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Ek
Prayas

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Researched, Edited and Curated
by Supriya Newar

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Prayag

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*PEk
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Editor's note

It is not very often that one gets a chance to string together a handpicked rope of natural pearls. It was hence was with ready willingness tinged with mild apprehension that I took up this assignment suggested to me by Harsh Neotia, someone I've had the opportunity of knowing and working with closely.

Willingness, because the subjects have been ones that have been very close to my heart. And apprehension because the responsibility is twice as much, when you are attempting to present something as profound as Kashi and Classical music on the one hand and recounting the accomplishments of a lady who even in her Oak Year remains inspiring, on the other.

My engagement with '*Ek Prayas*' over the last few weeks and months has been thoroughly enriching.

I therefore owe a heartfelt thanks to many. To the wonderful set of people at *Jnana Pravaha* for their patient co-operation, to all the artists as well as music lovers for sharing their precious memories, to Pt. Vijay Kichlu for his support and to Girija Devi ji for taking me on a most remarkable rewind. And how can I not extend a big thank you to the Neotia family for allowing me the space and creative freedom to string together the pearls as I deemed best and to *Badi Maa* (Bimla Poddar) for sharing her glorious innings in a most matter of fact way with me.

I can only wish her and her labours of love, *Jnana Pravaha* and *Gulab Bari* continued distinction and accolade,

Supriya Newar

Foreword

By Pt. Vijay Kichlu

*Guru, Indian Classical Vocalist, Founder of ITC Sangeet
Research Academy & Family friend*

The very character of Indian Classical Music comes out best in a baithak style of performance, where the artist develops a rapport with the audience which actually constitutes a very important part of the recital. Let me narrate a delightful incident to you without naming the artist.

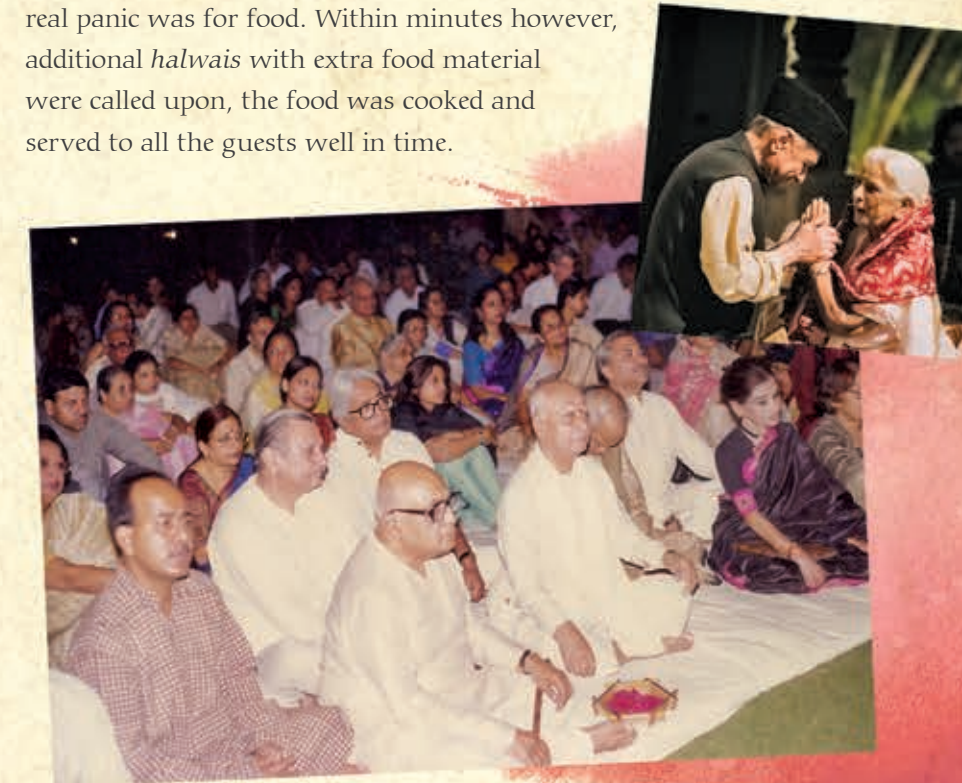
Back in the days of All India Radio, there used to be live broadcasts and a very senior artist was invited to the studio. He was explained the rules of how he must start singing once he sees the red light; shown the control room, microphone et al. Eventually, the light went red but the artist did not start singing, despite being prompted. Finally, when asked, he burst out saying, “How am I supposed to sing for the walls? I can’t see my listeners!”

The point I’m trying to make is that *Gulab Bari* the annual Music Festival held at the Neotia house in Kolkata, thanks to the patronage of the family and the guidance of Girija *behen* (Girija Devi) is a very special event and has managed to acquire a great following.

Originating in Banaras the concept of *Gulab Bari* is perhaps 200 years old. It was a seasonal celebration held after the festival of *holi* to bring in the month of *chait*. Earlier it was celebrated in temples but later got passed on to *rajas*, *maharajas* and the aristocracy, the *seths* and the *raees* of the city. Wherever it was celebrated there were *gulab* petals all over – the air smelled of *gulabjal* and even sweets were made of *gulab*. Girls wore pink *sarees* and the men pink *pagris* or *topis*. Sometimes the celebration even shifted to the big *bajras* on the Ganges. The most reputed musicians of the city, including the famous *baijis* were invited and they sang *dhrupad*, *hori-dhamar*, *khayal*, *thumri*, *dadra* or *chaiti* all night. There stood a kind of a competition between the *seths* and the *raees* to make their celebration better than the others. Such was the glamour of *Gulab Bari* in Banaras till about the middle of 20th century. I lived in Banaras as an adult and had the joy of attending some such *Gulab Bari* celebrations. It is difficult to describe the enthusiasm that prevailed.

When Bimla *jiji* (Poddar) and Girija *behen* decided to bring *Gulab Bari* to Kolkata, the idea appealed to the Neotia household and they all stood behind Bimla *jiji*. It was then that I enrolled myself as an apprentice to support the project. This year happens to be its 35th anniversary.

I clearly remember how in 1983 against 1000/1200 invitees, a crowd of 2000 music lovers turned up. Seating arrangements were made somehow but the real panic was for food. Within minutes however, additional *halwais* with extra food material were called upon, the food was cooked and served to all the guests well in time.





Every March, *Gulab Bari* becomes the talk of the town. After all, which is the other one day music festival where Girija Devi has performed 23 times, Birju Maharaj 12 times, Kelucharan Mahopatra 5 times, Zakir Hussain 4 times, V.G. Jog 6 times and Bismillah Khan, Vilayat Khan, Amjad Ali Khan, Shiv Kumar Sharma, and Hari Prasad Chaurasia all twice each. You name the artist and he/she was there, be it Bhimsen Joshi, Kishori Amonkar, Jasraj, Balamuralikrishna, Rajan Sajan Mishra, Padma Subrahmaniam, Malavika Sarukai, Ajay Chakraborty, Rashid Khan, Ulhas Kashalkar and many others. It is obvious that each of the artists enjoyed performing in its wonderful surroundings which is increasingly difficult to find these days. Many of them have repeatedly expressed their sentiments to me.

For years together, the *bhav* or the expressions with which Birju Maharaj and Kelu *babu* came together with Girija Devi singing and Jog *sahib* playing, amidst a showering of rose petals became the penultimate

legendary conclusion to every *Gulab Bari* session. The atmosphere would be absolutely electrifying!

I would like to recall one observation which touched me greatly. Each year, Vinod *bhai* till he was alive used to station himself at the entrance of the lawn welcoming the first guest and seeing off the last with folded hands. I admired his stamina and his sense of hospitality. And what is more is that I never heard him talk about this tiring responsibility even once. Suresh *bhai*, Harsh and Madhu took care of the guests inside and Bimla *jiji* seated herself in front of the green room looking after the musicians.

After 25 years of *Gulab Bari*, Bimla *jiji* decided to pass on the baton to Harsh and Madhu, who have kept the stature of *Gulab Bari* intact and the function is celebrated each year with the same gusto and enthusiasm.

When Bimla *jiji* attained the age of 60 years she decided to leave the city of Kolkata and settle down in Varanasi.

Bimla *jiji* gives the impression of just being a typical good old lady of a reputed Marwari family, busy in protecting and taking care of all the members of the household. Behind it all, it is difficult to notice her dynamism, vision and administrative leadership. Above all is her insatiable desire to preserve and promote the essence of Hindu philosophy and the glory of our traditional performing arts and handicrafts.

To believe all this one has to visit *Jnana Pravaha*, an amazing institution she has created in Varanasi. I regard *Jnana Pravaha* as something more than a Centre for Cultural Studies & Research. It has given rebirth to genuine and learned priests who are trained in the traditional *Guru-Shishya-parampara*. It is also reviving handicraft skills, once the pride of Banaras and saving those skilled workers and who had shifted to other professions for survival.

It is certainly true that without the supporting and guiding hand of Suresh *bhai*, *Jnana Pravaha* could perhaps not be what it is today. Suresh *bhai* for me, as for many others I know, was one of the finest human beings I have ever met. I could never imagine that a tall industrialist and a dignitary of his stature, particularly in present times, could be so humane and charitable on one side and a person of such fine taste, on the other. I have learnt a great deal from him and miss him immensely.

On the occasion of Bimla Devi Poddar's 80th birthday, let us pray that God Almighty grant her happiness and health and strengthen her capacities to serve society in the manner she has been doing for years.

Bravo Bimla *jiji*!



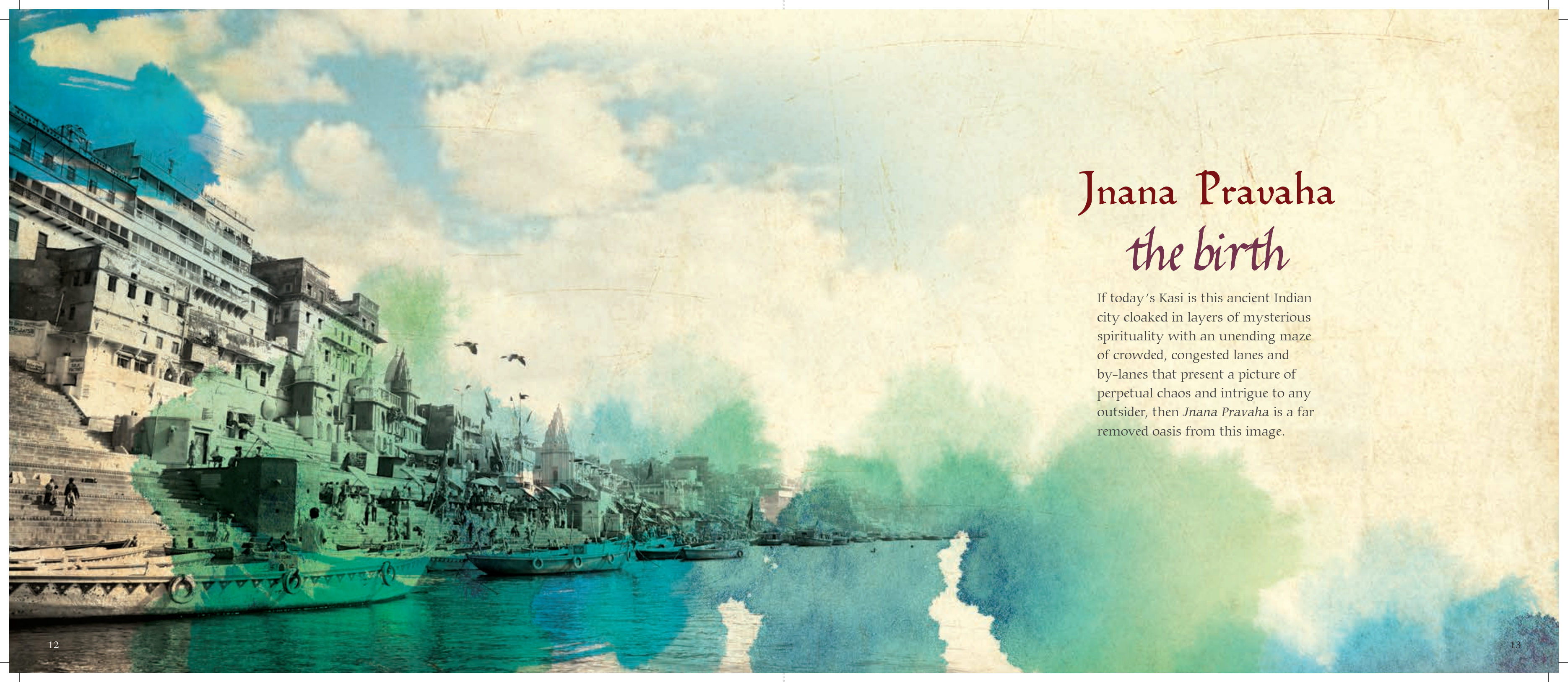


JñĀNA-PRAVĀHA
Centre for Cultural Studies & Research
Varanasi



“Benaras is older than history,
older than tradition, older even
than legend, and looks twice as
old as all of them put together!”

– Mark Twain

A painting of a crowded Indian city by the water, with a large temple on the left and many boats in the water. The scene is set on a riverbank with a large, multi-story temple building on the left. The temple has a prominent spire and is surrounded by a dense crowd of people. In the foreground, several boats are docked along the riverbank. The water is a deep blue, and the sky is a mix of blue and white clouds. The overall style is that of a classical painting, with a focus on the architecture and the bustling activity of the city.

Jnana Pravaha

the birth

If today's Kasi is this ancient Indian city cloaked in layers of mysterious spirituality with an unending maze of crowded, congested lanes and by-lanes that present a picture of perpetual chaos and intrigue to any outsider, then *Jnana Pravaha* is a far removed oasis from this image.



But if Kasi is to be understood as the very cradle and centre of human civilization, where knowledge has remained unbound and which has from time immemorial, drawn seekers from every nook and cranny of the world and every walk of life, then *Jnana Pravaha* is indeed an embodiment of it.

About an hour and a half's drive from the Varanasi, Lal Bahadur Shastri Airport gets you to *Samne Ghat*, south of which stands Jnana Pravaha, a Centre for Cultural Studies and Research.

As you enter through the large wooden gates, what greets you immediately is a sense of calm, squeaky clean cleanliness and ample greens amidst which carry on the Centre's pursuits and activities.

Jnana Pravaha has entered its 20th year.

The story of its formation and genesis is most interesting.

It so happened, that Smt. Bimla Poddar upon entering her 60th year, and after the demise of her father-in-law, Shri Janki Prasad Poddar, decided to leave the busy city of Calcutta and the day-to-day hustle and bustle of life, in exchange for a quieter, more soul searching alternative.

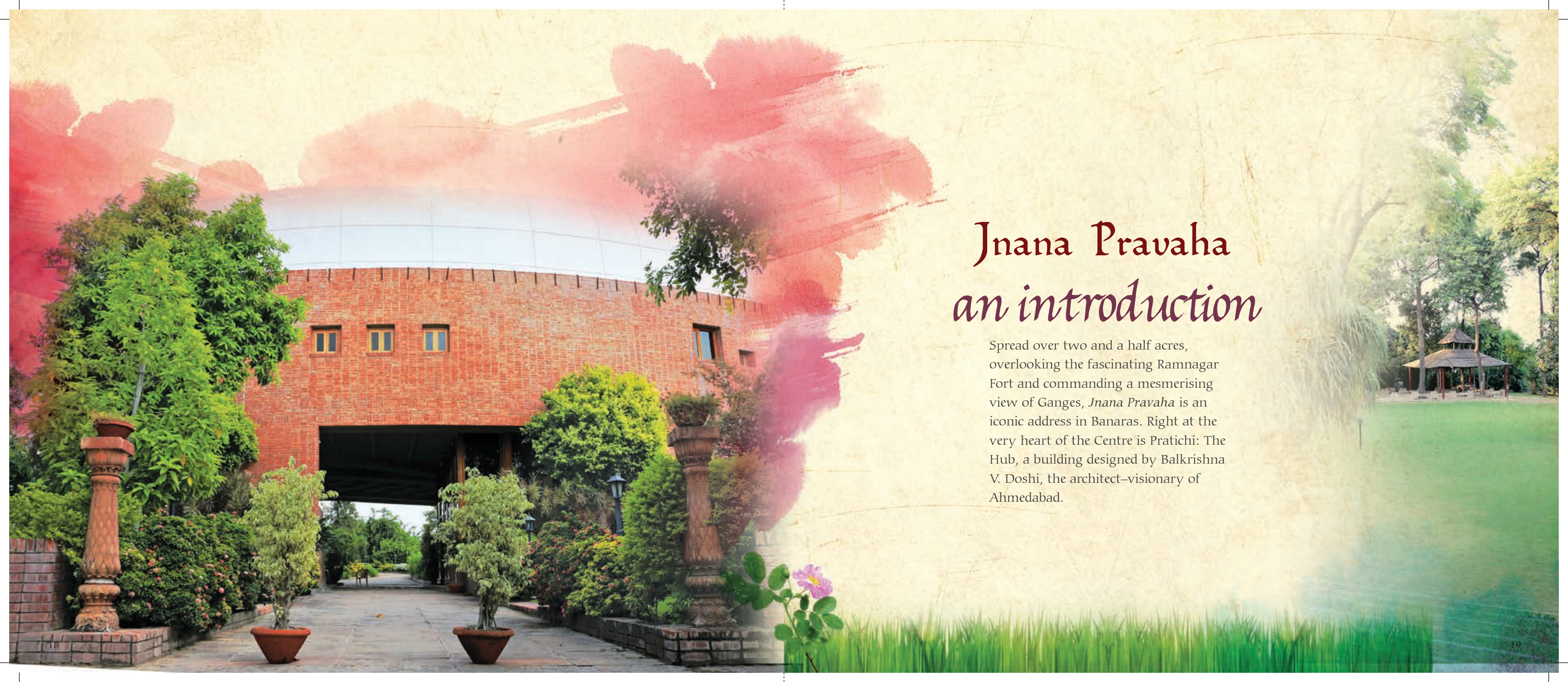
Kasi or Banaras on the banks of the River Ganga, was her natural choice as she had been absorbing all that one understands as 'Indian-ness' right from her early childhood and felt that Kasi alone could cradle all that she had imbibed.

The family eventually found a suitable plot of land with a full view of the Ganges upon which a home was to be built for her. The construction site was arduous and tricky, but once the home was ready, Bimla Poddar was ready to sit back and soak it all in.

Fate of course had different plans for her. As she began mingling with various learned men and women of the Banaras society, it became more and more evident, that sitting back was not going to be the course of her life. Besides, her brother in law, Late Suresh Neotia, who was already a passionate patron and collector of art and antiquity, dissuaded her from getting into, what she describes as a "vegetative state!"

Activities began in the form of a few preliminary discussions with experts on subjects related to art and music. Her collection of books and musical instruments found a place in the basement which also became the hub for a few lectures. It was during a chance meeting between Suresh Neotia and Professor R.C. Sharma, the then Director of Bharat Kala Bhavan, when the latter suggested holding an international conference at their home. By this time, it was clear to Bimla Poddar that she would like to formalise her pursuits and set up an institution.

Thus was born *Jnana Pravaha*, a Centre for Cultural Studies & Research in 1997 with Professor K.N.Mishra as its first Director.



Jnana Pravaha *an introduction*

Spread over two and a half acres, overlooking the fascinating Ramnagar Fort and commanding a mesmerising view of Ganges, *Jnana Pravaha* is an iconic address in Banaras. Right at the very heart of the Centre is Pratichi: The Hub, a building designed by Balkrishna V. Doshi, the architect-visionary of Ahmedabad.

Wide, gentle steps guide you down from Pratichi to neat, lush green lawns and a grove of trees that culminate in a *Yajnasala*. A riotous vegetable garden neighbours it. Adjacent to it are the *Atithisala* or the hostel for scholars and research students and the *Silpasala*, where the craftsmen remain busy with their masterpieces.

Founded in 1997 by the joint vision and conviction of Bimla Poddar and Suresh Neotia, the Centre was infused with life by the Late Professor R.C.Sharma, who had earlier served as Director General and Vice Chancellor of National Museum / Institute, New Delhi.

