

Ek
Prayas

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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 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.

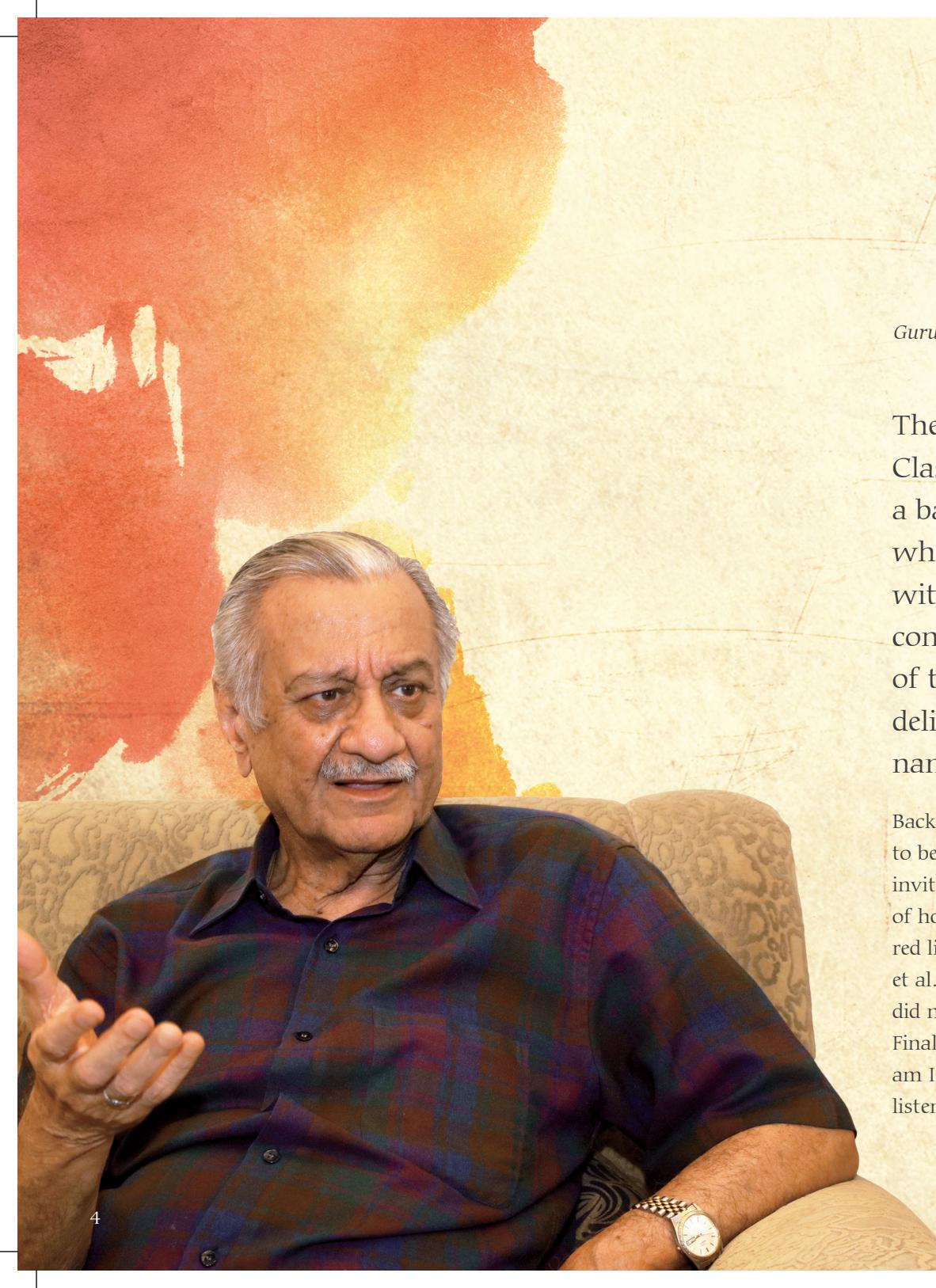
Willingness, because the subjects have been ones that have been very close to my heart. And apprehension because the responsibility is twice as much, when you are attempting to present something as profound as Kashi and Classical music on the one hand and recounting the accomplishments of a lady who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

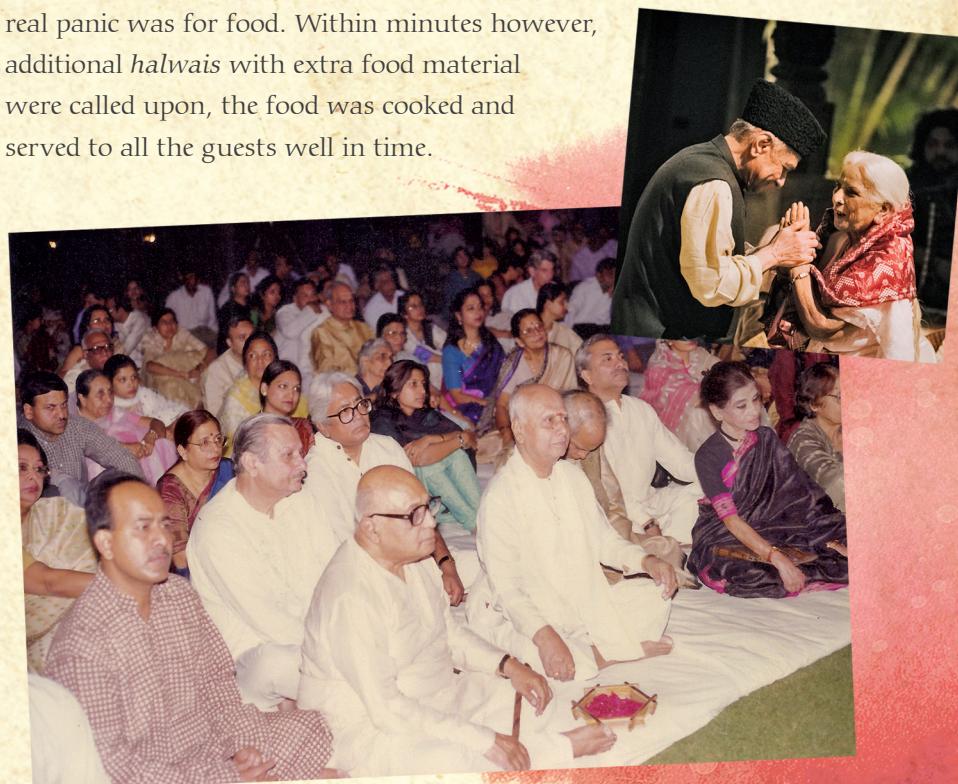
Back in the days of All India Radio, there used to be live broadcasts and a very senior artist was invited to the studio. He was explained the rules of how he must start singing once he sees the red light; shown the control room, microphone et al. Eventually, the light went red but the artist did not 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.

