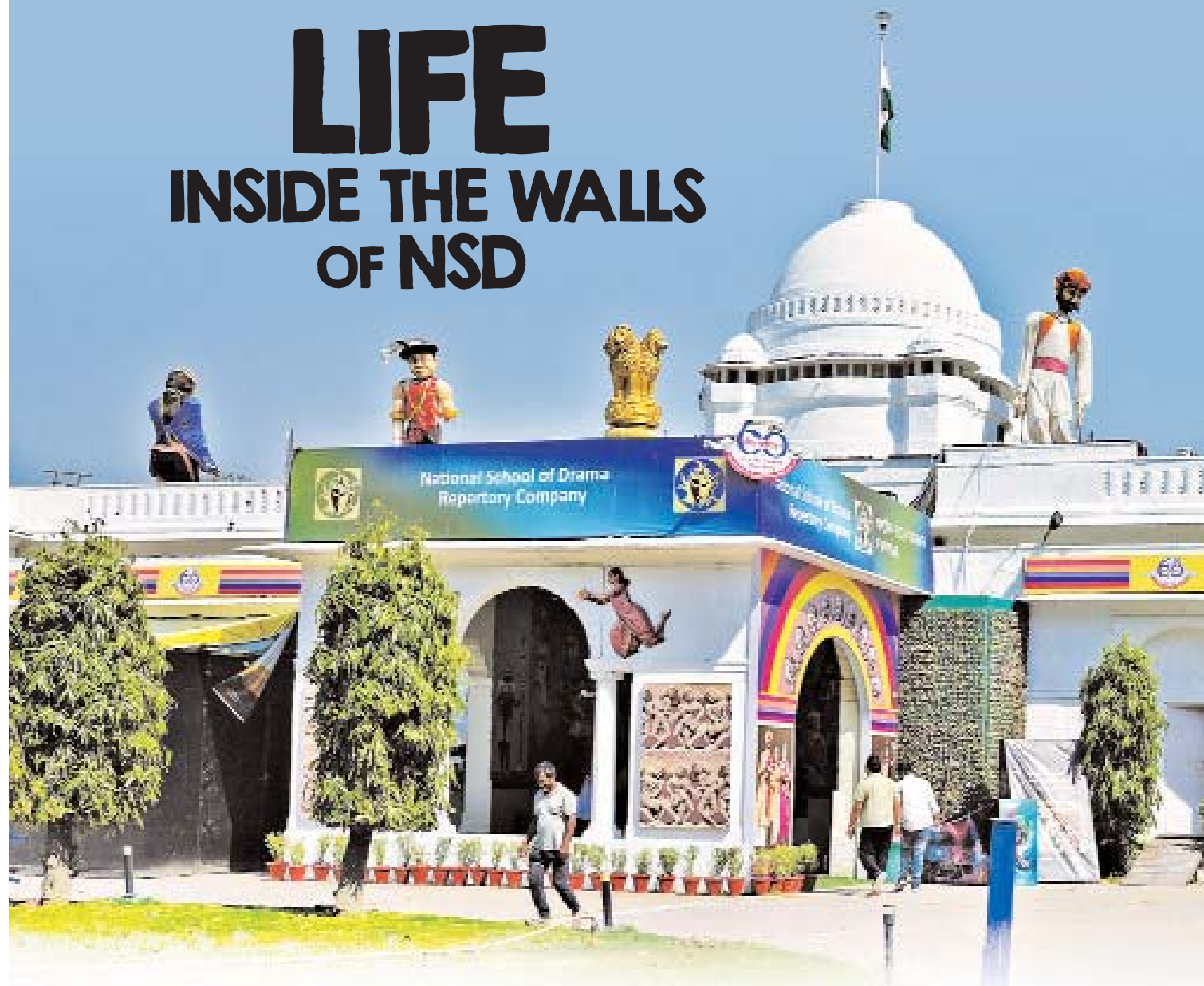
I'd say being forgotten. But what actually scares me is losing my relevance. If I lose my relevance, that's the end. Before the conflict ends and the scene is cut, I would like to cut it myself before I lose my relevance.

IN 1992, I WAS ALMOST SET TO MOVE TO ENGLAND. I HAD SIGNED A SERIES THAT WAS SUPPOSED TO RUN FOR THREE YEARS, BUT THE PROJECT FELL THROUGH, AND I WAS DEEPLY DISAPPOINTED. HOWEVER, AS A RESULT OF THAT SET-BACK, I ENDED UP DOING BANDIT QUEEN INSTEAD.





# LIFE INSIDE THE WALLS OF NSD



**W**hen we talk about art, we also talk about artists because art and artists are inextricably linked. An artist's life is influenced by various aspects. The crucible where an artist's soul is forged is often their birthplace, the environment that nurtures their nascent creativity. In India, the birthplace of countless luminaries on stage and screen is the *National School of Drama* (NSD), but NSD is different and is so much more than an incubator

of superstars. *Neena Gupta, Anupam Kher, Nawazuddin Siddiqui, Ashutosh Rana, Irrfan Khan* and more famous names have given some of the finest performances in *Piku, Sacred Games, Gangs of Wasseypur, A Wednesday, The Kashmir Files, Badhaai Ho, Vadh* and have left a mark on history. How does NSD do this? What is special provided by the NSD? NSD shapes raw talent into refined artistry. Everyone around might have heard that NSD is a Gateway to Indian Cinema, but behind that, there

*The life of an NSD student is anything but easy. Yet, those who pass out from its gates, carry with them not just a degree, but a legacy of theatrical excellence, writes ABHI SINGHAL*



is a whole lot of rigorous process and struggle that one has to go through even after for productions and projects.

While I walked through the gates of the NSD in New Delhi, I saw actors, actors who were 25 and also those aged around 55 years. NSD carries dreams of the budding actors and breaks the barriers that learning has no age, supporting the dreams of every age. When I talked to the ones wandering inside the gates, to the ones who are

not a part and dreamt so, the words carried baggage and happiness of getting into an institution that gives them an environment for their passion. Apart from the name there is so much offered once you are admitted inside this performing arts hub.

What sets NSD apart cannot be summed up to just the curriculum. The acting school has a comprehensive approach to acting, extending far





**ANUPAM KHER**  
**1978**

**LT. IRRFAN KHAN**  
**1987**

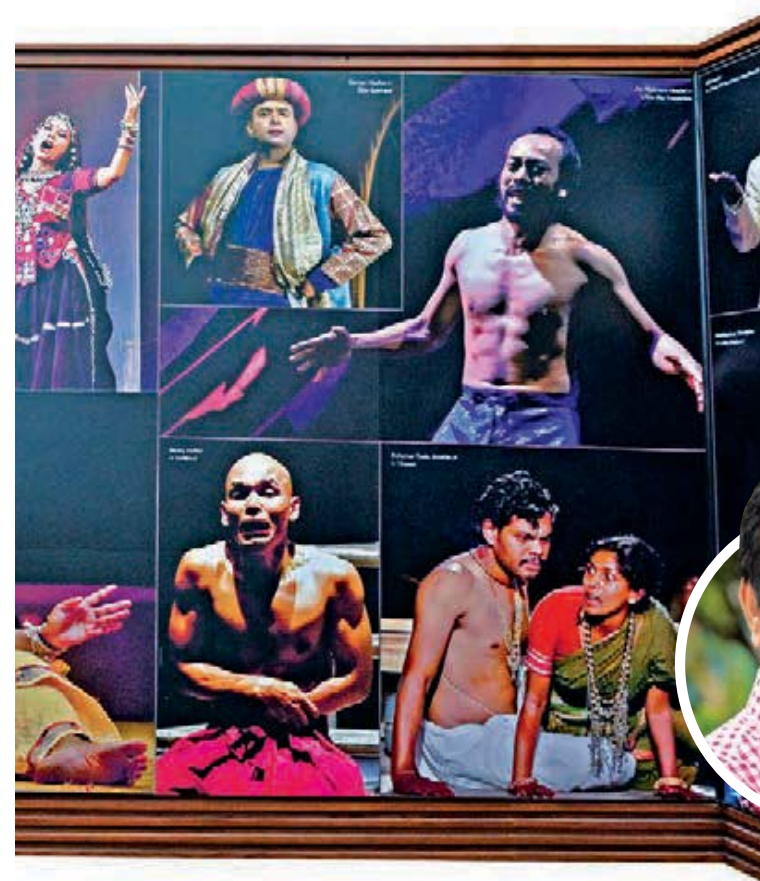
**NAWAZUDDIN SIDDIQUI**  
**1996**

**OM SHIV PURI**  
**1963**

**PANKAJ TRIPATHI**  
**2004**

beyond mere performance techniques. *Sanjay Shrivastava*, NSD graduate from Batch 2000, told the *Pioneer* that, "In this institute, study and practice are done keeping in mind both the theoretical & practical aspects of theatre. Apart from acting, intensive training is given here in design and direction. Along with acting, various aspects like craft, set design, makeup, costume design, light design, scenic design, and architecture are also put under training."

To work in a certain way you always need an environment, a surrounding that can help you go into the character you want to be. The environment of NSD has an aura, an



aura 999 (social meme language). Each person roaming around has a character to carry or is in the character practising some dialogues or music, or adjusting their dresses pre- and post-rehearsal. The students studying in NSD define it as a mandir, while those who missed the chance define it as a lost chance of entering the mandir.

