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The rituals, familial bonds, and celebrations still form the heart of these events



SHELTERS of HOPE

From cold streets to warm refuges
STORIES OF SURVIVAL IN RAIN BASERAS

Early this January, as winter's chill gripped the city, Rain Baseras became vital sanctuaries for the homeless. Despite challenges like overcrowding and poor hygiene, Rain Baseras stood as beacons of hope, highlighting the strength of the human spirit and the need for compassionate support during the harshest times.

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Shelters of hope...

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As the winter chill wraps its icy fingers around the city, the humble shelters known as Rain Basera become havens of warmth and hope for those living on the fringes of society. Nestled in various corners of the city, these night shelters provide a refuge for the homeless and destitute, offering them a reprieve from the harsh cold. In these spaces, stories of resilience, struggle, and endurance emerge, painting a poignant picture of survival against the odds.

Sonu, who stays at a Rain Basera near the Clock Tower, spends his days ironing clothes to make a living and finds solace and warmth in the shelter at night. Originally from a remote village, Sonu supports his family back home. He finds comfort in the provisions at Rain Basera, saying, "We get a blanket, a pillow, and a bedsheet here. It's enough to keep us away from the biting cold." He also expressed gratitude for the heater that keeps them warm and makes the frigid nights bearable.

Rani, with two small children to look after, manages a kiosk selling pan masala near Hotel Clarks Awadh. Her husband, lost to alcohol, is of no help, leaving her to bear the burden alone. For Rani, the Rain Basera at Parivartan Chowk is a stroke of luck. "In this biting cold, having a roof over our heads is a relief," she remarked, her smile fraught with fatigue yet gratitude. She also mentioned how the shelter has become a place where she can connect with other women facing similar struggles, providing a sense of community and mutual support.

Rehman, a feeble seventy-nine-year-old man, spends his days begging near the Kaiserbagh Bus Stand. Initially, he was not sheltered due to the lack of an Aadhaar Card, a policy prerequisite, forcing him to spend six chilling nights outside. He was later allowed in and given medicine and a bed. "This place saved my life," he said. Rehman's story highlights the bureaucratic hurdles that can sometimes prevent the most vulnerable



Pictures: SHRUTI KAPOOR

from accessing essential services.

While these stories highlight the significance of Rain Baseras, they also reveal the hardships experienced by their residents. Women and families face unique challenges. Many women working during the day return to find their allocated bedding dirtied or occupied. Most men are drunk and would rather lock such women out. "It's very uncomfortable for us," said a woman, explaining that there is no dedicated space for families. The lack of privacy and safety for women and children is a major concern that needs to be addressed.

Hygiene is another pressing concern. The shelters reek of garbage, and very little is done to clean them. "It smells so bad sometimes that it's difficult to sleep,"

lamented Rani, summing up the feelings of many others. The poor sanitary conditions pose health risks, especially during the winter when illnesses can spread more easily.

Nevertheless, Rain Basera residents are resilient. They adapt by forming communities within shelters and supporting each other in desperate times. The winter chill is unforgiving, but the voices of resilience in Rain Baseras remind us of the strength of the human spirit and the importance of collective efforts to create a more inclusive, compassionate world. The stories of Sonu, Rani, and Rehman are just a few examples of the countless individuals who find hope and warmth in these shelters, despite the many challenges they face. ■

MESSIAH ON WHEELS

The inspiring story of Suneel Shukla

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In a bustling city where daily struggles are often overlooked, there are unsung heroes, who go beyond their ordinary duties, to make a difference. Suneel Shukla, an e-rickshaw driver, is one such person. In the busy streets of Lucknow, where traffic congestion and long commutes are a part of daily life, Suneel stands with a light of kindness for disabled people, who find themselves in a spot of bother. He has put a poster on his e-rickshaw, stating, "Divyang ke liye nishulk seva", with his phone number. It has been more than a year since he started helping disabled people. For his selfless act, he was given a certificate of appreciation and honoured with Divya Karmayogi Samman.