Accepting the post as strictly honorary, Professor Sharma gave the Centre a structure and nurtured it with great care. His contributions are remembered and recognized by each one at the Centre till today.

Who christened the Centre remains a mystery but *Jnana Pravaha* is guided by a simple motto:

‘Jnana Ganga Punatu Va’
or let knowledge flow like the
Ganges and continue to bless
us all.

It is in keeping with the motto that *Jnana Pravaha* has laid down the following aims and objectives for itself:

- Bring together scholars of various nationalities on a common platform of cultural expression.
 - Foster in-depth study of ancient epigraphy and obscure Indian scripts.
 - Encourage and support advance research in Indian art, culture, archaeology and metaphysics.
 - Organise seminars, lectures, advance study courses and workshops.
 - Support artisans to preserve their hereditary skills of handicrafts.
 - Nurture cultural values among young generation through interaction.
 - Train novitiates for learned priesthood to cater to the needs of society.
 - Revive the performance of Sanskrit theatre and Vedic Yajna.
 - Award scholarships and fellowships to young scholars for further training in Indian classical music and study of Indian art and culture.
 - Explore, excavate and document heritage sites and ancient ruins of historical value.
-



The Atelier: Silpasala

Several elderly men are busy hammering and chiselling away various pieces of metallic objects, filling the quiet with an echo of comforting sounds. They are applying finishing touches to what will emerge as yet another lot of precious handcrafted 'Ashtadhatu' object d' art, ranging from decorative items such as bowls and plates to figures of Gods and Goddesses.

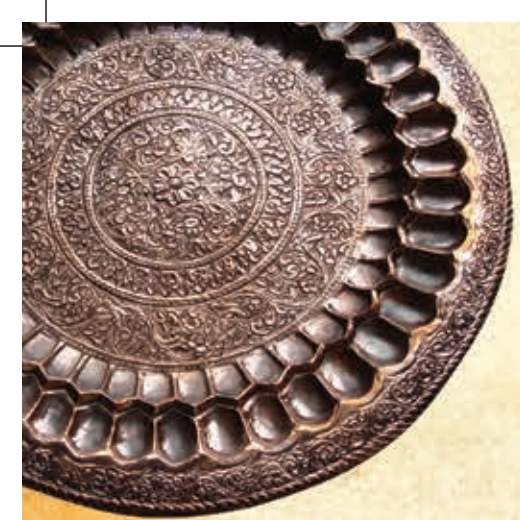
Dr. Pramod Giri, the man in-charge, shows me around The Atelier, the workshop which occupies a place of great pride at *Jnana Pravaha* and has been instrumental in reviving the traditional but fast diminishing *Banarasi* technique of creating handcrafted metallic pieces.



In this day and age of bulk factory produce, many of these artisans were forced to give up their skill and craft for lesser jobs. Being semi literate, they could find work only as contractual labourers or in factories. Some continued to be engaged with their craft but only part time. One or two were working as electricians, greasing fans. Others even turned to selling vegetables. Each one of them was grappling with issues like untimely and poor payment as a result of which both they and their traditional art were suffering.

It was this fact that propelled Suresh Neotia to launch 'The Atelier' in June 2008 with the clear aim to revive and preserve this art form. Pramod Giri goes onto demonstrate and explain the extraordinary on goings.

"Besides the fact that we got down to locating and rehabilitating each of these craftsmen, every piece handcrafted here is made of *Ashtadhatu* or a combination of eight metals: gold, silver, copper, tin, lead, zinc, iron and antimony," he explains. As a result, the final product is one that is strong and exudes a unique colour and lustre. Some objects like bells, even give out a unique resonating sound when rung.



Interestingly, each of the eight metals corresponds with some planet. For example: Copper and Gold with *Surya*, *Mangala* and *Guru*; silver with *Chandra* and *Shukra* and iron with *Shani*.



Repousee work or the art of creating a relief design by hammering the reverse side of a metallic sheet is the other form that has been greatly revived at *Jnana Pravaha*. A French word, *Repousse* literally means to push back and is carried out using only two metals: copper and brass. The show room at *Jnana Pravaha* occupies several works of fine *Repousse* work, mostly deployed in decorative items such as utensils, large pots and pans, plates, jewellery boxes, lamps and so on.

The Atelier has acquired a reputation for fine craftsmanship and purity of metals. Many visitors are left spellbound at the work being done and land up placing orders for their chosen Gods or other pieces. "Many have even commented on the fairly reasonable pricing of the items that starts from as low as ₹1,000/- and goes on to ₹25,000/- Each final product bears the JP trademark and a code number for identification," beams Pramod Giri.

As I bid adieu to the artists, I note that other than a smile, they don't really say much. It's their hands that do the talking.

I accompany him to the furnace to witness the casting of the metal, a process that is fast waning and is called *Madhucchist Vidhana* or casting through the lost wax process. I witness how a nude bee wax model is first prepared with two perforations – one at the top and the other at the bottom and is coated with clay. The artist creating the wax model is known to be one of the most trained hands in Banaras, second to none.

The model is then tightly bound by thin iron wire and left to dry in the sun. Once completely dry, it hardens and is put to burn in a pre heated oven where the wax melts casting its impressions on the dried clay. The model is then baked in a 1000c furnace till it burns red. With great care, the model is pulled out using a pair of tongs and immediately the molten metal is poured through the top hole and is released from the bottom one. The clay then comes lose, leaving the raw metallic model intact. The model thereafter undergoes a complete process of detailing, chiselling, embellishment and polishing till it is show room ready.



The Museum: *Kalamandapa*

The fact that any museum should be a treasure trove is a given but the fact that the treasure trove should be someone's personal collection that has been meticulously catalogued and put to display, resulting in a museum such as *Kalamandapa* makes you blink twice!



Offering a view of the Ganges, from every corner, the *Kalamandapa* houses Suresh Neotia's personal collection that ranges from rare paintings, sculptures, terracotta, coins, textiles to handicrafts and musical instruments, all acquired between 1962-1975 before the Antiquities and Art treasure act came into effect.

"He had a regular stream of art lovers and scholars visiting him and they would sit and discuss the subject *ad infinitum*. Somehow, his interest in Indian art was greatly piqued and he started acquiring a personal collection that started off primarily with art but later extended to coins and even textiles," recalls Bimla Poddar. However, much of the treasure lay locked in trunks until it was finally displayed at the *Jnana Pravaha* Museum.

Today, some of its outstanding exhibits include a huge *Kalamkari*, a dated copperplate or a '*tamra patra*' that once belonged to King Harshavardhan and still bears his signature and an exceptional piece of textile from the 16th century titled, '*Samit*' from Eastern India. "There are only three such known copperplates, two of which are in the Lucknow Museum. This one carries great significance as it is still in good condition and illustrates a land grant in his reign," explains Dr. Niraj Pandey, Assistant Director of *Kalamandapa*.



The museum has a rich collection of miniature paintings on palm leaves, paper, cloth and even wood. The collection is particularly rich in Bikaner miniatures. The themes range from religion to social activities such as hunting, various ceremonies, battle scenes and parties. The display of textiles is a stunning one, showcasing *saris* from various parts of India: *Baluchari* and *Kantha* from Bengal, *Phulkari* from Punjab, *Paithani* from Maharashtra, *Kalamkaris* from South India and ornate brocades from Banaras. Some time back, the Centre carried out an archaeological exploration at the Ramnagar site in Banaras and its findings also find due display.

Niraj draws my attention to a palm leaf dated 12th Century wherein *Kailadas's Abhijnan Shakuntalam* is inscribed. I am also left gawking at a 20 odd feet *Kalamkari* which has been carefully framed and placed at one extreme end. There have been some important additions to the museum such as a Varanasi Copperplate of *Govindachandra* of the *Gahadawal* dynasty, a *Gara sari* and a decorative *toran* with Parsi embroidery



Every year other than resident scholars and visitors, hundreds of students right from school to college throng the museum and are often left speechless. Earlier this year, *Jnana Pravaha* had a special visitor who far exceeded his stipulated time of visit and tour.

It was none other than our Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi who spent a great length of time, carefully observing and absorbing the exhibits at *Kalamandapa*.

The Library: *Pustakalay*

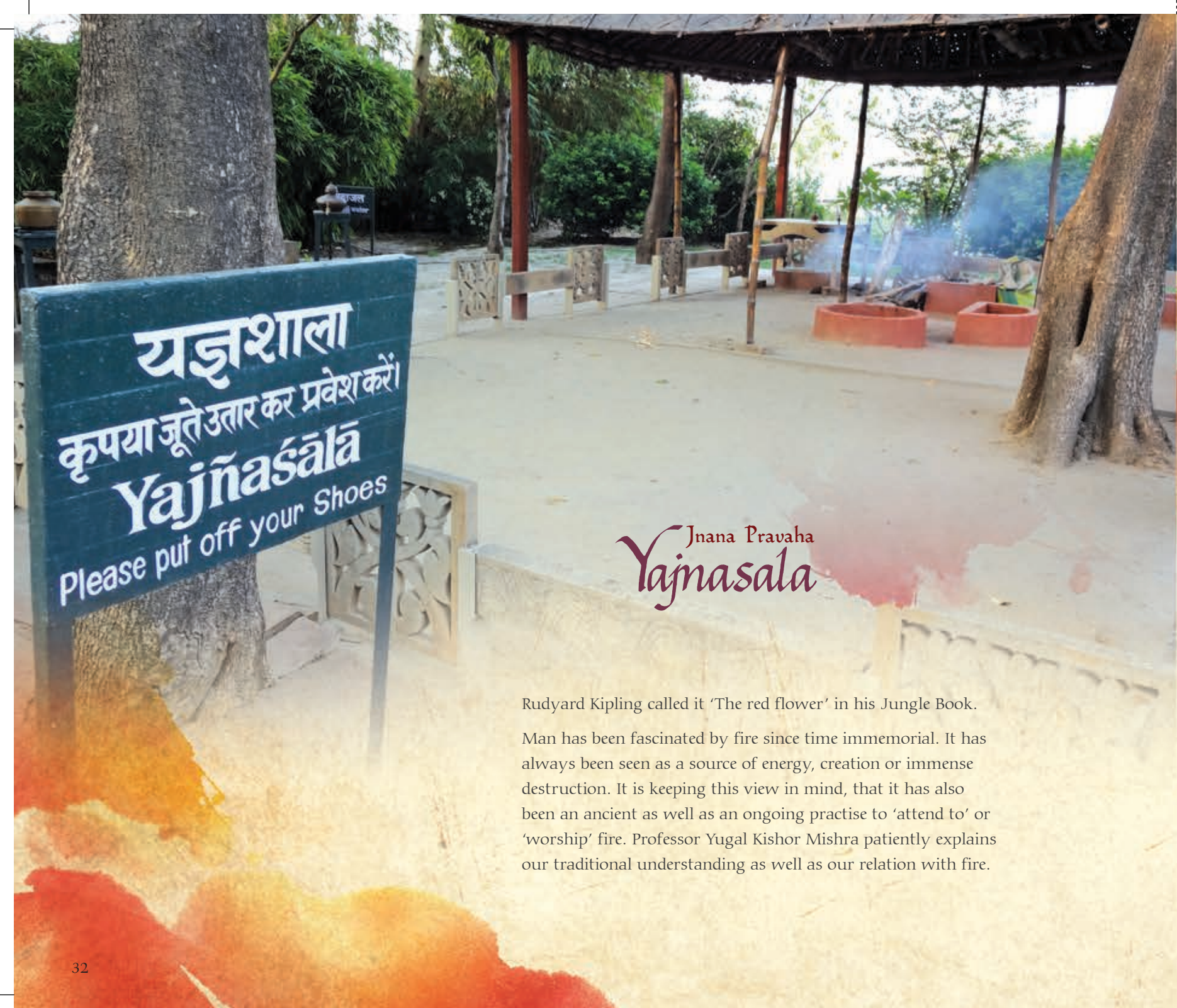
As a child, Bimla Poddar was fed on a diet which was rich in story-telling. She listened in rapt attention to her raconteur father, Satyanarayan Sekhsaria as he wove tales from epics like *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* and mythological stories to even those from *Akbar and Birbal*. The reader in her stayed alive over the years and she amassed a veritable collection of books on literature and philosophy.

Today, *Jnana Pravaha* has a reference library that consists of about 20,000 books and several rare manuscripts on various aspects of Indology, such as art, culture, philosophy, religion, history, epigraphy, archaeology, numismatics and even Sanskrit. Poddar's personal collection along with Suresh Neotia's collection of tomes on Indian art and heritage are all a part of the library today. It even stocks almost all publications by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) as well as the MARG series – *Silpa Sahatra Dal* on Brahminical iconography.



"Ours is a reference library and is greatly used and appreciated by students and research scholars. Membership is open to researchers who enjoy spending time here, given its serene environment. We do not however, allow books to be taken outside the premises as many of them are rare," explains Niraj Pandey.

The spacious library that was set up in 1999 presents a view of the campus greens and the river *Ganga* making it quite a favourite spot for bibliophiles. Every year, its collection is enriched by contribution or acquisition.



Jnana Pravaha
Yajnasala

Rudyard Kipling called it 'The red flower' in his Jungle Book.

Man has been fascinated by fire since time immemorial. It has always been seen as a source of energy, creation or immense destruction. It is keeping this view in mind, that it has also been an ancient as well as an ongoing practise to 'attend to' or 'worship' fire. Professor Yugal Kishor Mishra patiently explains our traditional understanding as well as our relation with fire.



"Other than Zoroastrians who worship the fire, we have also had a long standing practise since Vedic times of both worshipping as well as keeping 'agni' alive in our households. Keeping this idea and order alive, we have a dedicated *Yajnasala*."

The *Yanjansala* indeed, is a pivotal and a most fascinating point of the Centre. Located at the eastern end of the campus, it overlooks the *Ganga* and evokes divinity. Every evening, a *Ganga Aarti* is performed as a mark of respect to the holy river. Professor Mishra explains that this *Yajnasala* has been built exactly as per the Vedic times and style.

What's most remarkable is that there has been a flame that has been kept alive since 2000 and burns unabated, twenty four hours. This ever burning flame or the '*Prajwalit Agni*' has faced inclement weather and storm and yet held its flame intact for the last 16 years!



"We cannot see our Gods & Goddesses. They remain invisible to our eye. The only forces we do see are the sun and the moon but we can worship them only from a great distance. It is therefore, only '*agni*' or a burning flame that we can have amidst us and bow to as a source of energy," explains Professor Mishra. It is therefore '*agni*' that we hold most sacred and conduct our highest rituals and ceremonies, keeping a burning flame as our witness and guiding force.

I also learn that it is the rare breed of the '*Agni-hotri*' pundits who conduct the rituals in their purest form.

Each time a *Yajna* is held, the '*Yajnasala*' sends out fascinating sounds and vibes via chanting of *mantras*, ringing of prayer bells and blowing of conch shells leaving the entire gathering of assembled devotees and visitors as well as the air around, purer and more blissful.

The Guestrooms: *Atithisala*

Jnana Pravaha receives various kinds of guests whose length of stay too varies greatly. Some are visitors, while others could be academicians, research scholars or renowned speakers, both from India and abroad. Many of them neither speak nor understand Hindi. But that hasn't deterred a single guest from giving exceptionally positive feedback on their stay at the *Atithisala* at *Jnana Pravaha*.

The secret seems to be quite simple and uncomplicated. A well oiled administrative machinery, hospitable and trained staff, rooms that are well appointed without being opulent, enough quiet and greenery to inspire and wonderful home cooked vegetarian food with much of the vegetables being sourced from the backyard.

Besides the comfortable guest rooms, there is a common lounge and dining area, one end of which is occupied by a cabinet full of Indian string instruments such as the *sitar*, *tanpura*, *sarod*, *veena* and others. The natural quiet and acoustics almost tempt me to pull out a *tanpura* and tune it for song!

Mornings do not call for an alarm. There is enough bird chatter and chirp all around to wake you up with a smile and if you listen a bit carefully, you may even catch the morning mantras being recited.



Pathshala

Samskara and Anusthana Kendra



Not too far from the ever busy *Manikarnika Ghat*, is the *Meer Ghat*, named after Mir Rustam Ali who was the Governor of Banaras around 1975. Just like most other places in Banaras, one has to negotiate shops, dwellers, vendors of all kinds, pedestrians, ambler and the invariable bull, till one reaches a heavy wooden door set against intricately carved sandstone.

D3/1, *Meer Ghat*, popularly known as *Badi Kothi* or the large mansion has belonged to the family for more than a hundred years. Over the years, *Badi Kothi* has played myriad

roles, from being a point of shelter for visiting pilgrims to being a commercial office for trade and commerce.

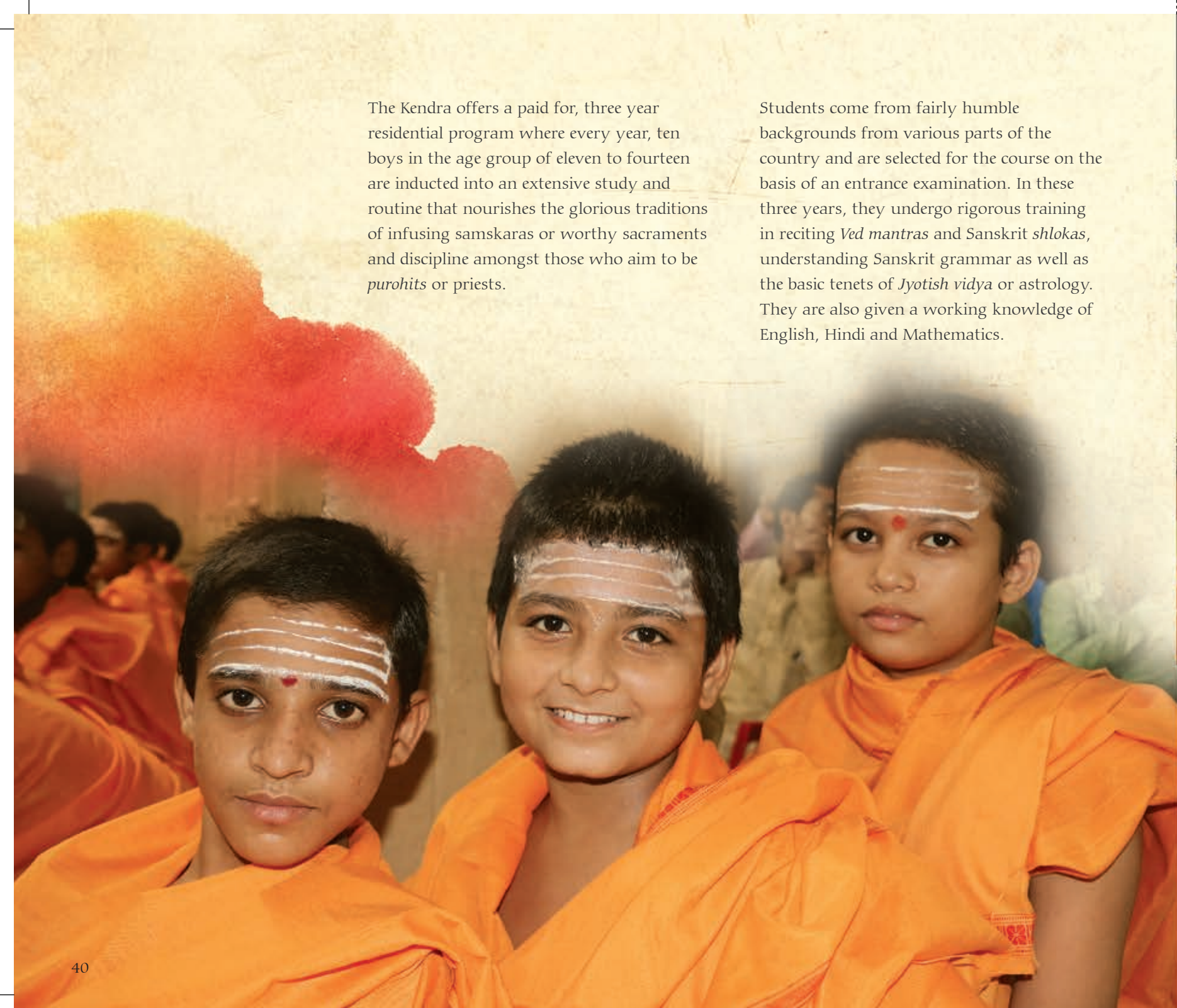
Today, this exquisite *kothi*, that is spread over two courtyards and is even referred to as '*Do chowk ki kothi*' houses the *Jnana Pravaha Samskara* and *Anusthana Kendra*. The door opens into a world that instantly feels surreal. The continuous hubbub of Kasi gives way to whitewashed walls exuding a bluish tinge that meet the eye against flowing ochre robes amidst an echo of mantras that pierce the silence.