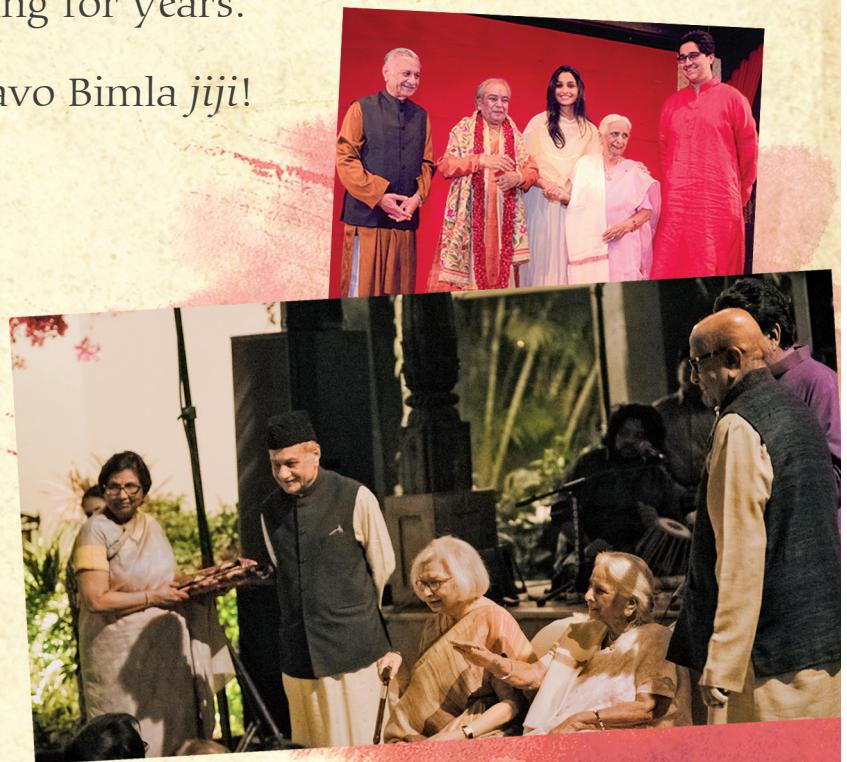
Bimla *jiji* gives the impression of just being a typical good old lady of a reputed Marwari family, busy in protecting and taking care of all the members of the household. Behind it all, it is difficult to notice her dynamism, vision and administrative leadership. Above all is her insatiable desire 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



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*.



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.



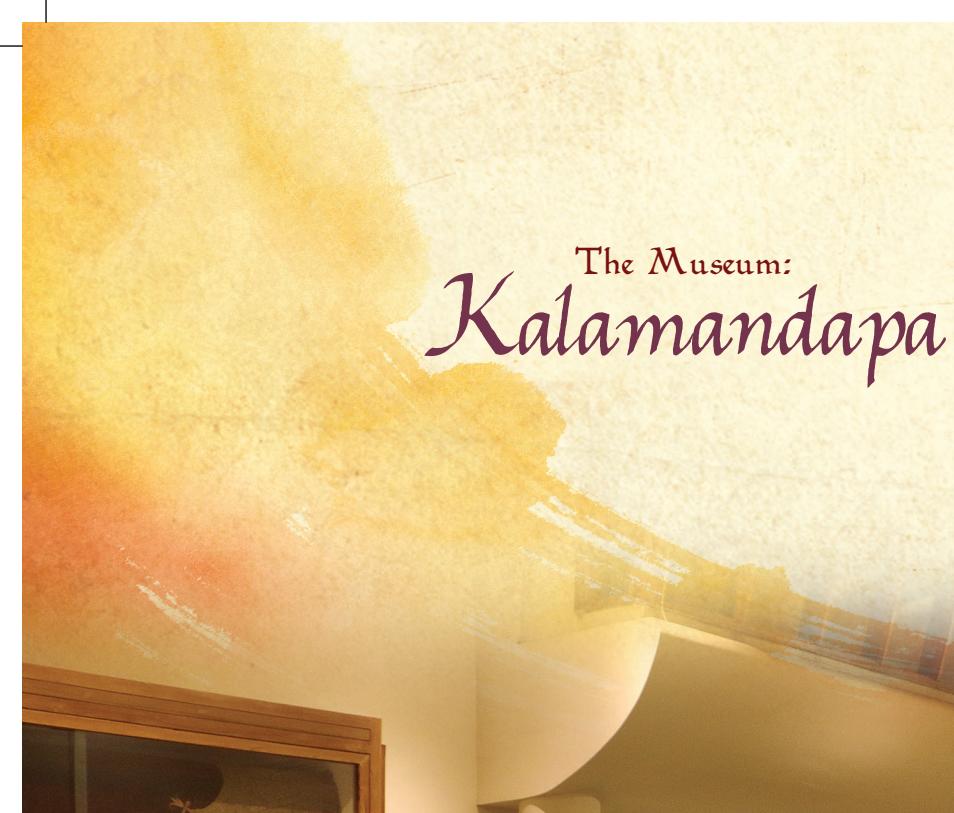


Repousee work or the art of creating a relief design by hammering the reverse side of a metallic sheet is the other form that has been greatly revived at *Jnana Pravaha*. A French word, *Repousse* literally means to push back and is carried out using only two metals: copper and brass. The show room at *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.





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.

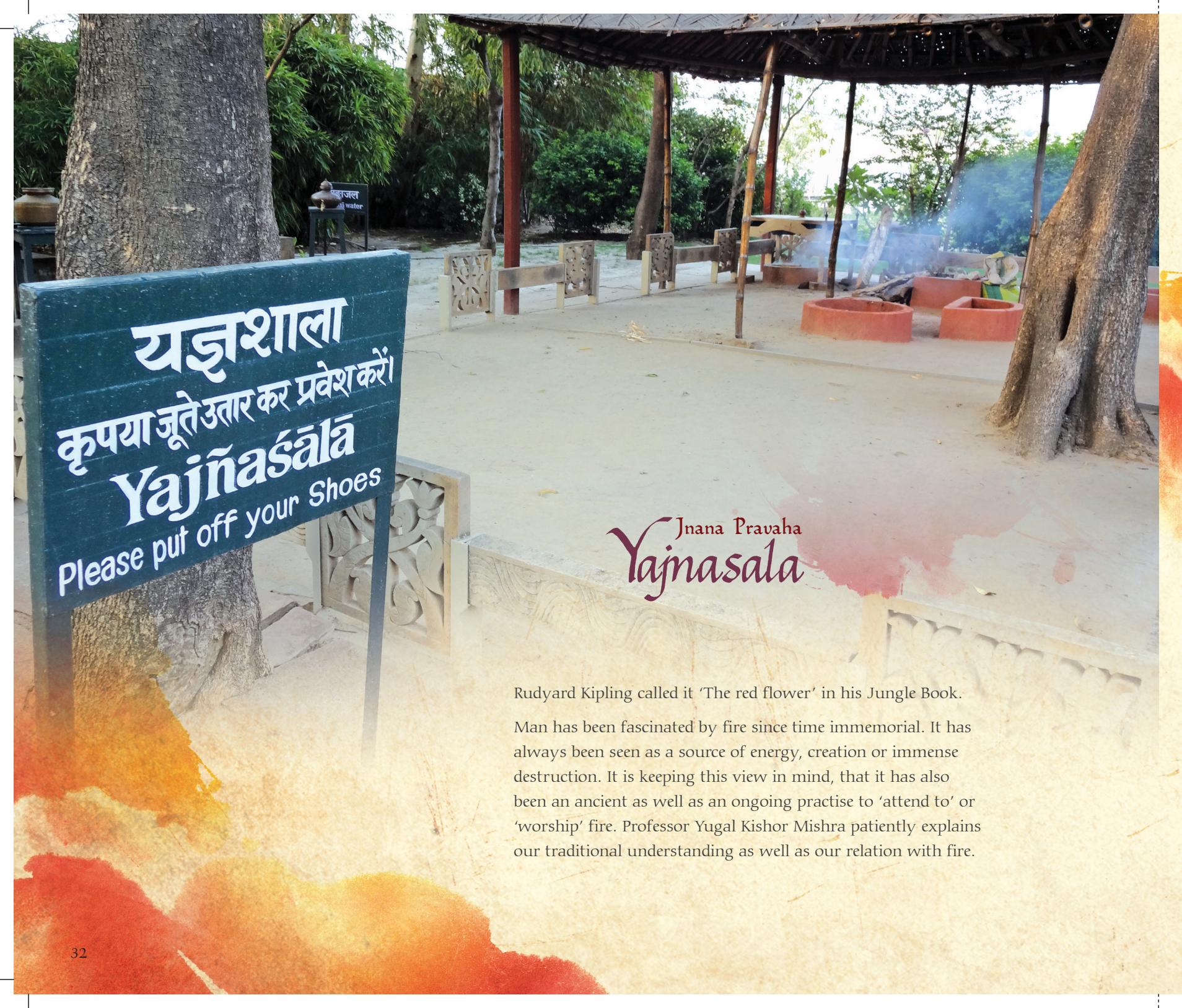
Today, *Jnana Pravaha* has a reference library that consists of about 20,000 books and several rare manuscripts on various aspects of Indology, such as art, culture, philosophy, religion, history, epigraphy, archaeology, numismatics and even Sanskrit.

