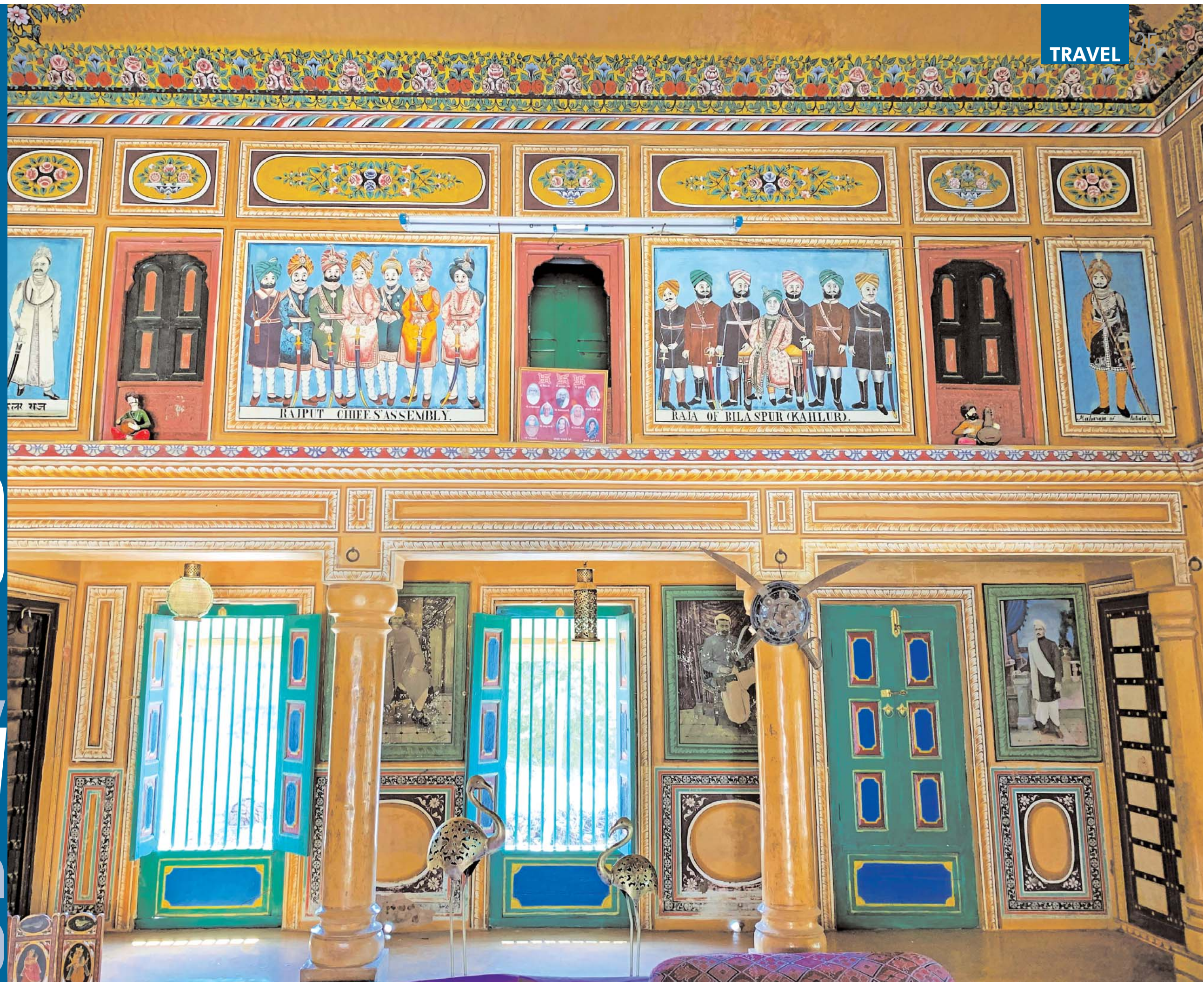


BAGAR, AN OLD SHEKHAWATI TOWN, IS MORE THAN JUST ITS FRESCO-RICH HAVELIS. LOCALS HAVE SMARTLY ADAPTED MODERNITY TO THEIR CIRCUMSTANCE AND UNDERSTANDING. SO THE RESTORATION ARTIST IS ADDING HIS OWN TWIST TO A MURAL. ONE SCENE, WHICH HAD KRISHNA HOLDING A FLUTE, HAS BEEN CHANGED TO KRISHNA SPEAKING ON THE TELEPHONE! **SHOBHIT MAHAJAN** MAPS AN INDIA IN CHANGE WHILE **NANDITA JAIN MAHAJAN** PICKS THE COLOURS FROM THE LOCAL MELA