The Kendra is *Jnana Pravahas's* laudable initiative to train priests not only in the right manner but also in the right environment. In 2003, the Kendra was borne out of a vacuum felt by both Suresh Neotia and Bimla Poddar who rued the fact that very often they could not find knowledgeable priests to conduct rituals even on important occasions.



The Kendra offers a paid for, three year residential program where every year, ten boys in the age group of eleven to fourteen are inducted into an extensive study and routine that nourishes the glorious traditions of infusing samskaras or worthy sacraments and discipline amongst those who aim to be *purohits* or priests.

Students come from fairly humble backgrounds from various parts of the country and are selected for the course on the basis of an entrance examination. In these three years, they undergo rigorous training in reciting *Ved mantras* and Sanskrit *shlokas*, understanding Sanskrit grammar as well as the basic tenets of *Jyotish vidya* or astrology. They are also given a working knowledge of English, Hindi and Mathematics.



The premise also houses a 200 year old Shiva *Mandir* which is maintained and looked after by the students, who make the daily offerings on a rota basis.

“We admit younger boys as they have a natural ability to memorize difficult *shlokas* and *mantras*. Moreover, we pay great emphasis on correct intonation and pronunciation of *mantras*, which a child learns best when he is young as his vocal chords and timbre are adaptable and flexible then. Once the intonations are registered precisely in his diction, they stay that way for life,” explains Professor Yugal Kishor Mishra who is chiefly responsible for the Kendra.

What is noteworthy is that upon completion, each of these boys either opts for higher studies and pursues graduation or post graduation or is immediately absorbed by society for their learning and skill. Not a single one has to worry about making a living.



The boys who follow a strict regimen that starts at the crack of dawn, however, look far from burdened. Their faces wear happiness and calm and if the courtyard is not ringing with *mantras*, it is full of good banter and bonhomie.



The Kendra is run under the astute guidance and chairmanship of Professor, Sudhanshu Shekhar Shastri, a noted scholar and the boys are under the chief tutelage of Vishnu Prasad Ghimire, who is their senior most '*Acharya*' from Nepal. The Convocation is held strictly on *Rishi Panchami*, around August, where every student takes an oath of service in the '*Dikshant Samaroh*' or the formal conclusion of his study.

R.C. Sharma Chair

Unearthing Banaras

As a mark of respect and deference to Late Dr. R.C.Sharma, the much revered father figure of *Jnana Pravaha* and with an aim to further research and study the dimensions of archaeology, a Chair was created in his name in 2012.

It so happened, that Professor Vidula Jayaswal was also retiring from Banaras Hindu University (BHU) that very year, after having taught Pre-historic or stone age archaeology. One fine day, to her surprise, she found Bimla Poddar, Managing Trustee of *Jnana Pravaha* at her office with a letter in hand, offering Professor Jayaswal, the esteemed R.C. Sharma Chair.

"I knew Dr. Sharma very well and was also associated with *Jnana Pravaha* since 2006, as they had provided the much needed financial aid and support to our team from BHU for our very important excavations at Ramnagar Fort. So, though I had initially thought of taking it easy for about six months after my retirement, I found myself saying yes to *Jnana Pravaha* in 2012."

That same year, Dr. Jayaswal was also directing excavations at Chunar and Shooltankeshwar. It was the quarries and inscriptions found in Chunar along with the deposits found in the mythologically important site of Shooltankeshwar, slightly away from the main city of Banaras, that virtually led her to Banaras.

Her connect with Banaras, however, was an old one. She was born here and was also the first female student to specialize in archaeology from BHU in 1968. "Banaras had always found a place as one of the oldest living cities of the world. One even finds a reference of Kasi in the *Atharva Veda* and much later in *Jataka tales* as well. Even so, much of its narrative remained a part of prevalent folklore. I wanted to test its historicity and pursue the disparity between the literary and known archaeological dating of Varanasi."





But wasn't most of Banaras, already well dug up, given its age and significance? "That it what I thought too, but I was pleasantly surprised, she says."

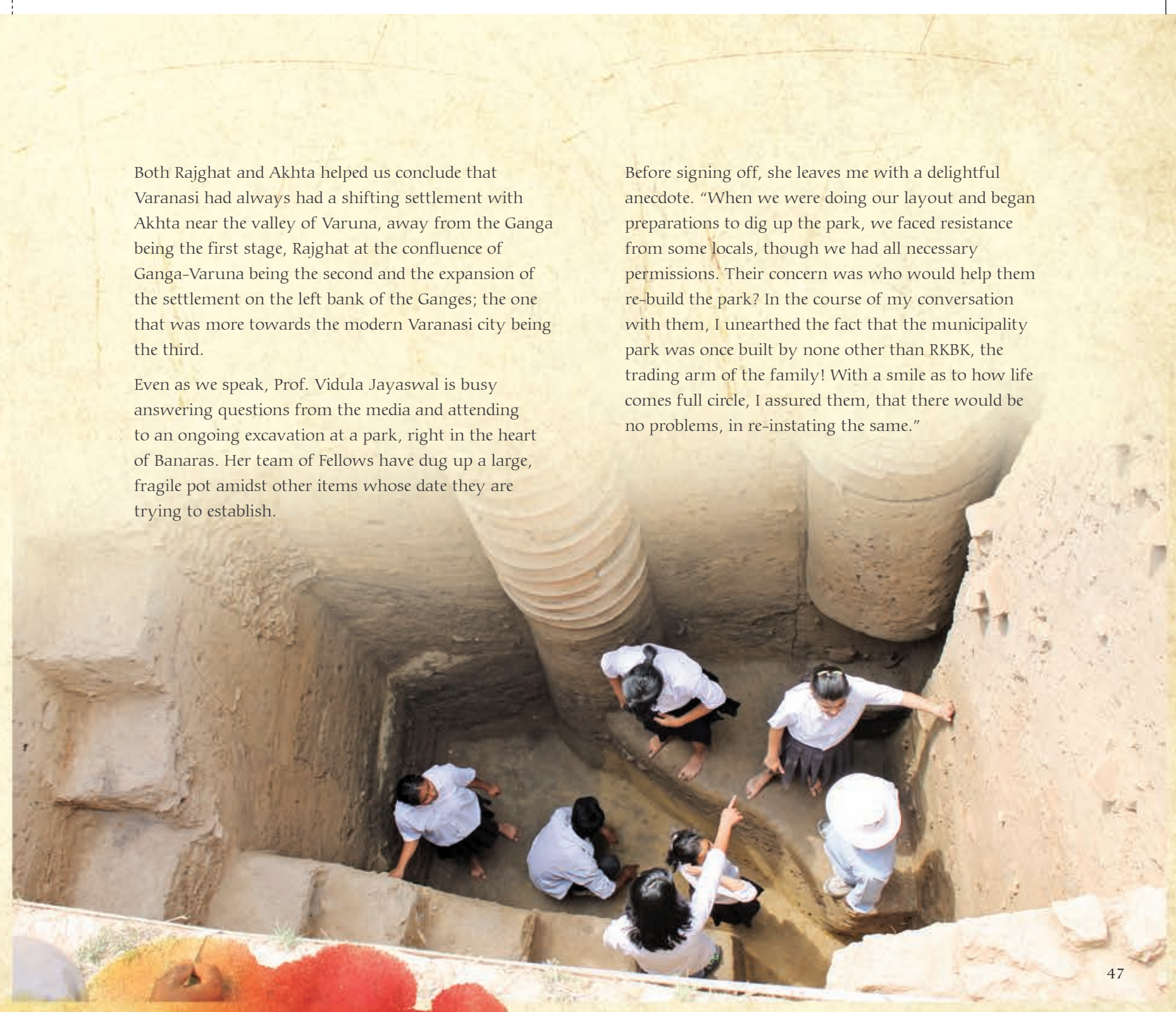
In 2014 excavations at Rajghat, near the Kasi station was completed in joint auspices of *Jnana Pravaha* and the Archaeological Society of India under the guidance of Prof. Vidula Jayaswal and Dr. B.R.Mani. The findings included pottery and other antiquities which were analysed by Dr. Meera Sharma.

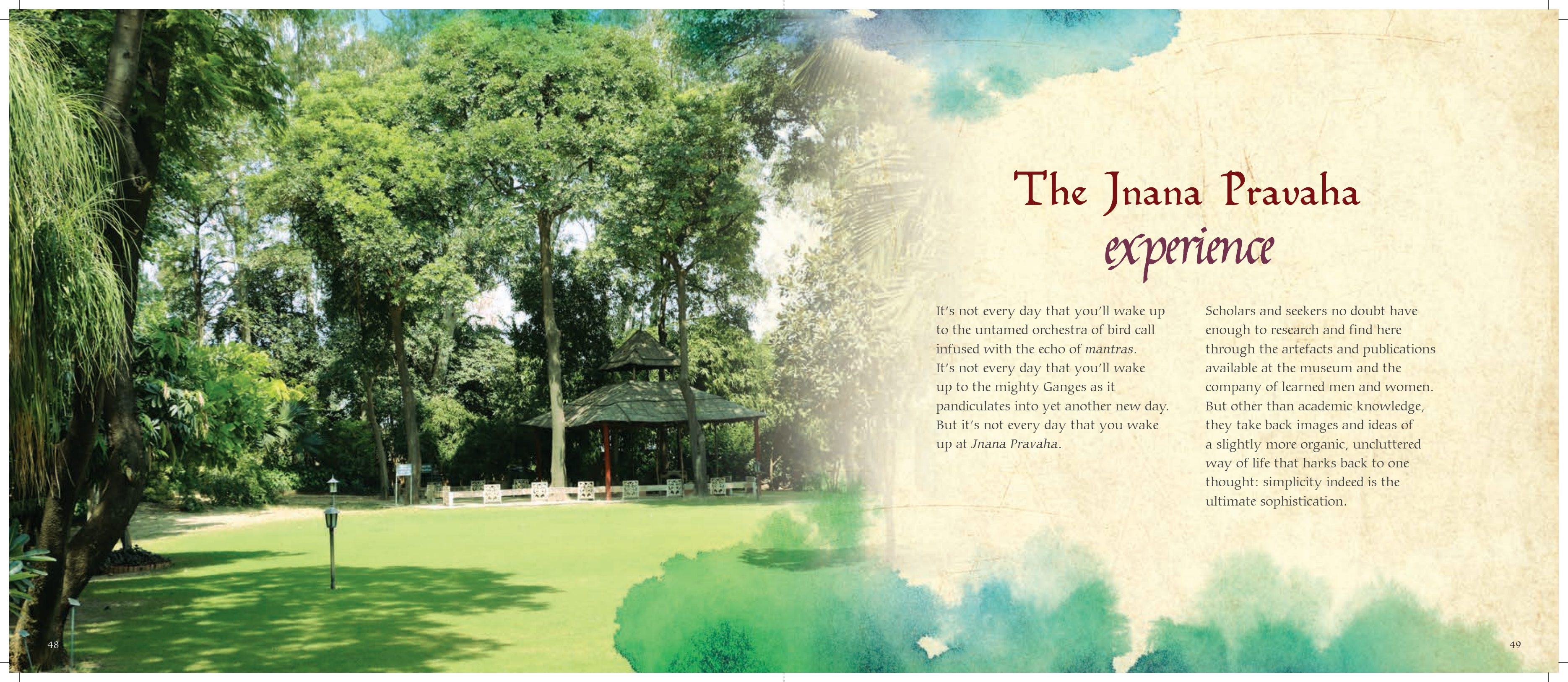
"We even dug up a site at Akhta, near Sarnath where the findings were particularly rewarding. We figured that it was one of the earliest rural habitations of Varanasi and the simplicity of articles found, suggested that pilgrims were only halting there for a brief period of time.

Both Rajghat and Akhta helped us conclude that Varanasi had always had a shifting settlement with Akhta near the valley of Varuna, away from the Ganga being the first stage, Rajghat at the confluence of Ganga-Varuna being the second and the expansion of the settlement on the left bank of the Ganges; the one that was more towards the modern Varanasi city being the third.

Even as we speak, Prof. Vidula Jayaswal is busy answering questions from the media and attending to an ongoing excavation at a park, right in the heart of Banaras. Her team of Fellows have dug up a large, fragile pot amidst other items whose date they are trying to establish.

Before signing off, she leaves me with a delightful anecdote. "When we were doing our layout and began preparations to dig up the park, we faced resistance from some locals, though we had all necessary permissions. Their concern was who would help them re-build the park? In the course of my conversation with them, I unearthed the fact that the municipality park was once built by none other than RKBK, the trading arm of the family! With a smile as to how life comes full circle, I assured them, that there would be no problems, in re-instating the same."





The Jnana Pravaha *experience*

It's not every day that you'll wake up to the untamed orchestra of bird call infused with the echo of *mantras*. It's not every day that you'll wake up to the mighty Ganges as it pandiculates into yet another new day. But it's not every day that you wake up at *Jnana Pravaha*.

Scholars and seekers no doubt have enough to research and find here through the artefacts and publications available at the museum and the company of learned men and women. But other than academic knowledge, they take back images and ideas of a slightly more organic, uncluttered way of life that harks back to one thought: simplicity indeed is the ultimate sophistication.



Lush greens

Naba Kishore Nayak, the man with the green fingers and thumb has clocked twenty years at the Centre. He along with his green army are responsible for keeping the Centre lush green and he takes ample pride and joy in his job. In his heavily accented Oriya Hindi, he takes me through the garden at *Jnana Pravaha*. “We have medicinal as well as some very rare plants and trees here. Amongst the medicinal are the likes of *Kanak Chaya* and *Muchakunda*. Our *Nolina* is truly rare. We also have a lot of aloe vera. We have trees dating back to the times of the *Panchvati*, such as *Sita Ashok* and *Palash* along with a young *Rudraksh*, which should begin to blossom in a couple of years.”



Vegetable Garden

Spread over two *bighas*, the vegetable garden at *Jnana Pravaha* ensures that much of what you consume is as farm fresh as it can get. “Vegetables such as *bhindi*, *lauki*, *tori*, *kumra*, *karela*, *kundri*, *parwal*, *gobi* to leafy ones such as *palak*, *dhaniya* and *mirch* (ladyfinger, gourds, cauliflower, spinach and coriander) all grow here in abundance, along with fruits such as *bel*, a variety of *aam* and *bijora*, (mangoes, wood apple and citron),” exult the staff members. And when the sun is beating down in the peak of summers, there’s nothing better than a freshly squeezed glass of *bel* juice from the backyard to cool you down.

Ecology and Ganga

“As a mark of respect to the life giving river, which we refer to as *Maa Ganga*, we offer prayers and conduct a small *puja* in the evenings,” reveals Professor Kamal Giri, Director *Jnana Pravaha*.

“We are also very careful of waste disposal and ensure no dirty water or garbage enters the *Ganga* from our Centre. In fact, during get-togethers, we do not use crockery of any kind. Our plates are made of well bound straw, *palash* and banana leaves,” she goes on to add.



Vedic Yajna and the lit fire

Every year during *Shivratri*, one can witness a glorious *Yajna* or an offering that is made for overall peace and harmony in keeping with the rituals that date back to Vedic times. Professor Yugal Kishor Mishra confirms that the *Yajna* is conducted in the in-house *Yajnasala*, as per the method sanctified in the *Bhagwad Gita*. “We conduct a *Mitra Vindeshti Yajna* following the *sarv pracheen* or the ancient way of making an offering,” he says. Right in the heart of the *Yajnasala*, also lays the *Prajwalit Agni* or a perennial fire that has withstood rain and storm and has stayed lit resolutely.



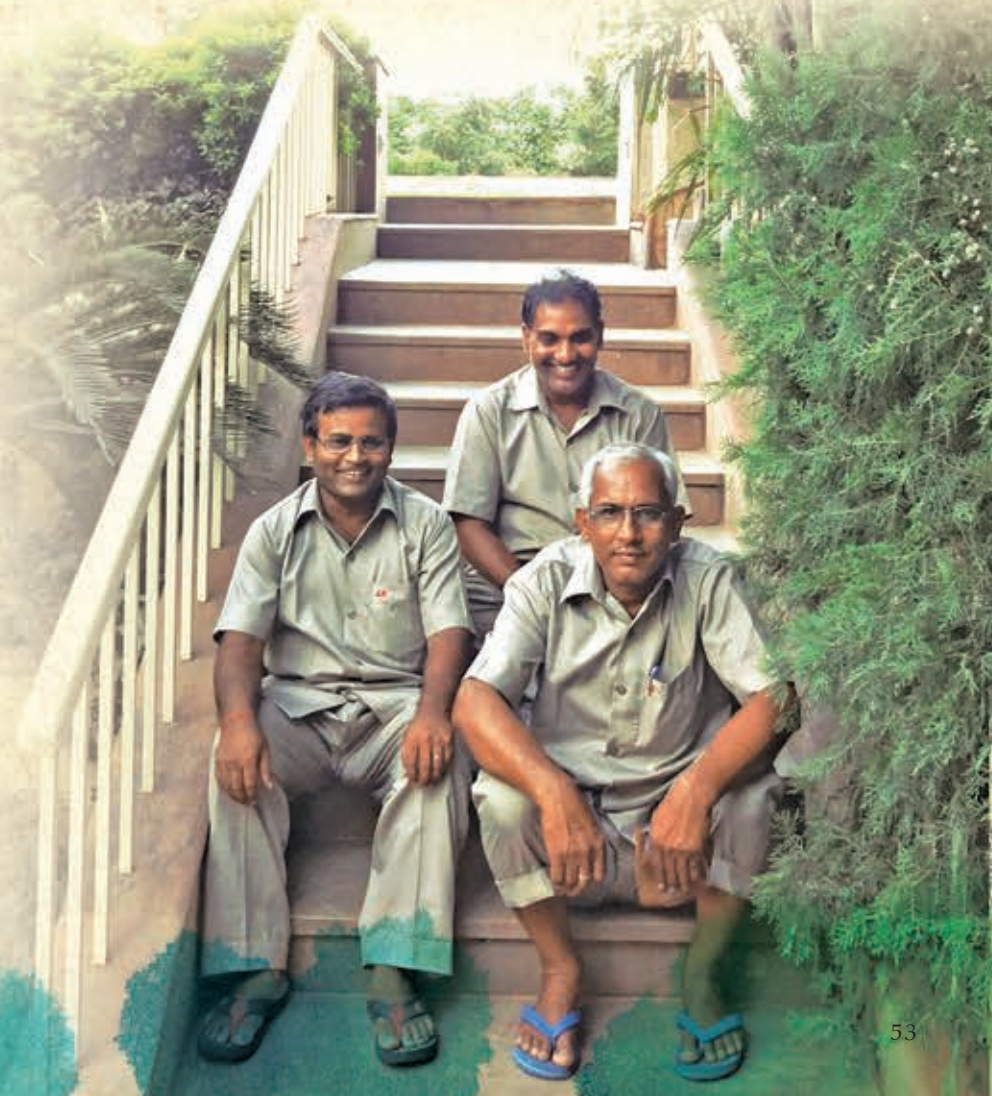
Bonhomie amidst discipline

His gaze may have blunted over the years, leaving him donning a pair of heavy spectacles, but his vision remains sharp. As the vehicle drops you off at the porch, the first human being that you invariably encounter at *Jnana Pravaha*, is *Ojha ji*, the guardian of the Centre. He greets you with a smile and a *Namaste* and welcomes you in. His presence remains a quiet but assuring one.

