



# Odisha to build world-class sports valley in BBSR

PM to lay foundation on Sept 17  
To be built on 150 acres of land, project entails Rs 1,000-cr investment

**NALINI SAHU**  
■ BHUBANESWAR  
The Odisha Government on Friday announced plans to build a world-class sports valley at Gothapatna on the outskirts of the capital city Bhubaneswar. Prime Minister

Narendra Modi will lay the foundation-stone for the project on September 17. To be built over 150 acres of land, the project will entail an investment of Rs 1,000 crore. The sports valley will, among others, have facilities for almost all the sports events played at the Olympics. The proposed sports valley will have facilities for almost all the sports and games like golf, wrestling, boxing, skating, archery, swimming, beach volleyball and other water sports as well as high performance centres. It will add to the constant endeavour of the

Odisha Government to put Bhubaneswar on the world's sports map. The State has already succeeded in grabbing the global eyeballs by creating world-class sporting facilities inside the Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar. With an incredible annual sports budget of Rs 1,300 crore, the highest among all States, Odisha is aiming at a holistic development of athletes and sporting culture. The State has already established a bouquet of high-performance centres at the Kalinga Sports Complex in hockey, football, swimming,

weightlifting, sports science, gymnastics, athletics, shooting and badminton. According to Olympian and renowned sprinter Shravani Nanda, the centres are a platform for athletes to refine their skills under seasoned mentors and coaches. "I extend my sincere thanks to the Odisha Government for its endeavour to build a world-class sports valley. This will further encourage our local talents as well as provide all the Indian players to hone up their skills here and emerge successful and international arena," said Nanda.

# 25 new excise stations to be opened in State

**PNS** ■ BHUBANESWAR  
To ensure strict enforcement in the aftermath of the Ganjam hooch tragedy, the Excise Department has decided to open 25 new excise stations in Odisha. "For effective enforcement and to make excise administration more efficient by strengthening the enforcement activities under excise and other relevant acts and to counter excise-related prob-

lems like cross border infiltration of liquor, illegal transport, storage, sale and illicit distillation of liquor/other NDPS items and to check hooch tragedy in the State, a proposal to open 25 new excise stations will be submitted to the government," Joint Excise Commissioner Somanath Majhi said in a letter to Superintendent of Excise of 16 districts. The Superintendents of Excise concerned have been

asked to examine the feasibility for opening of a new excise station based on geographical size of the existing one, inaccessibility of the far-flung areas, vulnerability to ID liquor distillation and supply from neighbouring district/State, vacuum area within the present excise station area, number of cases detected, number of accused arrested, quantity of seizure of ID liquor, number of ID pockets

busted during last financial years 2021-22, 2022-23 and 2023-24. A crucial meeting has been convened on September 4 to chalk out further strategy in this regard. In the Ganjam hooch tragedy, which has so far claimed three lives, police suspect a link with illicit liquor supplied to rural areas of Andhra Pradesh and the traders are now believed to be hiding in the neighbouring State.

## In State Spurious liquor claims 231 lives since 1992

Minister informs Assembly  
**PNS** ■ BHUBANESWAR  
At least 231 people have died due to consumption of spurious liquor in Odisha, the State Assembly was informed on Saturday. Excise Minister Prithviraj Harichandan shared the information while answering a question. Spurious liquor has claimed the lives of 231 people since 1992 in the State, he said. The highest number of 134 deaths due to spurious liquor took place in Cuttack in 1992 while 41 people died after con-

suming hooch in 2012 at Tukulipada on the outskirts of Bhubaneswar, the Minister said. Similarly, 20 people died in Puri in 2001 while 19 deaths due to spurious liquor reportedly took place in Ganjam in 2006, he said, adding that spurious liquor claimed the lives of seven persons at Tihidi in Bhadrak in 2019. The Minister further informed that there are 433 country liquor manufacturing units in rural areas of the State while licences have been issued to 490 such units for pouch liquor production.

# Balabhadra Pahandi mishap: Govt to perform remedial worship

**PNS** ■ BHUBANESWAR  
The Odisha Government would perform a remedial worship for the unfortunate mishap during of Lord Balabhadra's Adapa Mandap pahandi ritual on the occasion of the previous Rath Yatra in Puri, informed Law Minister Prithviraj Harichandan on Saturday. According to the minister, whatever had happened was an accident and it occurred due to some negligence. "However, Lord Balabhadra didn't fall on the ground and He was supported on the back of the servitors. The unfortunate incident happened as the 'Pata Dori' slipped due to some negligence. A probe committee was formed to carry out an investigation in this regard and they have already submitted their report to the temple management. We will review it soon and take action accordingly," said Harichandan. "Discussion in this regard



has been held with the Mukti Mandap pundits. A remedial worship for the unfortunate mishap of Lord Balabhadra will be performed after a suitable time is fixed by the Mukti Mandap pundits," he added. After the incident during the last Rath Yatra, there was

widespread outrage among devotees across the globe against the servitors for their alleged negligence that led to the mishap. As many as seven servitors were injured in the mishap during the Pahandi Bijje ritual. Subsequently, the probe committee was formed to

submit its inquiry report. Though the committee has already submitted its report to the temple management, the report has been termed as incomplete. The committee has been asked to go through the videos minutely again and give specific and pinpointed reasons for the mishap.

## 1.42 lakh cases pending in HC

Over 55,000 disposed of in last 5 yrs  
**PNS** ■ BHUBANESWAR  
As many as 1,42,858 cases are pending in the Orissa High Court, informed Law Minister Prithviraj Harichandan in the State Assembly on Saturday. The Minister's response was to a question raised in the House by Cuttack-Choudwar MLA Souvik Biswal. The BJD lawmaker wanted to know about the total pendency of cases in the High Court, disposal of cases in last five years and the steps that



are taken to speed up the process. In his reply, the Law Minister informed that 55,203 cases have been disposed of in the last five years. Similarly, the High Court has taken adequate steps to speed up the process to complete the trials and dispose old cases in the State. Similarly, the number of judges would also be increased in the State, said the minister.