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 Sahatram 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.



यज्ञशाला
कृपया जूते उतार कर प्रवेश करें।
Yajñāśālā
Please put off your shoes

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 *Yanjasala*."

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!

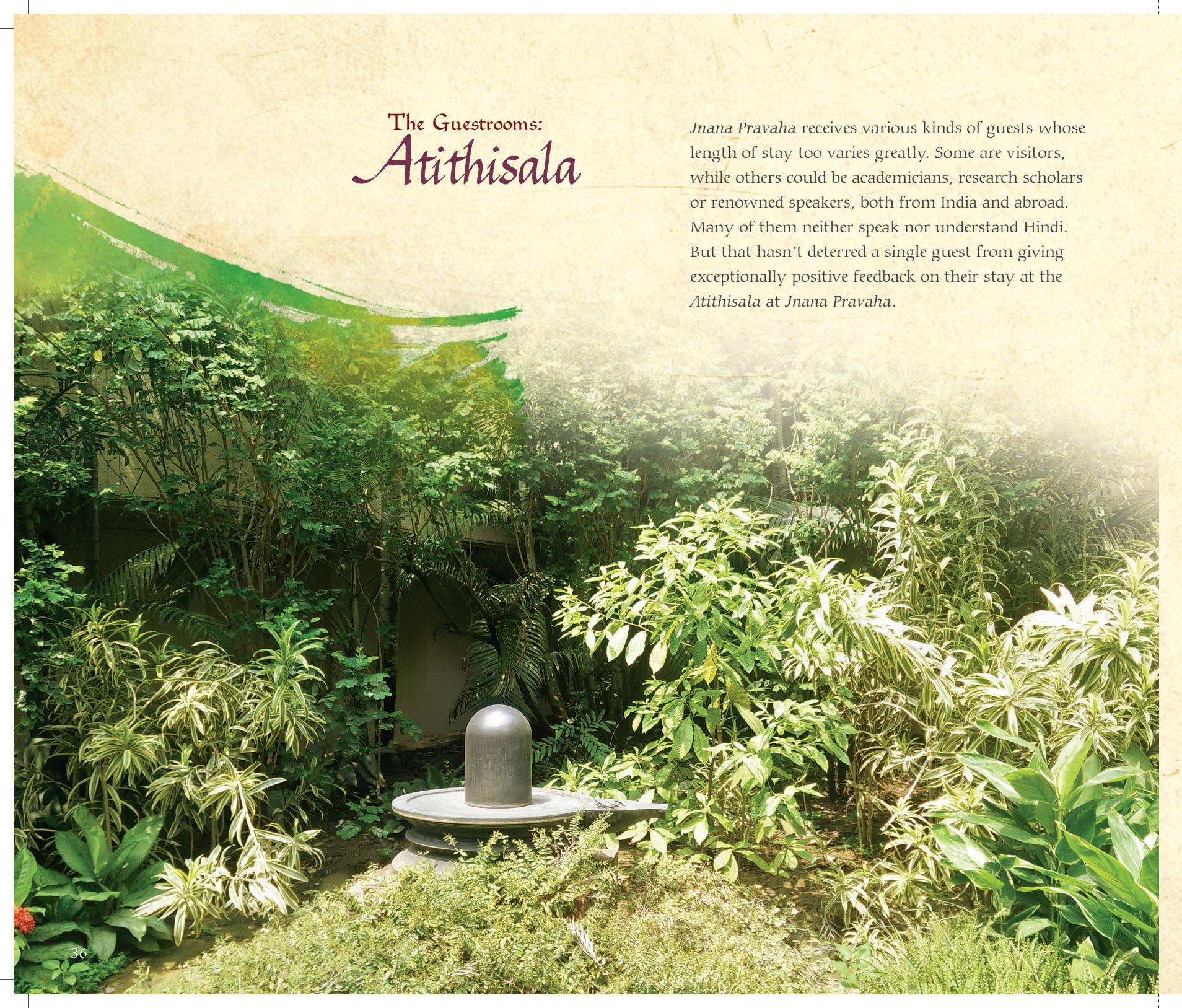




"We cannot see our Gods & Goddesses. They remain invisible to our eye. The only forces we do see are the sun and the moon but we can worship them only from a great distance. It is therefore, only 'agni' or a burning flame that we can have amidst us and bow to as a source of energy," explains Professor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

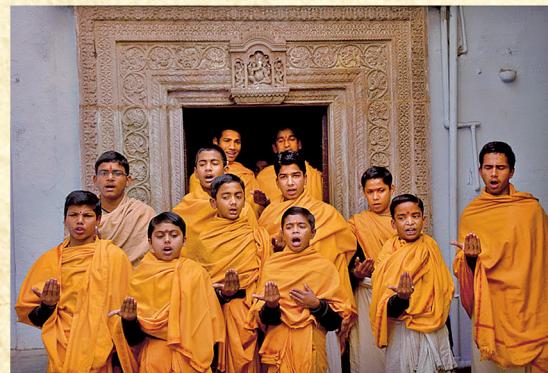
Besides the comfortable guest rooms, there is a common lounge and dining area, one end of which is occupied by a cabinet full of Indian string instruments such as the *sitar*, *tanpura*, *sarod*, *veena* and others. The natural quiet and acoustics almost tempt me to pull out a *tanpura* and tune it for 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, amblers and the invariable bull, till one reaches a heavy wooden door set against intricately carved sandstone.