Talking to *Vijay Gupta*, a 55-year-old artist studying at NSD, about life, he said, "I am a late bloomer; due to life circumstances, I couldn't join NSD earlier. But since the school has started basic and advanced training courses, each of three months duration, which are both affordable and less time-consuming, I was able to join. Modern techniques are also taught, enabling us



**NEENA GUPTA**  
**1980**

## IN CONVERSATION WITH **CHITTARANJAN TRIPATHY** (Director, National School of Drama)

**What does NSD offer that is different from the other theatre schools?**

NSD imparts a value and a culture; it teaches about the style of life and the way of living life and does not produce only actors and directors, as it impacts on the human character, and the intellect. NSD during the actual training is an intense training process of three years.

**How does NSD help students personally so that they are helped in their growth in the same line?**

Personally, after graduating from fellowship programmes, we assist students periodically. For those who wish to pursue theatre in their local areas, we provide minimal financial support. We have NSD's Repertory Company here, which has been operating for 60 years. It began with four actors when

Om Shiv Puri was a member, and today, approximately 25 people are employed. NSD's placement is facilitated by the Repertory Company for its students. We are in the process of establishing a casting and placement cell, which will enhance our placement efforts.

**Does NSD training give a cutting edge to the children in the industry, or does curriculum play an equally important role too?**

Training in the curriculum encompasses theoretical, historical, economic, cultural, anthropological, and social aspects. The curriculum is designed to facilitate the practical application of these theoretical perspectives and to define the ideal outcomes of such applications.

**The pass-outs from NSD play character-driven roles far better than commercial roles, and the audience loves those roles. Your thoughts on the same.**

In film, there are diverse characters, and it's all about embodying those roles effectively. NSD graduates excel at portraying various characters, and this could offer a fresh perspective. However, this requires courage from filmmakers and audiences. For instance, if anyone other than Anurag Kashyap had directed *Sacred Games*, Nawazuddin Siddiqui might not have been cast in the lead role. There's a prevailing cliché that underworld figures must be muscular, tall, and so on. Anurag Kashyap recognised and tested Nawazuddin's potential, hence his casting. Filmmakers need such visionary individuals.





to act more realistically.”

Festivals at NSD like *Adi Rang Mahotsav* and *Bharat Rang Mahotsav* act as big opportunities for the students, giving them a wider audience, reach and chances to earn appreciation. The coverage of these festivals by the media also helps in the recognition of the students in their professional careers. Students get a brush-up on their acting skills.

NSD enhances the skills of the students by accepting their raw self and working on the established skills to boost their confidence level and emphasising their strengths. “I was always a passionate actor, but I was lost in finding the right platform for my skills and acting. The confidence NSD gives by giving the students a platform is commendable. Whichever way we perform, we are given a platform. Platforms like Kamani

Auditorium are provided by the school which is a great opportunity,” said *Avinash Kumar*, pursuing the advance training course at NSD.

The artists from other theatre schools have seen a noticeable performance and maturity in the NSDians. They also believe that the way NSD helps their students with funds that are not provided by other acting schools.

Talking to *Sachin Sharma*, a budding actor who has performed in more than seven stage productions and participated in plays alongside NSD students in competitions, said, “NSD students have a significant advantage because they receive access to essential props, resources, and training — all under one roof with the best guidance. Once admitted, they don’t have to worry about arranging or spending extra money on costumes, makeup, and other necessities, as



everything is provided by the institute. Additionally, NSD productions sell tickets solely based on their reputation, whereas in other institutes, students often have the added responsibility of selling tickets for their shows.”

NSD may not guarantee instant stardom, but it undoubtedly equips its students with the tools to forge their path. The harsh training and immersive environment of acting give NSD graduates an edge that sets them apart. Yet, as *Durgesh Kumar* rightly said, after stepping into the industry, everyone stands in the same line. The struggle remains the same for all, but what NSD provides is the strength to embrace it, the discipline to persevere, and the artistry to make a mark. It is not just a ticket to the silver screen — it is the foundation upon which dreams are built.

## IN CONVERSATION WITH **DURGESH KUMAR**

(Actor, Bhushan alias Banrakas in Panchayat)

### How did NSD give you a platform in your career?

NSD is a one of the biggest institutes of the world at present time and the government does not spend so much on any other institute that it does on NSD.

Wherever you go in the world, there a fees charged. But NSD is such an institute where one gets a scholarship and very high-level acting is taught. I have been doing theatre for the last 12 years and have been in the industry for 12 years. NSD makes your craft strong, and after that, it is your marketing that gets the work done. It happens that when our audition or our photo profile is shown, an NSD pass out is recognised and you get some benefit in getting shortlisted, but after that, the struggle is the same for everyone.

### How were your 3 years of rigorous training at NSD?

‘*Bahut pyara hai maine bahut enjoy kia*’ (The training is very nice and I have enjoyed it very much during my time). We had to go through a 24-hour training process which included, physical, and psychological training. Training at NSD is marvellous is what I can say.

### How do you feel about your career after NSD?

After getting into the industry, everyone stands in the same line it is an NSDian or any top institute. After you get to the auditions, you are shortlisted, that’s a benefit, but getting into the audition is a struggle in itself; it is a tough job. From Naseeruddin Shah to Anupam Kher, everyone had their part in the struggle.







# Behind the Mask

*A chilling psychological showdown, where power, passion and deception blur the line between truth and lies, says SAKSHI PRIYA*

**T**he stage had been set. Two men sat across from each other, exchanging words laced with tension, wit, and something more sinister. A simple conversation or so it seemed. But beneath the surface, a battle unfolded, one that twisted and turned until the final moment.

What happened when two men, bound by love for the



A RICH, NARCISSISTIC, RETIRED FILMMAKER IS SEEN SPENDING HIS DAYS WITH HIS ESTRANGED WIFE. HE INVITES HER YOUNG LOVER, AN AMBITIOUS ARCHITECT, TO THEIR HOME BEFORE HE LETS GO OF HIS WIFE. WHAT IS ENTAILED IN A SEEMING CONVERSATION IS A PSYCHOLOGICAL PLAY BETWEEN TWO MEN

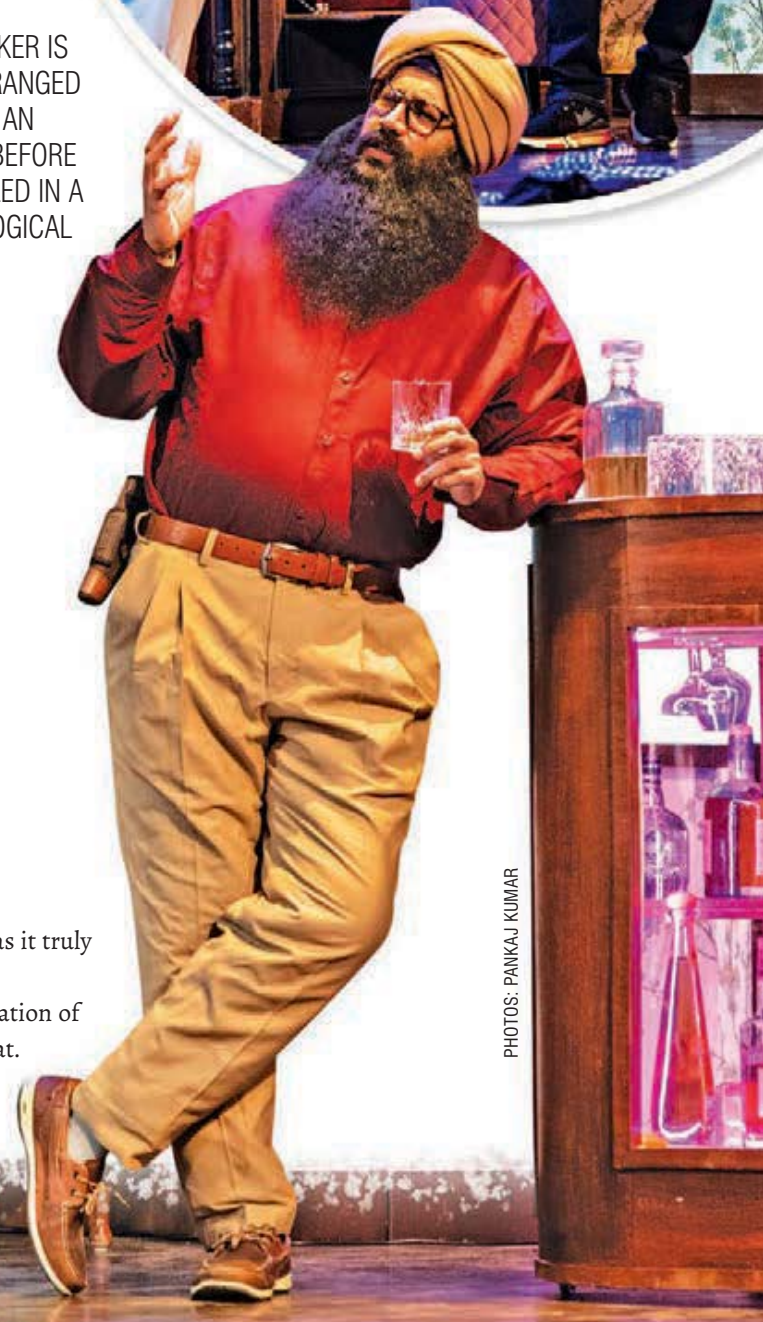
## A BATTLE OF WITS

Anil Wadhwa (Kumud Mishra), a retired filmmaker, discovered his wife's infidelity. Rather than reacting with fury or despair, he extended an invitation. His guest? Mayank Tiwari (Sumeet Vyas), the young architect who had taken his place in his wife's affections.