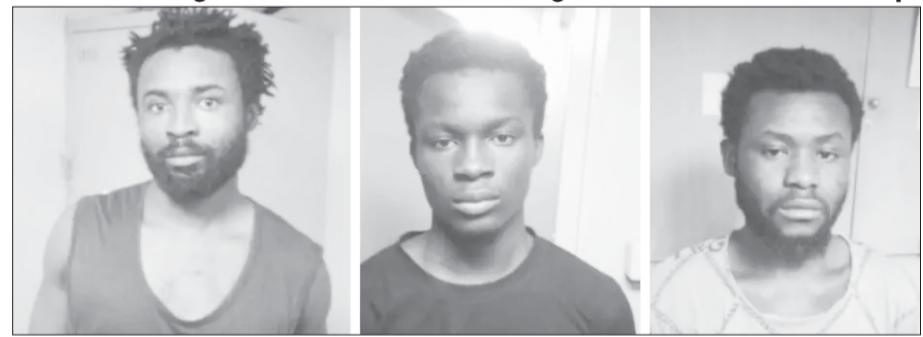
## Chikiti hooch tragedy 1 more patient dies; toll rises to 3

**PNS** ■ BRAHMAPUR  
The death toll in the Chikiti liquor tragedy in Ganjam district rose to three after one more person succumbed to its effects while undergoing treatment at an ICU of the MKCG Medical College Hospital in Brahmapur on Saturday. Moreover, four other affected persons are still undergoing treatment at the hospital. At least 15 persons from Moundpur, Jenapur and Karabalu village of Chikiti

block had consumed country liquor from a local unlicensed shop and were rushed to the hospital after their health conditions deteriorated. Following the incident, the State Government swung into action and intensified raids in Bhubaneswar and other parts of the State on illegal liquor units. Brahmapur Excise Superintendent Pradip Panigrahi was placed under suspension while two other officials were transferred after the spurious liquor tragedy in Ganjam.

## 'Chinese ship with 'illegal' Ghana immigrants at Paradip

**PNS** ■ PARADIP  
At least three Ghana residents, believed to be illegal immigrants, were spotted inside a Chinese ship that docked at the Paradip Port on Saturday. With its 20 crew members, the ship named 'MV where Wen' is carrying coal from Russia. Suspicion grew after three Ghana nationals were spotted inside the vessel, prompting Paradip Immigration officers to launch a probe into the incident. It was not clear whether the Ghanaian nationals have absconded from their country to go to another nation or have come to Odisha with



some other motive. Meanwhile, the Paradip Immigration office issued a notice to the Chinese ship and directed them not to de-board the Ghana nationals at any of the Indian ports. Meanwhile, no one was allowed to disembark from the

ship with the immigration department probing the case. The ship was also guarded by a security guard as the document verification was on at the time of sending this news, it was learnt. According to preliminary reports, the ship was carrying

coal from the Kavkaz port in Russia. On the way, it passed through many countries where the Ghana nationals are suspected to have entered the ship. However, it was not immediately known if they were planning to illegally migrate to India.

## In Cuttack Havildar found hanging in barrack

**PNS** ■ CUTTACK  
Mystery shrouded the death of a Havildar, whose body was found hanging in the 6th Battalion barrack at OMP Square in Cuttack on Saturday. The deceased was identified as Trilochan Sethi. Sethi's body was found hanging from a towel in the barrack. However, it was yet to be ascertained whether it was a case of suicide or murder. The concerned zone ACP said that the incident occurred when nobody was present in the

campus. The deceased Havildar's duty was scheduled on the day and his body was recovered in the wee hours. Following the incident, the body was recovered and his family members were informed about the incident. The 6th Battalion Commandant said, "The exact reason behind the death is yet to be ascertained." Things are likely to get clear after the probe progresses in connection with the incident and the postmortem report is availed.

## ASi held taking bribe in Baripada

**PNS** ■ BARIPADA  
The Vigilance police on Saturday caught Rama Chandra Soren, Assistant Sub-Inspector (ASI), Town police station in Baripada of Mayurbhanj district, while accepting a bribe of Rs 6,000 from a person. Soren had demanded the illegal gratification from the complainant to help him in a case registered at the Town police station. The entire bribe money was recovered from him and seized. Following the trap, simultaneous searches were carried



out at two locations linked to the ASI to ascertain whether he has accumulated assets disproportionate to his known sources of income. Further investigation was ongoing.

# To empower Ganjam SHG women TPSODL unveils incense stick making unit

**PNS** ■ BRAHMAPUR  
The Tata Power Southern Odisha Distribution Limited (TPSODL) has inaugurated an incense stick manufacturing centre in Rangeilunda Block of Ganjam district here recently. The centre, namely, Mangalam Dhoopbatti Centre, will work towards empowering women in rural areas. It came into existence, in partnership with the Odisha Livelihood Mission and the Mission Shakti, and aims to provide sustainable livelihood opportunities to women Self-Help Groups (SHGs) of the region. The inaugural event was



graced by TPSODL CEO Amit Kumar Garg, along with Block Development Officer (BDO) of Rangeilunda

Ansuman Mahapatra and other dignitaries. The Mangalam Dhoopbatti Centre will benefit SHG members

from six panchayats, namely Randha, Golanthara, Kanisi, Chikarada, Sasanpadar, and Kotharising.

The centre will engage women in producing eco-friendly incense sticks by up-cycling flowers collected from several temples. The innovative approach not only supports environmental sustainability by transforming waste into valuable products but also provides a stable source of income for the SHG members. CEO Garg said, "The TPSODL continues its efforts to empower the community by creating new opportunities. The company is particularly focused on the overall development of women, as well as progress in the social and economic life of rural areas. The incense stick production cen-

tre will not only provide women with employment but also promote Sustainable practices." Comprehensive training programmes have already been organised for the SHG members involved in the initiative. Led by experts, these sessions have equipped the participants with the skills to craft high-quality Dhoopbatti using natural materials. TPSODL has also facilitated the necessary machinery arrangements for the centre. Gitanjali Pradhan, a member of a participating SHG, said, "I am delighted to be part of the initiative and hope it will help us a lot in our economic empowerment."