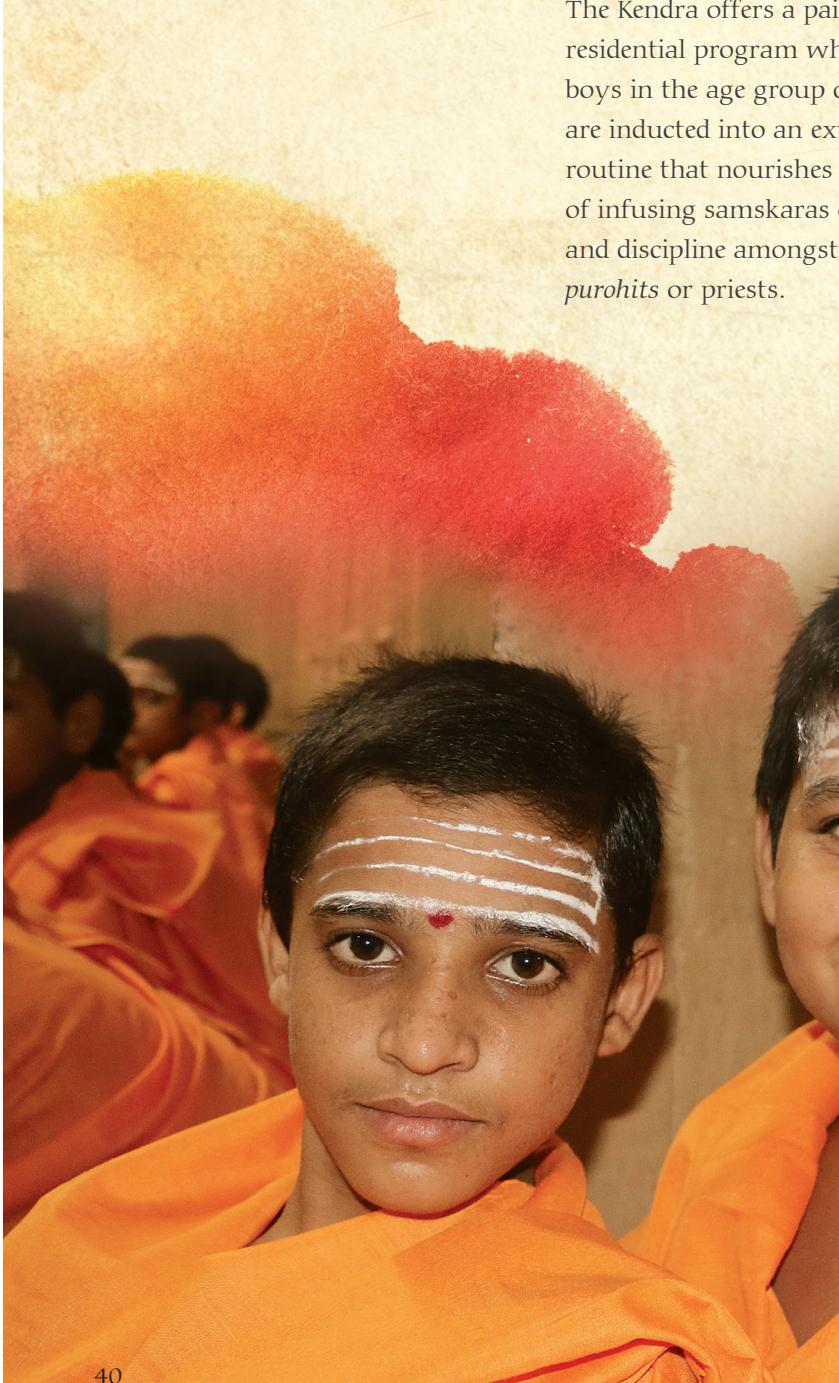
D3/1, *Meer Ghat*, popularly known as *Badi Kothi* or the large mansion has belonged to the family for more than a hundred years. Over the years, *Badi Kothi* has played myriad

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 Pravaha'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 rue 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 *purohitis* 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.

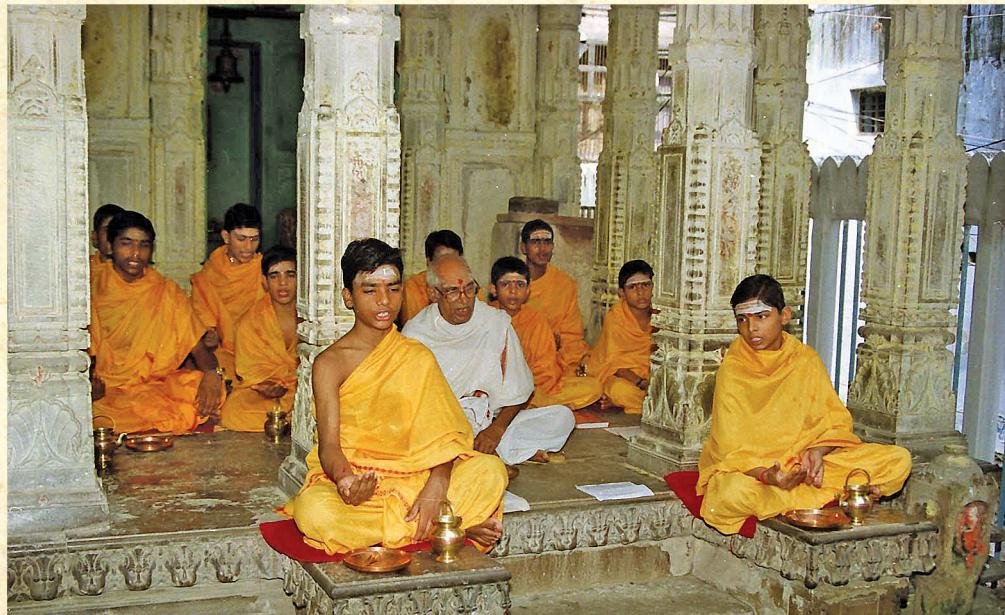




The premise also houses a 200 year old Shiva *Mandir* which is maintained and looked after by the students, who make the daily offerings on a rota basis.

"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.

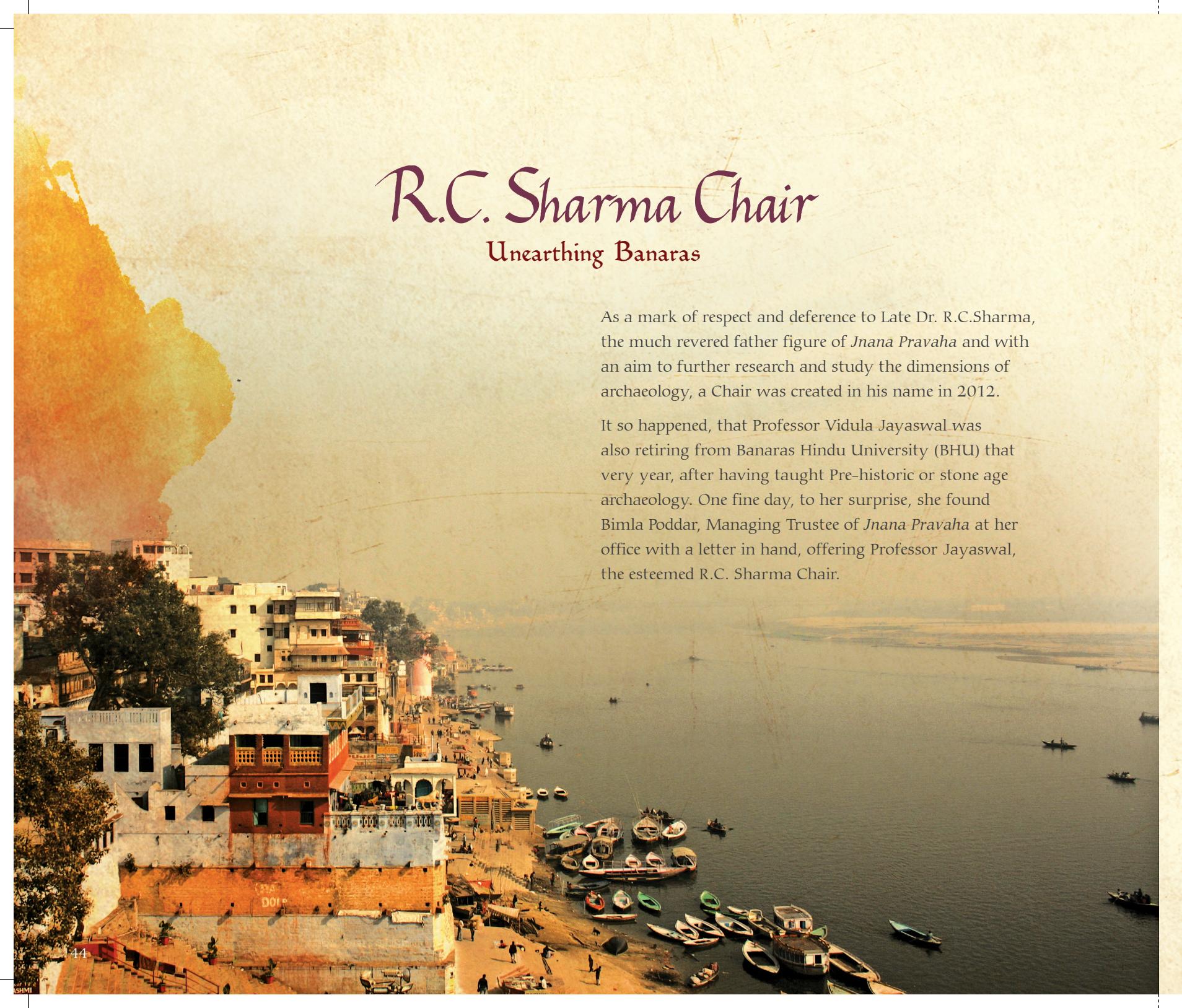
What is noteworthy is that upon completion, each of these boys either opts for higher studies and pursues graduation or post graduation or is immediately absorbed by society for their learning and skill. Not a single one has to worry about making a living.