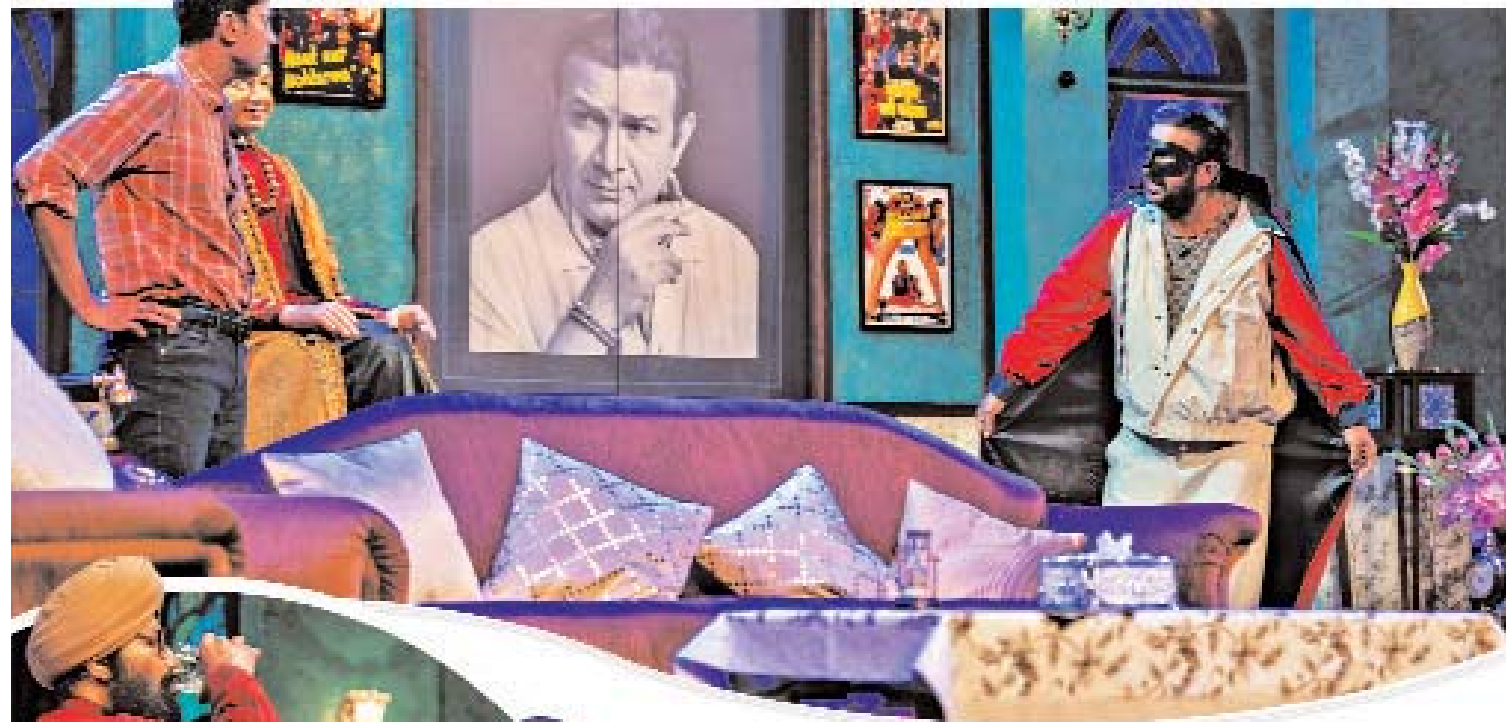
What began as a courteous exchange quickly escalated. Anil's polished words and calm exterior concealed something darker. Mayank, initially self-assured, found himself ensnared in a game he had not anticipated. But was he merely a pawn or also a player? The encounter was a cerebral showdown. The stakes went beyond heartbreak; they touched on identity, ego, and survival.

same woman, sat down for a "civil" conversation? Was it truly a conversation or something far more dangerous?

This was the world of *Saans Seedhi*, a Hindi adaptation of Anthony Shaffer's *Sleuth*, directed by Shubhrajyoti Barat. The play lured its audience, only to entrap them in a web of deception and psychological games.







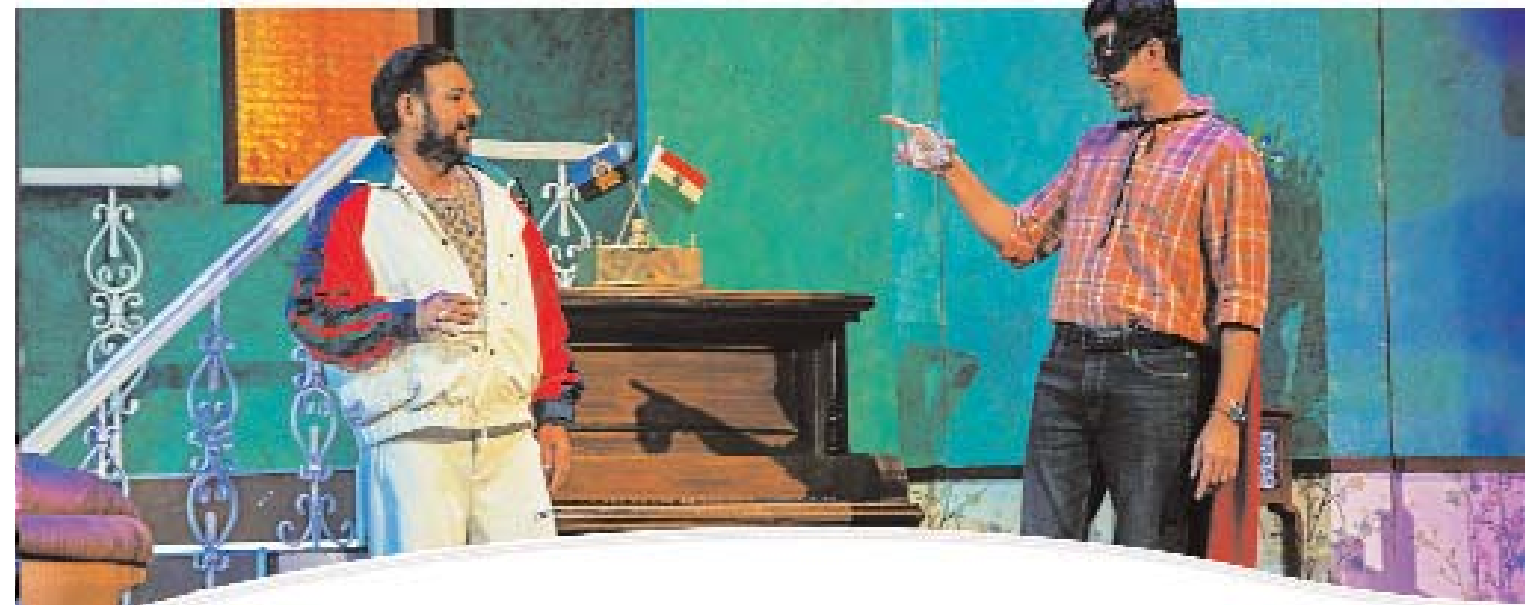
### POWERHOUSE PERFORMANCES

Kumud Mishra captivated the audience. His portrayal of Anil Wadhwa was multifaceted, charming in one moment, unsettling in the next. His shifts in tone were seamless and arresting. Sumeet Vyas's Mayank balanced ambition with an undercurrent of vulnerability, adding depth to a character constantly evolving on stage.

Their chemistry sparked with tension. Every glance, every silence, every carefully chosen word crackled with implication.

### TWIST ON A CLASSIC THRILLER

Originally set in an English country house, *Sleuth* was reimagined in Goa. Akarsh Khurana's adaptation added an Indian pulse, touching upon themes of masculinity, status, and pride. The setting, a stylish yet isolating home, played a role of its own, trapping the characters in an inescapable confrontation. For his directorial debut at Aadyam Theatre, Shubhrajyoti Barat ensured that every visual and auditory element heightened the tension. Lighting, music, and set design aligned to pull the audience into the volatile space these two men inhabited.



### WHO WAS TRULY IN CONTROL?

Just as one thought the game was over, the narrative shifted. Power dynamics flipped. Truths unravelled. The humour sharp, often unsettling, offered brief respite before diving back into unease. Audiences were left to question: who was orchestrating, and who was falling apart?

### FINAL THOUGHTS

As the lights dimmed on the final act, one could not help but sit in silence. What had unfolded was not just a conversation or a confrontation, it was a performance that stayed. Saanp Seedhi entertained, provoked, and left audiences questioning not just the characters' motives but their own perceptions.

A TENSE MOMENT ARISES WHEN A POLICEMAN HOLDS ANIL WADHWA AT GUNPOINT. IS THIS THE END OF HIS SCHEMES IN THIS UNPREDICTABLE GAME?

Aadyam Theatre's continued its mission of bringing layered, bold stories to audiences. Their belief in reimagining global theatre through a local lens was clear. This production further solidified their reputation as a space for boundary-pushing storytelling.