OLD TOWN, NEW BEATS



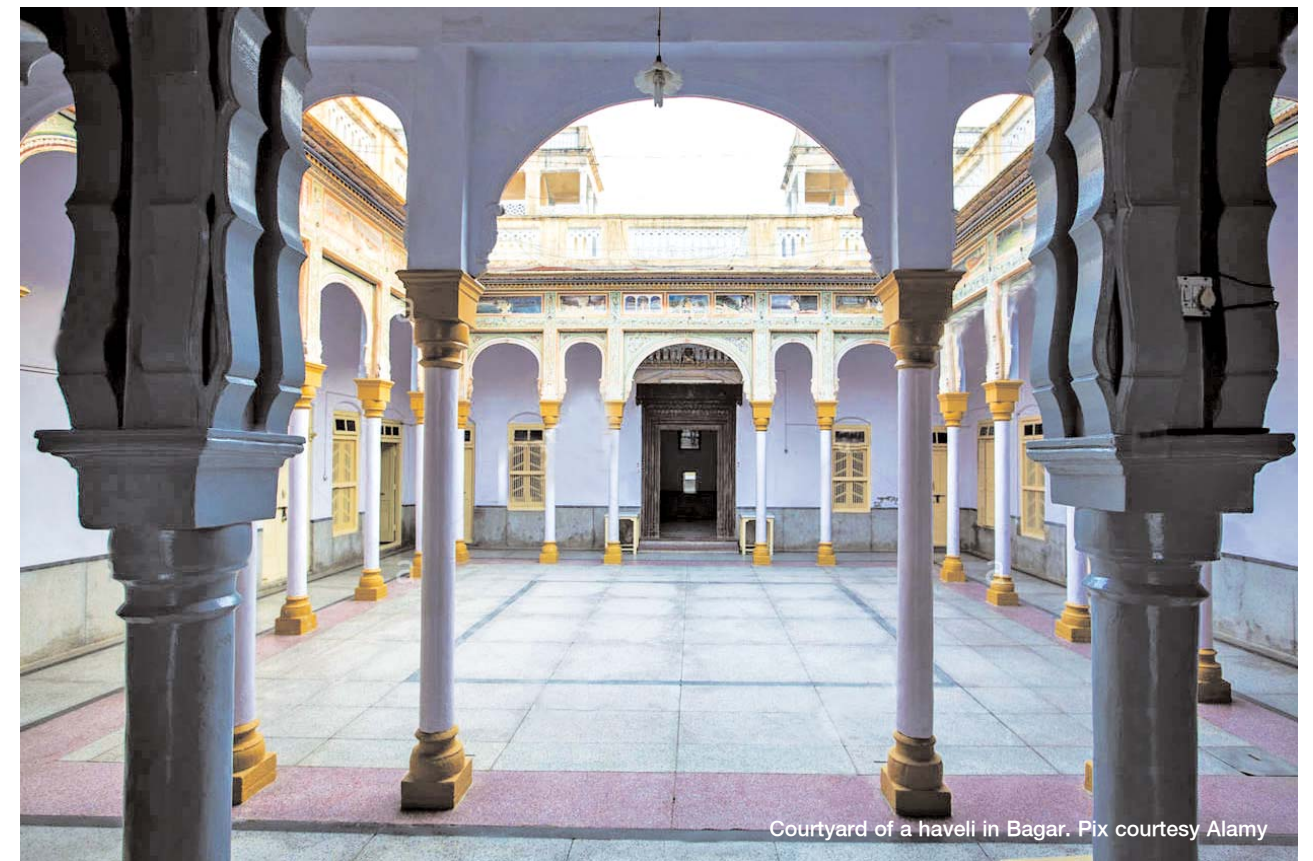
The loud music of electro *bhajans* can be heard from a distance. One lane of the undivided road is blocked by a procession of men, women and children carrying flags. Leading the procession is a tractor with huge speakers. The procession is accompanying a youngster who is rolling on the road. He is fulfilling a promise made to the venerable Khatu Shyam on being granted a wish. He will be rolling his way to the nearest Khatu Shyam temple, reaching later in the day, just in time for the *aarti* on the 11th day of the waxing moon in the month of Phalgun.