His humanity doesn't stop at disabled folks. On many occasions, he also helped students who were in Lucknow for competitive exams and were struggling with money, patients from other cities, and job-seekers. Born and raised in a small village, Kodiya Bazaar, in Gonda, he moved to Lucknow in search for work.

He lives near Awadh bus station, He co-habits with four others from his village, in a small room, sharing a rent of ₹5000 a month.

What truly motivated him to become a lifeline for disabled people? In an interview with Expressions, he had a one-word answer, "Insaniyat". Further, he added, "In today's world, humanity is the virtue that is most lacking. Humanity can't be bought with money, nor can it come with formal education from an

expensive institution. It is born in one's heart, one's character," he added.

Besides the disabled, he also transports ordinary folks who can pay for their fare, so that he can make a living, and save some money to send back home.

Suneel Shukla is a beacon of hope in a selfish inhuman world. His story is a testament to the power of kindness and community service, demonstrating that even one individual can make a significant difference in the lives of many. ■

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Picture: RAMZI HASAN



MODERN GROCERY WARFARE

Kirana stores losing the battle



Pictures: RICHA GOEL

RICHA GOEL

Master of Journalism & Mass Communication

Let us rewind to when our mothers sent us to buy groceries with a long-jotted list in our hands. We all had at least one kirana shop in our locale where familiar faces greeted us and a strong bond of trust grew over a period of time.

Post-COVID, the rise of grocery delivery apps such as Blinkit, Swiggy, Instamart, and Zepto abruptly changed the way we shop for everyday essentials. We're able to compare prices, avail discounts, and have groceries delivered to our doorsteps, with just a few taps on smartphones. While this convenience has been a boon for many, it has put traditional kirana shops in a tough spot.

"Customers open apps in front of us and then tell us they are getting a particular item at a cheaper rate. We can't afford that discount since it will be a huge loss to us," said Mahesh Gupta, a kirana shop owner in Udaiganj, Lucknow. These apps, usually owned by big conglomerates, offer discounts that shop owners cannot match. "Another issue is the decline in

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Even loyal customers have started relying on apps for convenience. There was a time when customers would come with long lists, and monthly groceries were regularly supplied from our shops.

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the number of customers, especially after COVID—how are we supposed to serve when we barely are getting customers at times," continued Mahesh.

"Even loyal customers have started relying on apps for convenience. There was a time when customers would come with long lists, and monthly groceries were regularly supplied from our shops," said Ram Babu, another shopkeeper in the same locality.

In research on shopkeepers in other localities, the views were the same; they echoed the same concern.

The struggle is not just financial as the sense of being replaced by impersonal apps is disheartening for many shop owners. It's hard for them to see their livelihood slowly diminish. But they continue because this is what they've built and all they've got. That's a sentiment, which seems to be shared widely among kirana shopkeepers.

As technology has gradually developed, the task of buying groceries has become less frequent, relieving many of the mundane task, but also stripping away the joy for shop owners in attending to customers and earning a decent living for their families. ■