# IN TUNE WITH GWALIOR

*From royal courts to modern stages, the Gwalior Gharana continues to shape India's classical identity, says MANISHA GAWADE*

**F**amous for its impeccable ancestral lineage rooting back to Tansen in the 15th century, Gwalior Gharana has given birth to many undying names of the Hindustani Vocal music, it has been the home of Pandits regarded as the land of Music, the Gangotri of Gharana. It was said that even a child from Gwalior cried in "Sur". Over time different styles of music



developed here, which found widespread acceptance. Raja Man Singh Tomer, Sangeet Samrat Tansen of Dhrupad style and Ustad Natthan Pir Bux, Ustad Hassu Khan, Ustad Haddu Khan and Ustad Natthu Khan of Khayal style were the innovators of Khayal style of whom Pandits of Gwalior are direct disciples.

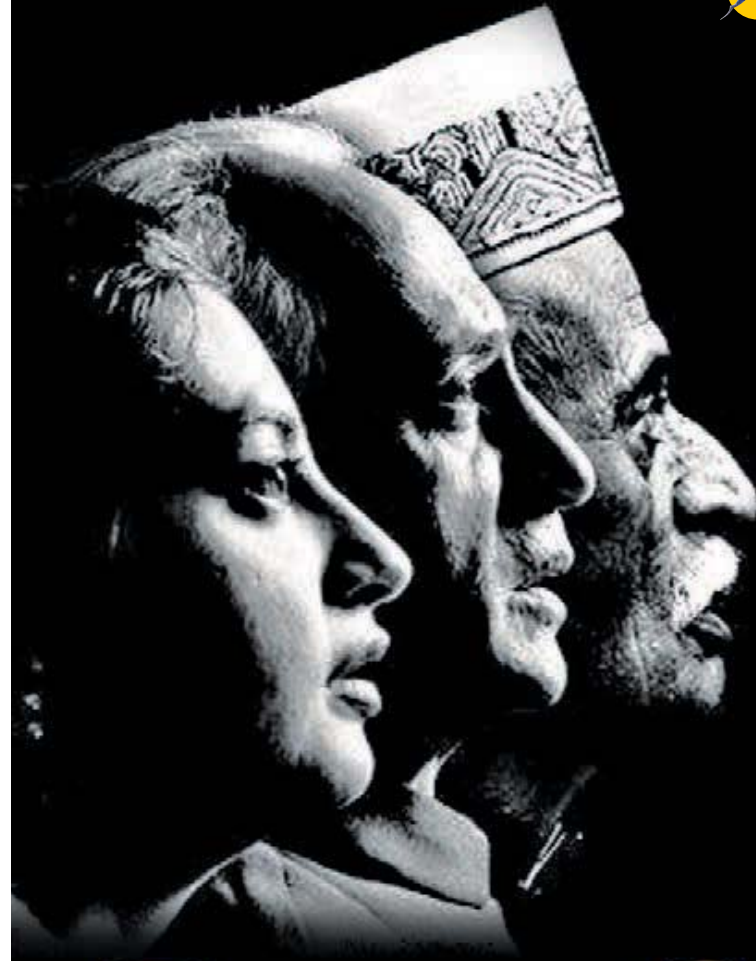
Today, we discuss the journey of this Gharana with a father and daughter duo of the internationally acclaimed names Pt. Laxman Krishnarao Pandit and Meeta Pandit as we thank them for their contribution for our historical gharana series.

## THE JOURNEY FROM DHRUPAD TO KHAYAL

After the Tomar dynasty, music received a great impetus under the royal patronage of Scindia's, Srimant Daulat Rao Scindia (1794-1827) and Srimant Jayaji Rao Scindia (1843-86). The court was graced by great masters, who were paid rich stipends amounting to hundreds of rupees while govt. officers used to draw merely ₹15 to ₹20 per month in those days. The Scindias were proud of their musicians and looked after them with great care and reverence. The court musicians were paid large sums as salary. The silver coins given to them were so heavy that the Ustads used to take it home on elephants and horses or palanquins. daki.

BUT BY THEN MORE THAN DHRUPAD, IT WAS THE DAY OF KHAYAL GAYAKI. THE GWALIOR SINGERS, EXPERTS IN DHRUPAD, NOW PLAYED A REVOLUTIONARY ROLE IN THE SHIFT FROM DHRUPAD TO KHAYAL GAYAKI.





THE GAYAKI OF GWALIOR  
GHARANA IS THE UNIQUE BLEND  
OF TECHNICAL PURITY, PERFECTION  
AND ARTISTRY

### Meeta Pandit narrates the family journey

Meeta said, "Pandit's who hailed from Chinchwad, Pune, settled in Gwalior, were great scholars of Sanskrit and were "Veda Shastra Sampanna" and were Keertankar's. There was great friendship in the family of Ustad Natthan Pir Bux and Pandit's. As their grandson's Ustad Hassu Khan, Ustad Haddu Khan and Ustad Natthu Khan used to learn Sanskrit Slokas and Marathi Devotional songs from Pt. Vishnu Pandit Chinchwadkar. He had four sons, Pt. Gopal Rao, Pt. Ganpat Rao, Pt. Shankar Rao and Pt. Eknath Rao, who used to help their father in kirtan by giving vocal support, playing Pakhawaj, Tabla and Harmonium. Ustad Haddu Khan recognized the talent of these young musicians and accepted them as his disciples.

### Pandits of Gwalior

Pt. Laxman Rao Pandit tracing the historical journey said," during the earlier half of the 19th century the Scindias established Gwalior as their capital in 1810. "My ancestors Pt. Ramchandra Chinchwadkar & great grandfather Pt. Vishnu Shastri Chinchwadkar, also moved from Pune to Gwalior. Being kirtankars, they were well acquainted with music besides being scholars of Sanskrit and



Us Rehmat Khan



Pt Shankar Pandit



Us Nissar Hussain Khan



Vedic learning. Thus, our family name changed to Pandit from Chinchwadkars. Having great interest in music made them close to many famous musicians. Amongst them were Us. Nathan Pir Bux. Pt. Vishnu Pandit was a regular visitor to Khan Sahebs house & used to teach Us Hassu - Haddu-Nathu Khan Sanskrit shlokas & arya abhangas of the famous Marathi Poet Moropant. The three brothers used to sing them along with Maharaja Scindia in his Devghar or temple.

### The Gayaki of Gwalior

The gayaki of Gwalior Gharana is the unique blend of technical purity, perfection and artistry. Gwalior gayaki is based on Dhrupad style with dominant use of Behalava, Meend-Soot, Gamak, Layakari and natural voice culture. Rigorous voice culture is done to cultivate the voice according to its natural qualities, to traverse three octaves with full throated majestic Aakar. After singing the Vilambit Khayal in single theka, the delineation of the composition is done with the Ashtang Gayaki

i.e. Asht means 8 fold gayaki i.e. alap-behalava, bol alap, taans, bol taans, layakari, gamak, meend-soot, murki-khatka-jamjama with its varieties. All the parts of the gayaki should be well balanced and if one of them is found weak then the style becomes handicapped.

The taans of Gwalior with its wide and intricate varieties are well known and distinct for their marvelous forms, in which each note shines like a string of pearls. While rendering them purity of ragas and swaras are maintained throughout. Besides Khayal, the Gwalior Gharana musicians are equally masters in rendering, Tappa, Tarana, Trivat, Thumri, Ashtapati, Chaturang, Pad and their varieties like Khayal-numa Tarana, Khayal-numa Tappa, Tapp-Khayal, Tapp-Tarana, Tapp-Thumri etc. because of intensive training of these forms, which evoked various rasas. It is interesting to know the origin of the use of Ashtapadi of Swami Jaydev in Khayal style.

— The author is an internationally acclaimed Curator and Artist





# The Silent Storyteller

An intimate exhibition where portraits speak through gaze, memory and unspoken emotion, says **SAKSHI PRIYA**

**B**elonging often reveals itself in the quiet moments — in the eyes of someone who has seen much, said little, and yet left a lasting mark. *Homecoming: Echoes of Belonging*, curated by Georgina Maddox, captures this essence with extraordinary grace. Artist Shana Sood presents a deeply intimate collection, where every portrait carries the quiet weight of lived

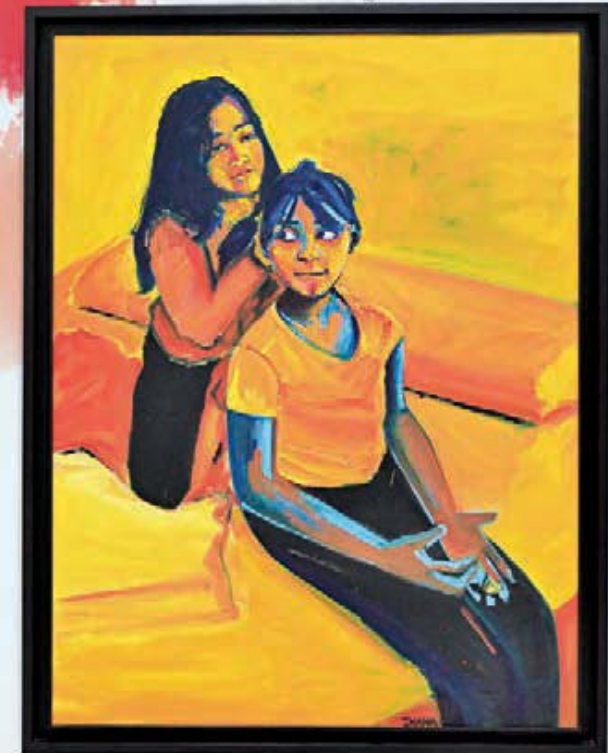
experience and silent stories waiting to be heard.