# ISLAND HOPPING IN THE MALDIVES



Traveling within the Maldives proves that the journey can be just as enchanting as the destination itself say **RUPALI & BAKSHISH DEAN**

Just a quick 20-minute speedboat ride from the capital, Male, transforms us from weary travellers to relaxed coconut sippers in an instant. That's no small feat, especially when many islands require lengthy boat and seaplane journeys just to begin the island experience. But don't be misled-despite its proximity to the capital, this island captures the enchanting 'island feel' and sets the perfect tone for arriving at this tropical paradise resort on its own private island. Four Seasons Kuda Huraa truly embodies the essence of Maldivian luxury. Since opening its doors in 1998, it has set the standard for other hoteliers hoping to offer a taste of paradise to their discerning guests. After undergoing several renovations, it's no surprise that this island boasts a remarkably high rate of returning visitors. Its positioning grants us uninterrupted views of the mesmerizing Indian Ocean, stretching as far as the eye can see. We are delighted by the choice of accommodations, whether overwater or on the beach. For our trip, we opt for a Sunset Overwater Villa with Pool, and it is simply magnificent. If it's your first time in the Maldives, we wholeheartedly recommend staying overwater-it's an experience you won't want to miss. The villa features a cloud-like bed, expansive bathroom, a magnificent bathtub, plus an infinity pool and the spacious terrace boasts an infinity pool and hammocks for relaxing while watching the fish below. Every amenity I could wish for is provided, and we especially appreciate the nightly replenishment of cooling Aloe Vera, which we slather on each evening to soothe my skin after a day in the sun. With so many amazing amenities available, it would be easy to spend your entire stay exploring the island's quarter-mile stretch. However, just a short 20-minute boat ride away, you'll find incredible world-class dive sites and renowned surf breaks waiting to be discovered.

**LANDAA GIRAVARU**  
The Four Seasons Landaa Giraavaru boasts a prime location in Baa Atoll, easily reached via one of the hotel's charming private seaplanes: the delightful yellow-and-black polka-dotted Flying Boxfish or the vibrant Flying Triggerfish. From our window, we are treated to a breath-taking aerial view, gazing down at the atolls from a lofty 5,000 feet. Below me lies the expansive 44-acre Four Seasons Resort on Baa Atoll, nestled within a serene 1.5-mile lagoon. Here, nature takes centre stage, with two stretches of pristine beaches calling me to explore their untouched beauty. As we step off the pier, we are instantly captivated by the ethereal blue waters and sweeping stretches of white sand. Towering 50-foot palm trees line a grand boulevard while mature gardens burst with the vibrant colours of banyan trees, lemongrass, frangipani, and orchids. The island feels completely untouched by time, offering plenty of space for leisurely strolls or even a solid 10,000 steps a day. If we ever need a break, we can easily hop on one of the electric bicycles available for everyone, or simply call for a buggy to whisk me away in comfort. The 102 thatched beach and water bungalows, more spacious than accommodations found elsewhere in the islands, blend seamlessly into the lush jungle, vibrant gardens, and soft sands. The bungalows, set in private gated enclosures, offer an intimate retreat. This remote island is a sanctuary for conservation, led by the Marine Research Centre's vital efforts to protect marine life. As nature enthusiasts, we truly appreciate this commitment to preserving the Maldives' natural treasures. Upon arrival, guests are greeted by a lively lagoon bustling with marine life, including eagle rays, stingrays, reef sharks, clownfish, and parrotfish-just in the house reef! As part of the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, visitors can also experience vast pods of



dolphins, nests of sea turtles (some even lay their eggs on the island), and the spectacular Hanifaru Bay, where massive swarms of manta rays feed the plankton-rich monsoon season from May to November. For those eager to delve into local culture, nearby inhabited islands offer an inviting glimpse into the vibrant tapestry of Maldivian village life, providing an opportunity to immerse myself in the authentic rhythms of this idyllic archipelago. For those eager for adventure, the luxury live-aboard catamaran, The Explorer, is an excellent option for diving and exploring the waters surrounding both Four Seasons resorts. This stay is not only luxurious but also mindful of the environment, making it all the more memorable. Our last stop is Blu for lunch, and what an experience it was! The restaurant, beautifully designed, overlooks the main pool and the vast ocean beyond. The food is simply phenomenal-we can easily dine there for a week without getting bored. Twice a year, the renowned Italian chef Gaetano Trovato and his team enhance the culinary journey with their exquisite creations. Dinner at Arnolfo is in a league of its own. Honestly, it is the best steak we have ever had, even surpassing those from Argentina. We would gladly return to Landaa Giraavaru just to savour it once more! The Moroccan-themed Al Barakat is equally exceptional. This resort truly prioritizes wellness in many forms. While the yoga classes and spa services are fantastic, it is the AyurMa Ayurvedic centre that truly captivates me. The consultations are thorough and illuminating; we learn things about ourselves that we have never realized before. Another compelling reason to visit the Maldives-it's a chance for self-discovery! After soaking in the serene beauty of Baa Atoll, we look forward to stopping by Male City to further embrace the richness of Maldivian culture.

**MALE CITY BY FOOT**  
While Kuda Huraa feels cosy and inviting, Landaa Giraavaru strikes us as grand and expansive, like a swinging pendulum. Since both are part of the Four Seasons family and many guests spend time at each resort, it's easy to draw comparisons, but we won't go down that road. Each place is truly a gem in its own right, and I can honestly say we cherished our time at both. Taking a seaplane back to Male offers a stunning view of the azure waters and lush green islands below. Each resort we pass has its own unique charm, showcasing the diverse beauty of this enchanting paradise. Once in Male, we are guided by a knowledgeable local expert as we explore the city's historic landmarks. We start at the harbour and move past the oldest school, a proud symbol of the Maldives' impressive 98% literacy rate. At the Royal Garden Café, nestled in a nobleman's 'Ganduvaru', we enjoy a lovely cup of tea surrounded by beautifully carved wooden interiors. The November 3rd Memorial pays tribute to the heroes of 1988, while Sultan Park and the National Museum preserve the rich history of the sultanate era. As we continue our journey, the Grand Friday Mosque and the Islamic Centre impress with their striking architecture, and Independence Square reveals yet another chapter of Male's story. The local markets are alive with colour and energy, showcasing an array of tropical delights. In this enchanting place, time seems to stand still, inviting us to discover more at every corner. It is a journey we won't soon forget!  
— Awarded the 'Best food writer in the country' by the Indian culinary forum, WACS and the ministry of Tourism, Rupali Dean writes on food and travel. Bakshish Dean, a 'distinguished chef and writer' with over 25 years of experience, excels in food styling and photography, while passionately exploring wildlife, forgotten recipes, and advanced culinary techniques