Dry fruits from the wet hills

SUPRIYA SRIVASTAVA

Bachelor of Journalism & Mass Communication

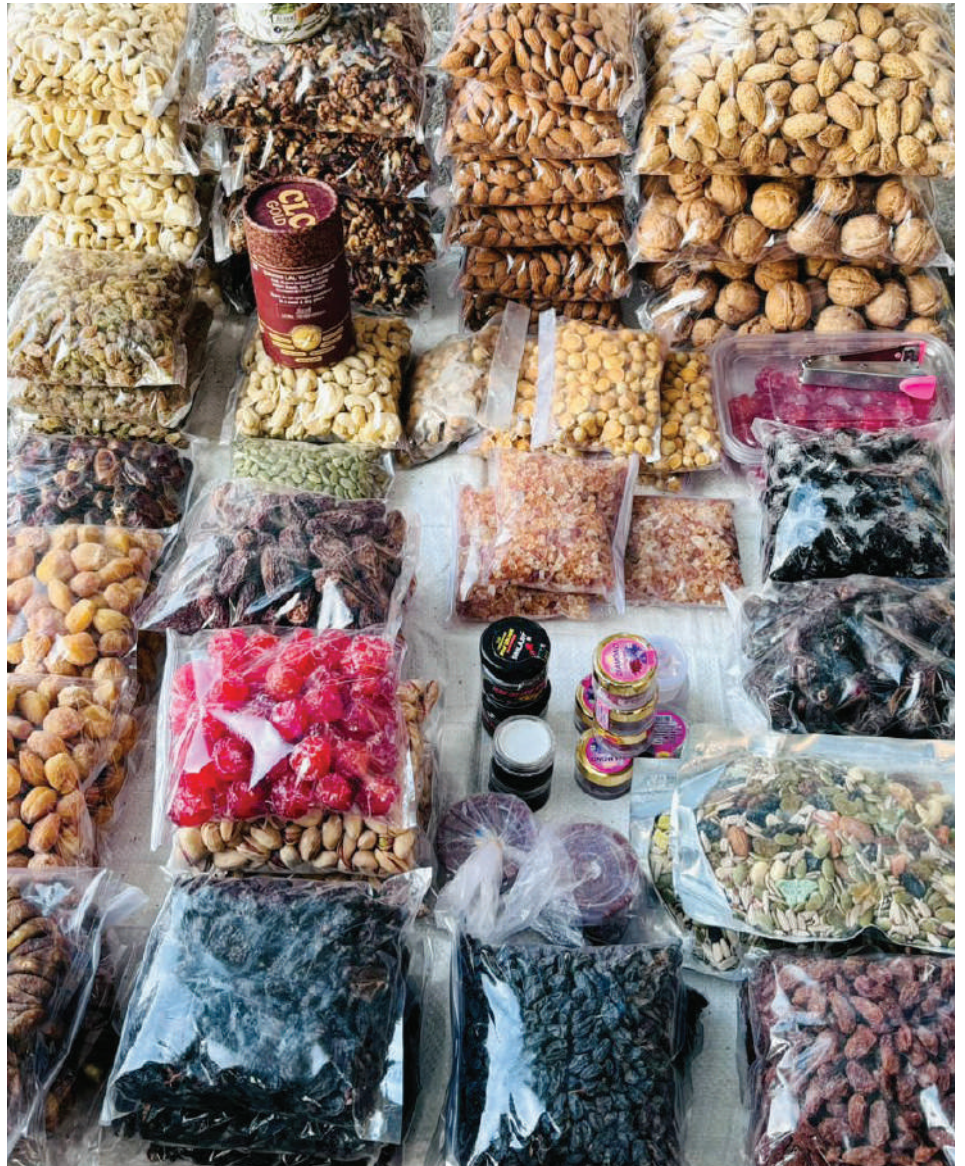
As winter sets in, Lucknow's streets come alive with Kashmiri dry fruit sellers, bringing a vibrant array of colours, sweet aromas, and warm hospitality. Their traditional attire, smiles, and stories weave a spell of enchantment, making the experience a celebration of community and resilience.

During our quest to unravel the tales of these sellers, we came across Irfan Wani, a dry fruit vendor in Lucknow. He told Expressions, "We leave Kashmir in September to come here with at least five months of stock. Almonds, walnuts, and saffron are in high demand throughout the winter months, and Kashmiri dry fruits are of unparalleled quality and flavour." Leaving the comforts of their home, Kashmiri traders find it extremely difficult to make a life in other cities.

According to Asif Lone, a 37-year-old saffron trader from Anantnag, "Transporting dry fruits to other cities is expensive. During our time in Lucknow, year after year, we live in Kaiserbagh, in a single room, with two other such vendors." Their concerns extend beyond their daily sales to the complexities of their homeland's politics.