Right from the office bearers to the staff, there is an unmistakable air of bonhomie between all. There's *Ramchandra* who remembers how you like your coffee and there's *Raju* who ensures that the office remains spic and span. Many have spent long years; some are relatively new. But that doesn't stop them from poking fun at each other as they go about their jobs and chores efficiently.

“One of the nicest things about our Centre, is there is no boss and no employee. We work and function just like a joint family, understanding that we all come from different backgrounds but respectfully accommodate each other. Moreover, anybody who comes here, automatically gets disciplined in a short time; such is our culture” explains Professor Kamal Giri.

Quite truly, Bihar, various parts of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bengal, Orissa and various other corners of the country, come and merge here, just the way the Ganga collects and creates so many influences, yet steadfastly flows on.





Prerana Pravaha

Once upon a time, even the servants who worked in the homes of scholars in Kasi conversed quite comfortably with each other in Sanskrit.

However, over time, Sanskrit which is the mother of all Indian languages and was one of the first ancient languages to be spoken in India became less prevalent and restricted to only the scholarly folk. As a result, the rich heritage available in Sanskrit also began to get restricted to a limited circuit only.

In recognition of this fact *Jnana Pravaha*, started '*Prerana Pravaha*' an initiative aimed at arousing interest and awareness in the younger generation and motivating them in understanding and preserving the ethos of our culture and heritage.

Jnana Pravaha took small but solid steps and the results have been both laudable and unbelievable.

Sanskrit Theatre

On the day that *Pratichi* was inaugurated, *Jnana Pravaha* staged Kalidasa's '*Abhijhana Shakuntalam*' to an august audience, comprising Dr. Vishnu Kant Shastri, then Honourable Governor of Uttar Pradesh, Girija Devi, the doyen of Indian classical music, *tabla* maestro Pt. Kishan Maharaj and hundreds of other enthralled members who gave it a resounding applause.

"Such was the quality and rarity of the presentation that the Governor who was supposed to leave in about forty minutes, stayed on for the entire two hour show" recalls Professor Yugal Kishor Mishra.

Ever since then, Sanskrit theatre, an age old tradition of Kasi has received a fresh fillip under the aegis of *Jnana Pravaha*. Between 2000 and 2005 two shows of '*Abhijhana Shakuntalam*' were held in Kasi and another in Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh on the occasion of Kalidasa's birth anniversary. Three shows of '*Vikramorvasiyam*' were staged in Kasi which eventually also travelled to the Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal.



Elaborating on the wonderful initiative, Professor Mishra reveals, that they try their best to stick to '*Bharatmuni's Natyashastra*', despite the various interpretations of that ancient text.



"What has been most heart warming and satisfying for us, is the fact that many a times, the participants have been students and general members of the society who have had nothing to do with Sanskrit. It is upon taking part that they go through rigorous training. We work very hard on their intonations and diction and by the end of it they are more than stage ready."

Typically, a production needs a team of about twelve to eighteen characters as well as four to five musicians and two directors: one male and one female.

“You may be pleasantly surprised to know, that in one of our productions based on *Mahabharat*, the character of *Bhim* was played by a Muslim boy. In fact, there have been many occasions, when several exchange students who are here in Kasi for studies, have taken part. We have also had a Polish girl, play the role of *Shakuntala* in one of our plays! With the presentation of Sanskrit theatre, we achieve several things: we revive and rekindle these tremendous works of art and this ancient language and we destroy all man-made barriers and boundaries of community and nationality, as the team gets together to present an ever classic text,” he states.

The Centre has already produced ten-twelve dramas and went international in 2015 when it was invited by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India to present ‘*Karnabharam*’ at the World Sanskrit Conference in Bangkok, Thailand.





Sanskrit *Antakshadi*

Bethe Bethe kya kare?

A road or a group train journey in India is still rarely complete without the group playing '*Antakshadi*'. Something engaging about this simple form of group activity and entertainment has kept it going even in the blitzkrieg of technology.

It is this very humble '*Antakshadi*' that Professor R. C. Sharma chose to deploy as a means to engage students and induct them gently yet in a participative way into Sanskrit and *Srimad Bhagvad Gita*.

Every winter, since 2000, several schools from in and around Banaras take part in a unique '*Gita Antakshadi*', where different school teams ace each other out as they recite *shlokas* from the *Gita*!

"Every year we have about 9-10 schools that participate. Every team has four members and we also have a lively

audience. What is noteworthy is that these schools are a mixed bag, from the modern and private run to the public schools as well as *pathshalas*. We give them a prior notice and they come well prepared," explains a smiling Niraj Pandey.

"We request a senior *Acharya* from Banaras Hindu University to conduct it. The *Acharya* picks up a *shloka* and the trail begins. We run this more in the spirit of participation than competition and each of the participants receives a prize and a memento from our institute," adds Professor Giri.

Such has been the acceptance of the *Gita Antakshadi* that the Centre also conducts the same based on *Mahakavi Kalidasa's* literature. This event has attracted students from colleges with generally the girls topping it.

Heritage Quizzes



The tried and tested medium of a Quiz competition is also held at *Jnana Pravaha* for students every year. The only difference is that every year, the Quiz has a special theme which is shared with the students in advance.

"The themes range from the holy city of Banaras to our literature, culture, fairs and festivals and even our fight for Independence. The whole idea again, is to impart knowledge in a fun way and inculcate a sense of pride about our country in the hearts of young children," explains Niraj Pandey.

Besides the *Jnana Pravaha* team, experts from BHU are also called upon to conduct and co-ordinate the event.

Multi dimensional activities held through the year

Once the academic year begins, the campus of *Jnana Pravaha* gets into action and a spate of multi dimensional activities dot the calendar through the year.

Once again, as a mark of respect to Dr. R. C. Sharma, the academic session begins every year on 1st August, the day he joined the Centre.

Professor Kamal Giri, Director, *Jnana Pravaha*, patiently lists out some key annual events:

Scholar-in-Residence Programme

"We started this in full earnest in 2015. The format is such that world class experts and scholars come and stay with us for one complete year, research unpublished topics pertinent to Indian classical art, philosophy and related fields. Once their stay is complete, they submit a manuscript to us, which we then publish. Our office extends every support to them during their research and study," shares Professor Giri.

Last year saw Dr. Ashok Kumar Das take up 'Wall paintings in Mughal monuments' and his wife, Dr. Syamali Das, conduct a study on 'Silk textiles.'

Professor P. K. Mukhopadhyay, who has retired from Jadavpur University and has been staying in *Kasi* for some time, took up the philosophical and cultural subject titled, 'India and her changing self perception.'

"During their stay these experts hold an 8-10 day advanced study course which is open to both students as well as those interested in these topics. Students from BHU, Sampurnananda Sanskrit University, Kasi Vidyapeeth and others often enrol," she says. The Scholar-in-Residence for 2016 at *Jnana Pravaha* is Dr. Buddha Rashmi Mani who after retiring from the Archaeological Survey of India is studying 'Inscriptions of Kasi.'



Workshops

Jnana Pravaha conducts at least two to three workshops by experts in the chosen field that are open to all, every year. The workshops are typically from the realm of Indian Art and are availed by both UG/PG students of visual arts as well as art enthusiasts.

In recent years, workshops have been held on Nathadwara and *Madhubani* Paintings and the topic for the workshop scheduled for February 2017 is '*Pahadi* Paintings.'



National & International Seminars

Since 2000, the Institute holds seminars every year that last for 2-3 days covering a range of topics. The international seminars are held in collaboration with foreign universities and see noted speakers from both India and abroad.

The International Seminar held in January 2015 was in collaboration with Cambridge and Oxford Universities, UK on 'Banaras, Bayly and the Making of Indian History' whereas the one held in November 2015 discussed 'Awakening the light of *Dharm*' in collaboration with 'Global Peace Initiative of Women'. This seminar was spread over three days with the final day venue being Sarnath.



Lectures

"We begin every new academic session on 1st August with an R.C.Sharma Memorial Lecture which is attended by scholars and students alike. In November, we hold another Lecture series, titled James Princep Memorial Lecture," states Professor Giri.

She also enlightens me on the fact that James Princep has had a valuable contribution in modern day Banaras, where he spent more than ten years. Much of the city's modern sewerage system was built by him. Infact, such is his popularity and acceptance that he is fondly referred to as '*Banarasi Princep*!'"

Jnana Pravaha also conducts eight-ten day advanced study courses on subjects related to Indian art such as Mughal paintings, terracotta and bronze art and so on. Each of these courses is conducted by renowned experts via visual lectures and demonstrations and is open to all.

"We are very conscious of the fact, that whatever we do must be authentic; must be solid. We do not want to do anything merely for name sake," asserts Professor Kamal Giri.



Vasantiki

Any centre in Banaras, devoted to the preservation of Indian culture and art can hardly be removed from Indian music. Quite rightly then, every year just before *Holi*, a gala musical evening is held at the lawns of *Jnana Pravaha* where noted Indian Classical artists, both vocal and instrumental are invited to regale the audience and herald the oncoming of spring.

Over the years, *Jnana Pravaha* has had superlative performances by Vidushi Girija Devi, Savita Devi, Shanno Khurana, Aarti Ankalikar, Ashwini Bhide, Manjusha Kulkarni Patil and Kausiki Desikan amongst others.

Over the years, this has become a much awaited event in the city calendar where the entire campus comes alive with a profusion of musical expressions.



Jnana Pravaha Kolkata Chapter

Scholarship for Indian Classical Music



Under the able guidance of convenor Pt. Vijay Kichlu, the Kolkata chapter of *Jnana Pravaha* focusses on developing several highly promising young artists from the field of Indian Classical Music. These scholars undergo vigorous training through the scholarship in a traditional *guru-shisya parampara* or tradition to achieve excellence.

Each of these students is amongst the finest and leading young musicians of West Bengal and is well on their way of achieving national recognition and acclaim.

Every year, a three-day *Jnana Pravaha* music festival is held to a packed hall in collaboration

with Sangeet Ashram at G.D. Birla Sabhaghar in Kolkata.

Currently, the following *Gurus* and their respective *shisyas* are engaged in the *Jnana Pravaha* music scholarship:

- Pt. Mohanlal Mishra (vocal) guiding Soumyajit Goswami.
- Vidushi Subhra Guha ((vocal) guiding Sanjukta Biswas, Sabina Mumtaz Islam and Shanta Kundu.
- Pt. Tejendra Narayan Majumdar (sarod) guiding Pratik Shrivastava.
- Pt. Kushal Das (sitar) guiding Kalyanjit Das and Koustav Majumder.
- Pt. Soumitra Lahiri (sitar) guiding Soumyajit Paul.
- Pt. Arup Chattopadhyay (tabla) guiding Soumen Nandy.

Jnana Pravaha Mumbai Chapter



Started in 2007, *Jnana Pravaha*, Mumbai (JPM) seeks to facilitate critical thinking in the arts. Through courses, lectures, seminars, conversations and performances, JPM offers a platform to engage with works and a window to the current worlds of theory and practice.

The Centre offers four widely acclaimed long term certificate / diploma programmes in India Aesthetics, Art Criticism and Theory, Yoga and *Tantra* and South East Asian Art with a newly introduced course titled Theoretical Foundations. The minimum eligibility for undertaking these courses is a Graduation degree.

Smriti Morarka, Bimla Poddar's daughter who is also a Trustee of *Jnana Pravaha Mumbai* shares that these courses have over

time acquired a great deal of goodwill and repute, even attracting international scholars. "Our participants are both young and older people who perhaps have greater flexibility of time now. A lot of art galleries and auction houses also send in their representatives to us."

But isn't *Jnana Pravaha Mumbai's* focus, then slightly different from its parent?

"Intrinsically we remain kindled by *Jnana Pravaha* Banaras, but have attuned ourselves to the needs and calling of a metropolis like Mumbai. We wanted to create a serious forum for critical thinking," she explains. The Mumbai Chapter is guided by Director, Dr. Rashmi Poddar under whom the centre has presented more than 225 public programmes over a range of subjects such as Art History, Aesthetics, Archaeology, Architecture, Anthropology, Literature and Philosophy. The Centre's Academic Director is Rohit Goel, a PhD candidate in Political Science and a Lecturer at The University of Chicago.

"Personally speaking, I have been greatly inspired by *Bari Ma* (Bimla Poddar), whose curiosity and ability to adapt have been incredible. Despite her life being more about changes than constants, she has effectively managed to overcome them each time," concludes Smriti with a smile.

Guests and Visitors

Right from its inception, over the last two decades, *Jnana Pravaha* has been continuously blessed by a stream of eclectic visitors and guests who have extended their good wishes and encouragement.



Comments

વિવિધતાનો ભંડાર
 ૨૦૫૨ મિલન
 દાંતના અભિવ્યક્તિ
 રૂપો છે.
 ત્રિવિધતાની
 વિશિષ્ટતા
 ડાહ્યા, કવિતા, દર્શન
 યોગ્ય ગુણો
 ઉત્કૃષ્ટતાને પામી
 પણ શિશુ, બાળ
 પણ શિશુ.
 કાળના આરોગ્ય
 ગિરનાર ગોદમાં
 આ ગુણો મિલન,
 અર્થ ઉત્કૃષ્ટ
 અભિવ્યક્તિ જે કાળ
 રહેશે. પ્રવાસ મા
 માટે પ્રવિષ્ટતા જે કાળ
 અભિવ્યક્તિ

“The diversity of this place acquaints one with the grandeur of India. The journey of the development of human culture and achievements in life can be estimated and understood through art, literature, etc. At the doorstep of Kashi and in the lap of Ganga, this Institution acts as a perfect ambassador of India. For tourists, this place is just like a training centre.”

Greetings,

Narendra Modi



COMMENTS / SUGGESTIONS

अत्यन्त प्रशंसनीय! प्रभु कृपा ही इस कार्य को सम्पन्न करने दे रही है। अगवनी गंगा के तट पर लम्बे समय से आये का यह आयोजन मेरना को पुनः उद्भूत करने का आयोजन है। यह क्रमशः प्रशिक्षण, पर्यटन प्रवर्धन हेतु अक्षयवर्ष का सम्मान का, प्रभु के प्रेमी यही प्रार्थना है।

James Bevan
92.8.2008



Vishnukant Shastri

COMMENTS & SUGGESTIONS

Many thanks for showing us this remarkable institution and its work. I leave having learnt a great deal about India's cultural heritage, and - having seen what you are doing to preserve and promote it - even more confident about India's future.

James Bevan
British High Commission
New Delhi



James Bevan

COMMENTS & SUGGESTIONS

I am happy to visit this beautiful temple of art, learning and culture - so fondly nourished by Bhai and his team. May mother Ganga's prarabha make Jnana prarabha flow in endlessness with prayers.



Prema Panduranga



Dr. Karan Singh

COMMENTS / SUGGESTIONS

What a joy to see this fine institution and to have spent time right on the banks of the sacred Ganga! I am greatly impressed by the valuable work being done in Jnana Pravaha under the guidance of Venkaji and his team. They are making a significant contribution to the already rich cultural heritage of Varanasi.

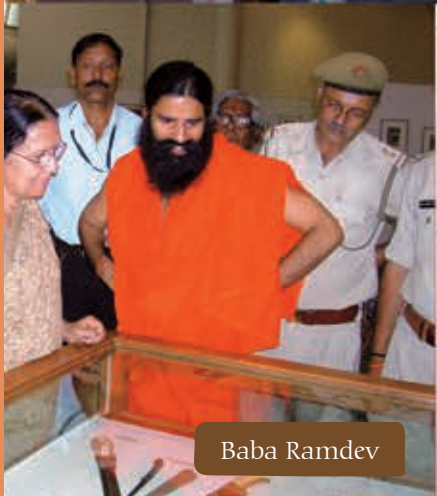
Dr. Karan Singh
ॐ नमः शिवाय



Jagmohan

A remarkable work done. It is really historic. The complex need to be put on the Tourist map. My warm congratulations. It is really a great service to the India art, history and heritage.

Jagmohan
18/7/16



Baba Ramdev

भारतीय कला, संस्कृति, वास्तव्य, इतिहास व विविध काव्यकविता, खोजकृति एवं सामाजिक मुद्दों के लिए अनेक प्रागैतिहासिक विनिर्माणों के माध्यम से प्रदर्शित सेवा प्रदान करने के लिए आभार व्यक्त।

Baba Ramdev
14/4/2008



Neil MacGregor

Thank you for allowing me to visit this beautiful place of scholarship, study and reflection, where great things are still being made.

Neil MacGregor
Director, British Museum



Sir Christopher Alan Bayly

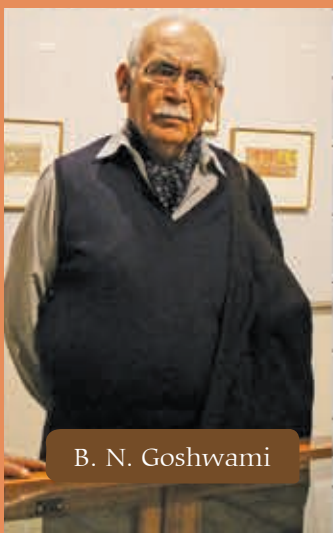
COMMENTS & SUGGESTIONS

This is a wonderful institution and I am deeply grateful to Mr Jnana Pravaha and Mrs Podder for the great kindness they have shown in organising our presence here.



Dr. C. Rangarajan

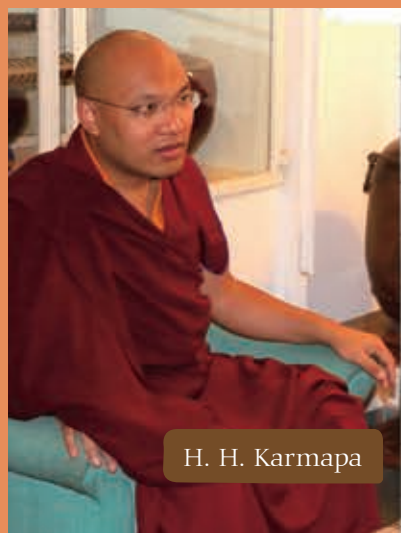
I am deeply impressed by the diversity of activities undertaken by this Institute to promote the study of art and culture. For a short visit alone, we must thank all those associated with this Institute. The Museum is truly inspiring. I had a very great time with the members of Jnana Pravaha. I pray to Lord Viswanath to bring me here again. I thank all the members to give me such a wonderful time. Dr. Haigyan Ray



B. N. Goshwami

A little haven of peace and quiet - Jnana Pravaha at Varanasi.

