

**Yesterday
once more in**

Awadh

**Manjari Chaturvedi captures the magic and
history of Lucknow**



*Firdaus-e-Husn-o-Ishq hain
daman-e-Lakhnau
Aankhon mein bas rahi hain
ghazalan-e-Lakhnau*

Travel is an integral part of every artiste's life. Recently, when I was in Lucknow for yet another performance, a gush of memories seized me, and I could not help but surrender to what's called nostalgia. This unique city, the land of Ganga-Jamuni *tehzeeb* (etiquette), is, after all, my

birthplace. It's a city that has greatly impacted my creative work. For me, Lucknow symbolizes a vast ocean of love that gets expressed through poetry, music and dance.

The one-hour drive from the airport into the city makes me realise how things have changed over the years. I now see broad roads, starkly different from the winding ones I knew as a child. Immediately, I am reminded of the many times I went to the airport to drop off or pick up my space-scientist father from his

travels, and that spark of excitement of watching planes take off and land. It was yesterday once again. I was also reminded of carefree school days, spent leisurely in the city – and of college days, marked as they were by apprehensions about having to start a career.

What stays with you is the sense of history this city has. When I was growing up, I learnt to remember routes using specific landmarks, such as a monument with a dome, a winding lane that has a certain quaint shop, or a nondescript temple that every passerby nods their head to, even without looking in its direction. Visiting after all these years, I thought I would know my way around using the same monuments to guide me. But I was quite mistaken. Often, we would find ourselves at a dead-end or winding back to the same point again and again.

City of landmarks

And what landmarks dot the city of Lucknow! It's like its entire history is lived through its buildings – starting with the incredible maze known locally as *Bhul Bhulaiya*, which is located inside the *Bara Imambara*. An impressive, 60-foot-high entrance, with no visible support, leads you into what remains – along with the *Chota Imambara* and the 18th-Century *Rumi Darwaza* (or 'Turkish Gate') – one of the city's most famous monuments. The *Rumi Darwaza*, lying near the *Chowk Market*, displays *Awadhi* architectural grandeur at its best. Growing up, I spent countless hours walking through the winding lanes of old Lucknow, particularly around the *Chowk*, one of the oldest markets in the city. It is just the place to find the right embellishment for my costumes – ornate edgings that recreate a lost time, which are only found in the small shops around the *Chowk* and in *Aminabad*. Surely, such places are a window into the city's rich cultural heritage.