Shafiq Ahmad, a walnut trader from Pampore, stated in an interview with Expressions, "The abrogation of Article 370 has significantly impacted our business. Kashmir needs basic amenities, government jobs, private factories, etc. Farmers, dealers, craftspeople and vendors like myself do not want empty promises but strong government policies that help us flourish. Leaders like Omar Abdullah frequently talk about restoring Article 370, but what we actually want is peace and stability above everything else."

Over the years, they've built a loyal customer base, with many coming year after year to buy their favourite dry fruits from the same familiar faces. Rajeev Singh, a resident of Gomti Nagar, Lucknow, said, "I've been buying dry fruits



from these Kashmiri vendors for years. Their quality is consistently excellent, and they always ensure that I receive the freshest stock."

Their journey from Kashmir to Lucknow demonstrates their persistence, resulting in a wonderful blend of culture, tradition, and perseverance. ■

Pictures: SUPRIYA SRIVASTAVA

Sacred WATERS

Pilgrims seek purification at the Maha Kumbh Mela 2025

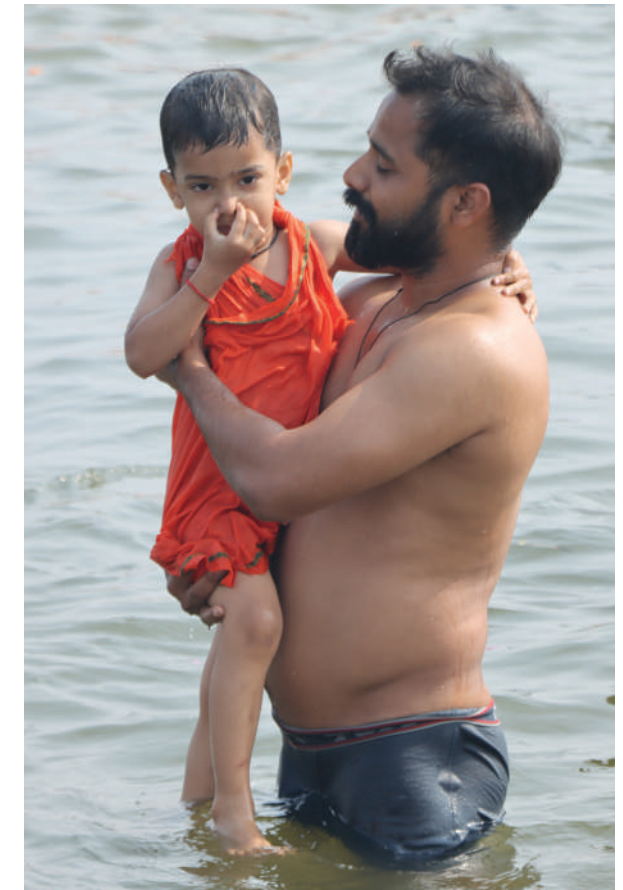
DR. MOHIT SHARMA
Assistant Professor, Amity School of Communication

During the Magha month, Prayagraj's sacred Sangam transforms into a vibrant theatre of devotion and faith. Pilgrims from all walks of life gather at the Maha Kumbh Mela 2025, stepping into the holy waters of the Ganges, Yamuna, and the mythical Saraswati rivers. They immerse themselves in the chilly waters, seeking purification and spiritual renewal. The air is

filled with the sound of sacred chants and the splash of water as thousands take the holy dip, believing it absolves their sins and leads to salvation.

Among the devotees, families hold hands, sharing this profound experience together. Elderly pilgrims, supported by younger relatives, symbolise the passing of traditions through generations. Nearby, sadhus with ash-smeared bodies and matted hair perform rituals, adding to the mystical atmosphere.

This scene at the Kumbh Mela captures the essence of India's rich spiritual heritage and the enduring power of faith. ■



Pictures: ABHISHEK SINGH

Pink booths

A beacon of hope and safety for women in Lucknow

MARIA SIDDIQUI & BHAVNA SONI

Bachelor of Journalism & Mass Communication

A 14-year-old student at a prominent girls' intermediate college in Lucknow, found herself in a distressing situation when a classmate began following and harassing her. Reluctant to confide in her family or approach the police, she recalled a session conducted at her school by some female police officers, explaining the purpose of Pink booth.

