

Open House

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[The philosophy of the place unfolds only slowly. Photo: K.V.S. Giri](#)





Just what is that je ne sais quoi about Lamakaan?

Some weeks ago I was discussing alternative spaces and cultural centres in our cities with a friend, and she asked what was so special about [Lamakaan](#), the non-profit, open cultural space in Banjara Hills. The answer I had then come up with was a rather drab one. Something about the place being different, that it warranted a trip to understand it, that it had a certain 'something'.

Then, a week ago, I saw a woman, possibly in her 50s, sitting on the raised platform in a room at Lamakaan. She looked comfortable in her saree, adjusting it once in a while, as she read, absorbed, from her laptop. Suddenly it struck me: this is why Lamakaan is so special. It makes all of us, irrespective of age, class or gender, feel comfortable in our skin, at ease.



Chai and samosa, culture and conversations. Photo: Nagara Gopal



I remembered how often I had seen people in their 50s or older, sitting there with their newspapers and pens to solve Sudoku puzzles and crosswords, even as young people, engaged in animated conversations, are always the majority.

That 'certain something' about Lamakaan has been described in different ways by different people. The New York Times refers to it as a "former home in a quiet Banjara Hills lane converted into a refuge for Hyderabad creative types back in 2010". Closer home, The Hindu calls it "the cultural hangout that has redefined open space for Hyderabad" and "a venue which doesn't charge for people to just hang out". Biju Mathew, part of Lamakaan's executive committee, had once said in an interview, "The idea of Lamakaan is to give something back to the city and to create a space where one can say what he or she wants, and not be judged." Sanjana Kapoor, who was there to organise a theatre workshop for children, said that the "fragrance of the place is akin to that at Prithvi".

Back to the conversation with my friend, and the question of why I go there... On the one hand, I go there to chat with friends, to work on unfinished documents (especially when stuck) or to just have chai and samosa. The canteen has a limited menu, but the food is too good to resist.

Possibly most importantly, though, I go there to 'do nothing'. And not many places in our cities allow that. On occasion, I have engaged in conversations with like-minded people, strangers until then, with whom I have shared a table. At other times, I have interacted with guests who have come there to share their knowledge and experience. I have sometimes attended events such as film screenings, Merchant Ivory's *In Custody* or Krupakar and Senani's *Walking with the Wolves*, performances of Kabir's songs, Urdu mushairas, talks by, say, a noted archaeologist like K.K. Muhammed. Then there are the book releases and poetry readings. Lamakaan also hosts regular events such as its Sunday Organic Fair.

So, my friend continued, what drives a Lamakaan, do you think? The philosophy behind the place slowly unfolds as one visits and revisits. Most events are either free or have entry charges that are typically less than Rs. 100. If the event organiser does not charge the audience, the venue does not charge the organiser. One can have lunch for under Rs. 100. Programmes are consciously centred around events that matter to the city and its conscience. For example, there were several

talks after Rohit Vemula's suicide in January. Sometimes, it is more than a cultural centre — University of Hyderabad students were served food here when they were shut out during the showdown with the administration.

Then, last year, someone served a notice on Lamakaan, claiming that the place was “creating nuisance to the surrounding residents and general public”. Hyderabad, thankfully, petitioned against the move strongly.

Finally, I ended by describing to my friend one of my favourite evenings at Lamakaan, a talk by Rahul Bose. He had spoken of cinema, sports and the not-for-profit world. That evening, Lamakaan was overflowing. People were sitting on the walls, on the balcony, on the rocks. Noticing this, Bose spoke of his aunt's house in Bombay and how people used to come there not just for chai and conversation, but also to sleep. The nights that he spent there he would see when he woke, 14-15 people fast asleep in the 10x10 room, as if the single-room house had expanded mysteriously by night. When hearts are big, walls somehow manage to recede and food appears as if by magic. Lamakaan had that feel to it, said Bose.

Of so many things we say, 'good things happen by chance', but Lamakaan is an exception to the rule. It is a planned good thing. A place, a thought, and a concept that other cities would do well to emulate.

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