# KINWANI HOUSE: YOUR ABODE THAT SHINES AMIDST HIMALAYAN FOOTHILLS

A peaceful retreat with old world charm and stunning views beckons travelers for a luxe, exclusive vacation, writes **SHARMILA CHAND**

Nestled in the foothills of The Himalayas, Kinwani House is a charming retreat that offers guests a rare opportunity to immerse themselves in the rich heritage of Tehri Garhwal. One remarkable aspect of Kinwani House is its geographical significance, with its longitude nearly aligning with 79 degrees east, passing through all twelve Shiva temples from Kedarnath to Kanyakumari, enhancing its spiritual aura, making it a unique destination.

### WHERE CULTURAL HERITAGE MEETS NATURAL SPLENDOR

About 40 minutes uphill drive from Rishikesh, took us to the stunning home of the Royal family, 'Kinwani House'. The estate, built in 1954, now stands as an architectural gem, a testament to passionate restoration, regal grandeur and a beacon of warm luxe hospitality. It offers a unique blend of modern comfort, natural beauty, and cultural richness, making it a perfect choice for discerning travellers. From the moment of arrival, the warmth of Marisha Chheda, Resort Manager and her team sets the tone for a truly memorable stay. That exactly is the sentiment as expressed by Aditya Paul Lakhnupal, Chairman, JPL Group, when he tells me, "Our goal is to seamlessly blend the regal charm of the past with modern luxury, offering our guests a stay that is as memorable as it is meaningful. We invite you to explore the spiritual treasures of Rishikesh and experience the tranquil beauty of Kinwani House-a



place where history and luxury meet in harmony." I stepped into my Princess Suite with smiling Aryan escorting me, and was captivated by the aesthetics infused with traditional and contemporary touches, featuring signature Aalia Collection amenities. Spread over two floors, the tastefully re-done House comprises six large suites, each with their own ensuite baths, drawing rooms and private decks. Each suite is a harmonious blend of old world charm and contemporary elegance, offering a unique blend of art deco design



and modern luxury, providing guests with an enriching and tranquil experience. The house also



boasts lush gardens, sweeping views of the holy river Ganges, breathtaking panoramic vistas of the majestic Himalayan foothills, creating a captivating backdrop for moments of serenity and reflection.

I loved my High Tea at the beautiful conservatory with a bar and sitting area for an indoor evening under the stars or a special evening of cocktails by candlelight. Every detail, from the room amenities to the dining options, is designed to ensure guests feel truly at home.

### DINING: CELEBRATION OF LOCAL FLAVOURS!

I was happy to see the menu that blends local regional dishes and world cuisine. Be it a hearty breakfast featuring both Indian and international favourites, or meals, the food caters to every palate. Here you celebrate both global flavours and the rich tapestry of Pahari cuisine. No wonder, the star of my meal was 'Pahari Thali' with local ingredients and specialties of the region. Chef Arvind Negi, Aalia Collection pointed out, "Our culinary offerings blend local flavors with global influences, ensuring a delightful gastronomic journey. From fragrant biryanis and robust curries, to succulent kebabs and the authentic Pahadi thali, our menu across celebrates the diverse culinary heritage of India. For our discerning global travelers, we present a thoughtfully curated selection of international dishes. Whether one wishes to experience Oriental, Continental, Italian, or Thai flavours, we love to create exquisite dishes. Our sweet offerings are the perfect finale to your dining experience enhanced by homemade fresh ice creams."

### ROOTED IN WELLNESS

Start the day with a serene Sunrise Yoga session, followed by an indulgent spa treatment

featuring varied therapies. What better way to unwind, than the temperature-controlled outdoor pool, a perfect de-stress mantra.

### IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES

For those seeking varied activities to engage themselves, the team crafts special experiences, including both cultural and adventure immersions. A visit to the iconic Parmarth Niketan Ashram to evening arti at Triveni Ghat on the banks of the Ganga in Rishikesh is a must for those spiritually inclined. For trek lovers there are several trails, the most beautiful being hiking up to the ancient Kunjapuri Devi Temple. Weather permitting, river rafting and bungee jumping are adventure sports one could partake in for those seeking thrills. Hike through pristine mountain trails, soak in the beauty of nature, or indulge in yoga and mindful meditation amidst the serenity of the Himalayas. The choice is all yours!

### TO CONCLUDE

If you looking for a tranquil getaway enveloped in natural splendor, The Kinwani House is the perfect answer. Here is a peaceful retreat away from the touristic crowd with experiences that are both enriching and indulgent. Whether it's enjoying a curated menu under the stars, relaxing in the temperature controlled pool with breathtaking views of the Himalayas, or embarking on a bespoke adventure with Kinwani Concierge, every aspect of Kinwani House is designed to leave a lasting impression.