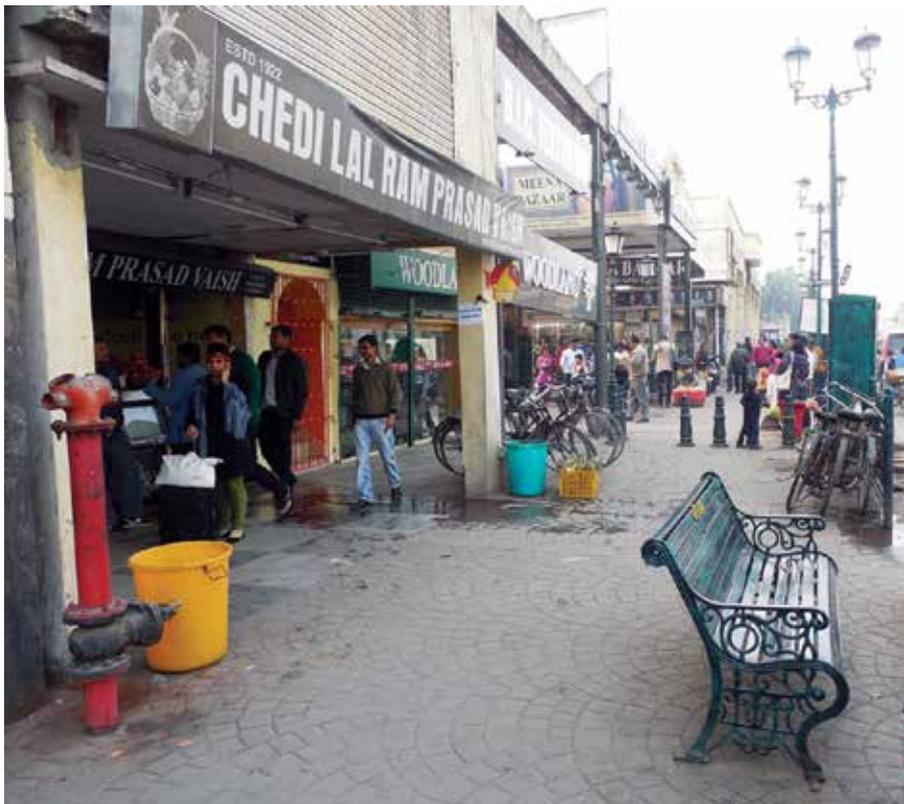


Evoking memories

The first film I shot in Lucknow was located at the Dilkusha Kothi, on a similarly warm day, decades ago. A hunting lodge converted into a summer palace for the royals, the Kothi was badly damaged during the revolt of 1857. Today, the structure has been reduced to a few towers and broken remnants of walls, which stand etched with memories, telling a story of ruin. Yet these bare remnants still draw in countless people, who sit for hours basking in the remains of a luxurious life led. I dance there to recreate a lost time for my audience.

Every Lucknowite knows the term '*ganjing*', which is to walk aimlessly down the roads of Hazratganj, the city's central shopping area. My friends and I would often do just that, browsing through little shops and of course, gobbling golgappas and chaat at our regular haunts. Such was the





popularity of these places that it was usually standing-room only. Now, we cannot even imagine aimlessly walking down the road – Hazratganj, as I see it now while passing through in a car, has had a huge makeover. I do, however, see something that bridges the past and the present: an old coffee house and a Barista lie together on the same road.

Cut to the present...

As my car winds its way into the newer parts of the city, the sprawling wide roads and towering new monuments greet me. Ambedkar Memorial Park, in Gomti Nagar, commemorates people who dedicated their lives to equality and human justice. In front of a huge mall, the new clock tower at Lohia Park – another memorial to social justice – catches my eye. Seeing this, my mind jumps to an image of the Husainabad Clock

AFTER HOURS



Tower, standing tall in the old city, and displaying Victorian-Gothic brilliance with a dial shaped like a 12-petalled flower. In so many ways, the city lives this constant dichotomy of old and new, the winding Gomti River connecting seemingly different worlds that exist within the same city.

My ancestral house on the banks of the river always gave us leeway to freely walk up to the river. As children, we would talk to a lady we knew as 'Nawaben', who lived with a few goats and gave us wild berries ('ber') to eat in season, and often just came by to have tea. Even in her disheveled state, there was always a certain elegance about that seemingly deranged old woman. It was only much later that we came





PHOTO COURTESY: SUSHIL SHARMA

to know that she had owned all the lands on the banks of the river. The wife of a Nawab, her family squandered away all their money, and she was relegated to living off alms in a small hut. My grandmother had bought land from her, and she was always welcome in our house. We unquestioningly continued the tradition until 'Nawaben' died a natural death. I sometimes wonder what she must have felt while seated in our sprawling verandah, sipping tea and eating snacks. Did she wonder if she was in her own space, or, had she become a stranger in her own land? Does time do that to a person?

*Kuch roz ka musafir o mehman
hoon aur kya
Kyun badguman hoon Yusuf-e-
Canaan-e-Lakhnau*

My recent visit came just before Holi, with piles of colour on sale everywhere. Every festival becomes an excuse for over-powering emotions of love to flow freely, magically, unrestrained. It is upon us to channelise these emotions to build harmony among people, and for centuries, the great saints, poets and masters have done exactly that, teaching us love beyond the confines of known boundaries

through poetry, music and dance. As I reach the stage and prepare for the concert, my mind tells me to work to the same end, and as I dance and whirl, I celebrate the very syncretic traditions that this city upholds.

*Ab is ke baad subah hain ur
subah-e-nau, 'Majaz'
Ham par hain khatam hain sham-
e-ghareeban-e-Lakhnau*
(Majaz Lucknawi, 20th century poet
from Awadh)



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