We are on our way to Bagar, a small habitation in the Shekhawati in Rajasthan, a region famous for its old *havelis*. The sleepy town, with a population of around 10,000, is based beside the main highway to Jhunjhunu, the district headquarters some 15 km away. Entry to

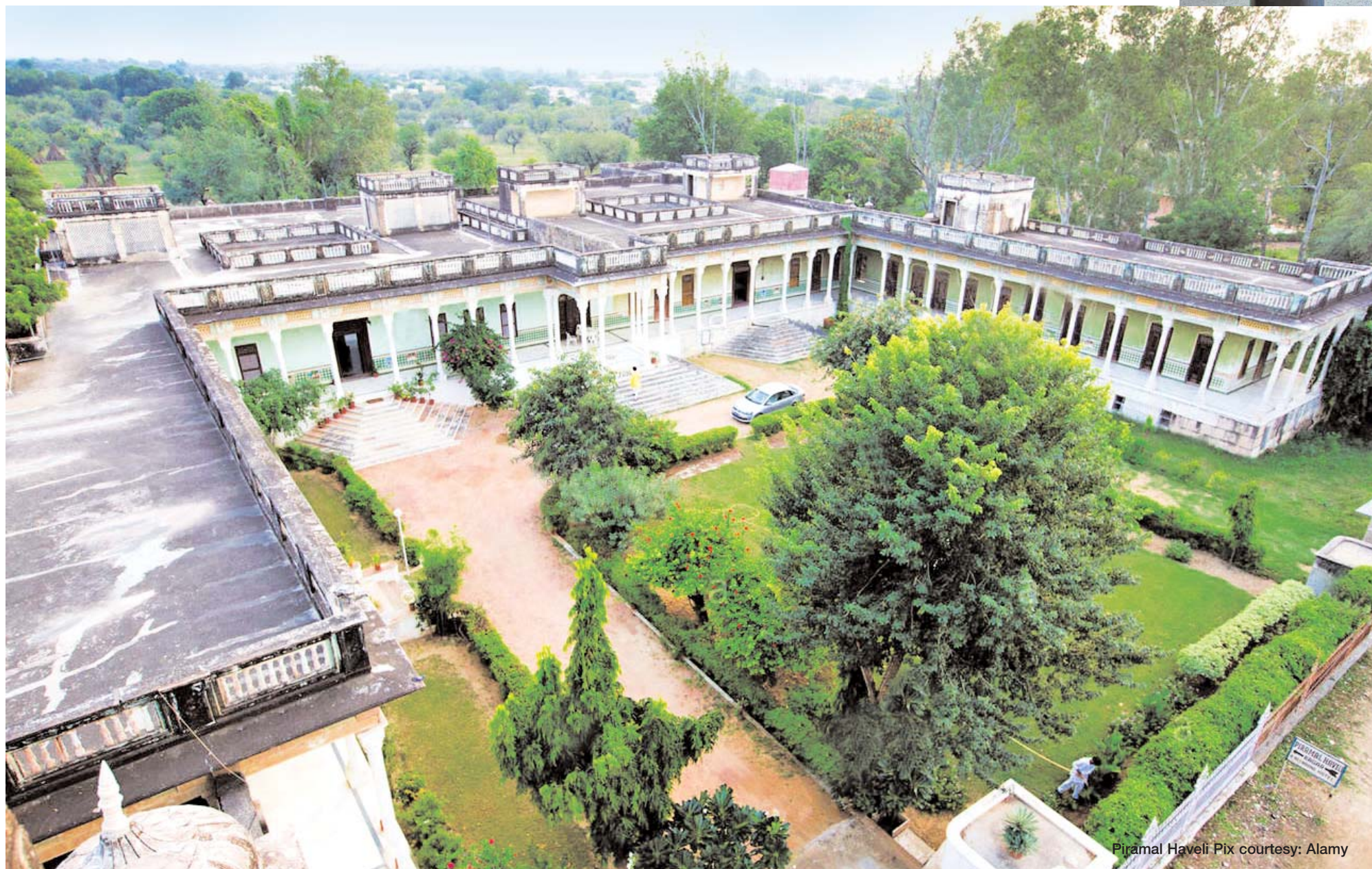
Bagar is through a three-storeyed gate, the Piramal Gate, and right next to it is our hotel, which is a restored Marwari *haveli*.