Summoning her courage, she dialed the number provided during the session. Her complaint was swiftly addressed, the boy cautioned, thereby providing a quick resolution.

Introduced as a part of the Mission Shakti Initiative, Pink booths are symbols of women's safety and empowerment. These special cabins or booths set up at strategic locations, are meant to provide a safe space where women can report issues without hesitation.

The first phase of Mission Shakti commenced in October 2020 during which Pink Booths were established at major crossings in Lucknow such as 1090, Bandariyabagh and Cabinetganj. Today, Lucknow has over 100 Pink booths strategically placed near schools, bustling streets and parks. At the iconic 1090, the



Pictures: MARIA SIDDIQUI & BHAVNA SONI

eye-catching, double-storied pink structures that house these booths are difficult to miss. In a personal interview, Rishu Sharma (29), a police officer stationed at 1090 Pink booth, highlighted the advantages of these booths over traditional police stations. "In the absence of such booths and fewer women officers in police stations, women were scared and uncomfortable in narrating their problems to male officers. The situation is different now. Women need not think twice before approaching us in here."

The lady officers not only attend to complaints but also run daily awareness campaigns, going around on government-provided pink scooters.

Pink Booths are functional between 10 am and 8 pm. Therefore, there are valid concerns raised about the limitations associated with the booths. Officer Poonam Verma, stationed at Pink Booth in Lalbagh, spoke on the issue: "In areas such as Charbagh, with round-the-clock footfall, including many women, Pink Booths are functional 24/7.

She further explained the procedure: "As soon as we receive a complaint, we

approach the accused and summon them to the police station. They are strictly warned to desist, and in some cases, even penalised. However, if they are unrelenting, a complaint is formally registered at the police station, with usual procedures followed."

The Pink Booth initiative has contributed to a decline in crimes involving women in cities like Ghaziabad where a 23.33% reduction has been observed. The presence of female police officers not only encourages more women to come forward but also ensures that complaints are handled with empathy and understanding. The officers are trained to provide immediate assistance and counselling, making the process less intimidating for victims.

From being scarce on the streets to ensuring consistent visibility, from a male-dominated force to a balanced representation, these initiatives have helped reshape perceptions. Though perfection remains elusive, Pink Booths symbolise a pivotal step towards women's empowerment and safety made possible only through hard toil by police officers. ■

FROM DAWN TO DUSK

The heartwarming stories of Saadatganj's vegetable vendors

VINAMRA GUPTA

Bachelor of Journalism & Mass Communication

In the heart of Saadatganj's bustling sabzi market, life begins before dawn, when vegetable vendors tirelessly set up their stalls, driven by purpose and perseverance. Among them are people whose stories extend far beyond the greens they sell; stories of survival, sacrifice, and a strong attachment to work.

Mohak, who has owned the wooden stand for a decade, explains, as he sorts the greens, "This is how I support my family. I am a father to three children, and they already have their own concerns. My wife is a homemaker and I don't want to pressure her to earn. So I never tell them about my daily troubles."

He has been sourcing vegetables directly from surrounding farms just after dawn. Bulk buying and knowing when to buy helps get a good deal.

"I lost my husband and decided to start selling vegetables to feed my children," Sheetal Devi, who opened her stall 15 years ago, told Expressions. My kids help me out on the weekends. With the cart all set up, we work as a team, which makes me feel proud. Sellers face rising costs, terrible weather, and long hours of work, but they draw strength from the nature of their jobs.

"Working long hours in the market is not an option, but a necessity," says Shakeel, another vendor, wiping sweat from his brow after another stressful day. "I have young children to provide for, and I can't rely on others to do so. It's exhausting, but their smiles are worth it."

