



# A 'Sutra' of Indian Philosophy

By Ashok Malkani

Weaving thousands of years of Indian ethos, its different schools of philosophy, its myriad myths, and narrating them through vibrant art forms is hardly easy. But that is what Le Sutra, the hotel which has won 'India's Most Unique Hotel' award at the IHEA (Indian Hospitality Excellence Awards) in recognition of the spirit of the hotel's innovation, has done. As I queried how the concept of an art hotel materialised, Ranjan Gupta, Head Operations, Le Sutra said, "We gave ourselves a brief to take a small hotel nestled in one of the most vibrant streets in Mumbai and make it as significant as any other in the world. Thus came up the idea of an Indian Art Hotel. Fired by the concept, several artists, designers, curators, philosophers and visualizers were inspired

to take on the challenge and create Le Sutra."

Mitali Bajaj, Head, Dr. Art + Design, the design studio that created Le Sutra, said, "Our uniqueness lies in the hotel being a virtual art installation where every element narrates a story. Here you could live in the rooms of Ravana, Karna or Buddha with the comfort and luxury of a five star hotel. It is a place for the body, mind and soul and the award has justified it."

Located in Mumbai, the streaks of innovation in the hotel come to the fore from the time you enter the lobby. The reception is based on the concept of 'kundalini'. The *kundalini shakti* is a potential power or cosmic energy that lies dormant at the base of the spine. India's spiritual tradition has it that awakening of this energy is an essential part of all spiritual

advancement and realisation.

The lift is based on the 'chakras', which means wheel or vortex. The *chakras* are energy centres that lie at the vertical axis of the subtle body and co-relate to the spinal cord of the physical body. They are not physical but are aspects of consciousness. They form the ladder leading up to the apex of spiritual awakening. Each *chakra* has a specific function and a specific colour and governs a specific organ in the body. There are seven *chakras* in the human body.

As the glass paneled elevator rises up to the third level you get the view of all these chakras. The three levels of the hotel represent the *Gunas* which sum up world view in Indian philosophy. The three *Gunas* - Tamas (colourful, opulent, intricate, erotic), Rajas (vibrant, action, passion, vivacious, stylish) and Sattva

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(minimalist, celestial, ethereal, aesthetic) – are tendencies and attributes that exist within people, nature and things; their thoughts and emotions, so essential to the evolution of consciousness.

### The Celestial Level

The *Sattva* level has four rooms – *Prakriti*, *Nirvana*, *Shuddhi* and *Mandala*. The décor of each of the rooms matches the names of the rooms.

The three *Gunas* or qualities and attributes are parts of *prakriti*. It includes the elements, senses and the very objects of the senses, the mind, body and ego and therefore both the gross and subtle versions of matter. *Prakriti* is a part of the feminine principle of existence. The observer is the *Purusha* or the spirit of consciousness. The room presents nature as it exists and super nature as you should aspire to be. Thus it has a painting showing a wise man abstracting himself from all that is the product of the three *gunas*.

The embedded seeds on the cupboards portray the birth of a new existence resultant from the fading of the old thought process. Dried leaves in the room indicate that it is only after old attitudes dry and die do we have the opportunity to sprout new leaves of thinking. The teak roor chair in the room signifies that everything has an expiry date and reminds us of our mortality and hence the urgency to move to evolution.

Buddha has explained Nirvana as the unconditioned mind, a mind that has come to a point of perfect lucidity and clarity due to cessation of the activity of making choices and decisions. The second room's décor is based on these lines. The room portrays that we can face various defeats, obstacles and temptations which work to bring us down to lower realms of existence.

The *Nirvana* room has a fresco that showcases Prince Siddhartha's journey and how he came to be known as Gautama Buddha. The dove and the hand on the cupboard tell us that one needs to control the fickle mind and prevent it from being caught up in the flights of fantasy. The room also has a *stupa* chair which is inspired by the *sanchi stupa*. The four *toranas* of the *sanchi stupa* which represent love, peace, trust and courage, are all very important attributes for attaining the *Bodhisattva* state of mind.

The décor in the *Shuddhi* room is centred on cleansing and getting rid of



impurities at gross and subtle level. In this room the floor is inlaid with *mandu*, indicating an ancient water purification system where water slowed down as it passed through rough stones, making it pure and clean. The painting on the wall talks about an 'out of body experience' where the *kundalini* has fully arisen in the man and the soul leaves from the *sahasra chakra* which is on the top of the head. He is greeted by an angel who gifts him a lotus, a symbol of purity. The angel has come to take him to heaven. The hour glass signifies that time is limited. The inspiration of the *Yoga Danda* chair comes from *Yog Dand*, an ancient technique designed by *Yogis*, centuries ago, to harness the power of yoga by the balancing of energy, through corrective breathing techniques.

The fourth room on this floor *Mandala* means container of the essence of energy. It represents wholeness and can be seen as a

geometrical cosmic diagram which connects the finite to the infinite, the world that exists both beyond and within our mind. The *shree yantra* in this room is considered the greatest and the most auspicious of all *yantras*. It displays the splendour of the male and female principle to manifest the root principles of life (*tattvas*). The centre of the *shree yantra* is the 'bindu' which represents the union of the manifest and the obscure worlds. The *shree yantra*, which eliminates all negative energy and radiates positive energy, represents the goodness of Goddess Laxmi in abstract geometric patterns at all levels. The chair in the *Mandala* room represents a lotus in full bloom, representing enlightenment.