Shana, a self-taught artist with roots in India and a home in the U.S., uses portraiture to bridge identities shaped by place, culture, and memory. Many of her works centre around Indian womanhood, the diaspora experience, and the subtle threads that tie people to one another across time and space. Her use of deep reds and textured



PHOTOS: PANKAJ KUMAR

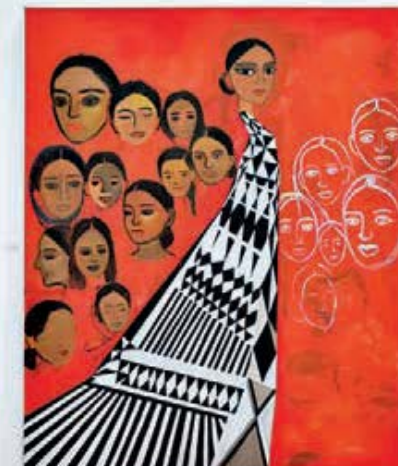
SHANA'S USE OF THE COLOUR RED ADDS LAYERS OF MEANING, LINKING PERSONAL MEMORIES TO DEEP CULTURAL SYMBOLISM. THIS COLOUR NOT ONLY EVOKES PASSION AND POWER. THE THEME EXPRESSES HOW ART CAN REFLECT BOTH INDIVIDUAL EMOTION AND COLLECTIVE CULTURAL HERITAGE



brushwork creates a rhythm that moves between nostalgia and assertion, tradition and voice.

Among the most moving works in the exhibition is *Storytelling*, a portrait of a man who has worked in her home for many years. Though he cannot speak and lives with several disabilities, he communicates volumes through his eyes. Shana and her nephew have learned from his presence

over the years. "He can't hear fully, and he doesn't speak, but somehow he knows everything," Shana shared. "He tells stories, without a word, just like a storyteller." The painting captures the silent wisdom of someone who has seen more than he lets on, someone whose gaze holds memory, mischief, and emotion in equal measure. Through this portrait, Shana honours a man whose life is







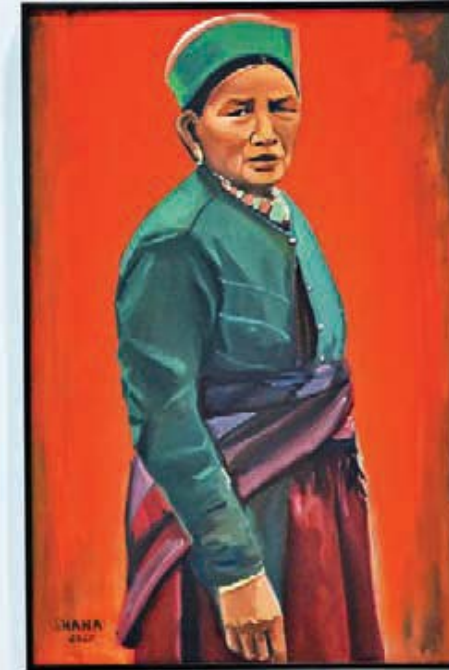
THE ART EXPLORES THE DELICATE BALANCE BETWEEN MAINTAINING ONE'S CULTURAL IDENTITY AND ADAPTING TO A NEW ENVIRONMENT. THIS THEME RESONATES WITH ANYONE WHO HAS STRADDLED TWO WORLDS



full of unspoken narratives, proving that silence too can be expressive.

Another standout piece is Dusky Bride, the artist's personal favourite. The bride, depicted with a warm medium skin tone, is striking not only in her traditional attire but in her quiet strength. Her beauty lies not just in how she looks, but in how she carries herself — confident, self-aware, and luminous from within. The portrait challenges narrow beauty standards and celebrates women who embody both heritage and individuality. There's a quiet resistance in the way the bride meets your gaze, proud of who she is and where she comes from.

Elsewhere, portraits reflecting intergenerational love, memory, and feminine resilience add further depth to the



THE STRENGTH AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY PORTRAYED IN SHANA'S WOMEN ARE BOTH EMPOWERING AND TRANSFORMATIVE. THIS THEME EMPHASISES THE IMPORTANCE OF RECOGNISING WOMEN'S POWER AND AUTONOMY

exhibition. Each canvas feels like an encounter — offering space to pause, reflect, and feel the subtle connections between lives.

Through Homecoming, Artist brings forward untold stories, of people who might otherwise be overlooked, of emotions too complex for words, and of the many ways identity and belonging take shape. And when you stop to listen, they speak volumes. Shana's work beautifully navigates the complexities of the diasporic experience. Her art explores the delicate balance between maintaining one's cultural identity and adapting to a new environment.

This theme resonates with anyone who has straddled two worlds, reflecting the journey of finding belonging while embracing change.







# CITY Dreams ON CANVAS

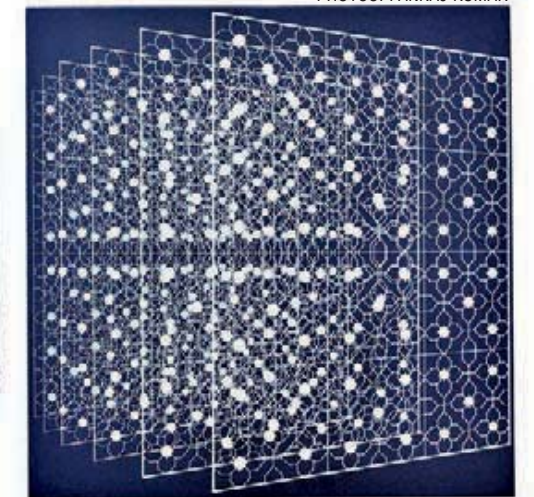
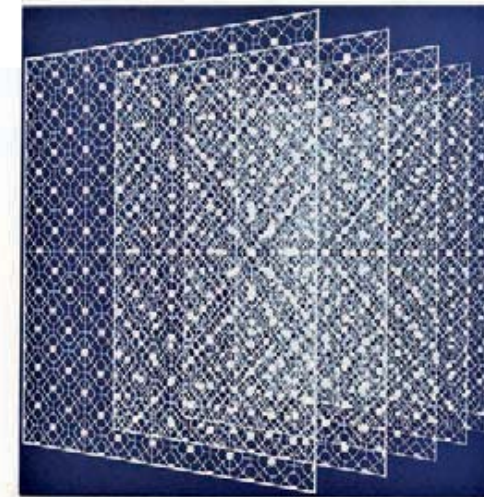
*An art show that brings Mumbai's heart and soul to life through every brushstroke, says SAKSHI PRIYA*

There's something instinctive about the way music and art speak to us — wordless, yet deeply understood.

Both stir emotion, trigger memory and offer connection. When the two come together, the impact is immediate. *Bambai Se Aaya Mera Dost* captures this fusion with striking clarity, creating an exhibition that's as evocative as it is unforgettable.

Titled after the iconic Bollywood song, the show brings Mumbai's creative energy to New Delhi in full force. Curated as a collective voice, it brings together various galleries and artists, not competing, but collaborating to showcase works that explore identity, nostalgia, rebellion, and belonging.

The participating artists are varied, yet each brings a unique contribution that speaks to the pulse of Mumbai's dynamic art scene.



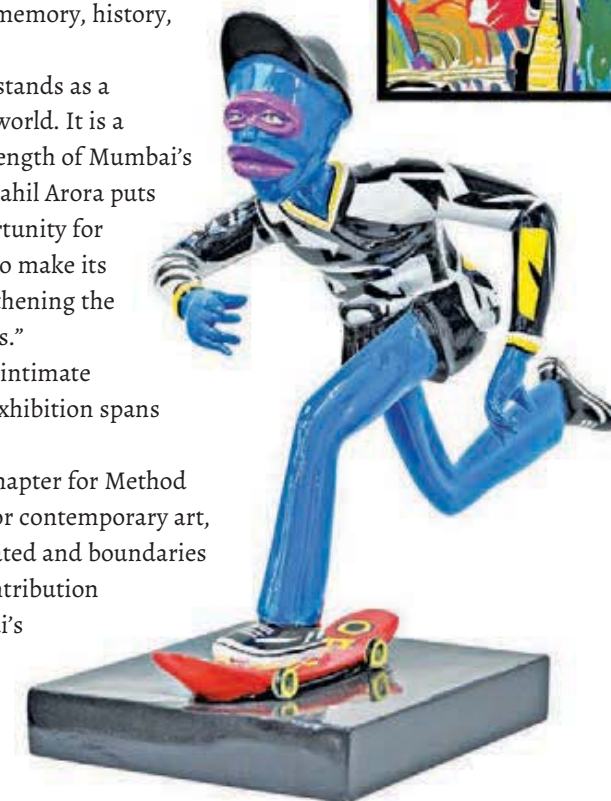
PHOTOS: PANKAJ KUMAR

Sameer Kulavoor's iconic cityscapes capture the essence of urban India, filled with vibrant and chaotic life. Mithu Sen's uncompromising narratives explore identity and the human condition, while Saviya Lopes brings intimate textures and layered emotions that resonate deeply with the viewer. Whether it's Gurjeet Singh's powerful, introspective works or Dhruvi Acharya's striking compositions, each piece adds a layer to the broader conversation on memory, history, and belonging.