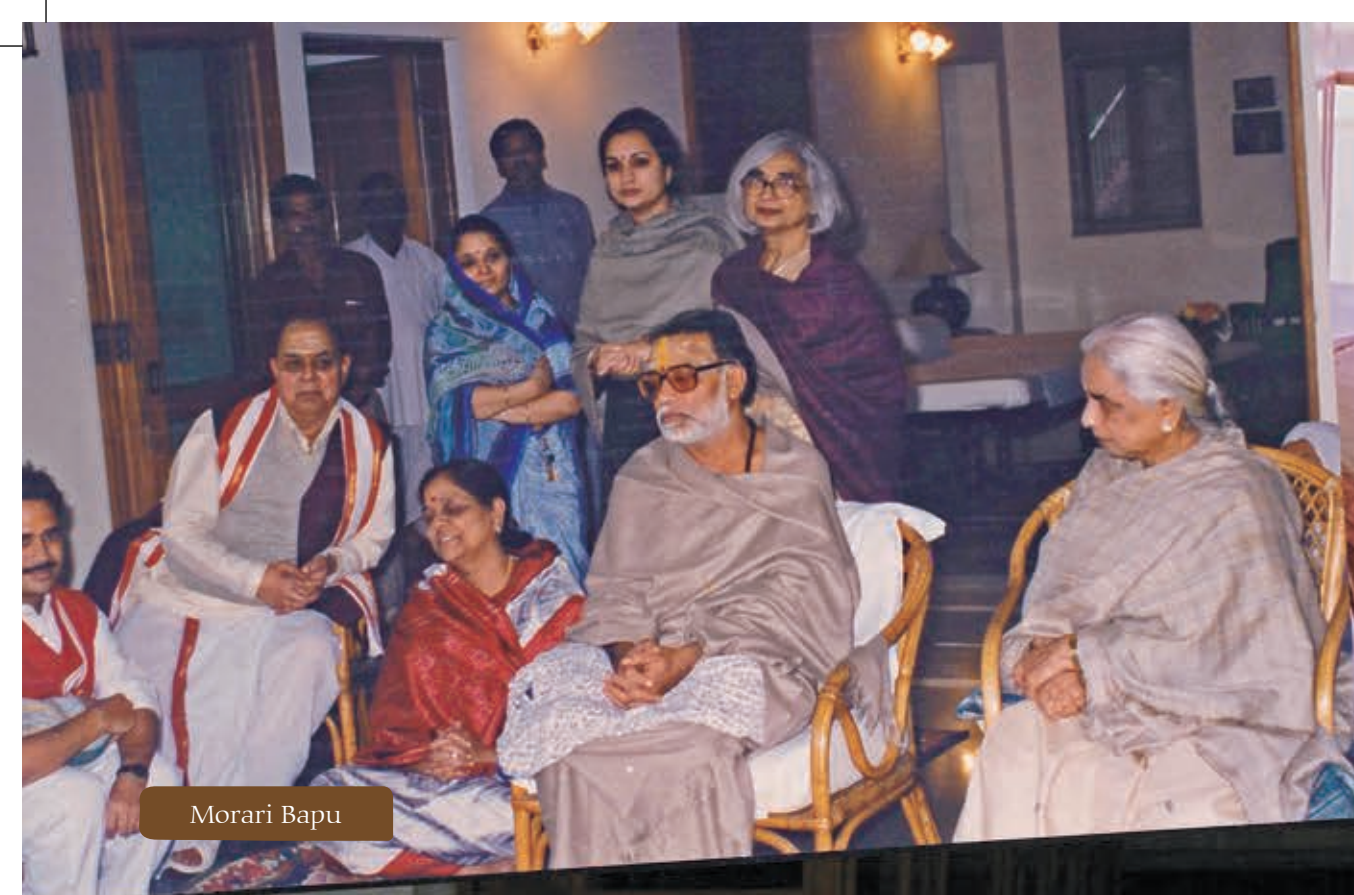
युं जैसे शिव का सांझी
प्रभु के चरणों पर आ गिर
उत्तम की ऐसी ना रहे
आएत वही ही हो रहे



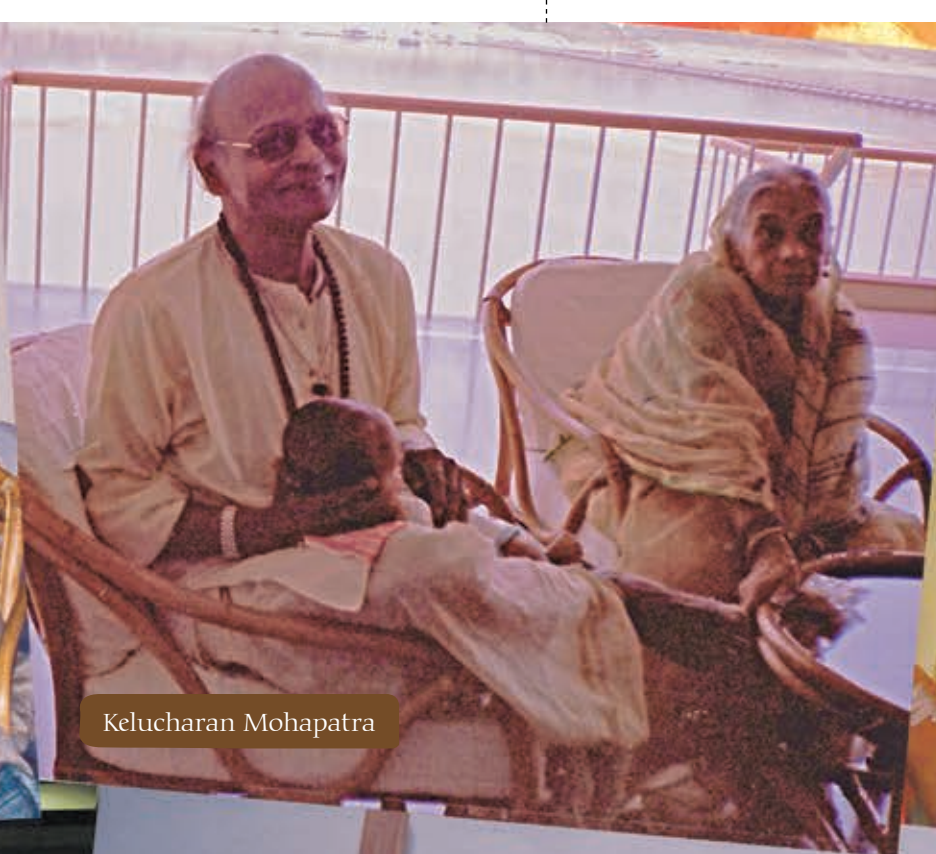
H. H. Karmapa

Comments

श्रीगुरुदेव गुरुदेव
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श्रीगुरुदेव गुरुदेव



Morari Bapu



Kelucharan Mohapatra



Shankaracharya Jayendra Saraswati



Arun Jaitley



Kapila Vatsyayan



Shyam Benegal

Invocation

प्रसादाद्विश्वनाथस्य काश्यां भागीरथीतटे।
वृद्धिर्ज्ञानप्रवाहे स्यात् संस्कृतेश्चानुशीलने॥

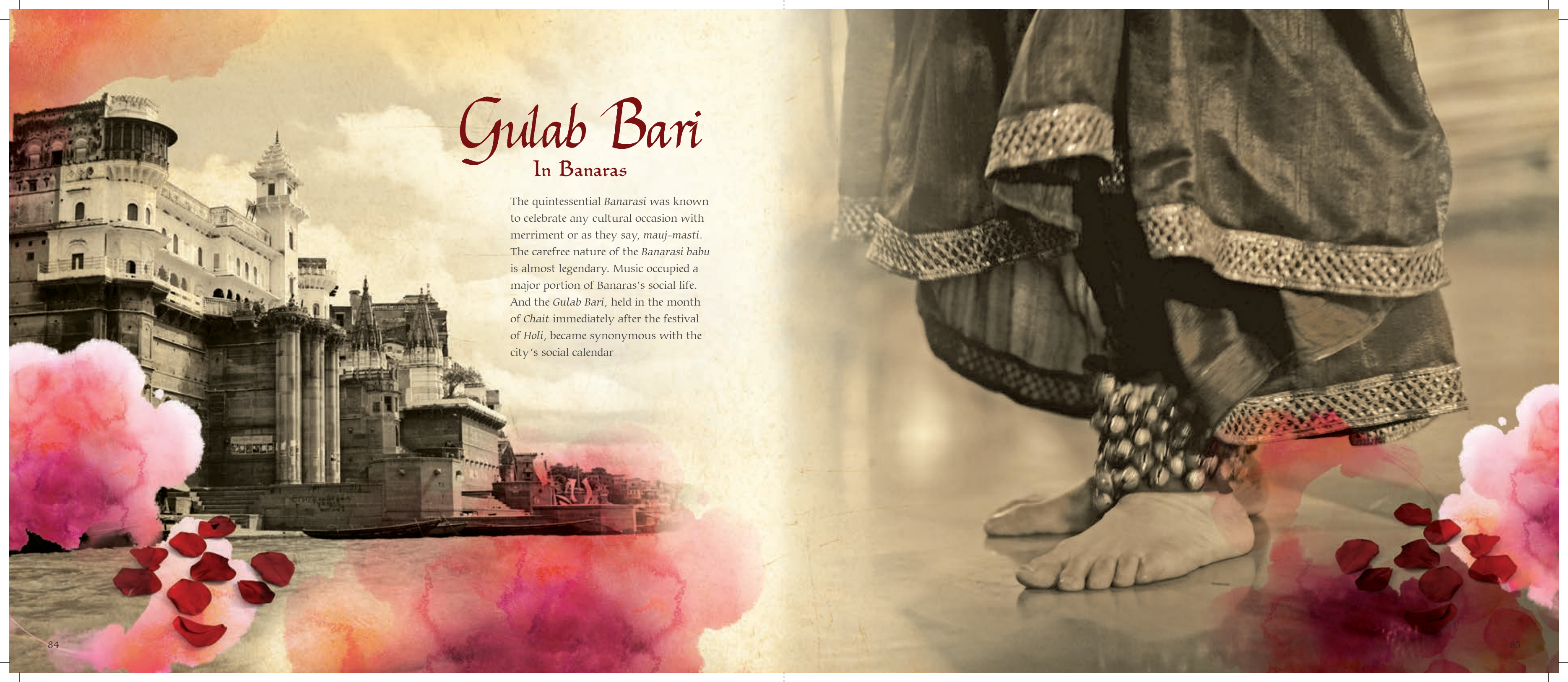
*prasādādvīśvanāthasya kāśyāṁ bhāgīrathitaṭe |
vṛddhirjñānapravāhe syāt saṁskṛteścānuśīlane ||*

*Nourished with the Grace of Lord Viśvanātha, Jñāna-Pravāha rests on the bank of Gaṅgā in Kāśī
Dedicated to the Pursuit of Knowledge and Enrichment of Culture.*





*Fragrance of music
over the last 35 years
at Gulab Bari*



Gulab Bari

In Banaras

The quintessential *Banarasi* was known to celebrate any cultural occasion with merriment or as they say, *mauj-masti*. The carefree nature of the *Banarasi babu* is almost legendary. Music occupied a major portion of Banaras's social life. And the *Gulab Bari*, held in the month of *Chait* immediately after the festival of *Holi*, became synonymous with the city's social calendar

The origin

There are many versions of the origin of *Gulab Bari*. But according to most scholars, the tradition maybe almost 270 years old, initially hosted by Mir Rustam Ali, the *subedar* of the *Nawab* of Oudh, way back in 1735.

However, Mir Rustam Ali's reign came to a rather ignoble end with his treasurer, Mansa Ram, proving a traitor. And even as Mansa Ram's son, Balwant Singh, came to power, the ritual of *Gulab Bari* perished for a while. Balwant Singh was more a conqueror than a man of culture, whose marriage to the beautiful Panna ruined him, with Panna seeking the help of Warren Hastings to sort out matters of ascendance. Panna's descendents revived the tradition of *Gulab Bari*. The tradition got a new fillip once more in the late Mughal period.

The bloom of Ghazipur

As the name suggests, roses of a special variety became the focal point of this festivity. The palest pink and fragrant Ghazipur blossoms with their broad petals were brought by bullock cart loads.

Hosted immediately after the riotous festival of *Holi*, the nature of *Gulab Bari* parties was more soigné and graceful. Some well known *Gulab Baris* were personally graced by the presence of *Maharaja* of Banaras. The mood at *Gulab Bari* recitals was always mellow, with the yellow moon clinging to a clear sky and the *chait* breeze evoking the languor of the *snacharee bhav...chait ki nindiya ho jiyara alsaney ho Rama (In my state of utter sleepiness, I am laden with languor...)* that summed up the essence of the celebrations.

Mostly held in the open precincts of garden homes, the invitation cards for the occasion were sent out a month earlier.

The heart of the show

Initially, there was no elaborate stage for performers. The audience was expected to sit on mattresses spread all around with bolsters provided for comfort. Elaborate Mughal patters came to be used to braid the area that was cordoned off for performers. Some performances would continue through the night.

At first, women were never invited for *Gulab Bari* shows. The lucky few would watch the proceedings from first floor verandas covered with *chik* curtains. *Gulab Bari* was an epitome of sophistication where the rules of the *mehfil* were strictly observed.

The nuances

Sharp at eight o'clock, the *mehfil* began with a prayer to Lord Krishna and rose petals were offered at his feet. The meal served was an assortment of finger food with lentils and potato curry being amongst the regular items. Sweets included hot *jalebees* or *motichur laddoos* made fragrant with rose water and saffron. As the night slowly thickened appeared the main courtesan, the *baiji* who kept the audience enthralled till the wee hours of

the morning. As part of tradition, she sang a special *bhajan* as a *dua* for good luck to begin her recital. Her last songs however, were rendered when the stars would begin to fade and the first blush of pink appeared in the pink horizon.

That is why it was often said, 'Fine are evenings of Lucknow, but nothing like the mornings of Banaras!'

The musical extravaganza

The order in which the music unfolded held its own enchantment. A *khayal bandish* usually marked the beginning of a performance. Then came a few *thumris* that gave way to *dadras*, *kajris* and *horis* and finally a variety of *chaitis* to commemorate the occasion.

Fading away

With the end of the Second World War and the abolition of the *Zamindari* system, *Gulab Bari* recitals began to fade into the pages of history. Though some stray soirees, tried to keep the institution alive, the spirit of the show had faded. Several veterans in Varanasi still recall *Gulab Baris* held. They talk of Bismillah Khan's *shehnai* and Girija Devi's unforgettable performances. But the grandeur and the glory were alas over.

By the time India became independent, the *Gulab Baris* of Banaras had irrevocable lost their brilliance and sparkle

(Extracted from Jayabrato Chatterjee's, *Roses all the way*.)

Jeevan Dor
– the thread of life

Girija Devi

Early life and younger days

The dazzle of her diamond nose pin is only second to the radiance in her eyes; her gaze. A delicate *chandan tika* adorns her forehead. And her voice which completely belies her age is made of a rare compassionate texture that carries with it, the aroma of a million tales. Sitting across Girija Devi, I savour every breath of her being, as she takes me through the contours of her extraordinary life.

Born to Ramdas Rai and Suryamukhi Devi in Kashi, in 1930, Girija Devi was the seventh of nine children. As a young girl, she was brought up by her father almost like a boy and made to learn all kinds of sports and outdoor activities, including fishing, swimming, horse-riding and even archery. But the one activity that left most smitten was when she would wake up every day at 4am and listen to her father sing. "I fell in love with music as I learned how to listen to it from the young age of four," she begins.

Such was her devotion to music that her father felt she must obtain tutelage. Pt. Sarju Prasad Mishra became her first *Guru*, introducing her to the world of classical music in its various forms: *khayal*, *thumri* and even *tappa*. In those days, it wasn't considered very noble for young daughters to be singing outside their homes, so a young Girija Devi made music her constant companion, humming along as she carried out various household chores and duties.

When she was only fifteen, she was married to Madhusudan Jain, a businessman who supported her greatly in her artistic pursuits and right after the first year of marriage, the couple was blessed with a baby girl, whom they fondly called *Munni*. But Girija Devi's calling for music, remained so strong, that she sought solitude and the opportunity to completely immerse herself in music. She left Kashi for Sarnath and carried on rigorous lessons under her second *Guru*, Pt. Shrichand Mishra.

The one year sabbatical, as it were, proved to be monumental for her art. Girija Devi would wake up at 3:30am everyday and begin her *riyaz*. "I felt I was in an ocean of music; I got a tremendous opportunity to reflect; to understand.

"Tapasya akele mein hi hoti hae," she states quietly.

picture courtesy: www.girijadevi.com



Once back in Kashi, it was only a matter of time, before she was invited by All India Radio for her first broadcast in Allahabad. The year was 1949 and she was just 20 but it was a superlative rendition. After the success of Allahabad, Girija Devi began touring and performing extensively at prestigious music festivals with leading musicians of that time and continued to receive the support of her husband. But in 1975 fate dealt her a mean blow. She lost her husband and was so woeful that she decided to give up music. "I took off all my adornments and stopped wearing colour. I was miserable and was suddenly left with the burden of managing domestic life all by myself," she recalls painfully.

It was only after a difficult year of grieving and a tremendous amount of encouragement from fellow musicians and friends that she dared to hold a

program again in Calcutta to a thundering applause. From then on, she decided to continue. "Besides, I also wanted my daughter properly educated and settled. So I decided to take on the challenge. I also thought that if God can take up both the male and female form when necessary, I should not be scared either!"

In the late 1970's, Pt. Vijay Kichlu who had been entrusted by ITC with the task of setting up a music school based on the *Guru-Shisya parampara*, approached Girija Devi who agreed to become a *Guru* in 1978 and found an address at ITC, Sangeet Research Academy in Calcutta.

Bimla Poddar: Early life and younger days

Such has been her abiding fondness for music, that she calls it a *beemari*! Even as a young girl, who spent her early years in the small town of Chirawa in Rajasthan and later grew up in Bombay, Bimla's calling for music was recognized by her family and a harmonium was made available to her using which, she picked up traditional, folk as well as devotional songs. She also remembers chanting *mantras* in the morning with her father and grandfather and revelling in the many mythological stories they often narrated. She recalls watering the household *tulsi* and the echoes of *Inquilab Zindabad*, the cry for freedom piercing the air of a colonized India. "The seed of Indian tradition and way of life was well sown in me imperceptibly," she explains.

Of course, just as most girls of that time, Bimla too found her nuptial knot tied at a tender age of 13 to Bimal Poddar and life brought her to Calcutta in 1949 as a young bride.

As a young daughter-in-law, Bimla happily absorbed the energy and atmosphere of her new liberal home. Her father-in-law, Late Janki Prasad Poddar, besides showering love and affection upon her, was also a deeply spiritual man who recited *The Gita* and *the Ramayan* regularly.

In an air redolent with culture, Bimla's fondness for music found opportunity and gained further momentum. "My husband Bimal was really fond of *ghazals* with a weakness for Begum Akhtar. We would sit and listen to her for hours," she recalls. By then, Bimla had also started learning to play the *sitar* from none other than the celebrated Kalyani Roy, who was a disciple of Vilayat Khan. Simultaneously, her brother-in-law, Late Suresh Neotia, opened up the world of art, miniatures, and paintings and deepened her sense of aesthetics. As a family, they would regularly attend and sometimes even host cosy musical soirees, listening to prominent artists and mixing with an eclectic lot of people.

Fate tested Bimla too, by robbing her of her husband when she was only 32. But so entrenched and content was she in her family that she even turned down her father-in-law's offer of finding a new match for her.



Serendipity and Sanjog Banaras comes to Ballygunje!

On one of his many tours to Banaras, Suresh Neotia was escorted to a typical *Banarasi* musical evening, titled *Gulab Bari* by his close friend, Late Murari Lal Kedia who was a noted figure in the cultural circuit. The artist performing that evening was none other than the Shehnai Nawaz, Bismillah Khan. Other than the magnificence of the artistry, Suresh immediately fell in love with the beautiful atmosphere that had been created for music to enchant one and all. Upon slightly deeper research, he found that *Gulab Bari* was an age-old tradition of presenting music in Banaras, but over the years, had fallen upon hard times.

He narrated the episode to his sister-in-law, Bimla, and expressed a great desire to host a similar session at their residence in Calcutta with the help of a few artists. After hearing him out, Bimla Poddar had only one reply. "If we have to host *Gulab Bari* at our residence, there is only one person who can do it: Girija Devi." Interestingly enough, though Bimla had heard Girija Devi several times and was besotted with her music, she did not know her personally. The duo decided they must make an acquaintance.

There is a Buddhist saying, that goes, 'When the student is ready, the teacher will come.'

One fine day, during Durga Puja, Bimla Poddar had a visitor. The noted musicologist Sunil Satpati had come to meet her and during the course of their conversation, casually remarked, "*Guru ji* is in the car." Whose *Guru ji*?" enquired Bimla. "Girija Devi," he replied!

Almost in disbelief, Bimla ran out and warmly invited Girija Devi inside. The two got talking and Bimla Poddar expressed her ardent desire to host *Gulab Bari* under Girija Devi's guidance. The artist declined, explaining that she performed only at music festivals or in temples and could not participate in private functions at anybody's home. Bimla looked crestfallen. Until Girija Devi, who had attended a couple of recitals by Pt. Jasraj and a performance by Pt. Birju Maharaj at their residence, offered, "There is one solution though. I don't mind singing for my disciples. If you become my disciple, I can sing for you."