The stories of these vendors reveal a never-ending dedication, formed of love and duty for the community they serve and their own families. Their stalls are more than just places to sell veggies; they also support their families and construct better lifestyles. When we buy from them, we become a part of their journey, helping them keep their dreams and traditions strong. ■



Pictures: VINAMRA GUPTA

VOWS TO WOW

The changing face of Indian marriages

YUVIKA SINGH

Bachelor of Journalism & Mass Communication

Nowadays, Indian weddings are a whole new realm of discussion. They have transitioned into extravagant, multiday events where every detail is attentively planned and executed. From luxurious venues to bespoke trendy designer outfits that set them unique, couples and their families strive for matchless, memorable experiences.

Modern weddings often include pre-wedding shoots, theme-based décor, and a variety of entertainment options, ranging from live bands to firework displays. In the past, Indian weddings were simple yet meaningful, deeply rooted in traditions and rituals.

While organising ceremonies, families relied on relatives and neighbours for help. The aim was to follow customs and traditions, and the charm lay in the element of togetherness.

A modest feast, traditional music, and handcrafted decorations were enough to make the day special. The venues used to be common and simple- homes, community halls, or banquet spaces. Décor was minimal yet meaningful, often handmade

by family members, symbolising love and personalisation. In contrast, millennials introduced a wave of creativity and experimentation to their weddings. They prioritise personalisation and are eager to try new trends.

Destination weddings, fusion ceremonies, and themed events are staples of millennial celebrations. Simer & Harjeet, a couple to be, said that they want their wedding to be one for the ages. "From pre-wedding shoots to the bidai, we have hired an event management company for flawless planning and execution. The idea is to create a unique experience that reflects our personalities, and is unique from others," said an excited Simer. Their parents didn't mind swapping traditional rituals with modern customised vows or arranging extravagant sangeet nights with professional dancers, hosts and DJs.

Social media has also played a significant role in shaping their approach, with couples striving to create Instagram-worthy moments that stand out and are good enough to post.

In what could be seen as a silver lining, Gen Z, despite being tech-savvy and progressive, seems to be leaning towards an adherence to traditions. They view rituals as important connections to

their roots. They are seemingly inclined towards heritage and traditions.

Gen Z brides often opt for traditional red attires, whereas grooms for white/cream, classic floral décor, and ceremonies conducted in ancestral homes or temples with the closest family and friends. However, they balance this with subtle modern touches, like eco-friendly practices and a small guest list of only important friends and family, emphasising meaningful interactions over grandeur.

The financial dynamics have also evolved through the years. While earlier, weddings were managed within modest budgets, today's celebrations can be skyrocketing. This has led to the emergence of an entire industry involving designers, photographers, caterers, and entertainers.

Despite the modernisation of wedding and wedding rituals, the essence of Indian weddings remains unchanged. The rituals, familial bonds, and celebrations still form the heart of these events.

Indian weddings have come a long way, and their evolution is a testament to the country's ability to embrace change while honouring its roots. Marriage continues to be a celebration of love, family, and culture. ■



Picture: YUVIKA SINGH



Clinging on to straws: Potters and the ancient art

AAROHI SEEM

Bachelor of Journalism & Mass Communication

Pottery is the simplest and the most enduring of all arts. It is the perfect union of utility and beauty. This, one of the oldest art forms, can turn ordinary clay into functional and decorative masterpieces. Everyone could smell the earthly scent of clay which brings all the childhood nostalgia back. Away from the daily chaos of the city these artisans-day in and day out-mould more and more, tirelessly.

The city of Nawabs, Lucknow still carries a rich legacy coupled with creativity, in its famous, 'Chinhat potteries'. The business of pottery saw a major decline during COVID-19. "Before the pandemic, the market was huge. Today, there are just a few stalls on either side of the road," stated Meena, one of the artisans who faced hardships during COVID-19 times. Another potter, Atif, blamed the overuse of plastic in the modern world. "Nowadays, people look at clay art as an

outdated fashion and replace it with plastic which is harmful to health", he stated.