"If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion"  
— Dalai Lama



## MOSCOW FILM FESTIVAL KICKS OFF WITH FOCUS ON INDIAN CINEMA

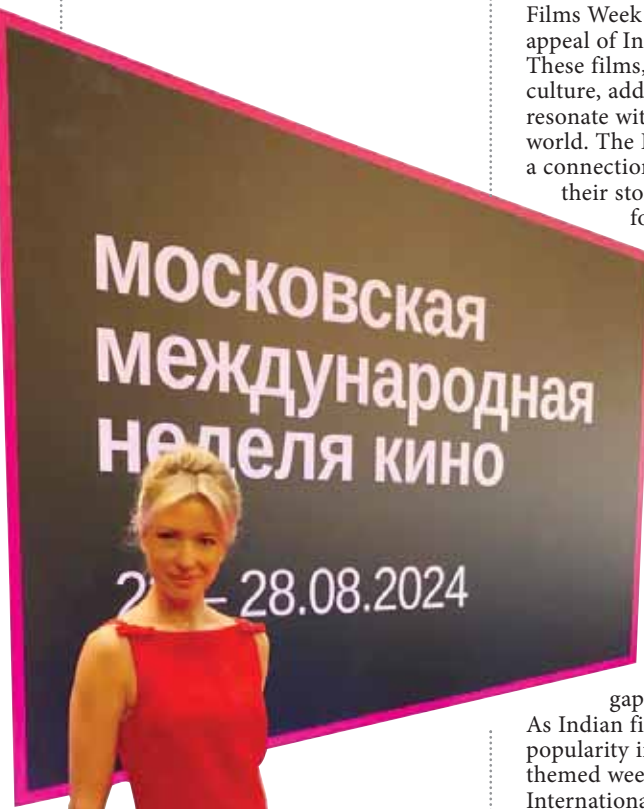
*Laapata ladies* and *Kalki* resonate with Russian audience, opening up huge possibilities for Indian cinema in Russia, writes **GYANESHWAR DAYAL**



The Moscow International Films Week, an event that has become a significant cultural bridge between Russia and the world opened up in Moscow with much fanfare at Khudozhestvenny Cinema and with people from film fraternity from around the world in attendance at the gala event. On the first day of the Film Week, screenings of both foreign and domestic films took place, including the nationwide premieres of the Indian sports drama *Field* and the philosophical-mystical drama *Alzheimer* from Iran. This year it is an Indian-themed week with focus on Indian cinema and celebrating Indian art of storytelling on celluloid. The film festival is hosting films from more than 40-countries but the flavour of the festival is completely Indian. The second day was completely dedicated to Indian cinema, with Russian artists performing on Indian songs and Indian cuisine being served at the venue with Bollywood songs playing in the background. The Indian segment of the festival is dedicated to celebrating the richness and diversity of Indian cinema, offering Russian audiences a taste of India's cinematic brilliance through a curated selection of films. Among the highlights are two remarkable Indian films, *Laapata Ladies* and *Kalki*, which have captivated the Russian audience with their unique storytelling and cultural nuances. Indian cinema has long been admired in Russia, with classics from Bollywood making their mark in the past. Ra Kapoor was a household name in Russia and 'mera joota hai Japani, an all-time hit. The Indian-themed week at the Moscow International Films Week is a testament to the enduring connection between the two cultures. This year's selection is not just about showcasing films; it's about highlighting the shared human experiences and emotions that transcend borders. As one Russian filmmaker quipped, "Indian and Russian films are made with heart, the most striking similarity between Indian and Russian films is that the songs are woven into the storyline." This is despite the fact that much is lost in translation and language barrier remains a significant impediment. But that is about to change as Swapna Dutt, the co-producer of *Kalki*, told the Pioneer that they would be releasing the film dubbed in Russian. "Indian films were once very popular in Russia, we want to open that bracket again. I am sure Indian films have a huge market here," said Swapna Dutt.

THE INDIAN SEGMENT OF THE FESTIVAL IS DEDICATED TO CELEBRATING THE RICHNESS AND DIVERSITY OF INDIAN CINEMA, OFFERING RUSSIAN AUDIENCES A TASTE OF INDIA'S CINEMATIC BRILLIANCE THROUGH A CURATED SELECTION OF FILMS. AMONG THE HIGHLIGHTS ARE TWO REMARKABLE INDIAN FILMS, "LAAPATA LADIES" AND "KALKI," WHICH HAVE CAPTIVATED THE RUSSIAN AUDIENCE WITH THEIR UNIQUE STORYTELLING AND CULTURAL NUANCES

*Laapata Ladies*, a film that delves into the complexities of womanhood in contemporary India, has struck a chord with Russian viewers. The film's narrative, which intertwines humor with social commentary, offers a glimpse into the challenges and aspirations of Indian women. The Russian audience, known for its appreciation of nuanced storytelling, has responded positively to the film's portrayal of universal themes such as identity, freedom, and societal expectations. *Kalki*, another standout film screened on the second day, explores themes of mythology and modernity, blending them in a way that is both thought-provoking and visually stunning. The film's exploration of Indian mythology, set against the backdrop of modern societal issues, has intrigued Russian viewers. The film's ability to weave together the old and the new, the mythical and the real, resonates deeply with a culture that values its own rich historical and cultural heritage. The success of *Laapata Ladies* and *Kalki* at the Moscow International Films Week highlights the growing appeal of Indian cinema in Russia. These films, while rooted in Indian culture, address universal themes that resonate with audiences across the world. The Russian viewers have found a connection with the characters and their stories, appreciating the films for their depth, creativity, and the way they tackle complex social issues.



The Indian-themed week has also opened doors for cultural exchange, with discussions and workshops that allow Russian audiences to engage more deeply with Indian cinema. This exchange of ideas and cultural narratives fosters a deeper understanding between the two nations, reinforcing the importance of art in bridging cultural gaps. As Indian films continue to gain popularity in Russia, the Indian-themed week at the Moscow International Films Week is likely to become a regular feature, showcasing the best of Indian cinema to Russian audiences. The success of *Laapata Ladies* and *Kalki* is not just a win for the filmmakers but also a testament to the universal appeal of Indian stories that, while deeply rooted in their own cultures, speak to the shared human experience. The Moscow International Films Week's Indian-themed week is more than just a showcase of films; it's a celebration of the cultural connections between India and Russia. The warm reception of films like *Laapata Ladies* and *Kalki* by the Russian audience is a reflection of the power of cinema to transcend borders and bring people together through the shared language of storytelling.