"Overjoyed, I obviously agreed instantly! It was as though all of it was pre-scripted. Girija Devi wanted to conduct a small *puja* and just when I was wondering what to offer to the Gods, I realised that an untouched pot of fresh sweets had just arrived! I found a perfect brand new *sari* for her; one that I'd purchased for myself but not used. What's even more unbelievable is that when she entered our home, it was her music record that was playing! It was a beautiful and utter *sanjog*," shares Bimla Poddar.

The first *Gulab Bari* that thus came to the Poddar-Neotia residence in Ballygunje, Calcutta, all the way from Banaras, was held in 1981 under the stewardship of Girija Devi. Her disciple, Bimla Poddar opened the evening with a *Ganesh Vandana* while the *Guru* with her students, re-created the magic of Banaras. Though only a few years apart in age, both women had come together in a *Guru-Shisya* relationship, thanks to their deep love and passion for classical music and Indian traditions.

The gathering of close family friends and music lovers were left spellbound. *Gulab Bari* had received an overwhelming response and was here to stay.

The Mentor and her disciple a sublime partnership



The first *Gulab Bari* that was created out of passion is now three and a half decades old. Right from the beginning, it was the stage for stalwarts to deliver their absolute best. The audience that has only grown year after year has been happily lapping it all up.

Somewhat frail of health but indomitable of spirit, Padma Shri Bimla Poddar rewinds and reflects on the phenomena, ascribing much of it to her beloved *Appa* (Girija Devi), her family's love and support and God's doing.

"Girija Devi's relationship with our family has glided over three generations as easily as her voice moves across three octaves. *Gulab Bari* would have never blossomed the way it has, had it not been for her. It only took a phone call from her to even the reigning artist of the time for him/her to readily agree to perform at *Gulab Bari*. Never in so many years, have we ever discussed the artist's fee or other such modalities. We simply went by *Appa's* advice," she reveals.



"*Pratham aur akhiri, yeh ek hi ghar ka rahega*" (first and last; it can only happen here) adds Girija Devi, resolutely stating that she would not do this for anybody else, no matter what the rewards or returns. But what is so special about the Poddar-Neotia household for her to feel so?

"Because both art and the artist are genuinely respected here. That is what gives me the confidence to tell an artist, '*tumko aana hae aur gaana hae. (Just come and sing).*' Right from *Kakoji* (Janki Prasad Poddar) to Harsh *babu* and now his son, one feels respected and a part of the family," she elaborates.

Girija Devi refers to every member by their nick name. Despite Bimla Poddar's striking white mane, Girija Devi lovingly calls her *beti*. She has taught music to everyone from the matriarch to the youngest child; has ordained that the womenfolk must wear yellow for a wedding in the family and has even fixed up a *Banarasi* menu on one of the occasions. "Her word was the last. Not out of fear, but out of trust and respect," emphasizes her disciple.

Suddenly in the course of the conversation, *Appa ji* inquires, "*Beti, yeh mentor kya hota hae?*" Padma Vibhushan Girija Devi has been anointed as Mentor for the birth centenary celebrations of Pt. Madan Mohan Malviya in Banaras in 2017. Both Bimla *ji* and I burst out laughing. "It is who you have been to me and so many others," smiles her disciple.

Alap Gat Jod Jhala

Inspired by a
Jugalbandi at
Gulab Bari

Supriya Newar

Alap



Strangers. Veiled.
Guarded. Off-limits,
until a gentle spring breeze cajoles,
forming a crevice, an ice break.
A cordial acknowledgement.

A half-smile; a polite hand shake.
Measured introductions
between meandering pauses.

A few syllables, an opening line.
The first strum.
An imperceptible nod.

The beginning of a conversation.
Sans structure. Sans confines.
Purely for its scope, its traverse;
Not for its milestone.

An eye contact.
A struck chord.
Relaxed veins.
Idle banter.
The sense of a possibility.

Gat



The pleasure of a common strain,
embarked upon with refrain.
An uncomfortable yearning.
A loosened grip over oneself.
The closing in on a chasm.

A disquieting bond.
An odd rush.
A palpable chord.
The creeping in of companionship.
The birth of trust.
The desire to go farther, to spend oneself.

Jod



A cascade of notes, unbridled, crashing in.
Free from the constraints of the known.
Free from the fear of the unknown.
Breaking down barriers.
Tearing open floodgates,
in sublime breathlessness.

A keen onlooker by now smitten.
Rushes in to join the rhythm.
Making space for himself.
Oddly enough bringing the two only closer.
The two who were till the other moment, rank
strangers.
Who lay cold, veiled.
Who no longer are, what they were.

Their strangeness shattered to bits
into a million notes, that lie scattered around them.
Bringing them closer to their own selves.
A heightened, animated yet effortless dialogue.
Gushing energy.
Precipitous urgency.

The fresh entrant, rallying them on
to the strike of a lightning, a crescendo.

Jhala



And then a bend,
moving closer towards a circle.
In absolute submission.
In jubilant exhaustion.

The sinking realization of an entire single being,
born out of the demolition of two full ones.

A bare pause.
An engulfing nude stillness.
A spell that lasts a moment
and carries within it, a lifetime.

The divinity of silence,
now broken
by the murmur of a string.
The very string upon which the journey had commenced,
having broken the stupor, stands guilty.
Heralding tighter strings, guards to be pulled back on.

The circle of life stands erect again.
In its completion, it has come undone.



“Music is the highest art
and to those who understand,
is the highest worship.”

Swami Vivekananda



"Gulab Bari came to the Neotia household, thanks to Girija masi's (Devi) inspiration and Bimla bhabiji's perspiration! I have the fondest memories attached with it. The very first year, started in the most homely way, devoid of any grandeur. I remember dancing that year in a pink lehenga, which I'd borrowed from my neighbour! I was all of 28 then! More than anybody else, I remember how excited Kakoji (Late J P Poddar) was. Despite his age and health, he was completely involved and beaming with happiness.



Another personal and treasured memory I have is how Bimla bhabiji would coax us to wear pink saris for Gulab Bari and for many years, even gifted us one.

And the music was simply divine. The tribandi (trio) of Ustad Bismillah Khan, Pt. Birju Maharaj and Girijia Devi ji is unforgettable. The spontaneity and the dignity with which they performed left us with life-long lessons in humility and sheer artistry.



The other performance that I'll always cherish was one of the last performances of Kelu babu (Pt. Kelucharan Mohapatra).

He had undergone a by-pass surgery that year but his performance was absolutely stunning. He passed away only a few months after that show. Gulab Bari was an initiative that came straight from the heart!"

Chetna Jalan: Danseuse and family friend



“Gulab Bari is paradise on earth. It presents a wonderful opportunity for artists to meet, deliberate and discuss various aspects of music and culture. It is an event to cherish and look forward to.”

Dr. Balamuralikrishna



*“I have enjoyed the gracious hospitality of Bimla ji who is a great lover and patron of arts. The ambience as well as the audience at *Gulab Bari* was lovely too.”*

Late Pt. Bhimsein Joshi





"Gulab Bari was an old tradition of Banaras that has been ably carried forward in Calcutta."

Late Ustad Bismillah Khan





"I have enjoyed family like relations with the Neotias and Bimla ji and have wonderful memories of performing for *Gulab Bari* along with India's most eminent artists. I sincerely hope that the atmosphere of future *Gulab Baris* remains just as magical and continues to enthrall the audience."

Pt. Birju Maharaj



“I remember walking in with my husband, Cushrow Irani, year after year into the Neotia residence for *Gulab Bari*, only to be warmly greeted by both Vinod and Suresh. One could tell what a close-knit family they were, by the way every single guest was welcomed warmly and personally. And though every year, the food would be the same, my husband would ask Madhu with a twinkle in his eye, “What’s for dinner?” He loved the sumptuous fare that was laid out!”

Threety Irani: Family friend and ex-columnist



“I was very young when I attended my first *Gulab Bari* and I’d never heard or known of this concept before. So what I experienced was the fragrance of Banaras without leaving Calcutta. I was truly wilfully transported to a land of magical realism. It was the most enchanting and uplifting experience! Over the years the event has progressed and evolved yet retained its charm. For me the most abiding image has been of Pt. Birju Maharaj and Girija Devi performing in a manner that was like Krishna seeping into our souls!”

Prof. Anuradha Lohia: Family friend and academician



"As music lovers, right after the culmination of Dover Lane Music Conference, we awaited the *Gulab Bari* evening. I think what set apart this evening was how traditionally it was organised and conducted. Right from the way the artists and audiences were taken care of to the marvellous feast...Bimla di kept it very traditional. I have wonderful memories of *Abba* (Vilayat Khan) performing there."

Purnima Mookerjee: Family friend and Ustad Vilayat Khan's disciple





“It has been my pleasure to be associated with Gulab Bari from the beginning. My deepest appreciation and applause on keeping the tradition alive!”

Pt. Jasraj



“We used to live abroad and returned to Calcutta only in 1998. Our apartment overlooked the ample Neotia garden and we had heard about a gala musical soiree that the family held. However, one fine evening the strangest thing happened.

Our apartment somehow has fabulous acoustics. It maybe because it is well ventilated. One evening, my entire apartment was echoing with the voice of Girija Devi! I could hardly believe it. Her music was coming out of every wall! Obviously our apartment had caught on to the wonderful music being rendered next door and I sat and listened in rapt attention.

The next day, I sent a note to them, narrating the incident and thanking them for the treat. Immediately, I got a call from Bimla Poddar, inviting me over for a cup of tea.

We became friends and over the years, I have attended several *Gulab Bari* evenings where I’ve enjoyed listening to and watching great maestros like Pt. Jasraj, Bhimsein Joshi and Kelucharan Mohapatra perform.”

Amrita Mukherjee: neighbour and friend



"I can't forget my performance at *Gulab Bari*. The evening had started with Kishori *ji* singing. After her performance, I danced and after me, Girija Devi *ji* sang. And the concluding piece was when all three of us came together: two legendary vocalists with whom I was doing my *sanchari abhinaya* or expressing the song. The song spoke of how a *gopi* wanted to run away from her sister-in-law and mother-in-law, to meet Krishna, the stealer of hearts. So, in my performance, I behaved as though Kishori *ji* was the former and Girija *ji* was the latter and actually ran away!

The audience loved it! All of us stood united by Krishna!

It has been an absolute honour to know Bimla *ji* as well as Suresh *bhai* who was ready to lay down his life for Indian heritage!

May we see Bimla *ji*'s birth centenary celebrations in her presence!"

Padma Subrahmanyam





“As a music lover, I have been fortunate to attend *Gulab Bari* since its inception. The audience soaks up the rich cultural fare and the superb ambience, where every guest is made to feel special. Originating in Varanasi, *Gulab Bari* is now a much sought after evening hosted by Bimla ji and the Neotias.”

Ramesh Tapuriah: Friend and music enthusiast



“I’ve had the pleasure of sharing the stage with the legendary Girija Devi at this wondrous venue. The credit of the beautiful atmosphere goes to the family and is one that music lovers will continue to cherish for many years to come.”

Ustad Amjad Ali Khan





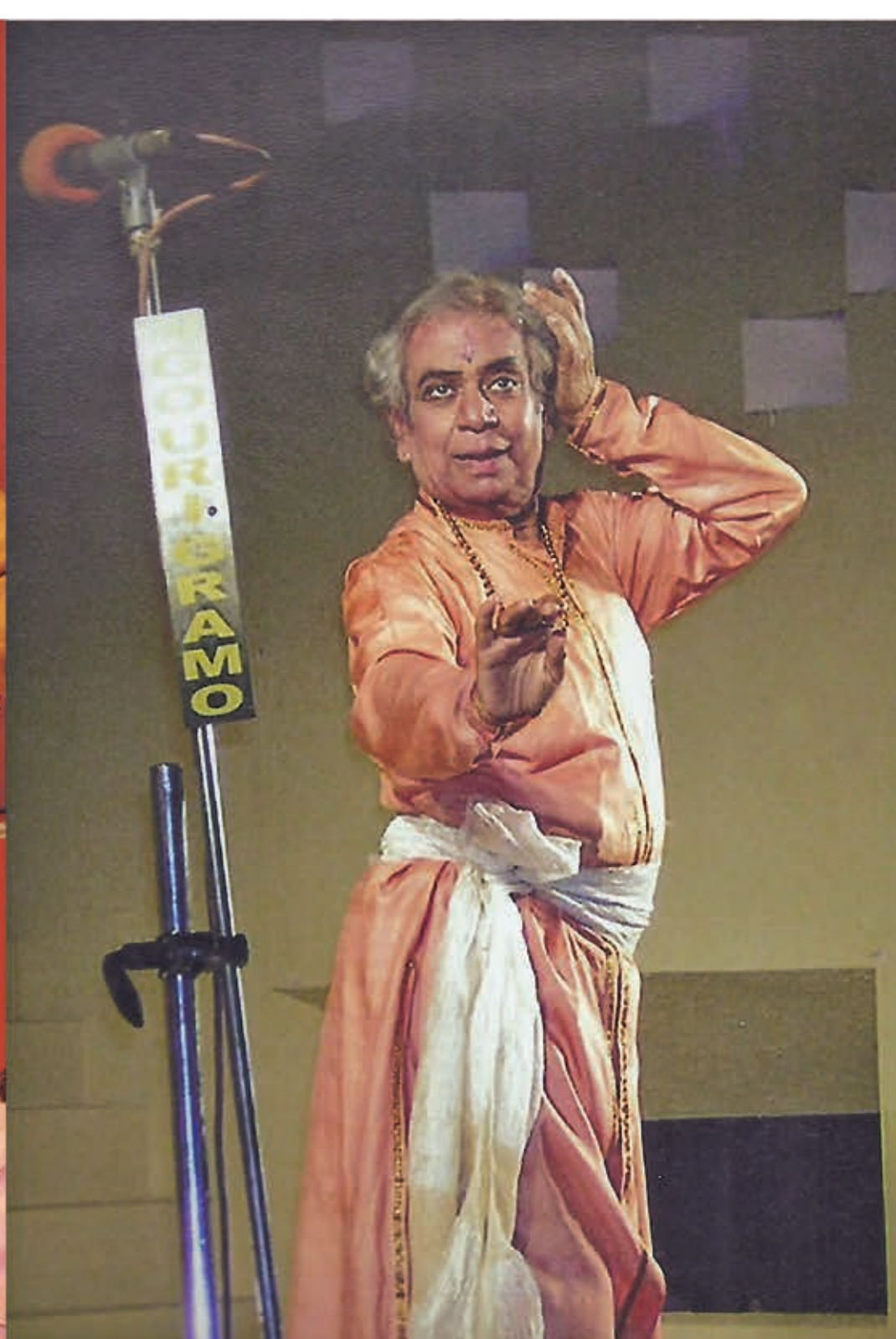
"I am 90 years old now. But back in our time, we were so fond of classical music, that we would stay parked in our cars, listening to the concerts held at 'Mahajati Sadan' through the speakers that were placed on the streets! Needless to say then, that the musical evenings at *Gulab Bari* were something we eagerly looked forward to.

The nicest thing about the *Gulab Bari* evenings was the fact that they were not time bound and were held in the open air. Auditorium functions can never have that appeal. We would allow a

lot of time to every artist to warm up. If we started feeling a bit sleepy in the later hours of the evening, we would check our reverie with a cup of hot tea.

The atmosphere was wonderfully homely and warm and the audience used to be packed with music lovers."

Ravi Prabha Burman: Music lover and family friend



“It was when we were travelling to Andaman for a holiday that we bumped into the Neotias, who were also there with their close friends. A friendship was struck between us, particularly with Late Suresh Neotia and the very amiable Bimla ji and we kept in touch. It so happened, that our family was also very fond of music and we had close relations with some celebrated musicians of that time. So, we received an invitation when *Gulab Bari* began in 1981 and we have attended many *Gulab Baris* since then.

All we can say is that some of those evenings have acquired immortality.

We especially cherish the spontaneous bonhomie that was expressed through the finest musical artistry between Pt. Birju Maharaj and Girija Devi ji. May the tradition continue for many more years to come.”

Tapati and Malay Banerjee: Friends



“It is a matter of great joy that the tradition of *Gulab Bari* has been kept alive in Calcutta for so many years by Bimla Poddar and Shri Suresh Neotia. May Goddess Sharada shower her blessings so that it continues for many more years.”

Pt. Kishan Maharaj





“Three and a half factors make for the fullness of a musical experience.

Three and a half? That sounds odd.

Let me explain the three and a half.

The first is the music itself. The second is the mood of the musician.

Third, the attunement of the listeners. And the last ‘half’, the arrangements that are made for the first three.

Why should those constitute ‘half’, and not a ‘full fourth?’

Because the arranger, or the host, is a self-effacing factor who does what is necessary with his or her ego only partly visible, like the half-moon on a winter’s night.

The host cannot be completely invisible for he or she has to be doing what is necessary, but has to do that without self-consciousness and

certainly with no sense of self-importance.

This is where *Gulab Bari* has been such a fulfilling platform for a concert. Music is in the air, the musician is at ease, the listener is completely wrapt in it. And the host is both there and not there, ‘*hazir bhi aur ghayab bhi*’.

Handling things but not holding on to things. Being attached and yet detached.

The half in ‘Three and a half’ also brings to mind the *svara* that follows the *Shadja*, *Rishabh*, *Gandhara*, namely the *Madhyama*. Now, *Madhyama* has two variants – *shuddha* and *tivra*. A good host of music is like the *shuddha madhyama*, that is, she or he is a pure medium, an unsullied mode, a lucid vestibule which disappears even as it is felt.

At *Gulab Bari*, I had the opportunity to hear Pandit Jasraj and Vidushi Girija Devi. They were in their elements, enjoying every note

they sang, with the gathering savouring it like grass which takes in the dew. Rose petals were everywhere but not suffocatingly so. They softened the scene, without stifling it.

I wish *Gulab Bari* the lasting fragrance of music that is offered and shared, without a trace of patronage.”

Gopalkrishna Gandhi:
Former Governor of West Bengal

“I do hope that this rich musical tradition will carry on for many more years.”

Vidushi Kishori Amonkar



“Ah, *Gulab Bari*! So many memories, such varied aromas...and the fragrance still lingers!