The Marwaris were traders par excellence who made their fortunes in places as far away as Assam and Madras (as Chennai was called then). Wherever they spotted a business opportunity — tea in Assam, jute in Bengal or even opium in China — they were quick to exploit it. The menfolk moved to wherever their business took them while leaving the families in their ancestral towns and villages. The money made in business made it possible to build not just *havelis* for their families but also give generous endowments to community projects like temples and schools.

Our *haveli*/hotel has the standard architecture of the region. A row of rooms looks out into the garden past a deep verandah. The entrance is a big room which served as a *baithak* for business dealings. This leads to



Courtyard of a haveli in Bagar. Pix courtesy Alamy



Piramal Haveli Pix courtesy: Alamy

a courtyard with rooms on all sides. This was the space for the males of the extended family as well as male guests. On the side opposite the *baithak* is the entrance (usually behind a wall to ensure the *purdah* from the outside) to the inner courtyard which was the female space with kitchens and bedrooms. This is the usual layout for a single storeyed *haveli*. When there are two floors, then the *baithak* is outside the courtyard, the ground floor is the private (female) space and the top floor is for the male relatives. The entrance to the top floor is from the outside to ensure the privacy of the women quarters. The courtyard walls are covered with very elaborate frescoes.

In the evening, we take a walk along the “Main Street” of Bagar to the other end of the village where the two tourist attractions are located. An old, dirty pond with the pretentious sounding name of Fateh Sagar Lake. And a temple of who else but Khatu Shyam!

Khatu Shyam is a very popular deity in Rajasthan, Haryana and parts of Uttar Pradesh. The main shrine is at a place called Khatu in Rajasthan, about 80 km from Jaipur, where lakhs of people descend, especially during the month of Phagun, for the annual festival. Most towns and even villages have their own temples to this deity, who is especially revered by the Marwari community. The temple at Bagar is one such temple where the annual mela is on.

The fair itself is the standard small town affair with various stalls selling household items and food and there is also the regulation Ferris wheel and roller coasters. The action, however, is in the open space near the temple. This being the day of the annual festival, preparations are on for the procession, which will move all over the village.

There is a row of jeeps and tractors lined up in front of the temple. Leading the procession is a multi-coloured Bolero, from Bharat DJ Sound. It is a self-contained vehicle, fitted with huge speakers and spotlights at the back and a diesel generator welded to the front. The sides of the vehicle are brightly painted with pictures of Bollywood starlets in alluring poses. There are dancing and performing troupes from several places who have been hired for the procession.

The star attraction though is the Mahadev Arts Group from Sirsa, a town in

Haryana. The group's leader, Ramu Rajasthani "Malang", is playing the part of Shiv. A rotund man, who is surprisingly agile and expressive, Ramu is accompanied by several youngsters. Shiv is appropriately coloured blue and has a live snake around his neck. The children are in awe of the brave demeanor of the God given that the snake is slithering around his torso. It is only on closer inspection that one notices a transparent tape around the snake's mouth to prevent it from biting!

The dancers, who appear to have trained for one of the many dance reality shows on television, are a very energetic lot and dance well to the devotional songs, set to popular Bollywood tunes blaring at 150 decibels from the humongous speakers. The role of Parvati is played, as are all the female roles, by an effeminate looking youngster. The crowd is ecstatic at the various antics of the dancers and the romance of the God and his consort.

Despite the acrobatic dancing of the troupe, the children are moving to the other star attraction — a dancing camel. The camel is being made to tap to the music by his minder with the help of a stick. Apparently, dancing camels are all a rage in these parts as is



evident from the various advertisements I saw in the village as well as the owner's mobile number painted on the camel's neck!

The procession starts and winds its way around the narrow lanes of Bagar. There is hardly any space for the large number of onlookers, who are not just from Bagar but also from the neighbouring villages. The women are mostly sitting on the roofs of houses. Interestingly, the married women here are almost always veiled while the unmarried ones are typically clad in jeans and tops. Maybe in a few years we would be seeing these teenaged girls also metamorphosing into conservatively dressed women.

Bagar is a village which seems to be dominated by the family of the Piramals who also own the *haveli* where we are staying. And curiously, it is an educational hub of sorts with at least two dozen educational institutions — from schools and colleges to even a Leadership Institute. Most of these are run by some trust or the other set up by the extended Piramal family. This is something I also noticed in the other towns we passed on our way — the philanthropic tradition is quite strong among the Marwaris, especially when it comes to setting up institutions in their ancestral towns.