I DON'T SMOKE, DON'T DRINK MUCH, AND GO TO THE GYM FIVE TIMES A WEEK. I LIVE A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE AND FEEL GREAT. I CAN RUN A MARATHON, YOU KNOW  
—SARAH MICHELLE GELLAR



From leading corporate giants to shaping culinary excellence, PAWAN SONI'S journey is a celebration of passion and innovation in the food industry, says SAKSHI PRIYA

# FROM CORPORATE SUCCESS TO CULINARY STARDOM A JOURNEY INTO THE WORLD OF FOOD BLOGGING AND AWARDS

In the culinary world, where flavours tell stories and meals become cherished memories, Pawan Soni has forged an extraordinary path. A former Vice President at global giants like HSBC and GE Capital, Soni made a bold yet passionate shift from the corporate boardroom to the vibrant food scene. Driven by his love for discovering hidden gastronomic gems, he founded Indian Food Freak, a blog that has since grown into one of India's most influential food and travel platforms. His journey took a remarkable turn in 2014 when he launched The Big F Awards, a celebration of culinary excellence that has now become one of Delhi NCR's most prestigious events. Now entering its 11th year, The Big F Awards have distinguished themselves with an unwavering

commitment to transparency and integrity. Built on the principle of not imposing any financial burden on nominees, these awards have earned a reputation as a fair and respected platform for recognising excellence in the food industry. Over the past decade, they have become synonymous with culinary credibility, highlighting the region's finest dining establishments and championing new talents, including home chefs and bakers who bring fresh flavours and creativity to the table.

This year, The Big F Awards embark on an exciting new chapter by expanding their reach to encompass the entire Delhi-NCR region, reinforcing their vision of inclusivity and growth. This grand event will showcase a diverse array of culinary talent, with new categories that reflect the latest trends and celebrate the art of both dining out and home cooking. Attendees can look forward to an immersive experience where innovation, artistry, and passion are celebrated in a truly memorable way. At the heart of this celebration is a distinguished jury, featuring some of India's most renowned culinary experts, such as Chef Kunal Kapur, Chef Nita Mehta, Rocky Singh, and many others. These esteemed judges will rigorously evaluate each nominee, visiting the restaurants and sampling the dishes before casting their votes. This commitment to fairness ensures that the awards remain a beacon of trust and excellence in the food industry.

For Pawan Soni, The Big F Awards are more than just an event, they are a community and a platform for supporting genuine connections and inspiring culinary creativity. As he prepares for the upcoming awards in September, Soni envisions an evening that brings together the best of Delhi NCR's food scene, offering an opportunity to celebrate, connect and elevate the standards of culinary excellence. With a legacy of integrity and innovation, The Big F Awards continue to shine as a cornerstone of the region's vibrant food culture. Founded in 2014, The Big F Awards have become a symbol of credibility and fairness, consistently upholding the highest standards in the industry. This year's edition promises to build on this legacy, with new surprises, new talents, and new stories to be told. Join Pawan Soni and his esteemed panel in this grand celebration of culinary brilliance, where the finest in food artistry come together to create an unforgettable experience.

With a legacy of integrity and innovation, The Big F Awards continue to shine as a cornerstone of the region's vibrant food culture. Founded in 2014, The Big F Awards have become a symbol of credibility and fairness, consistently upholding the highest standards in the industry. This year's edition promises to build on this legacy, with new surprises, new talents, and new stories to be told. Join Pawan Soni and his esteemed panel in this grand celebration of culinary brilliance, where the finest in food artistry come together to create an unforgettable experience.

## A CONVERSATION WITH PAWAN SONI

Pawan Soni shares insights into his transition from corporate life to food blogging, the challenges he faced in

the early days and his commitment to transparency and excellence in The Big F Awards. He provides valuable perspectives on the growth of his blog, the influence of his corporate background and what to expect from this year's prestigious event.

**You left a successful career as Vice President at MNCs like HSBC and GE Capital to follow your passion for food. What motivated this career shift, and how did your corporate experience shape your approach to food blogging and awards?**

Back in our day, social media wasn't a thing. Like many, I followed the conventional route—completing an MBA and then diving into the corporate world. But food was my escape. Traveling the world, I discovered hidden culinary gems and started writing for newspapers and magazines. Eventually, I launched my own blog, Indian Food Freak. Before I knew it, my passion for food had grown into a full-blown career.

**MY CORPORATE EXPERIENCE WAS THE YEAST THAT HELPED INDIAN FOOD FREAK RISE. THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE IN ORGANISING THE AWARDS WAS SECURING SPONSORS WHO BELIEVED IN THE VISION BUT DIDN'T INFLUENCE THE RESULTS.**

In foodie terms, my corporate career was a recipe for success, but my love for food was the secret ingredient. I traded PowerPoint for paprika and now, I'm serving up a plate of purpose. Jokes aside, my corporate experience was invaluable. It taught me critical skills in sales, operations, and more, which I still use in my second career. Having worked with ethical companies, I've always prioritized transparency. Even after 11 years of running the food awards, I ensure there's no money exchange involved, whether for nominations, attending the awards or in any other aspect.

**When you started Indian Food Freak food blogging was relatively new in India. How did you introduce the concept to an unfamiliar audience, and what strategies did you use to build your initial following?**

Introducing food blogging to India was like adding a new spice to a traditional recipe—initially unfamiliar, but now indispensable. I focused on creating content that was relatable, authentic, and sprinkled

with humor. I remained honest and objective in all my reviews, even if it meant ruffling a few feathers among friends in the industry. By avoiding fancy jargon and staying true to my readers, I built trust and loyalty. My guiding principle has always been to write for my readers, not for the restaurants.

**How did you address the skepticism or resistance from both the public and industry professionals during the early days of food blogging, especially when it was an emerging field?**

Skeptics are like stale spices - they need to be replaced with fresh perspectives. I proved that food blogging wasn't just a flash in the pan by consistently delivering quality content and building a loyal community. Facebook played a significant role in this, as I created a space where food enthusiasts could exchange opinions and learn from each other.

**What were some of the biggest challenges you faced in creating content for your blog in the early days, and how did you overcome issues related to resources, technology or audience engagement?**

The early days were like cooking with limited ingredients—creativity was key. I tackled challenges by infusing my content with storytelling, leveraging social media, and engaging with my audience like a master chef. Content was never an issue because food is something we encounter daily. To improve the visual appeal, I invested in a DSLR. As the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words.

**Indian Food Freak has grown into one of the largest food and travel blogs in India. What were some of the initial challenges you encountered when starting your blog and organising The Big F Awards, and how did your corporate experience help you navigate these obstacles?**

My corporate experience was the yeast that helped Indian Food Freak rise. The biggest challenge in organizing the awards was securing sponsors who believed in the vision but didn't influence the results. My sales and marketing skills were crucial here. Convincing people of the brand visibility that our awards could offer was key, and looking back, I'm proud to say that I delivered on those promises.