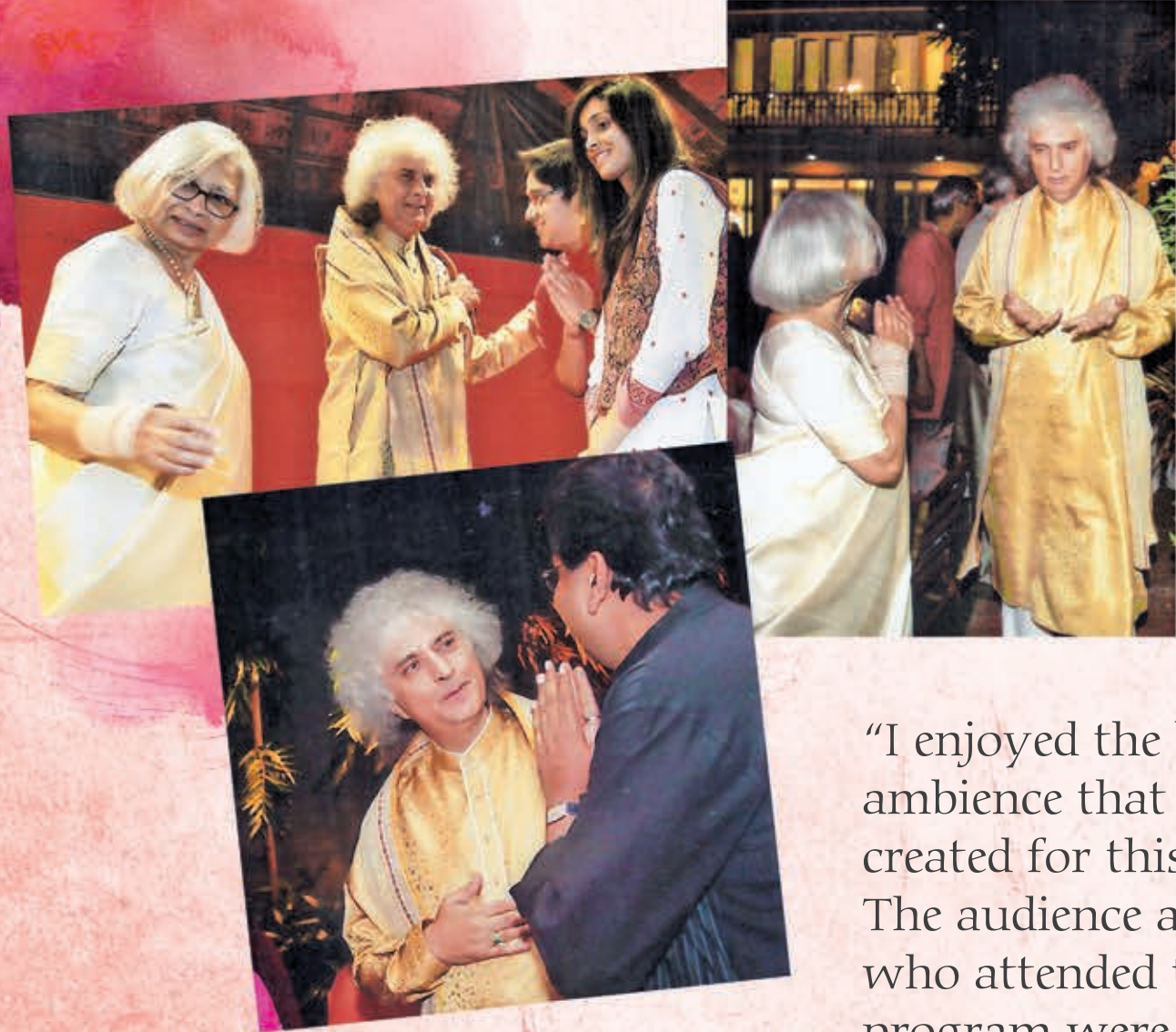
Each occasion has been a musical feast, with the best artistes of Indian classical music and dance adorning the stage.

One outstanding performance which immediately comes to my mind is Kishori Amonkar's. She began her performance, nervously plucking at her *surmandal* until her voice rose and fell in melodic waves. The listeners sat in pin-drop silence, lost in some enchanted ocean of pure magic. The recital finally came to an end just before dawn, accompanied by a light spring drizzle. It seemed like the ultimate benediction showered from heaven!

The tradition of *Gula Bari* will carry on...music will warm the gentle spring evenings at Queen's Park for years to come. But I will sorely miss Vinod Uncle's smile greeting the guests and the twinkle in Suresh Uncle's eyes, reprimanding me affectionately for turning up late... 'Janey kahaan gaye woh din, kehtey thhey teri raah mein nazron ko hum bichhaayengey/ Chahey kahin bhi tum raho, chaahengey tumko umrbhar, tumko na bhool paayengey...'”

Jayabrato Chatterjee: Author and family friend





"I enjoyed the beautiful
ambience that was
created for this occasion.
The audience and *rasiks*
who attended the
program were inspiring."

Pt. Shiv Kumar Sharma



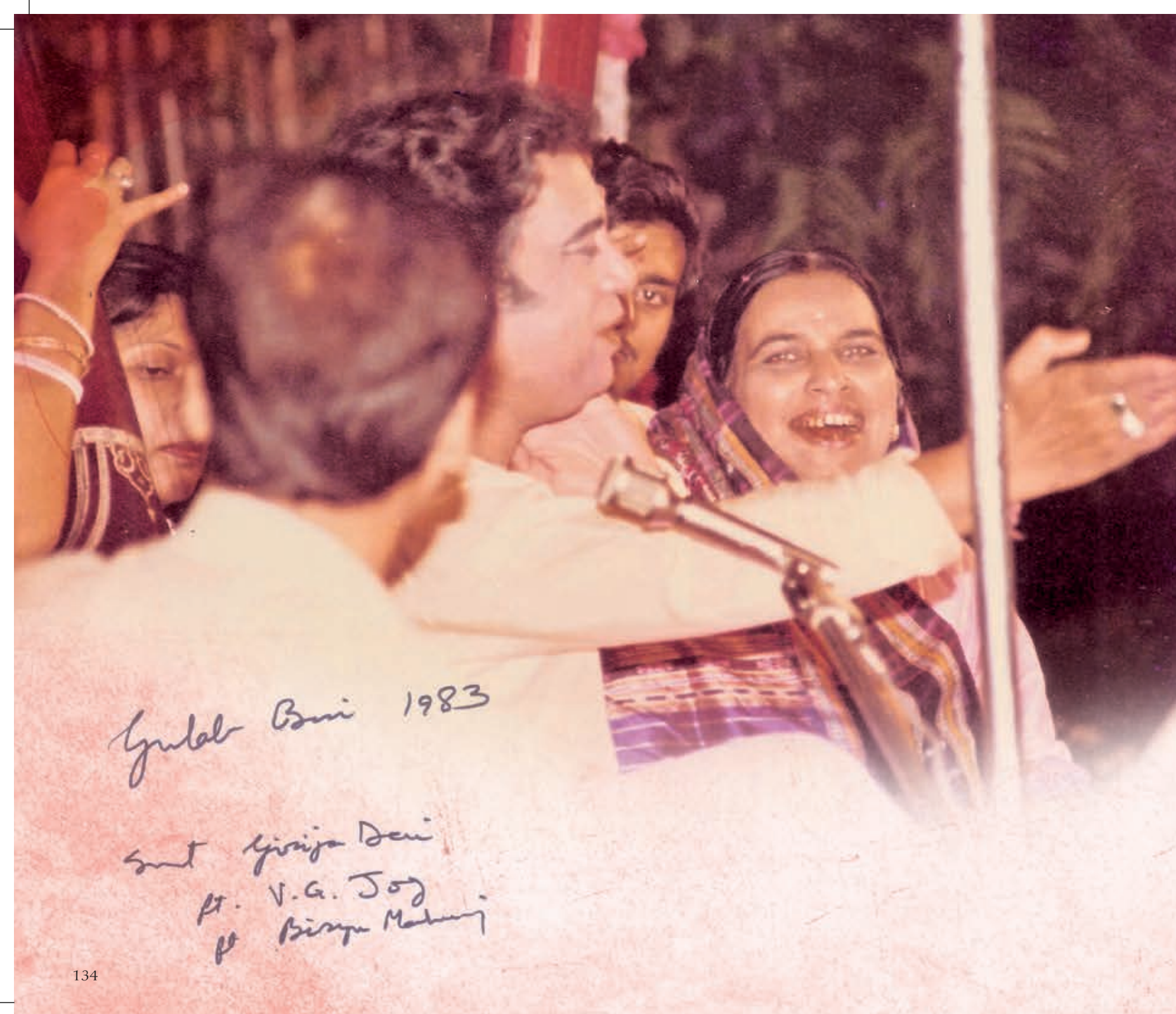
"I've had a wonderful
association with this family
that has a deep passion for
music and our heritage.
It is thanks to their efforts
that a festival like *Gulab
Bari* continues to be alive
in Calcutta, even today."

Pt. Hari Prasad Chaurasia

*Gulab Bari
1989*

*Smt. Girija Devi
Ms. Malavika Sen
Pt. Hari Prasad Chaurasia
Ustad Zameer Khan*





Gulab Bari 1983

Smt. Girija Devi
Pt. V.G. Jog
Pt. Birju Maharaj



"Our families go back three generations, when my husband's grandfather, Toolsidas Jewraj, was friends with Late Shri Janki Prasad Poddar. So we have had the good fortune of being associated with *Gulab Bari*, right from its very first year.

It was a simple, homely affair in those days with some unforgettable music. Glorious images of Pt. Birju Maharaj, Saswati Sen and Girija Devi remain mint fresh even today. Of the vocal concerts, the evening when Pt. Balamuralikrishna sang remains strongly etched in my heart. When Vilayat Khan played, the sheer joy on his face would seep into our hearts.

If the music was not ambrosial enough, there was piping hot, delicious food that we greatly looked forward to.

It is remarkable how Bimla ji, not only experienced the joy of classical music herself, but also used her resources to nourish it and spread it amongst others. I would call it *Sampatti ka sadupayog!*" (Correct use of wealth)

Purnima Toolsidass: Family friend

Gulab Bari

2006

ft. Rajan Sanyal Mishra
Malvika Sarukkai



"It is amazing that *Gulab Bari* completes 35 years!
I remember performing even for the 25th year when
I was presented with a silver flower.

Hosted on the lush lawns of Queen's Park, it brings to
mind a celebration: a celebration of 35 years of validating
the classical arts, a celebration of spring, a celebration
of dance and music, a celebration of colour and of the
artistic spirit.

Memories flood me: of how I was invited with the
utmost elegance and grace for the first time by Suresh
Neotia ji and Bimla Poddar ji; how Girija Devi ji would
be busy with her preparations amidst the fragrance of
roses, of how numerous glasses of *thandai* would be
served non-stop with *laddus* and of how Zakir Hussain
landed straight from the airport to deliver a superlative
performance!

Gulab Bari is Kolkata's oasis
in spring time!"

Malvika Sarukkai



"*Gulab Bari* kept eluding me. The timing of my visits to Kolkata somehow,
never matched with the evening. Until in 2016 it finally did.

Those years of anticipation heightened my walk into the magical rose-tinted
ambience created by Madhu. And then I immersed myself in the notes of
Tejendra Narayan Majumdar's *sarod* and Kushal Das's *sitar*.

I was left even more enthralled by the exquisite
Bharata Natyam and *Odissi* of Malvika Sarukkai
whom I knew as a schoolgirl.

She and her sister would come in their striped Cathedral uniform to pick up
their mother, Saroj, who would later play such a
definitive role in Malvika's trajectory.
We both worked on the same 4th floor
of the heritage Times of India building in
what was then still Bombay.

I'm hoping I won't have to wait as
long for my second *Gulab Bari*."

Bachi Karkaria:
Writer and columnist





"I clearly remember the very first year of *Gulab Bari*, way back in 1981 and I've not missed a single year since then. The fact is that it was such an aesthetic presentation right from the word go that Calcutta was simply bowled over. Absolute stalwarts descended upon us and one could enjoy listening to them in such an intimate way. *Bilkul ru-ba-ru hoke*. Every year had its own flavour but what remained a constant was the lovely camaraderie between the artists, the goodwill shared amongst them as colleagues. Over the years, it has become a calendar event that everyone greatly looks forward to."

Veena Kichlu: Thespian and family friend



"I still remember my first experience of *Gulab Bari* when my sister Madhu, had come into the Neotia family as a bride and had conducted the welcome ritual for all the artists. The whole experience of artists together was mesmerizing."

Sadhana Agarwal: Madhu Neotia's sister

"*Gulab Bari* at the Queen's Park residence of the Neotia family was always an extraordinary experience. The family displayed total sensitivity to the performers, extending an open-hearted welcome to music lovers who attended the evening, giving painstaking care to aesthetics and blending informality with all the observances that traditional courtesy demanded most graciously.

The very mention of *Gulab Bari* evokes nostalgia for what used to be in Banares in days long bygone. Re-invented and restored by Bimla ji and her family in Kolkata, it preserved and shared the fragrance of *Banarsi desi gulab* (roses) over many years.

Gulab Bari has given both artists as well as the audience, a chance to be transported to world of magic and miracles for a few unforgettable hours."

Subhashini Ali: Politician, actor and family friend



"Once upon a time, Bimla ji and I learnt *sitar* from the great Kalyani Roy together. It is because of this, that I received an invitation to attend the first *Gulab Bari*, which in those days would be a most intimate gathering of music lovers. Gradually, I got to know the family and came particularly close to Suresh bhai. I don't recall missing even a single *Gulab Bari* over the last 35 years. I hope this treat and tradition and the respect bestowed upon the artist at *Gulab Bari* continues for many, many long years!"

Dinesh Trivedi: Family friend and politician



"The *Gulab Bari* evening for me was like a painting; an oil on canvas.

As if a river with petals of *Gulab* is suddenly flowing out into the ocean and we were fortunate enough to witness its *sangam* at the height of the *Jugalbandi*!"

Jibak & Chumi Mukherjee: Family friends



*"At Gulab Bari,
one knows one is
wanted; one's art
is looked forward
to and the night
is fragrant with
the expectations
of art lovers!"*

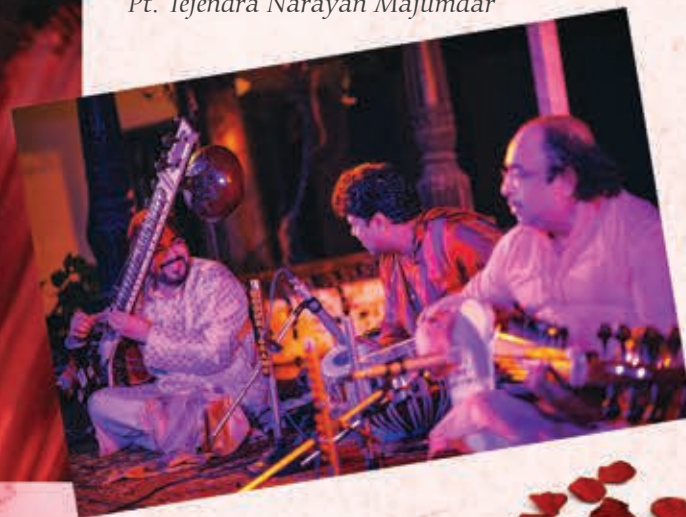
Mallika Sarabhai





"I've been attending *Gulab Bari* from the time I started my career. I would sit quietly at the back and listen to legend after legend perform there. It was therefore a dream coming true for me, when I was invited to perform too. *Gulab Bari* is rare in every way: for the ambience it offers; for the wonderful mix of audience that comes from every walk of life and for the artist who enjoys performing so close to the crowd. It's wonderful that it clocks 35 years and I hope it continues to shine for many more years to come."

Pt. Tejendra Narayan Majumdar



"I heartily congratulate the Neotia family for promoting the best values of our art and culture through *Gulab Bari*. I've had the good fortune of performing with my son Nishat Khan for a most august audience."

Ustad Imrat Khan



“*Gulab Bari* is a stage where our most respected seniors have performed so it was an honour to occupy that stage.

Moreover, Bimla ji's love for music and the *baithak* setting, make it even more special. I still remember having chosen and rendered *Raag Behaag* for my performance, as suggested by Vijay Uncle (Pt. Vijay Kichlu), as *Behaag* has a very distinct rendition and appeal in our *Gharana*.

Ustad Rashid Khan





"I am delighted to note that *Gulab Bari* is completing 35 years. It was here that I first heard Ustad Vilayat Khan Sahab. I was fortunate to see the performance of Pandit Birju Maharaj.

Smt. Bimla Poddar began this programme which has now been ably carried on by Madhu and Harsh. I hope that this musical soiree celebrates its gold anniversary and beyond."

Tanushree Shankar: Friend and danseuse



"I've been associated with *Gulab Bari* right from the beginning, thanks to my close friendship with Late Vinod Neotia. I've seen it grow from a close knit family affair to this mammoth event that it is today. The Neotias have always been very good hosts and every *Gulab Bari* concert has been commendable. I particularly extend my regard and respect to Bimla ji, a very fine person who has been chiefly responsible for its advancement."

Kariappa: Business partner and family friend



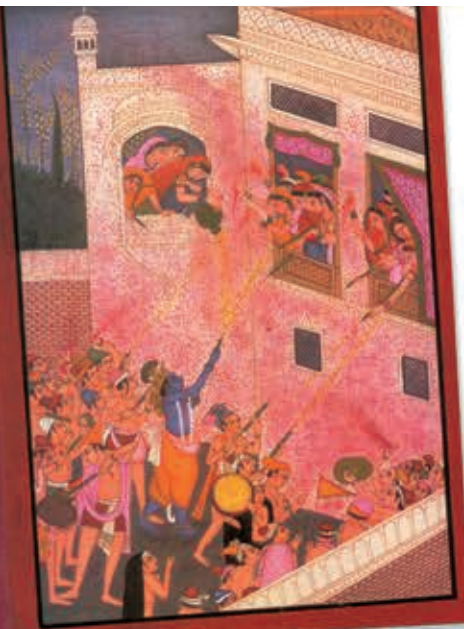
"Ironical that the walk down memory lane to write this is as I sit listening to a 4 day long music concert (albeit music of a different kind) indulging in the momentary escape to enjoy the "raga" in its entirety. My first memory of *Gulab Bari* is of a very elegant, poised *Bari ma* on stage with a proud *Appa ji* beside her. The confidence she exuberates, the meticulous planning, cultivating traditions and values are all iconic of *Bari ma*. When Kaartikeya and Ishani, attended *Gulab Bari*, *Bari ma* showed them to do *pranam* to the stage before they stepped on it. I admire her and love her not only for what she represents but who she is to me. From you *Ma* - I learnt when life gets tough, get tougher, when god gives you lemons, gracefully make lemonade."

Shraddha Gupta, daughter of Bimla Poddar





Gulab Bari invitations since 1981



7/2 Queen's Park
Calcutta 700 019

This year, the great masters of Indian Music—
Ustad Bismillah Khan, Pandit V G Jog, Pandit Kishan
Maharaj, Smt Girija Devi and Pandit Birju Maharaj,
would present Benaras 'Gulab Bari' at our residence.

We would request you to kindly be with us to share
this experience.

With regards,

(BIMLA PODDAR)

Dear

Your company in every heart exuberant joy and colour
and this Benaras brings on an ambience ideal for
enjoying the delight of 'Sitar and Langa'.

Pandit Bhimsen Kaul, Smt. Girija Devi, Pandit Birju
Maharaj with Smt. Sen accompanied by Pandit V G
Jog, 10th March, 1981 to give expression to this individual
and collectively in their own inimitable ways.

will give all of us immense pleasure if you could be
to share this experience. The programme starts at
5 PM at 7/2 Queen's Park, Calcutta 700 019.

use do confirm, as early as possible, that you will be
with us.

With regards,

Sincerely,

BIMLA PODDAR

PARTICIPATING ARTISTS

Padma Bhushan Smt. Girija Devi

Ustad Imrat Khan
with his son Nishat Khan

Smt. Mallika Sarabhai



Bimla Poddar
requests the pleasure of the company of

at
Gulab Bari
on Friday the 5th March, 2004
at 7/2 Queen's Park,
Kolkata 700 019



Bimla Poddar
requests the pleasure of the company of

RSVP
S. K. Menon
Dinesh Menon
2247 0818

Time
6.45 pm

please present this card at the entrance



Bimla Poddar
requests the pleasure of the company of

Smt. Girija Devi

Ustad Kishan Maharaj

Pandit Birju Maharaj

Smt. Sanjukta Panigrahi

Smt. Basanti Sen

Bimla Poddar
requests the pleasure of the company of

at
Gulab Bari
on Saturday, 13th March 1998
at 7/2 Queen's Park, Calcutta 700 019

Smt. Girija Devi

Smt. Kishori Amambari

Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam

February 15, 2000

Dear

Once again, on Saturday, 4th March 2000, we present Gulab Bari from
our residence.

I am enclosing your invitation cards, which may please be presented at the
entrance. This is being done because we are anxious to ensure the comfort and convenience
of our guests.

I look forward to your presence at this function. We shall appreciate a response
with warm regards.

Yours sincerely,

Bimla Poddar



Bimla Poddar, 7/2 Queen's Park, Calcutta 700 019
Phone : 247 0818, Fax : 247 0818

Gulab Bari
MADHU & HARSHAVARDHAN NEOTIA
request the pleasure of the company of

at
GULAB BARI
on Friday the 2nd March 2007
at 7/2 Queens Park
Kolkata 700 019

RSVP
S. K. Menon
Dinesh Menon
2287 0818

Time
6.45 pm

PARTICIPATING ARTISTS

Smt. Girija Devi

Pandit Jasraj

Smt. Chitra Visweswaran

Presented by
mcmf

Participating Artists

Smt. Girija Devi

Ustad Anwar Ali Khan



Bimla Poddar, 7/2 Queen's Park, Calcutta 700 019
Phone : 247 0818, Fax : 247 0818

February 15, 1986

Dear

Once again we present Gulab Bari on Saturday, 2nd
March, 1986, at our residence.

