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BOOKMARK THIS HOLIDAY

In the age of digital reading, Edwina D'souza rediscovers the joy of turning pages at Bhilar, India's first 'book' village



Photo: Ruby Singh

A beautifully painted house in Bhilar

The morning sunlight filters in though the dust, etching myriad patterns on the ground. I sit back and relax with a glass of piping hot tea. Next to me on a stool is a bowl of strawberries, freshly plucked from a nearby home's kitchen garden. The sounds of a village waking up to the day fade into the background, as I dive deeper into the book in my hand. And reading is what I intend to do during this weekend trip. Not a surprising goal, considering I am in India's first book village Bhilar. And this is not a fiction!

Nestled between the popular tourist destinations of Panchgani and Mahabaleshwar in Ma-

harashtra, Bhilar is a quaint village surrounded by strawberry farms and vineyards. Its population of barely 3,000 earns its revenue from strawberry farming. Every second house in Bhilar has a patch of green in its backyard, where the berries are grown and the produce sold in the local markets.

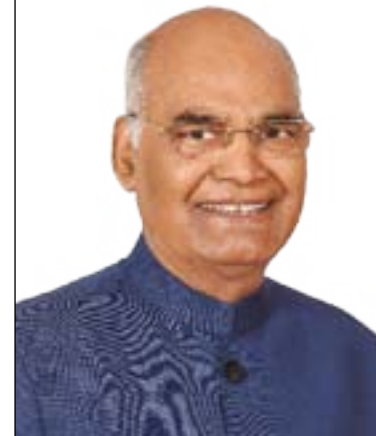
Based on the concept of Hay-on-Wye, a Welsh village known for its book stores, over 25 families in Bhilar have opened up their homes for book lovers to read and research from a choice of almost 15,000 Marathi and 500 English books, mostly provided by the state adminis-

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1. A dwelling in the village housing children's books

2. A child reading a book at one of the homes

Photo: Edwina D'souza



Did you know?

>> THE IDEA

The Hay-on-Wye town is known for its plentiful book-stores and a literary festival that attracts about 2,00,000 visitors every May. Richard Booth, who popularised the concept in 1970, believed that the move would bring in tourists, generate jobs and stop local migration. Little did he imagine that the rest of the world would follow suit. Today, book towns have sprung up in Japan, Belgium, Netherlands and Australia.

>> GETTING HERE

Bhilar is 16 km from Mahabaleshwar, a popular hill station. The nearest airport is in Mumbai (260 km). You can stay in Mahabaleshwar; Bhilar too has a few homestays.

tration. The idea was floated by the Rajya Marathi Vikas Sanstha and state education minister Vinod Tawde in 2017 after his visit to Hay-on-Wye, and, Bhilar was given its formal identity of Pustakanche Gaav.

India is familiar with book streets to a certain extent like the famous College Street in Kolkata, Avenue Road in Bengaluru and the Flora Fountain in Mumbai. But converting an entire village into a book town was a first.

Travelling with a group of cousins, I spot a signboard announcing the village, much before we arrive. Driving through myriad shades of green we enter picturesque Bhilar, where brightly painted homes depicting the genre of books they house, welcome us. At our first stop, we pick up a handy map to steer us to the other homes. A local volunteer explains that almost 70 artists from an artists' collective in Thane, called Swatva, had painted colourful murals on the walls of the dwellings in the village. One house, brightly painted with images of forts and Chhatrapati Shivaji, catches our eye. We enter to find several books on history, especially about the heroic exploits of the Maratha king. Another home with comic figurines on its facade offers children's books. As we walk from house to house, browsing through rows of books on various subjects, I realise this is a community initiative. To promote Marathi culture and bring the joy of reading back into the lives of people, the villagers have volunteered to turn their houses into libraries, free of cost.

Visitors can walk in, pick a book and read in quietude, while the family goes about its chores.

I visit one of the houses, belonging to a lady named Pushpa. As I choose something to read, she goes about tinkering with pots and pans in the kitchen. It takes a while to get used to the feeling that you're entering a stranger's house unannounced and rummaging through bookshelves, but the locals are warm and welcoming, and their doors are always open. Removing your shoes before entering a house is considered polite. Neighbourhood stalls sell tea, meals and snacks. As it's a weekend, the village lanes are dotted with groups of tourists. Pushpa says that even shops and temples have opened their doors to visitors like us. Each household gets about 300 to 400 books in a particular genre like poetry, biographies and science. Her house exhibits children's novels.

After about two hours of stepping into every home, we pick a favourite read and station ourselves in the village library. Mobile phones are put on silent mode and time flies as pages turn. As the day draws to an end, we get ready to leave. We have booked our stay in Panchgani, just 15 minutes away and plan to return the next morning for another day of reading.

The author is a travel journalist and the views expressed in this article are her own

Photo: Ruby Singh

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