### The Vibrant Level

The *Rajas* level of the hotel also has four rooms – the *Dyuuta*, *Kathak*, *Shringar* and *Karna*.

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The *Dyuuta* room represents life as a game of pitch-and-toss. The headboard of the bed is in the form of chess board as chess was one of the oldest games played by the kings. The Knights which are the lower bed posts are vital players in the game. The *Saap Seedi* chair is a depiction of the game of Snakes (Saap) and Ladders (Seedi).

Outside the room the artwork reflects a game of knots and crosses. *Ginjifa* cards are installed in the bathroom. The painting represents various elements of gambling; depicting different forms of ancient Indian betting games.

*Kathak* comes from the Sanskrit word 'Katha', meaning 'story'. Patronised by the Kings of the Mughal era, this is an ancient art of storytelling through dance where hand gestures and facial expressions weave the entire story together. The painting in the room shows two dancers, male and female, with different hand postures and *ghungroos* or 'bells', all of which are integral parts of the dance. It also has a portrait of Wajid Ali Shah of Oudh – a connoisseur of Kathak. The *Sarangi* chair is a depiction of the *Sarangi*, a musical instrument, used in the dance form.

Since beauty is nothing without grace, the *Shringar* room symbolises the delicate union of beauty and grace. The mirror installation in the bathroom represents the many different facets and perceptions of a woman. The mirrors symbolise self-love, an important aspect of *Shringar*. The room has a *Nathni* lamp. The 'Nathni' or nose stud is the most seductive of all the ornaments worn for *shringar* and is mentioned even in the Vedic scripts. The nose is said to be

closely related to the sexual organs and hence a woman wears a nose ring to signify it. The painting in the room showcases the different moods of a woman. The peacock chair in the room is also quite significant. Peacock is the symbol of beauty and grace. The peacock's feather, in the form of an eye, represents knowledge.

The designers of the hotel believe that the hero of Mahabharata, an Indian epic, was Karna, a Karna showed valor, generosity, forgiveness, loyalty and hard work, to attain efficiency and power, hence the *Karna* rooms in Le Sutra. The décor in the room comprises of Karna's arrow, a weapon which represents not just skill and accuracy, but also spiritual and mental power. At its lower end, the Sun and the Moon, both guiding lights, represent energy. The third eye on the arrow symbolises the accuracy with which it hits its mark. The art installation above the headboard of the bed is representative of the Sun (the father of Karna) as per the aesthetics of ancient Indian temples. The room has a Chariot Wheel Chair. This chair shows Karna's hand trying to remove the wheel from the mud.

### The Colourful Level

The *Tamas* level of Le Sutra comprises of *Ravana*, *Maya* and *Vaasna* rooms.

Though *Ravana* is depicted as a rogue character in the epic Ramayana, there is a certain segment of Indian philosophers who believes that *Ravana* with his ten heads depicts his thorough knowledge of the six *Upanishads*, the *veena* Vedas and his ability to master the *four*. He was believed to be a devout follower of Lord Shiva. *Ravana* could be summed up as a symbol of wickedness as well as wisdom. The room is an illustration of his scornful thoughts, strategies and his scornful impressions of self, adversary and tact. The painting in the room depicts *Ravana* in his avatars as a demon king and a sage holding a *veena* surrounded by the nine planets at Mount Kailash, the holiest peak in the Himalayas. The horns and scepter in the chair represent *Ravana* as the notorious king of demons while the *veena* leg of the table



Ranjan Gupta

speaks of his prowess over the musical instrument.

*Maya* in Sanskrit means 'that which is not'. It is thus an epiphany that has the power to liberate the soul. Thus the décor in the *Maya* room centres around the realisation of futile possessions within and around oneself which results in one's true consciousness. The artwork in the room is the artist's impression of how supreme consciousness is broken up into various elements that facilitated in the formation of diverse cells, species, and

planets amongst other things. The painting shows over time the human mind desires wealth, love, dreams and always hopes. The *Moh Maya* chair is an artist's interpretation of elements such as wealth, pride and ego to be temporary and a delusion that originate from our ignorance and therefore our perception of false reality. The other elements within the room include glass and mirrors, helping one reflect one's true reality versus perceived reality.

'*Vaasna*' refers to 'sensuality' in Sanskrit. In the *Vaasna* room the fresco on wood depicts that all matter consist of male and female energies and the union of these energies: 'Purusha and Prakriti' or 'Shiva and Shakti'. The union of man and woman in the sexual act is one of the ways in which this reality exhibits itself. This union is not just an act of higher levels of consciousness. The *Yoni* or the salvation lamp is an artist's explanation of sex to salvation. There are also ample *Khajurao* miniatures in the room.

As Gupta pointed out, "Le Sutra blends aesthetics, hospitality and mind space. It is the only hotel in the world that narrates Indian philosophy through contemporary art. It took us about three years to work on the details that were required to create a hotel that is innovative and also soothing for the clients who visit us."

Regarding the future plans of the hotel Gupta informed that the concept of Le Sutra would be expanded to more hotels and F&B outlets through the franchisee route.