I am enclosing invitation cards, which may please be
presented at the entrance. This is being done because we are anxious
to ensure the comfort and convenience of our guests.

I look forward to your presence at this function
and appreciate a response from you.

With warm regards,

Yours Sincerely,

Bimla Poddar

Srimati Girija
Pandit V G
Kumari Malavika
Pandit Hari Prasad
Ustad Zakir Hussain

They will be with us on Saturday,
4th March 1989 from 6.45 p.m.
especially until the early hours of the
next morning.

We look forward to having you with
us at our residence, 7/2 Queen's Park,
Calcutta 700 019, to share this
experience.

Please confirm.

With warm regards,

RSHAVARDHAN NEOTIA

Dear Friends & Music Lovers,

Re: Invitation for Gulab Bari 2013

For almost three decades our family has been hosting Gulab Bari function at
home, 7/2 Queen's Park, Kolkata 700 019. We are privileged to have had the
distinguished artists of the country grace Gulab Bari.

We are equally privileged to have many friends and music lovers grace this occasion
by their kind presence. Learning from experience, we mention 'RSVP'. However,
it is not get adequate response from our esteemed invitees.

It leads to a situation that before the event we are unable to ascertain how many
will come and who among them would stay on for the full length of the
performance.

We all know, the senior artists perform later and it is a bit awkward if many people
are early. Hence, we would be very grateful if you can please let us know of your
presence by joining us at Gulab Bari.

Over the years, we have observed that

7/2, Queen's Park,
Kolkata - 700 019
Phone : 247 0818
Fax : 247 0818

February



ARTIST
Smt. Girija Devi
Ustad Anwar Ali Khan



The making of Gulab Bari

Behind the scenes



Three generations; fourth in the anvil.

Thirty five years.

One annual musical affair.



How do you recall and narrate all that has been going into the making of an annual evening, which over the last thirty five years has acquired a formidable reputation, besides having stolen several hearts, young and old!

On a rain soaked July evening, over steaming cups of Jasmine tea and hot *samosas*, the Neotia household gets together to share nuggets of how they have been preparing for and presenting, *Gulab Bari*, their annual musical soiree that has been going strong since March 1981.

What transpires is a free-wheeling *adda* full of reminiscence and precious tales.

The starting point

“Well, the starting point really is selecting the artist and then contacting him/her or them,” begins Bimla Poddar, the to-be octogenarian matriarch of the family who has been steering the show with her passion since the start but is quick to discount any credit. “We all get together about six months in advance and everyone throws up names of their choice. Of course, we are duly guided by *Appa ji* (Girija Devi) as well as Vijay *bhai* (Vijay Kichlu). Sometimes, we have to make considerations and give up on a chosen name if the artist is travelling or committed elsewhere,” she explains. “In all these years, we’ve been immensely fortunate to have absolute legends grace our home. Not once have we encountered an artist declining to perform for *Gulab Bari*,” reveals Krishna Neotia, her youngest sister-in-law.

The garden



By now, Madhu Neotia, the youngest daughter-in-law of the family has warmed up to the conversation. “I must tell you how the garden was prepared in the initial years,” she says. “We used to ready literally a thousand potted plants in such a way, that they would be in full bloom during *Gulab Bari*. The family favourite was the double bulb petunia which would be planted in plenty to add a burst of colour every year. Along with petunias, we would also plant carnations and several other flowers. In the initial years, the entire driveway would be filled with flowering potted plants and the air would be thick with the scent of *desi gulab* or rose,” she happily recalls. “Sometimes, we would get requests from our friends, the day after the soiree to part with some of the blossom, which we readily did. We had an excellent gardener called *Bansi*, who took care and great pride in keeping the garden bountiful and beautiful,” adds Bimla ji.



The culinary spread

If *Gulab Bari* has its loyalists for music, its loyalists for food are not too far behind. “From the very first year till today, our menu and the style of serving has remained the same,” states Krishna ji. “Actually, the credit for the menu goes to *Appa*,” chips in Bimla Poddar. “It was she who advised us on keeping it simple and similar to the erstwhile *Banarasi Gulab*

Bari. Right from the beginning it has been so well received by all that we haven’t tampered with it since then. Of course, our official taster is Krishna,” she says, looking at her sis-in-law with a smile, who adds, “There are a few ground rules though. We don’t serve aerated drinks; we use only earthen ware and there is no bearer service. It operates on self service.”

The invitations

“Our very first invitations were actually letters that we sent out to our friends and music lovers. Not only were there no mobile phones in those days, most of the times, even the house phone (landline) would be out of order! So, a bevy of well instructed men went criss-crossing the city, armed with addresses and letters and ensured each household received theirs, well in advance,” explains Poddar.

“What’s more, my younger brother-in-law, Vinod, (Late Vinod Neotia) would personally visit every home in our neighbourhood, extending a cordial invite to each household, requesting them to attend,” she adds.

In fact, as hosts, they weren’t strict about checking the invitation card at the gate, till a certain year when the word had gotten around so far and wide that they landed up receiving about 2500 guests for the evening! “We had a tough time! We ran out of food. There was no place to even stand, forget sit. Since then, we decided we must be stricter with the invitations and would be more careful about gatecrashers,” she recalls.

Charmingly enough, in the initial years, the envelope would be stuffed with fragrant rose petals along with the invitation, a practise that alas, was discontinued as the audience grew in number and the invitation card was standardized about ten years ago.

Gulab Bari
A MUSICAL JOURNEY

Swagat

If there is one unanimous verdict on *Gulab Bari* by artists and audience alike, it is how all are personally welcomed to the evening, by some family member or the other. “I clearly remember how *tauji* (Late Suresh Neotia) would meet and welcome the artists. He was equally at home with a *namaskar* as he was with an *aadaab*. He would fondly reach out to artists even much younger to him, with a half bent *namaskar* and do a *pranaam* to those older,” remembers Harsh Neotia, his nephew, who has also held the role of the emcee right from the first year.

“We applied a *chandan tika* (sandalwood mark) on the forehead of every guest and artist, gently spraying them with *gulab jal* and offering them a *desi gulab* as they entered our home,” adds Madhu.

The ensemble

“For years together, all of us would wear *saris* of a common colour, as ordained by *Appa*. So much so, that though I would ordinarily wear white, she ensured that I ditched those for blushing pinks and other bright colours,” recalls Poddar with a smile. That obviously meant that the family had to ensure that their wardrobe was in sync much in advance. “Even our reigning *Radha–Krishna thakur ji* (deity) would wear new and matching *poshak* (clothes) as ours as they descended every year, from my room to the garden, to bless us all!”

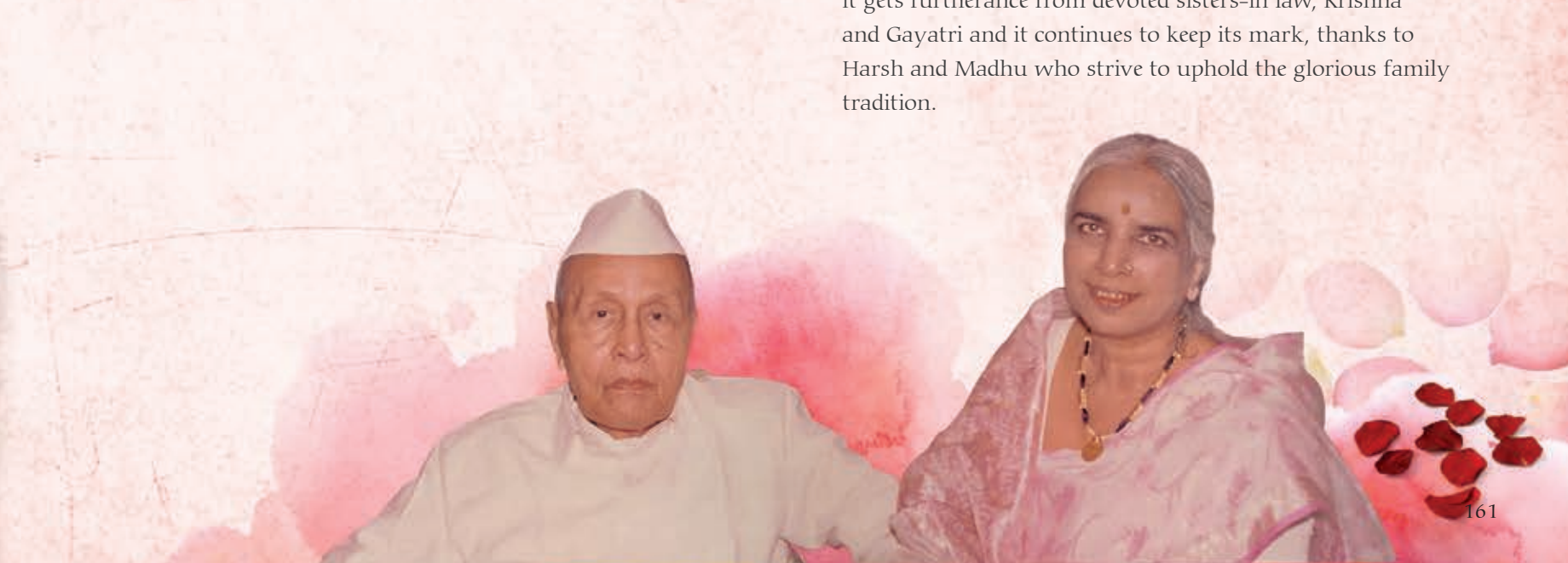
Collective prayers

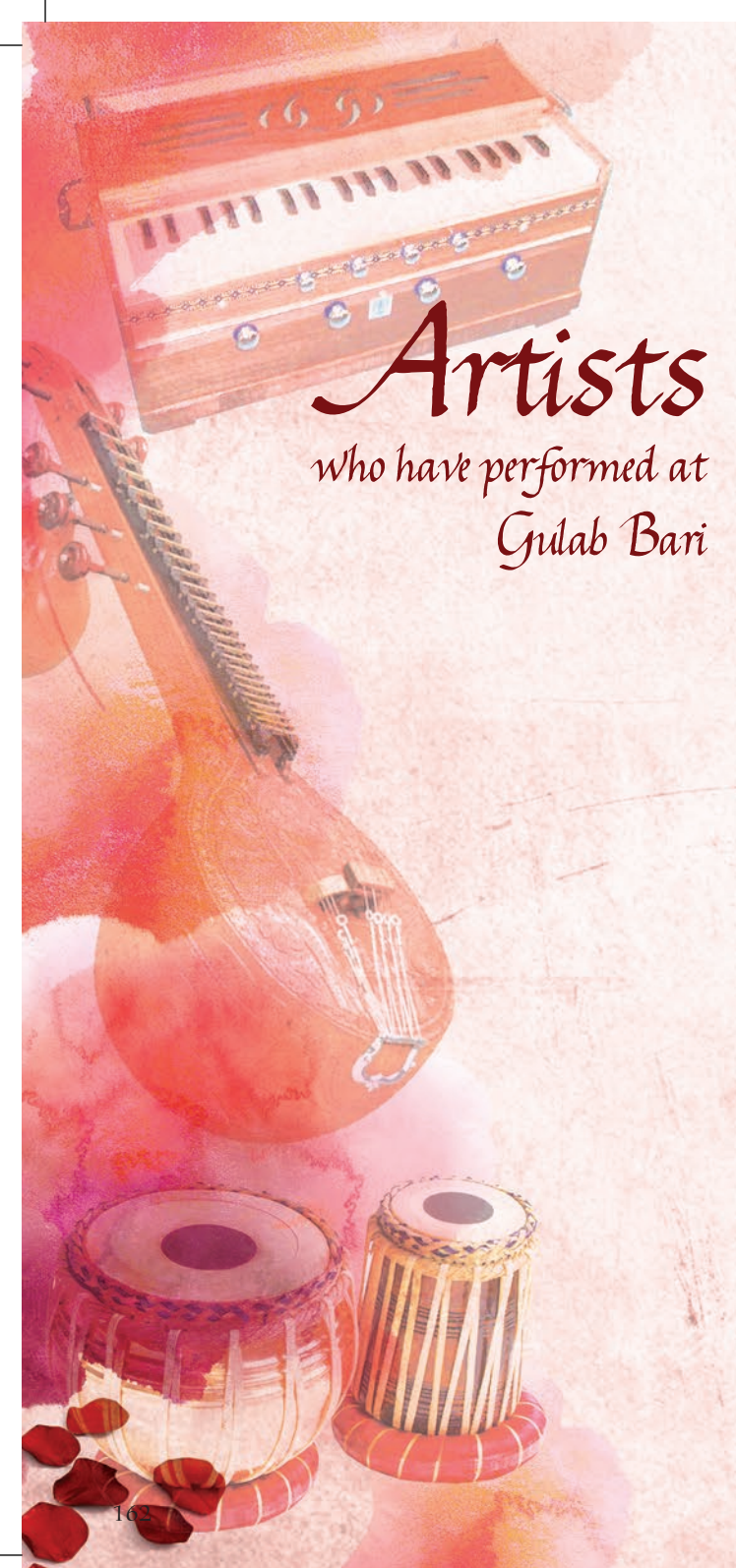
Despite thorough preparation, if there is one thing quite out of the family’s control, it is the weather. “Right up to the final day, we all silently pray for a clear day and for *Lord Indra* to be kind,” say Harsh and Madhu in unison. While most of the years, *Indra* has indeed been kind to *Gulab Bari*, there was one time, when the rain Gods decided to come down in a light shower just before the performance was to begin. “Luckily, the guests had not reached by then. What we did as damage control, was to quickly get the lawn dried, mop and soak out the water and add extra sheets and spreads. Fortunately, the Gods relented after a brief shower and all went off well,” shares Harsh. “There was another evening much earlier, when it got so cold, that we had to provide shawls to many members of the audience,” smiles Madhu.

The X-factors

For all the pain, meticulous preparation and effort that goes into organising *Gulab Bari* year after year, the family makes it look fairly simple. From the guest list to the cavalcade of cars, from eccentric artists to celebrated guests, they explain that each family member trusts the other; mistakes are forgotten and forgiven and things are well streamlined as each member’s role and responsibility is clearly laid out. What’s more, each one shares the jubilation of their home resounding with the finest music and the warmest vibes.

As correct as that may be, I suspect that the strength and the vigour lies elsewhere; it lies in the blessings of the family’s erstwhile patriarch, Late Janki Prasad Poddar and the good fortune of having someone like Girija Devi as a *guru*; it comes from Late Suresh Neotia’s ardent love for all things cultural; it gets fuelled by Bimla Poddar’s passion; it gets furtherance from devoted sisters-in law, Krishna and Gayatri and it continues to keep its mark, thanks to Harsh and Madhu who strive to uphold the glorious family tradition.





Artists

who have performed at
Gulab Bari

Sushri Aditi Mangaldas
Kathak

Pt. Ajoy Chakrovarty
Padma Shri
Vocal

Ustad Amjad Ali Khan
Padma Vibhushan
Sarod

Pt. Balamuralikrishna
Padma Vibhushan
Vocal- Carnatic

Pt. Bhimsein Joshi
Bharat Ratna
Vocal

Pt. Birju Maharaj
Padma Vibhushan
Kathak

Ustad Bismillah Khan
Bharat Ratna
Shehnai

Sushri Chetna Jalan
Kathak

Vidushi Chitra Vishwesaran
Padma Shri
Bharatnatyam

Pt. Deepak Maharaj
Kathak

Vidushi Girija Devi
Padma Vibhushan
Vocal

Pt. Hariprasad Chaurasia
Padma Vibhushan
Flute

Ustad Imrat Khan
Sitar and Surbahar

Pt. Jasraj
Padma Vibhushan
Vocal

Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra
Padma Vibhushan
Odissi

Pt. Kishan Maharaj
Padma Vibhushan
Tabla

Vidushi Kishori Amonkar
Padma Vibhushan
Vocal

Pt. Kushal Das
Sitar and Surbahar

Vidushi Malavika Sarukkai
Padma Shri
Bharatnatyam

Vidushi Mallika Sarabhai
Padma Bhushan
Kuchipudi and Bharatnatyam

Ustad Nishat Khan
Sitar and Surbahar

Vidushi Padma Subrahmanyam
Padma Bhushan
Bharatnatyam

Pt. Rajan And Sajan Mishra
Padma Bhushan
Vocal

Pt. Rakesh Chaurasia
Flute

Ustad Rashid Khan
Padma Shri
Vocal

Sushri Saswati Sen
Kathak

Vidushi Sanjukta Panigrahi
Padma Shri
Odissi

Pt. Shamta Prasad
Padma Bhushan
Tabla

Pt. Shiv Kumar Sharma
Padma Vibhushan
Santoor

Sushri Shubha Mudgal
Padma Shri
Vocal

Ustad Shujaat Khan
Sitar

Pt. Tejendra Narayan Majumdar
Sarod

Pt. Ulhas Kashalkar
Padma Shri
Vocal

Pt. Venkatesh Kumar
Padma Shri
Vocal

Ustad Vilayat Khan
Padma Vibhushan
Sitar

Pt. V G Jog
Padma Bhushan
Violin

Ustad Zakir Hussain
Padma Bhushan
Tabla

With love and respect



Be it *Gulab Bari* or our everyday lives, by God's grace, right from day one, Bimla *bhabhi* and I have enjoyed a sweet relationship. Preparations for *Gulab Bari* would always begin at home well in advance. In the earlier years the evening would stretch well beyond midnight leaving us physically tired, but delighted as a team, as a family.

In the course of our work, I have been reprimanded by her each time I've made a mistake. But such is her showering of love and affection that I have never taken it amiss.

Even today, when I go to Banaras, I feel a sense of belonging. I am made to feel a part of all that is going on there whether it is textile work, metal crafts, archaeological findings, lectures, plays, et al. This is because of Bimla *bhabhi* who makes me feel that my inputs are equally appreciated.

I have learned so much from her.

I am indeed blessed to have a *bhabhi* who gives me so much love.

All I can say to her today is:

कैसे मैं तुझे एहसास दिलायु
मेरा सफर कितना सुन्दर है.

जब भी पहले की बातें याद आती हैं,
तो आँखें नम हो जाती हैं.

जब भी मैंने तुम्हारे ज़ख्मों को
भरने की कोशिश की,
तुमने पहली ही मेरे ज़ख्मों पर
मलहम लगा दी.

ऐसा प्यार हमारा हरदम बना रहे,

आपकी, कृष्णा

With love and respect, Krishna.



Pranam

Earlier this year, when the *Gulab Bari* invitations were being sent out, someone remarked that *Barima's* (Bimla Poddar) annual evening was turning 35. It got me thinking and I realized that not just that but even *Jnana Pravaha*, the institute which she has nurtured like a baby, turns 20 this year. And *Barima* herself turns 80!



A celebration of her pivotal role was in order.

Barima has been a constant inspiration, not just to me, but many. She has had her fair share of trials and tribulations; of loss and bereavement. But *Barima* has carried on, resolutely and enthusiastically, accepting the challenges as part of life and moving on.

To Madhu and me, she has first been a caring mother. Her strong roots give her ever flexible wings to manage and organise things elegantly, leading by example. And her love for literature and music has been greatly infectious. Despite not being an artist herself, she has been an aficionado enough to have encouraged the finest artists to grace our home for *Gulab Bari*.

Looking back on this joyous occasion, I cannot but remember my deceased father and uncle, Vinod and Suresh Neotia respectively. If *papa* was a silent patron, always available with a large heart, *tauji* was a larger than life figure with a great penchant for everything artistic.

On their behalf and indeed of the entire family, I can only say that it fills our heart with joy to see her turn 80!

I am grateful to God for granting me this privilege of being brought up by her and for her loving indulgences ever since I was born.

Happy Birthday *Bari Ma*!