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."

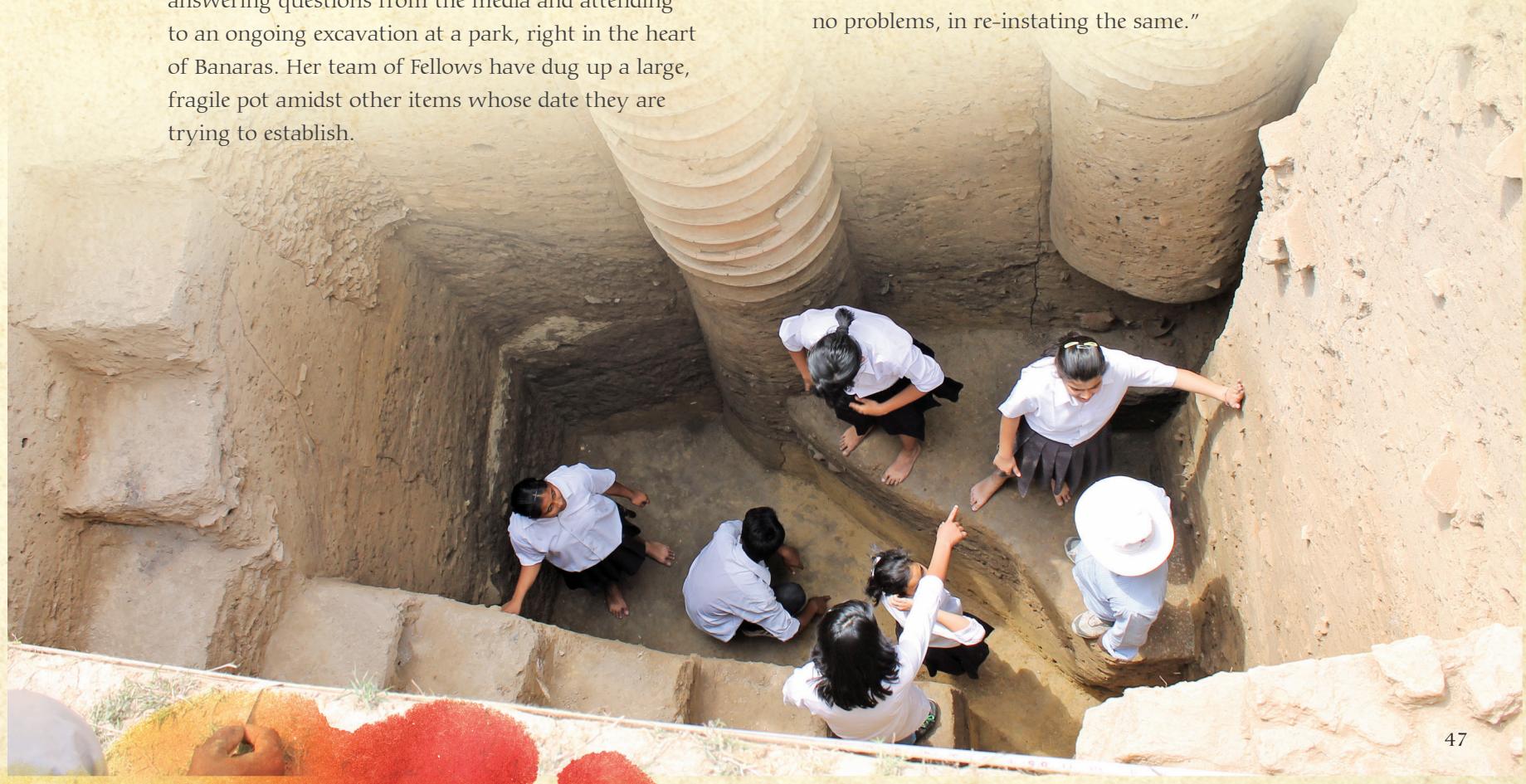
In 2014 excavations at Rajghat, near the Kasi station was completed in joint auspices of *Jnana Pravaha* and the Archaeological Society of India under the guidance of Prof. Vidula Jayaswal and Dr. B.R. Mani. The findings included pottery and other antiquities which were analysed by Dr. Meera Sharma.

"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.

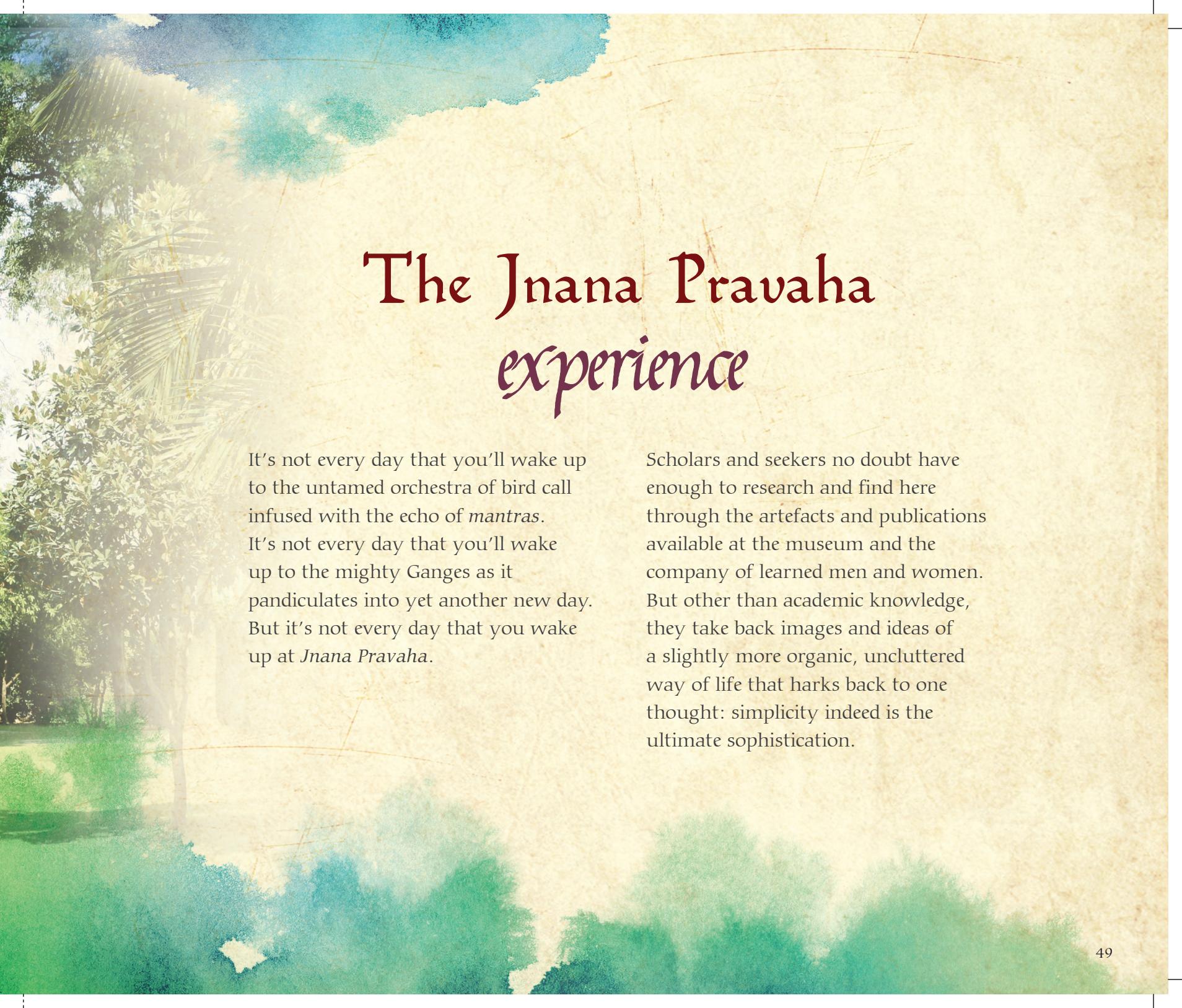
Both Rajghat and Akhta helped us conclude that Varanasi had always had a shifting settlement with Akhta near the valley of Varuna, away from the Ganga being the first stage, Rajghat at the confluence of Ganga-Varuna being the second and the expansion of the settlement on the left bank of the Ganges;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