Pottery art not only highlights the creative or cultural aspect but also reflects the mantra of an eco-friendly and sustainable lifestyle. These factors result in financial struggles for these artisans. Sourabh, selling his potteries at Chinhat, shared his plight: "The major earnings of my business are only during the Deepawali season. Rest of the year, we find it hard to arrange even two square meals."

Women in this business often find it difficult to manage their household with work. Anita found these challenges tough to handle initially, but her children supported her unwaveringly. "I am a mother of two and it is not easy to manage your work and family simultaneously. However, my children are extremely supportive. They look after the daily work of the household," she stated. There are millions of women like Anita, who support their families and also manage the household chores.

The art of pottery making, though rare in modern society, has the potential



Pictures: AAROHI SEEM

to bring together the creative and the culture. However, due to the Western influences in our lifestyles, we are losing the shine of this rich art form. The only message of these artisans, it seems, is, "People should recognise the value of the traditional craft and the artisans who are keeping the heritage alive. Appreciate this beauty moulded with dedication and unity." ■

Kashi Labh

MUKTI BHAWAN

Death hotel or spiritual hospice?

ASHKA JAIN

Bachelor of Journalism & Mass Communication

Ever heard of a place where people go to die to attain salvation? Varanasi's Kashi Labh Mukti Bhawan (KLMB) does just that! Located on the banks of the holy Ganges, Kashi is known as the city of Lord Shiva and has long been a hub for education, devotion, and moksha (liberation).

For thousands of years, the core of Hindu theology has been the idea that one can achieve moksha by dying in Kashi. KLMB offers a peaceful haven to individuals who want to spend their final days in the city, searching for moksha. Hindu mythology holds that people who pass away in Kashi while reciting the name of Lord Shiva are released from the cycle of life and death.

The need for a dedicated location for terminally sick devotees seeking moksha was felt in the 20th century as Varanasi's urban sprawl started to take shape. The Dalmia family founded KLMB in 1958.

Rather than medical treatment, it provides people in their last days with a serene and spiritual setting. The goal is

not to extend life, but to assist residents get their minds and souls ready for the final trip. Proximity to Varanasi's most well-known cremation site, Manikarnika Ghat, heightens its solemnity and spiritual impact.

Each of the institution's 12 rooms contains a bed and a fan, among other basic conveniences. The organisation has a distinct set of rules. Potential residents must be elderly or terminally sick, with a high probability of dying soon. The stay is allowed for 15 days only, but it could be extended if death seems likely in a few more days.

The moksha seeker must be accompanied by a family member or caregiver to offer both physical and emotional assistance while they are there. With family members and priests leading rituals, prayers, and mantra chanting, the goal is to enable a tranquil and spiritually satisfying conclusion.

There is a calm and spiritually fervent atmosphere at Mukti Bhawan. Chanting Vedic hymns and prayers is how mornings start. Introspection, prayer, and scripture study are among the many activities that residents engage in. Priests are available to perform rituals that are thought to purify and prepare the soul

for liberation, such as the reciting of the Bhagavad Gita. In their last days, residents frequently find comfort in sharing their life stories and reflecting on their experiences. Knowing that they are completing their spiritual journey by spending their final moments in Kashi has brought great solace to many.

Despite its admirable goals, Mukti Bhawan faces difficulties. It can accommodate a maximum of 12 people at a time. Furthermore, it can be challenging to strike a balance between conventional spiritual activities and contemporary reality.

Mr Pawan Mishra, a 35-year-old had his mother-in-law admitted to this hotel. He explained how peaceful and serene the experience was for him: "The best thing about this Mukti Bhawan is that they chant prayers and mantras all day which keeps the environment spiritual."

Institutions like KLMB provide a timeless reminder of the value of spirituality, compassion, and dignity in life's last moments as the world changes. While some call it the Death Hotel, it is a spiritual hospice, playing a special role as a doorway to salvation in the holy city of Kashi, where life and death interact so dynamically. ■



Pictures: ASHKA JAIN