**This year, The Big F Awards has expanded to cover the entire Delhi-NCR region. What motivated this expansion, and what new opportunities and challenges do you anticipate?**

Expanding The Big F Awards to Delhi-NCR was like adding a new course to the menu—a natural progression. Since it takes nearly six months to organize the awards, with our jury visiting each restaurant to taste the food before

delivering a verdict, venturing into other cities wasn't feasible. However, Delhi-NCR should be treated as one city, with people frequently traveling for work and pleasure. Including Delhi has given us broader and, in some cases, better choices, helping foodies make informed decisions when they dine out.

**The introduction of categories for home bakers and home chefs is a unique and thoughtful addition. What inspired these new categories, and how do they reflect current trends in the food industry?**

Home bakers and home chefs are the new spice merchants—they're driving innovation and shaping trends. These categories reflect the democratisation of food and the rise of culinary entrepreneurship. I'm pleased to see that home chefs and bakers are now taken seriously. Not only have their businesses expanded, but many new ventures are focused solely on this segment, helping them grow by organising pop-ups at five-star hotels, developing apps for delivery, and introducing them to wider audiences.

**Winning the Best Influencer Award by BBC Good Food in 2018 is a significant achievement. How did this recognition impact your career and the growth of Indian Food Freak and The Big F Awards?**

We all seek acknowledgment and appreciation. Winning the award was a validation that I was on the right path. It boosted my morale and increased confidence in the products and content I deliver.

**The Big F Awards are known for their transparency and integrity. How are you ensuring these values are upheld in this year's expanded edition, especially with the addition of new categories?**

Transparency and integrity are the secret ingredients in The Big F Awards' recipe. We ensure fairness by using a robust judging process, clear criteria, and a commitment to accountability. From selecting the right jury to deliberating each result, we remain steadfast in our dedication to honesty and transparency.

**As you prepare for the 11th edition of The Big F Awards, what are your personal goals for the event, and what do you hope attendees and participants will take away from this year's awards?**

My personal goal for The Big F Awards is to foster a culinary community that's the icing on the cake. I hope attendees and participants leave inspired, with new connections and a renewed passion for the food industry. People don't mind losing as long as they know they lost to a worthy opponent. Our aim is to be fair and just while building camaraderie among all industry professionals.

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



A TRIBUTE TO TRADITION

GURU SHOVANA NARAYAN'S 75 YEARS OF KATHAK MASTERY

Sharanyam, a heartfelt tribute to the legendary Guru SHOVANA NARAYAN on her 75th birthday, beautifully celebrated her extraordinary journey in Kathak. The evening was a touching tribute to her life's work, showcasing the profound impact she has had on the art form and her disciples, says SAKSHI PRIYA



Photo: Pankaj Kumar

In the world of Indian classical dance, few names resonate with as much reverence as Padmashri Guru Shovana Narayan. Her journey is not just a tribute to her unparalleled dedication to Kathak but a living legacy that has inspired generations. As she steps into her 75th year, the Asavari Centre for Kathak honoured this icon with an evening titled "Sharanyam," a celebration as vibrant and profound as Guruji herself. Padmashri Guru Shovana Narayan is a celebrated icon in Kathak, with a remarkable career spanning over six decades. Her innovative approach and deep understanding of Indian culture have redefined the art form. With prestigious awards like the Padma Shri and Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, her influence extends beyond performance to visionary choreography, dedicated teaching, and cultural leadership. On this unforgettable evening, the Stein Auditorium at India Habitat Centre in New Delhi was transformed into a space of dance and devotion. The evening was not just an event; it was a vibrant expression of love, respect and admiration from her disciples worldwide. Each performance honoured not just Kathak but the essence of Guru Shovana Narayan - the artist, the mentor and the visionary. From the moment the lights dimmed and the

first note echoed through the auditorium, it was clear that this evening was extraordinary. The performance of "Taal Pancham Sawari" was a masterful display of rhythm and precision, perfectly embodying the discipline and expression that Guruji has always emphasised. Beyond the technical brilliance, it was the sheer emotion that captivated the audience. "Chaand" was not just a dance; it was a poetic journey that moved everyone present. Similarly, "Malika" seamlessly fused song and dance, creating a blend of beauty that felt almost otherworldly. One of the most memorable moments of the night was "Moonlight Impressionism," a performance that seemed to slow time itself. The dancers moved with such grace that the stage became a peaceful space, where the silence of moonlight was captured in every gesture and step. The soft strains of the piano added an extra layer of

elegance, making it feel as though the audience was witnessing a dream come to life. The evening was a reflection of the profound bond between Guruji and her disciples, a connection that was evident in every movement and gesture on stage. This wasn't just a series of performances; it was a living reflection of the relationships built through years of shared passion, dedication, and mutual respect. As the video presentation played, featuring heartfelt birthday messages from her students, the emotion in the auditorium was overwhelming. These messages were more than just words of



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admiration; they were living proof of the deep, enduring love and gratitude that have grown over the years - a love that extends far beyond the art of Kathak. As the evening drew to a close with the powerful performance of "Dhwani-Pratidhwani," the energy in the auditorium reached its zenith. The audience's applause was more than just appreciation; it was a collective outpouring of respect, love, and admiration for a woman who has devoted her life to the pursuit of art and the nurturing of others. In the words of Guruji's first disciple, Shruti Gupta Chandra, "Sharanyam is a small tribute from all of us who have learned so much from Shovana Didi - dance in its purest form and, with it, many life lessons. And the learning continues..." Guruji herself reflected on the evening with emotion, saying, "The air rebounded with the pure love and sublime devotion of all the disciples that touched every heart and left everyone emotional. The programme was meticulously planned and executed." As her disciples paid tribute through their performances, it was clear that Guru Shovana Narayan's influence extends far beyond the stage. She has touched lives, instilled values, and inspired a generation of dancers who carry forward her legacy with pride and reverence. For them, she is not just a guru; she is a mother, a confidante, and a guiding star. Guru Shovana Narayan represents both tradition and innovation. She embodies the continuity of creativity, demonstrating that art is not just about preserving the past but about creating a future rooted in tradition yet open to new possibilities. As we celebrate her 75th year, it's evident that Guru Shovana Narayan is much more than a dancer; she is a visionary whose life has been dedicated to Kathak. Her legacy extends beyond performances to the hearts of her students and the countless lives she has touched. She is not just a mentor and guide but an inspiring figure whose dedication continues to elevate the art form and inspire those who learn from her.