*Bambai Se Aaya Mera Dost* stands as a statement of unity in the art world. It is a reflection of the collective strength of Mumbai's galleries. As gallery founder Sahil Arora puts it, this exhibition is "an opportunity for Mumbai's thriving art scene to make its presence felt in Delhi, strengthening the ties between our communities."

From the urban streets to intimate expressions of memory, the exhibition spans various artistic narratives.

The show reflects a new chapter for Method Delhi, an evolving platform for contemporary art, where collaboration is celebrated and boundaries are pushed. Each gallery's contribution amplifies the voice of Mumbai's artistic community, allowing it to make its presence felt in the capital city.



AT METHOD DELHI, IT'S AN OPPORTUNITY TO EXPERIENCE A DYNAMIC CROSS-SECTION OF CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ART, A VISUAL CELEBRATION OF FRIENDSHIP, COMMUNITY, AND THE VIBRANT SPIRIT OF COLLABORATION





# STILLNESS ISN'T INSTANT

*Many fear meditation because they expect peace too soon. But real calm takes time, patience and practice, says ABHI SINGHAL*

**S**taying calm and centred is not something everyone can effortlessly achieve. True silence and inner calmness stem from within, and they are cultivated over time through consistent practice. When I speak of stillness and calm, I firmly believe that the most effective way to attain both is through meditation.

However, the moment the word *meditation* is

mentioned, people tend to react in polarising ways. Some embrace it wholeheartedly, recognising it as a beautiful and transformative journey. Others shy away from it, assuming it to be a complex and intimidating process. But in my experience, after engaging in conversations with people around me, I've realised that many are simply unaware of what meditation truly involves



— largely because they have never actually tried it. I collected insights from two experts to talk about meditation, its myths, and the facts.

Meditation is a disciplined practice that trains the mind in attention and awareness. Its ultimate aim is to achieve a calm, mentally clear, and emotionally stable state. It involves focusing on a particular point of concentration, such as one's

breath or a mantra, which gradually helps in detaching from habitual thought patterns. This process aids significantly in reducing stress, anxiety, and mental clutter.

Talking to *Dr Astik Joshi*, Child, Adolescent, and Forensic Psychiatrist, at Fortis Hospital, Shalimar Bagh, said, "It is a common myth that meditation instantly brings peace and calm. In reality, when





GRADUALLY, IN THE PROCESS OF MEDITATION YOU'LL NOTICE THAT THESE THOUGHTS BEGIN TO LOSE THEIR POWER OVER YOU. THEY WILL PASS THROUGH YOUR MIND WITHOUT DISTURBING YOUR EMOTIONAL BALANCE OR AFFECTING YOUR INNER STATE. THEY WILL MAKE YOU CALM AND LEAVE YOU DISTRESSED.

one begins meditating, it often brings a heightened awareness of inner chaos, restlessness, or buried emotions. The initial phase can be uncomfortable as the mind resists stillness. True benefits come with consistent practice and patience."

Beyond its capacity to induce calmness, meditation contributes meaningfully to one's overall well-being. Regular practice is known to reduce anxiety, lower stress levels, and promote emotional resilience. Additionally, it can enhance sleep quality, elevate mood, and sharpen cognitive abilities. Thus, meditation is not limited to providing inner peace — it also plays a crucial role in improving sleep habits, increasing focus, and contributing to holistic wellness. In this fast-paced and often overwhelming world, meditation has truly become the need of the hour, especially for today's younger generation.

When someone begins their meditation journey, they often go through several emotional and mental phases. The moment you sit comfortably, close your eyes, and start to meditate, the real process begins. Contrary to common belief, your mind does not become quiet instantly. You may find yourself thinking more than ever before. This surge in thoughts often discourages beginners, who assume that they're doing something wrong because they're not feeling peaceful right away. But this is a misunderstanding.

As soon as you close your eyes and thoughts start flooding in, allow them to come. Acknowledge and accept them instead of resisting or running away. Gradually, you'll notice that these thoughts begin to lose their power over you. They will pass through your mind without disturbing your emotional balance or affecting your inner state.

People practicing meditation often



feel like it is a failure when thoughts start coming in while they close their eyes. "It is a myth that thinking during meditation indicates failure. The human mind is naturally active, and thoughts will arise, especially for beginners. The key is not to eliminate thoughts but to become aware of them without attachment or judgment. Observing your thoughts and gently returning focus to your breath or mantra is a sign of progress. This practice strengthens mindfulness and builds mental discipline. Being aware that you're thinking and choosing to refocus is a crucial step in meditation. Therefore, having thoughts is not a setback — it's part of the journey and a sign that you're on the right path," said *Dr Astik Joshi*.

"Just like for fever, you have to take medications for a course of time, the same way it will take some time to get in action and should give it that time," says *Yash Gupta*, an Art of Living faculty and meditation expert. With regular practice, you will learn to disengage from these thoughts, which is especially beneficial in curbing

overthinking. Whether you are dealing with workplace stress, relationship issues, friendship conflicts, loneliness, or any other personal struggle, meditation helps create a buffer between you and your problems. It equips you with a sense of emotional detachment that protects your peace.

Meditation asks for no age. I asked *Yash Gupta* about the belief that meditation is only for adults or older people. He broke this myth by explaining, "Meditation is for everyone who likes to stay calm and manage their emotions and take the right decision at the most difficult times. It helps you in better decision-making and better stability, resulting in a more stable and happy life. Also, it doesn't have any age barrier — that is for sure."

Meditation is not just a practice people talk about without understanding — it is a powerful process that heals you both externally and internally. Over time, it teaches invaluable lessons and guides you toward meeting your truest self — the version of you that exists beyond the chaos of everyday thoughts.



# FACIALS: NEW FACE *of* SKINCARE

*Every now and then, your skin deserves more than just a daily skincare routine, writes ABHI SINGHAL*

**I**n a working week, how much time do you have or can you take out for your skincare or yourself as a whole? Wellness is no longer a luxury; it has become a lifestyle, and people have realised the importance of taking out time for themselves. As people strive to find balance between work and personal health, skincare has become a key component of self-care.



WHILE YOU'RE STILL CONSIDERING WHETHER A FACIAL IS THE RIGHT CHOICE FOR YOU, IT'S ESSENTIAL TO CONSULT A QUALIFIED PROFESSIONAL SUCH AS A DERMATOLOGIST OR COSMETOLOGIST