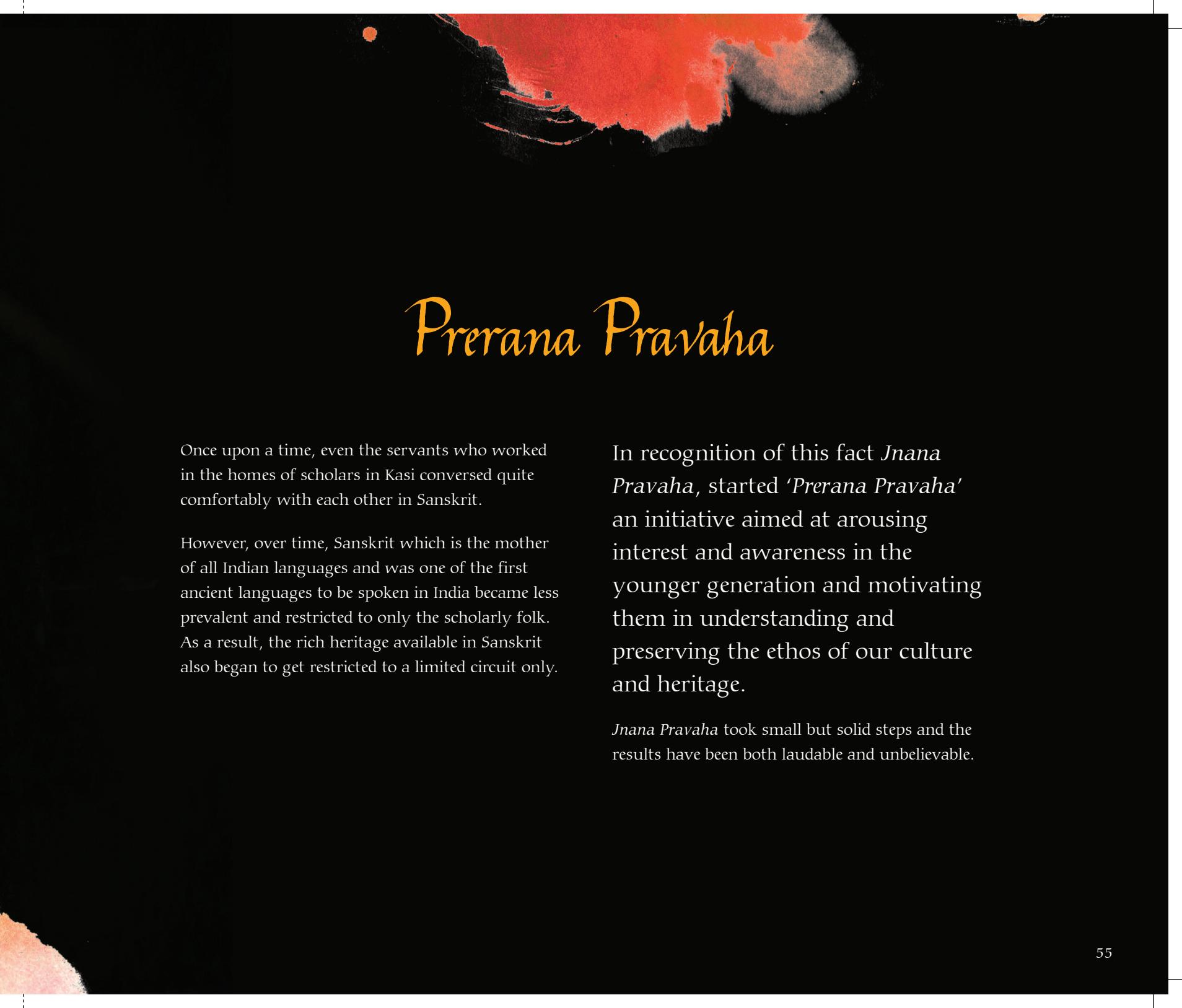
Right from the office bearers to the staff, there is an unmistakable air of bonhomie between all. There's Ramchandra who remembers how you like your coffee and there's Raju who ensures that the office remains spic and span. Many have spent long years; some are relatively new. But that doesn't stop them 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.

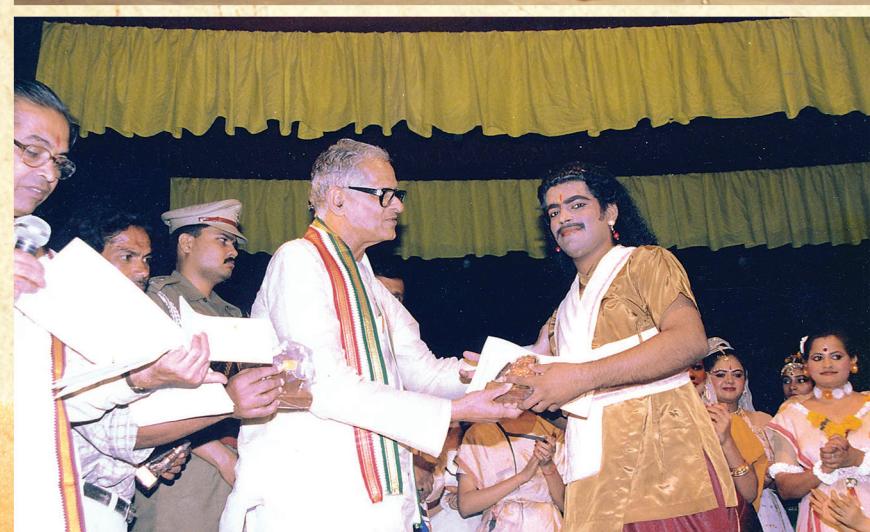
Jnana Pravaha took small but solid steps and the results have been both laudable and unbelievable.

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 Bhagavad 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, Sampoornananda 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 Nathdwara and *Madhubani* Paintings and the topic for the workshop scheduled for February 2017 is 'Pahadi Paintings.'

