HOTEL

HARSH NEOTIA TELLS *t2* HOW HE CONCEPTUALISED RAAJKUTIR

Raajkutir is a product of his fascination for the Bengal Rennaisance, "the glorious period of Bengal's history". Ambuja Neotia Group chairman Harshavardhan Neotia gives **t2** a peek into his passion project.

Raajkutir has completely transformed Swabhumi. How did the idea of a boutique hotel come about?

Swabhumi was conceived before the advent of malls and at that time it was intended to be like a Dilli Haat or a Chokhi Dhani. That was the inspiration, to do boutique sores, food, a place to celebrate social functions and festivals. So initially for the first seven-eight years it worked, but then we found that the younger people were moving towards the bigger malls. And that kind of lost its attraction.

So for the last four-five years we have been thinking of doing something with it and then it took two-three years to get the requisite permission from the KMC. So the work started two years ago and phase-wise we took up the development, but whatever we have done now was master-planned about three-four years ago.

First we made Swabhumi a little more upmarket, with the social function halls made aesthetically more elaborate. Then we thought about converting the courtyard into a boutique hotel that was reminiscent of the architecture of 80-100 years ago. So that's how the whole thing sort of came about and then we put together all the pieces in the puzzle.

While doing the walk-through, your team told us the story woven around the property. A fictional story surrounding a property is so unique. How did you think about it?

I always thought people are more interested in stories than just a piece of architecture. I was always very fascinated with Bengal Renaissance and that very glorious period of Bengal, 1860-70 to 1920-30. It was a great period of aesthetic awakening, philosophy, literature, art. That's the period which has always been resonating in my readings of Tagore. That was there in my mind, so I thought why not give people a peek into that life, of course in a more eclectic, avant-garde manner, but a little peek into that glorious chapter of recent Bengal history.

So the whole story was woven around this mythical zamindar who lived there with his family and like most of the zamindars, got dispossessed of his belongings by falling into bad times. And then we resurrected it and restored it to a hotel. So that was the narrative and what helped us is it started giving meaning to certain things that we were calling by particular names. Connecting the rituals, the people, the food… so it gave meaning to why you are doing what you are doing.

Like we have The East India Room where we will be having an interesting menu from British Indian times and the influence

Harsh Neotia at The East India Room in Raajkutir

that the British had on Bengali cuisine, and some of those lost recipes of Bengali grandmothers. These are all a part of the story… like always in a zamindar family there will be somebody who is a great connoisseur of food, so resurrecting some of those. We put it all in this story to create that holistic experience. In fact, the spa will also be the area where the ladies of the house

would go for their ritualistic bath and to get dressed up. So things like that.

The basic thought process of the story was shared by me. I have been inspired by my readings, particularly Sunil Gangopadhyay's book *First Light*.

Tell us about your involvement in the decor?

My involvement is of course at the conceptualisation level. Giving the brief to the architect and then taking it to the next level in refining the brief, and refining the design inputs. To see that we don't copy that period because people will know it is built today, but it should give them a peek into that life. For instance, the rooms will have air-conditioning, but we do have ceiling fans. So all modern comforts have been put in obviously because otherwise it won't work, but you'll get a sense of that period.

What's the target clientele for Raajkutir?

Number one, foreigners, tourists and NRIs visiting Calcutta will make up a part of the clientele. Number two, social celebrations like weddings, birthdays, anniversaries. We are not looking at business travellers, not that we have a problem, but they might find it a little too fussy.

Tell us about the F&B offerings at the hotel…

Apart from The East India Room, there's a bar, The Swig. It's not complete yet, it should come up in a few weeks. It's very interesting… it's

in a staircase, at multi levels. It's a two-storeyed glass structure, like an observatory.

Does the end product live up to your vision of it?

I think we have tried to do what we wanted to, but like every movie is judged on a Friday evening, when it opens and people actually visit it we will know. So far whoever has seen it have found it exciting, but they were all guests and not visitors coming here to stay. So the taste of the pudding will lie in the eating. The first one year will tell us… it takes a while for things to build up, so in a year we have to see if it lives up to our expectations.

You are on an overdrive with F&B offerings — Raajkutir, UNO Chicago Bar & Grill, the new Afraa. Any more plans?

We have two hotels coming up in the hills… one is in Sikkim and one is in Makaibari tea gardens (in Kurseong), slated to open in end of 2019. Those are very large hotels, 80 rooms each. So that would keep me busy for the best part of the year, because the structures have been completed but the slog overs begin when the finishing starts and all the finer details have to get finalised.

We just opened the third UNO in Bangalore and we hope to open three-four more UNOs across India in the next financial year.

Smita Roy Chowdhury