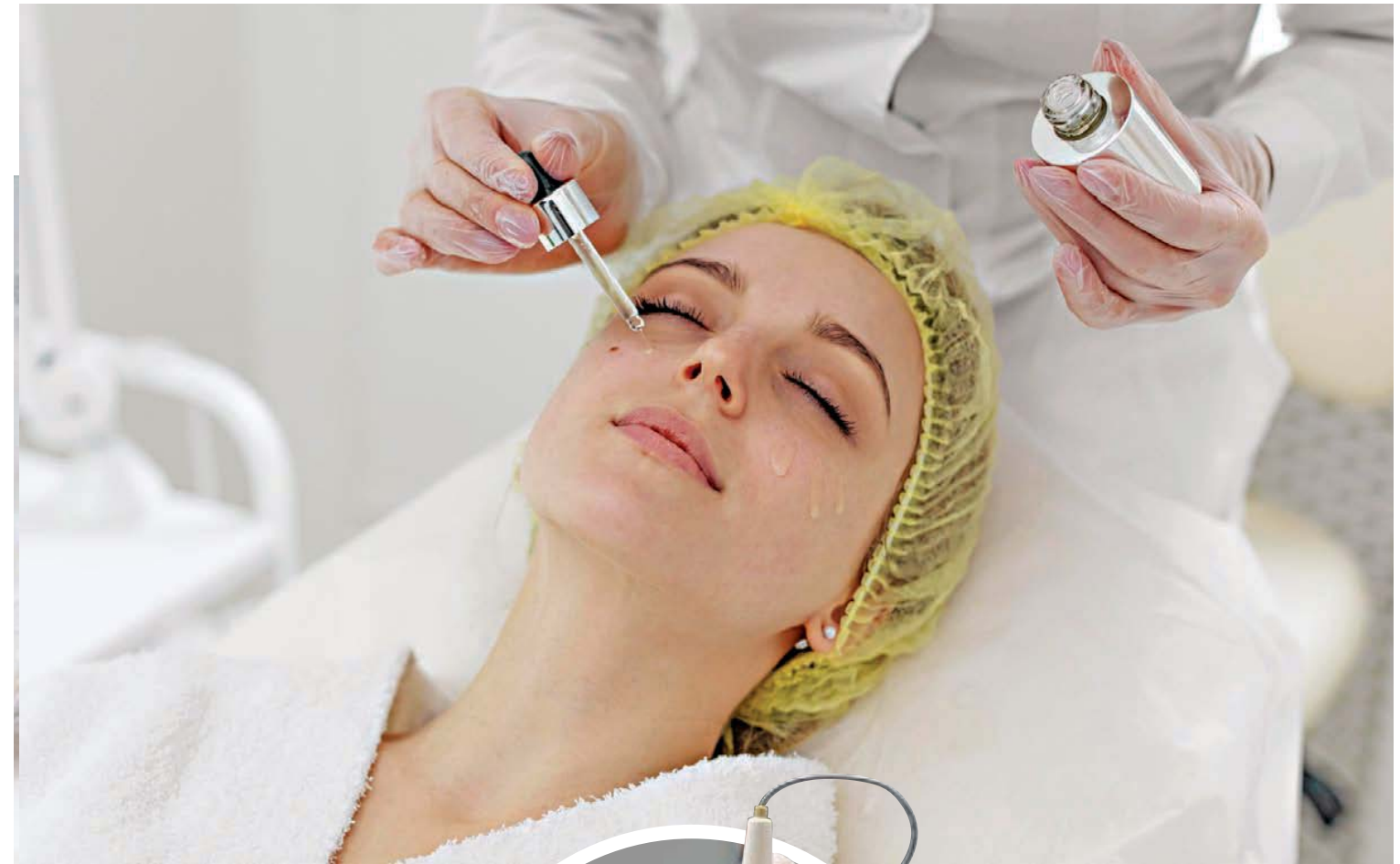
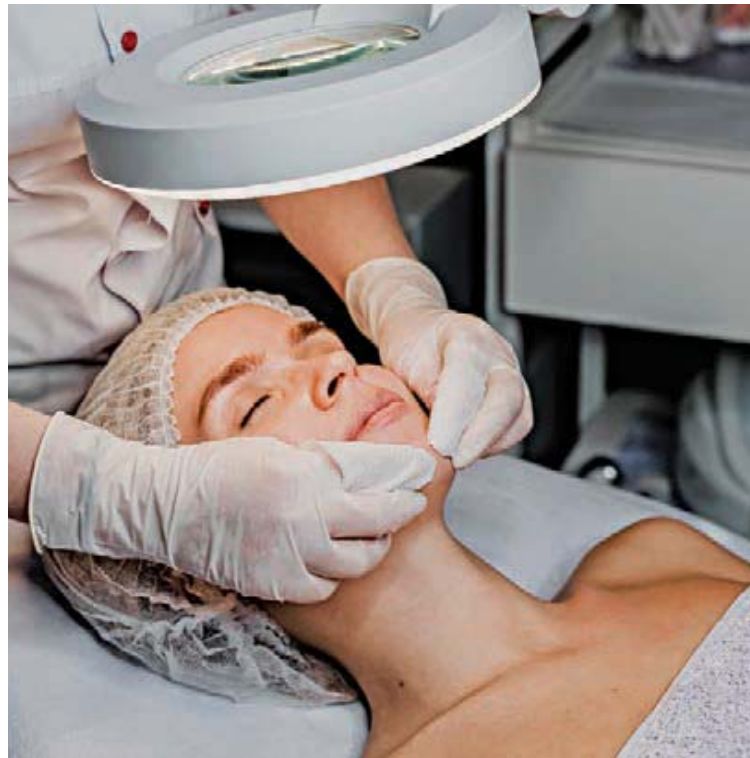
Some years back, which was once considered an aesthetic indulgence, *facial treatments* are now widely acknowledged for their therapeutic, preventive and rejuvenating benefits. In between all these facials, serums and more lies a growing understanding that glowing skin isn't just about appearance, it's a reflection of internal wellness.

Daily skincare routines, though essential, can only do so much in combating environmental damage, stress, and ageing. This is where professional facial treatments come in, offering deep cleansing, targeted nourishment, and restorative benefits that go far beyond topical applications. Regular facials can improve blood circulation, stimulate collagen production,

## BEAUTY BEGINS WITH CARE

Regular facials can help with deep cleansing, exfoliation, hydration, and improved skin texture, potentially preventing acne and reducing sun damage. Facial massage can also improve blood circulation, relieve pain, and help manage scar tissue.





detoxify the skin, and promote lymphatic drainage. More importantly, they create time for individuals to pause, unwind, and invest in their well-being.

Over the past decade, facials have evolved from simple salon rituals to medically informed, technology-backed treatments. No longer limited to face packs and steam, today's facials combine science and skincare. They are done with the help of advanced devices and dermatologist-approved protocols. Treatments such as *Hydrafacials*, nano-needling, and chemical peels target specific concerns like hyperpigmentation, acne, and early signs of ageing, while promoting healthier skin from within. Facials at *Merakki Wellness and Co.*, such as *Fire & Ice Facial*, *Deluxe HydraFacial*, *Signature HydraFacial*, *Platinum HydraFacial* and more, are given to you according to your skin type.

While you're still considering whether a facial is the right choice for you, it's essential to consult a qualified professional such as a dermatologist or cosmetologist. These experts assess your skin type, understand its unique needs, and recommend the most



suitable treatment and product. With their guidance, you can ensure that your facial is not only effective but also safe and beneficial for your skin's long-term health. Going for a facial without a consultation can lead in acne, skin allergies and discomfort.

One wellness centre for the same leading this transformation is *Merakki Wellness Co.*, a premium skin, hair, and beauty clinic. Founded in 2023 by wellness entrepreneur *Rima Narula*, *Merakki* is redefining self-care for the people by offering facials that blend technology, holistic healing, and personalised care. Their range of treatments includes the *Signature Facial*, *Platinum Facial*, *Fire & Ice Facial*, and the *Deluxe Hydra Facial*. These facials are designed to cater to different skin types and concerns, with immediate and lasting results.



What sets *Merakki* as a wellness centre apart is its focus on wellness-first skincare. Facials at the clinic are not just surface treatments — they are experiences rooted in dermatological science and emotional well-being. From deep hydration and exfoliation to LED therapy and oxygen infusion, each session is tailored after expert skin analysis, ensuring the right solution for every client. For example, in such heat, getting a tan is very normal, but getting a de-tan facial without the correct prescription will not help you.

The clinic's philosophy aligns with a broader shift in the beauty industry, where the emphasis is moving from perfection to care, from cover-up to prevention. Facials are increasingly seen as monthly maintenance, much like a balanced diet or regular exercise.

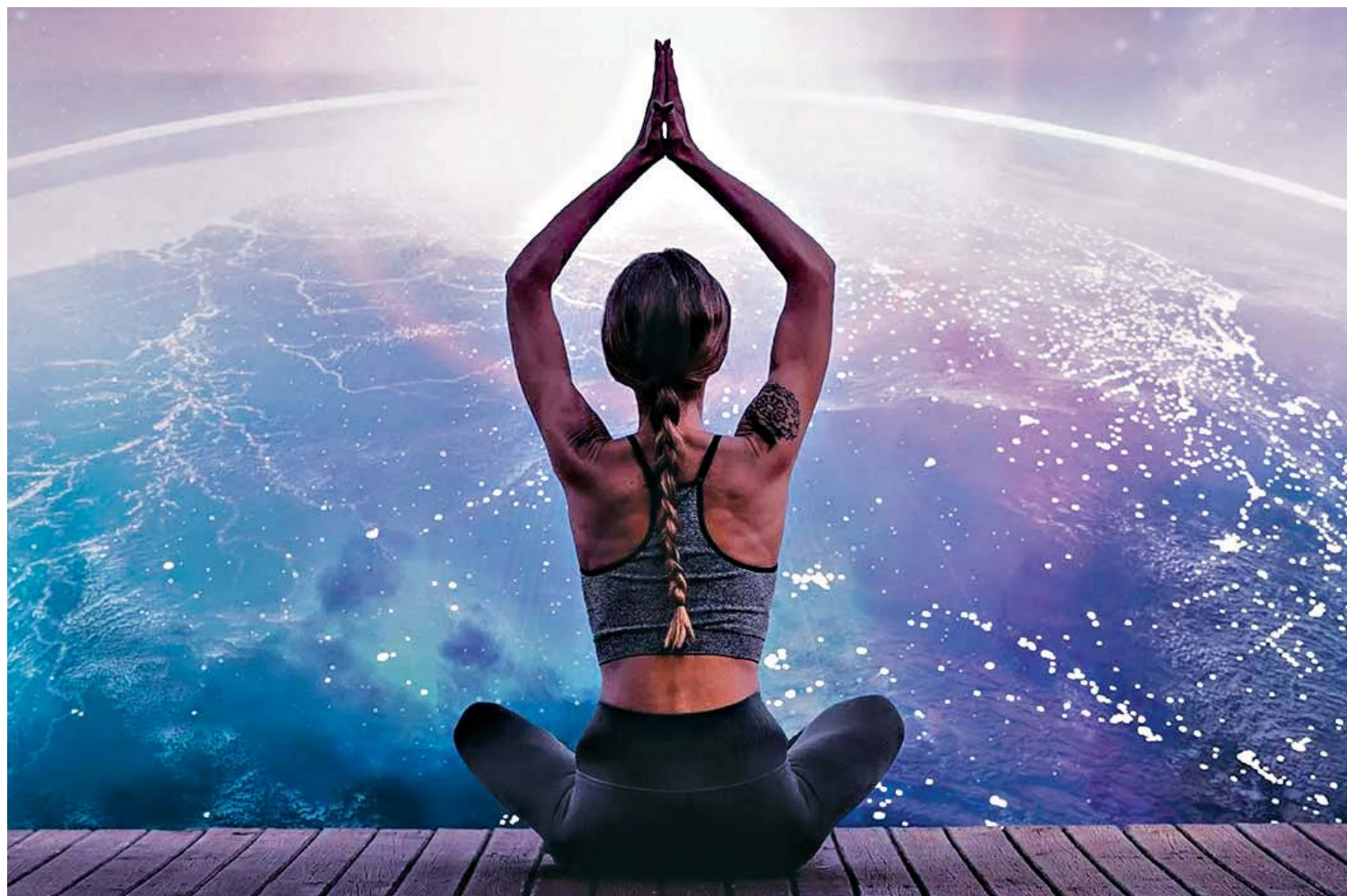




Dr Tanu Jain

## THE THREAD BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

The wind carried secrets as we drove through the *Nilgiri Hills*. Each breath filled my lungs with the scent of wet earth and fresh tea leaves. My heart swelled with peace. These were not just hills covered in emerald green; they were living beings, ancient and wise, welcoming us into their misty embrace. Beside me, my friend sat in silence. Words felt heavy, unnecessary. Our eyes spoke volumes as they drank in the endless green tapestry unfolding before us. Sometimes, the



deepest connections form in silence. We pulled over at a small hut nestled between thick trees.