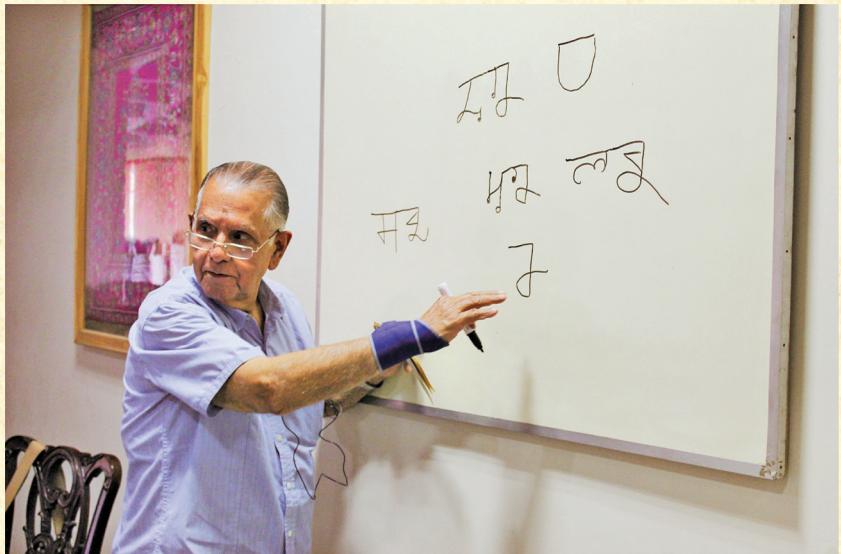


National & International Seminars

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 Anklikar, 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 Sabhaghār 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

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"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



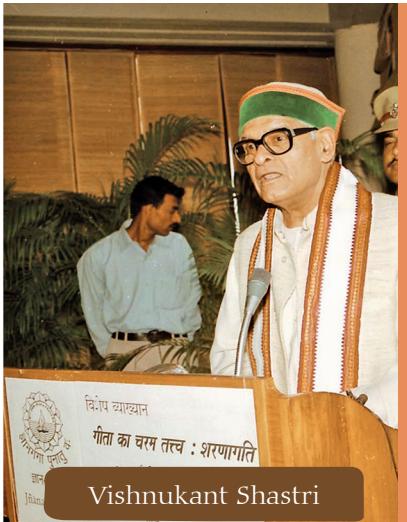


COMMENTS / SUGGESTIONS

अत्यन्त प्रभावित हुए। प्रश्नों की इमारत को जूप में
गोली दी रही है। अपनी गंगाके तरफ परम्परान संग्रहालय
का अद्यायोंजा चेतना को कुमा: ३२ कुरुक्षेत्र द्वारा अध्योजन
है। अद्यक्षमश: पुस्तिक, प्रसारित प्रवर्तित है अस्त्रकर्म का
२२.५ लाख रुपये, प्रश्नों में भी यही प्राप्त होता है।

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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 Revan
British High Commission
New Delhi.



COMMENTS / SUGGESTIONS

What a joy to see this fine institution and to have spent two nights on the banks of the sacred Ganga!

I am greatly impressed by the valuable work being done in Jnana Pravaha under the guidance of Veerji and her team. They are making a significant contribution to the already rich cultural heritage of Varanasi.

Shankhiji
अ॒-न॒मः शिवाय



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 Indian art, history and heritage. Jagmohan (64)

विश्व व्याधान

गीता का संदर्भ

Dr. Karan Singh

संसद (संसद विभाग) कलालयन (कला विभाग विभागालय)

COMMENTS & SUGGESTIONS

This is a wonderful institution and I am deeply grateful to IG Jnana Pravaha and Mrs. Poddar for the great kindness they have shown in organizing our conference here.

Sir Christopher Alan Bayly



Dr. C. Rangarajan

I am deeply impressed by the diversity of activities undertaken by the Institute to promote the study of art and culture. For a city well alone, we must thank all those associated with the Institute. The Museum is truly inspiring.

I had a very great time with the members of Jnana Pravaha. I pray to Lord Viswanatha to bring me here again. I thank all the members to give me such a wonderful time. Dr. Haigpyn Raygoza



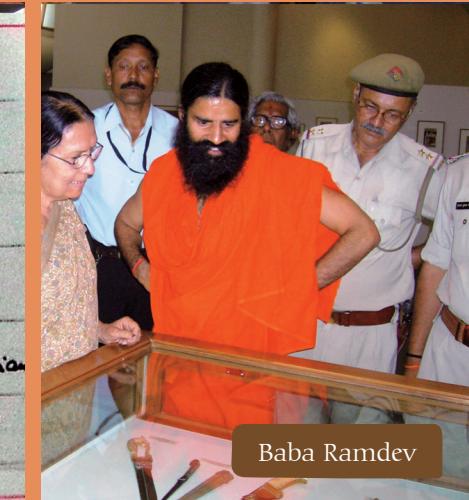
COMMENTS & SUGGESTIONS

I am happy to visit this
beautiful temple of art,
learning and culture - so
fondly nominated by Deoli
and her team. May mother
Ganga's pravah with Jana
pravache glow in endlessly
with prajna. for for

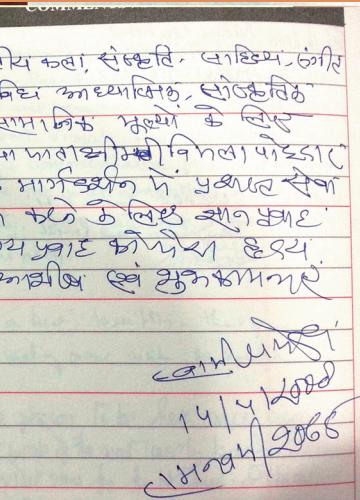
James Bevan



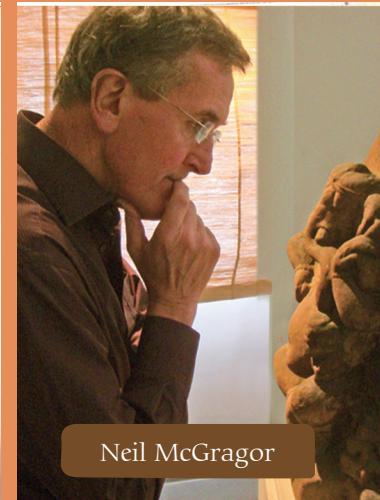
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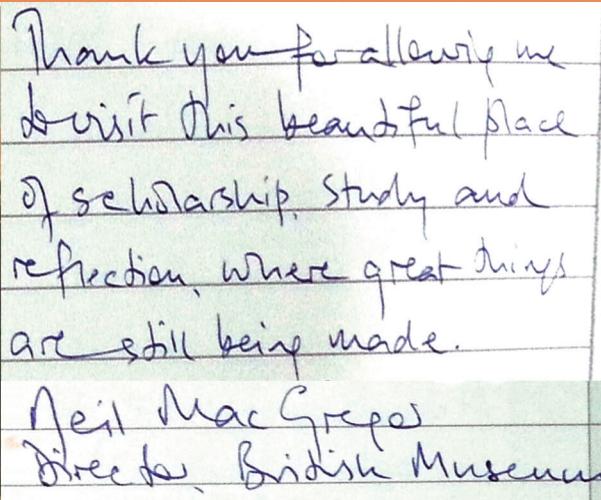
Baba Ramdev