The tradition of community involvement is not restricted to the Marwaris. In Udaipur, in several government schools, there are boards announcing how

certain individuals have donated money for specific things like a water cooler or an R.O filter. In Bagar, the government primary health centre has waiting benches, railings and even counters donated by individuals in the village. Even the space around electric poles, where there are usually naked wires hanging making it a death trap, have been cordoned off by walls constructed by various organisations who then have the right to advertise on those walls. This model of community participation in what is usually considered to be the state's exclusive domain is something I have not seen elsewhere.

The next morning we drive to Mandawa — the main tourist attraction in Shekhawati with its many *havelis*. The drive is through a fascinating landscape — undulating lush green wheat and mustard fields interspersed oddly with post-apocalyptic looking barren sandy wastes and the occasional bare *khejri* tree. All along, we pass huge billboards advertising various schools and private hospitals. The schools in these parts, unlike their metro counterparts, do not advertise their wards' success in JEE or NEET. Instead, the billboards proudly display mugshots of scared looking

students who seem to have joined the defence services or have cleared the Sainik School entrance. In fact, a couple of schools we passed on the way had boards claiming to have ex-NSG commandos to train for the gruelling physical examination in these entrances. The advertisements for the private hospitals on the other hand, have huge pictures of the owner doctors, dressed appropriately in their operating masks and blue overalls. I guess this is to instill confidence in their capabilities to cure.

In Mandawa, we ask around for one Mr Ashok whose name has been recommended by a friend as someone who can show us around. He is to be found at the Goenka *haveli* where he also runs a shop selling the usual tourist souvenirs — prints of miniature paintings, postcards, over priced antique-looking trinkets, which are obviously made in Moradabad or some such place.

Hearing Mr Ashok trying to convince a group of French tourists to buy an over-priced applique umbrella reminds me of Raju guide — Ashok speaks fluent French! The sale over, he comes to us and quite nonchalantly informs us that he can speak five languages while his helper Mukesh is fluent in four. He





also proudly tells us that he does not mind fleeing the White folk since they have looted us for centuries!

He takes us on a guided tour of three *havelis* in the neighbourhood and gives us a long spiel about the frescoes. There are scenes from the Mahabharat and Ramayana as well as several incongruous figures like Sumo wrestlers and a train. Ashok tells me that the owner of the *haveli* wanted his womenfolk to see what a train would look like, decades before it was introduced in India and so got it painted.

These mansions belong to the extended Goenka clan and are being restored by artists from Jaipur. The colours used are vegetable extracts and are surprisingly durable to the elements. Apparently, the frescoes were painted with these colours on wet plaster and once dry, were polished with coconut oil. However, some of the frescoes which have faded are being brought to life once again by the artists. Except that they are adding their own twist to the originals. One scene which had Krishna holding a flute, has been changed to Krishna speaking on the telephone! Pointing this out, our own Raju guide informs us that since Krishna had many girlfriends, he was busy and had to keep in touch with them using a phone!

Our final destination in Mandawa is the famous fort/hotel which we are told can be seen in many Bollywood films. It also has become the favourite destination for weddings of the nouveau-riche-but-not-quite-Ambanis set from Delhi. The huge wooden doors have the regulation tall, well-built Rajasthani gent with handle bar moustaches guarding it, who follows us

around so that we don't sneak in without paying the ₹250 entrance fees. Since it is very hot by now, we avoid the fort tour and head back.

On the way back, we pass the District headquarters of Jhunjhunu where the major attraction is the biggest Rani Sati temple in the world. The temple interestingly abuts what seems to be the Muslim quarter since I notice many shops selling biryani as well as several small mosques. The big mosque is some distance away.

The temple is a huge complex and apparently sees tens of thousands of devotees every day. Crossing the courtyard to the main temple, there are boards for the general canteen and one for the *idli-dosa* canteen. And just before the entrance, there is a sign for a AC toilet where one can have a shower with a towel for ₹15 or use the toilet for ₹10. The toilet does justify the price since it is all marble, five-star hotel quality with swank fittings!

In Bagar, on our last day, we see that the Khatu Shayam mela is still on though the only visitors now are some children and teenagers out for some fun on the rides. The Mahadev Art Group and Bharat DJ Sound are packing up and moving onto their next assignment. The *dargah* of a local *pir* is desolate with just one old lady praying for his blessings at the tomb. Outside, some cows and a bull forage for food in the pile of rubbish, trying to find something in the plastic bags. A couple of baby monkeys jump on the bull which seems not terribly concerned about them. Bagar continues with its sleepy way of life, never mind the occasional intrusion of electro *bhajans* and *Dance India Dance*.