An elderly shopkeeper with kind, crinkled eyes nodded at our request for tea. His gentle hands moved with practised ease, brewing a drink that seemed to hold the essence of the mountains themselves. As the warm cup touched my lips, I closed my eyes. The fragrant steam danced with the mountain breeze, creating a moment of perfect harmony. That is when I noticed him, a figure draped in white, sitting beneath a grand old tree. Stillness surrounded him like an invisible shield. His eyes were closed, his face peaceful. Something about his presence tugged at my soul. That is Mutthuswami," the shopkeeper whispered, his voice thick with respect. "Once a professor. His family lives in America, but he finds peace here in these hills." My gaze met my friend's. A silent understanding passed between us, a shared memory of our own meditation retreat in Rishikesh flashing in our minds. Without words, we knew what we had to do. As if feeling our thoughts, Mutthuswami approached us. My heart quickened. We greeted him with slight bows, our hands pressed together. Though no words passed between us, questions bubbled inside me like a mountain spring. We sat before him on the cool

earth, letting the hills cradle our conversation. My friend broke the silence first. "Sir, what is the relationship between religion and spirituality?" The question hung in the air like morning mist. Mr. Mutthuswami did not answer immediately. His silence gave me time to drift back to Rishikesh, the flowing Ganges, the chanting, the feeling of something greater than myself. I remembered how thoughts came and went like clouds, how some lingered longer than others, shaping our lives in ways we barely understood. When Mr. Mutthuswami finally spoke, his voice was soft as falling leaves.

He shared his story, thirty years teaching religious studies, losing his wife a decade ago, his daughters living in America. His eyes grew distant when he mentioned his daughters, his fingers absently touching a simple thread bracelet on his wrist. Religion, he said, looking at the distant hills, "is like this road we travel on. Built with purpose, marked with signs, maintained by many hands. It gives direction, community, a sense of shared journey." He cupped his hands, gathering the sunlight that filtered through the leaves above. "Spirituality is the water that quenches our deepest thirst. It flows freely, takes the shape of whatever holds it, yet remains true to its nature."





As he spoke about the differences, organisation versus freedom, external authority versus inner knowing, absolute truths versus personal discoveries, I watched his face. Each word seemed to come not just from knowledge but from lived experience. His hands moved gently with his words, sometimes reaching out as if touching invisible threads that connected all things. In ancient times, he continued, his voice growing softer so we leaned in closer, “humans looked up at the stars with wonder.

They felt connected to forces they could not explain. This feeling, this spirituality, came first. Religions grew later, like trees from these seeds of awe.” A small bird landed near us, tilting its head as if listening. Mr. Mutthuswami smiled at it. “Both paths seek the same mountain peak, but take different routes.”

As he spoke, I found myself nodding, tears gathering in my eyes without warning. Not from sadness, but from recognition. His words touched something deep within me, something that had always known these truths but had never heard

them spoken so clearly. My friend’s eyes were bright too. I noticed his hand resting on the earth, fingers spread wide as if trying to feel the heartbeat of the hills. His shoulders had dropped, the tension of our busy lives melting away in this sacred space.

Mr. Mutthuswami fell silent again, closing his eyes briefly. When he opened them, they seemed to hold the entire blue sky. “The truest temple,” he said, touching his heart, “has always been here. The holiest text is written in the language of compassion. The greatest prayer is a life lived with awareness.” Time seemed to stand still in that moment. The trees around us swayed gently, as if bowing in agreement. Even the breeze paused to listen. When it was time to leave, words failed us.

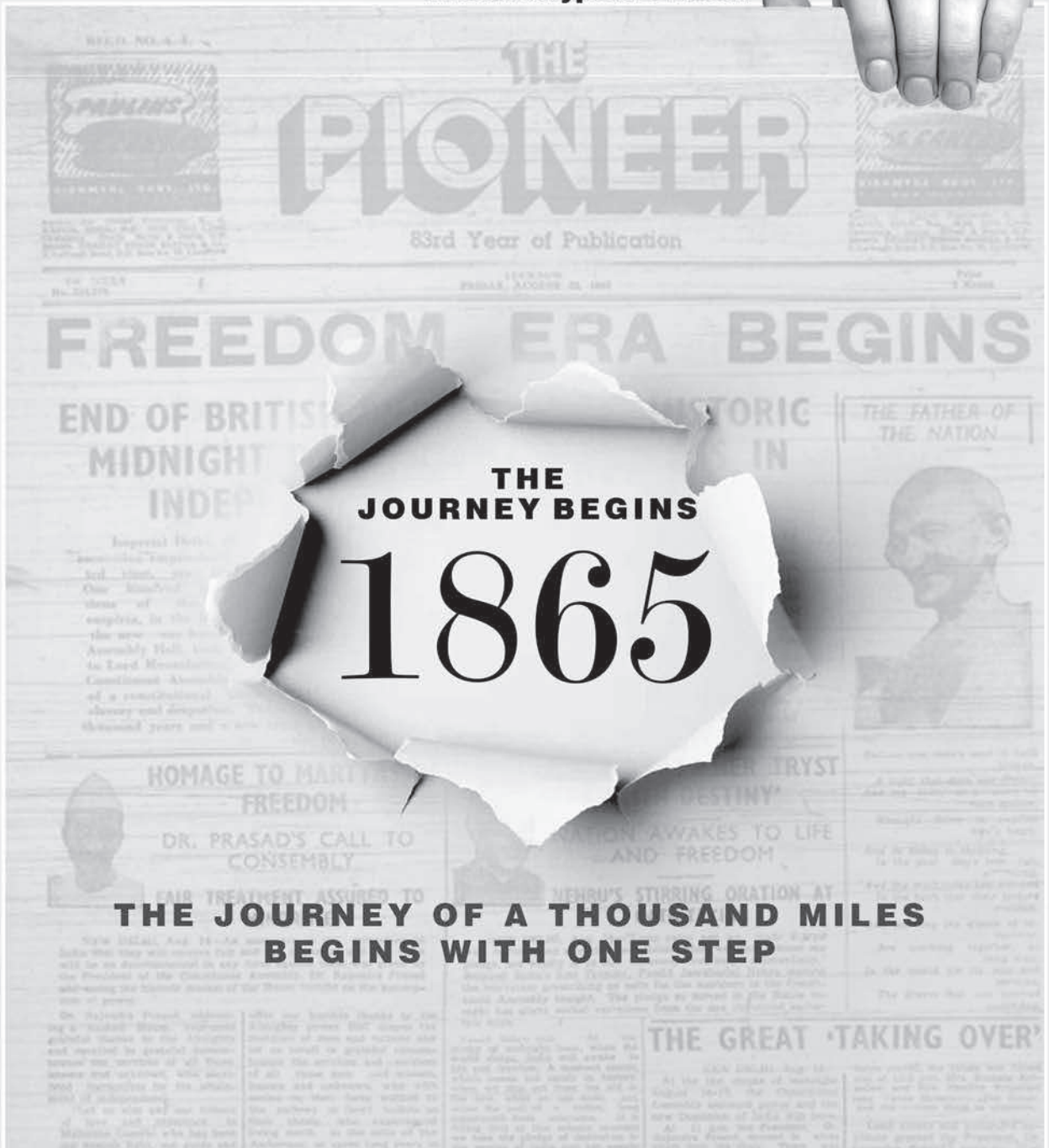
How do you thank someone for opening a door you did not know existed? My eyes filled with tears that spilled freely down my cheeks. Not tears of sorrow, but of overwhelming connection, to this man, to these hills, to something vast and ancient that had always been there. As we walked back to our car, I turned for one last look. Mr. Mutthuswami had returned to his spot beneath the tree, eyes closed, face serene. But something had changed.

The Nilgiri Hills watched us leave, their blue-green slopes gentle as loving hands. I knew then that we were never truly separate from nature, from each other, from the divine. We were threads in the same grand tapestry, each one essential, each one connected to all others. And as we drove away, the mountains whispered one last secret: that the journey between religion and spirituality is not a choice between two paths, but a dance between form and freedom, between community and individual seeking, between ancient wisdom and personal truth.

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— The author’s views are personal. The author is a civil servant at the Ministry of Defence and a spiritual speaker





The Pioneer was founded by George Allen in Allahabad, 1865