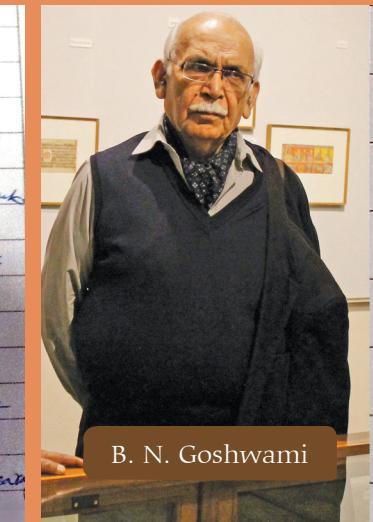
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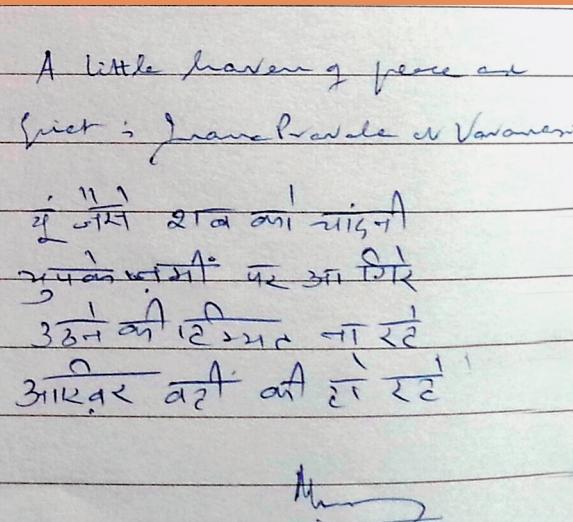
Neil McGragor



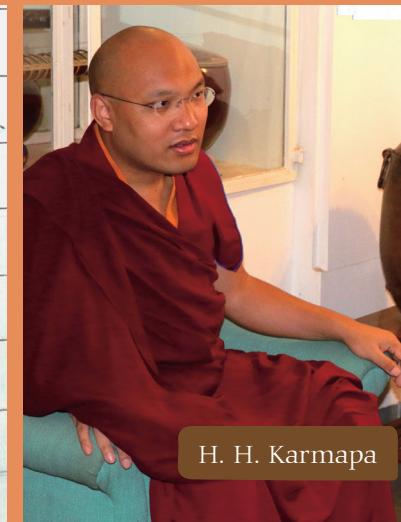
Neil MacGregor
Director, British Museum



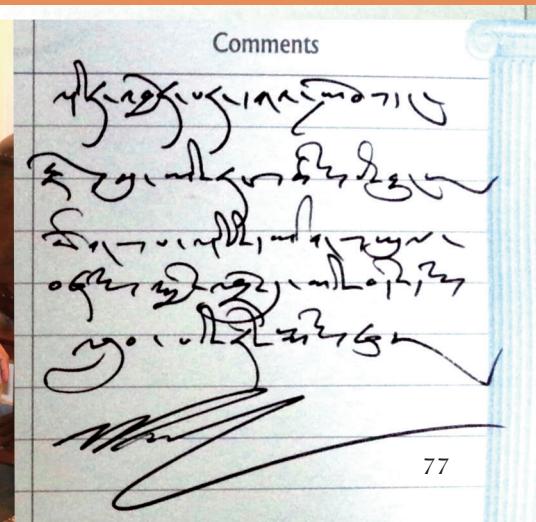
B. N. Goshwami



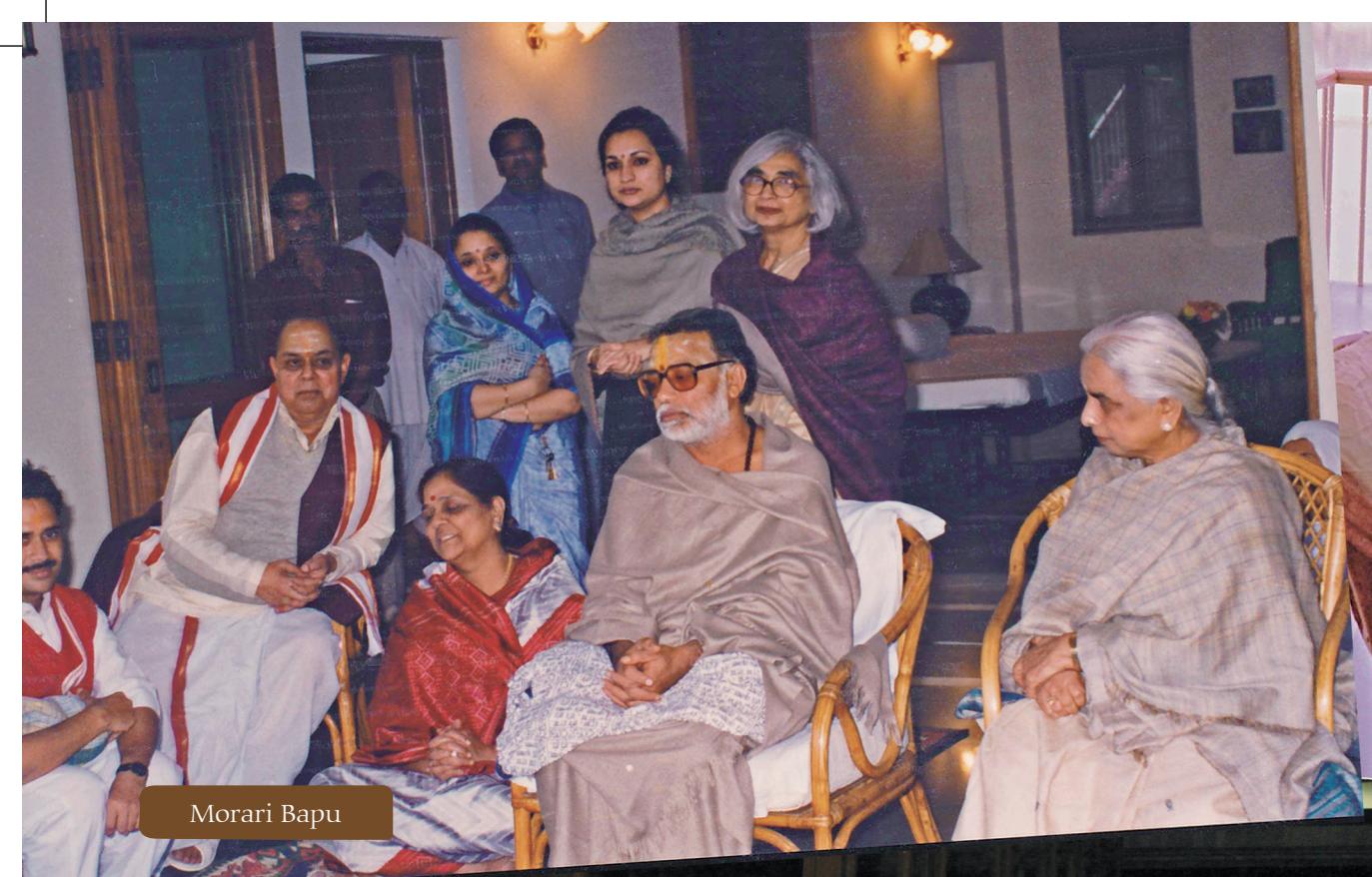
A little haven of peace as
quiet is Grandvala & Varanasi



H. H. Karmapa



Comments





Shankaracharya Jayendra Saraswati



Kapila Vatsyayan



Shyam Benegal

Invocation

प्रसादाद्विश्वनाथस्य काश्यां भागीरथीतटे।
वृद्धिज्ञानप्रवाहे स्यात् संस्कृतेश्चानुशीलने॥

*prasādādviśvanāthasya kāśyāṁ bhāgīrathītaṭe /
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.*