A CELEBRATION OF INDIA'S TIMELESS CRAFTSMANSHIP

Naayaab highlights India's rich craftsmanship through over 100 masterpieces by renowned artisans. This exhibition blends tradition with innovation, presenting a unique cultural celebration, writes SAKSHI PRIYA

Naayaab, a groundbreaking exhibition platform, is set to become a beacon of India's rich heritage, showcasing over 100 masterpieces by the nation's most celebrated artisans. Spanning three major cities New Delhi, Hyderabad and Mumbai. This exhibition is more than just an exhibition, it is a profound celebration of India's artistic legacy, bringing together over 40 traditional art forms under one roof.



A SHOWCASE OF INDIA'S ARTISTIC DIVERSITY

Naayaab's significance lies in its ability to bring together an extraordinary collection of art forms, each representing a unique aspect of India's cultural fabric. With works from over 70 master artists, including several Padma Shri and Shilp Guru awards, this exhibition is a rare opportunity to witness the pinnacle of Indian craftsmanship. The exhibition highlighted the exceptional craftsmanship of several renowned artisans. Sudarshan Sahoo captivated with his intricate stone carving while Jai Prakash Lakhiawal impressed with his detailed miniature paintings. Khaleel Ahmad showcased his exquisite kilim carpets and Bhuri Bai presented her vibrant Bhil art. Durga Bai Vyam contributed her intricate Gond paintings. The visionary leaders behind Naayaab were Ajay A Singh, Founder Director and Akansha Dixit, Founder & Chief Curator. One of the most captivating pieces is the Inlay Artistry Chest by

Rupan Matharu, a work that exemplifies the exhibition's ethos of blending tradition with modernity. Crafted from Indian rosewood using traditional Hoshiarpur inlay techniques, Matharu's chest replaces the historically used ivory or bone with acrylic, making it both environmentally conscious and a stunning piece of art. The intricate patterns and meticulous detailing make it a true testament to the mastery of Indian artisans. Another powerful piece is Durga Bai Vyam's Gond Painting "Climate in Crisis", which uses symbolic imagery to address the resilience of nature in the face of human activity. This painting not only showcases the intricate detailing typical of Gond art but also delivers a poignant message about environmental conservation. Jai Prakash Lakhiawal's Shrinathji in Tanjore and Miniature Fusion painting is another highlight, merging Tanjore and Pichwai styles

to create a resplendent depiction of the Hindu deity. The use of gold leaf and natural pigments elevates this piece to a new level of artistic brilliance. The Heritage Red Sozni Shawl by Bashir Ahmed Bhatt is a must-see for those interested in traditional Indian textiles. This exquisite shawl, with its intricate embroidery of 600 stitches per centimeter, took four years to complete and is a tribute to the time-honored skills of Kashmiri Sozni artisans.

MASTERPIECES OF CRAFTSMANSHIP

Among the many remarkable pieces, Shiva Kumar's Tri Panel Mythic Tales stands out as a masterpiece of wood inlay and carving. Spanning six years in the making, this wooden set depicts narratives from the lives of Lord Rama and Lord Krishna across three panels, showcasing scenes like Sri Rama Pattabishekam,



Vishwaroopa and Krishna Leela. The craftsmanship is so intricate that concealed handles reveal a hidden third panel, an engineering feat in itself. The use of different woods and seashells for vibrant hues, along with hand-carved Yali motifs on the outer frame, make this artwork a true marvel. Another notable piece is Mukesh Kumar Soni's Maharaja Brooch Pendant, a stunning example of Meenakari on gold. Inspired by the regal bearing of Rajput personages, this pendant cum brooch combines uncut diamonds, baroque freshwater pearls, glass, spinels, and gold to create a piece that is both opulent and refined. The intricate designs on both sides, along

with the use of vibrant enamel colors, reflect the rich tradition of Meenakari, an art form passed down through generations since the Mughal era.

A PLATFORM FOR PRESERVATION AND INNOVATION

Naayaab is more than just an exhibition; it is a movement aimed at preserving and reviving India's traditional art forms. The long-term vision of making Naayaab an annual event, both in India and globally, is commendable. By doing so, the organizers hope to inspire the next generation of artisans and ensure that these invaluable skills continue to thrive. As an art enthusiast, witnessing Naayaab is both a privilege and a profound reminder of the richness of Indian heritage.



Photos: Pankaj Kumar

The exhibition not only showcases the exceptional talent of Indian artisans but also serves as a platform to elevate these crafts to the global stage, ensuring they are celebrated for generations to come. Naayaab is not just an exhibition, it is a celebration of India's artistic heritage, a platform for master artisans and a beacon of hope for the future of traditional crafts. In an age where digital and mass-produced art often takes center stage, Naayaab stands as a beautiful contradiction, a reminder of the beauty of handcrafted excellence and the importance of preserving cultural legacies. For collectors, connoisseurs and art lovers alike, Naayaab offers a rare opportunity to connect with the soul of Indian culture, to witness the legacy of its artistic heritage, and to support the artisans who dedicate their lives to preserving these traditions. It is an unmissable event that promises to leave a lasting impact on anyone

who values the intersection of history, culture and creativity. Naayaab is not just an exhibition but a profound celebration of India's rich artistic heritage. By bringing together over 100 masterpieces from acclaimed artisans across the country, it offers a unique platform that honors and revives traditional crafts. The intricate works displayed, from the innovative Inlay Artistry Chest to the evocative Gond Painting, illustrate the extraordinary skill and creativity of Indian artisans. This event is a tribute to the enduring significance of these art forms and serves as an inspiring reminder of the beauty that emerges when tradition meets innovation. Naayaab stands as a pivotal moment for both art lovers and cultural enthusiasts, marking a significant step in preserving and promoting India's invaluable artistic legacy.

