

A Ray Of Hope

There are important lessons to be learnt from the Jaipur Literature Festival's success

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It is a joy to write the rare positive column about something beautiful in India. The recently concluded Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF) attracted enormous crowds and put India on the global map. At the time of writing this, Google News displayed over five thousand media stories on the JLF worldwide.

The JLF's rapid growth is astounding. In 2008, the festival had 2,500 attendees. In 2012, more than 75,000 people participated, a 30-fold growth in four years. Festival venue Diggi Palace, a family owned haveli-heritage hotel, burst at the seams on festival days. However, the festival remains free and open to all. School students, Nobel prize winners, socialites, scholars, tourists – all enter the gates together to be a part of hundred-plus sessions over five days. The infectious energy of the organisers – Namita Gokhale, William Dalrymple, Sanjoy Roy and Sheuli Sethi – made 2012's festival as they worked relentlessly to run a show that Sanjoy agrees is akin to 'marrying a 100 daughters off at the same time'.

Interestingly, the JLF has given India far better PR worldwide than, say, another initiative of the government to do the same – the Commonwealth Games. What is striking is the difference between the JLF's budget – Rs 5 crore, raised through private sponsorships – and that of the Games which cost Rs 70,000 crore, almost entirely given by the state. But most of the Games news coverage was related to the scam or the shoddiness of the work.

It would be foolish if we did not draw lessons from what made the JLF rock while exercising India's soft power by having future events. Here are the six reasons behind the JLF phenomenon.

First, the inclusion of the world's most prominent authors. While not every attending author is a Booker or Pulitzer winner, the JLF always had a few of them. This gave it enormous credibility and attracted the media. If your event is not truly world-class, you will get a fraction of the attention you would otherwise. The Commonwealth Games is no Olympics, and hence the world cares little. Be the best, or nobody cares.

Second, the JLF's range of sessions makes it relevant for a wide variety of audiences. International guests can find at least one author they have read or heard about, making them connect to the festival. Readers of popular fiction would find popular authors, not making them feel out of place.

Third, Jaipur is simply beautiful. The architecture is unique and the city is clean and well kept. The government is tourist friendly. The wonderful Rajasthani people give genuine smiles to strangers. This setting enhances the experience of the visitor, who hankers to come back.

Four, there is a certain humility in the organisers' approach. Despite the literary community being ridden with elitism and snootiness, the JLF manages to keep it classy without being snobbish. There are stories of school students arriving in trains and staying overnight at the platform to attend the festival. For the so-called arbiters of good literature, it must be tempting to sneer at such audiences, but the JLF team has kept away from that attitude.

Five, the festival provides oodles of media-friendly content. Writers have interesting things to talk about and can generate lots of stories for newspapers and TV channels. Naturally, the content-hungry media likes to be there.

Six, the execution is near flawless. As a speaker this year, I found the logistics perfect; almost all sessions start on time. Execution isn't easy in India, but the JLF gets it right.

At the same time, like all things successful, the JLF has to guard against forces that will try to either exploit its fame or bring it down out of sheer envy. It also has to manage growth, which seems unstoppable at this point. Here are two suggestions.

One, do not indulge extreme voices beyond a point. Writers like to give their points of view and feel passionately about them. However, the JLF is no activist agitation. Too much has been already said about the Salman Rushdie controversy, but the simple lesson is a zero-tolerance policy at the venue for people who hijack the festival's agenda. The festival has to remain neutral to all views. It is not a Ramlila Ground.

Also, the festival has to respect local government guidelines, and that includes their security risk perceptions. Even if some esteemed guests oppose or mistrust government policies, the venue is not the place to protest. They can express themselves, but need not

take on the government from the venue. They are free to hire a separate protest venue and do it.

Two, the festival will need to consolidate. Given the growth, it is going to be impossible to manage the crowds at the same venue in the next few years. Modest price ticketing won't make the festival undemocratic. There can be flexibility – free days or ticketed days, student pricing, donor events etc.

As a writer, and as an Indian citizen, i feel immensely proud about this celebration of books. Those who say India is all about Bollywood and cricket should pay a visit to the JLF. Silly controversies come and go. Let us rejoice that India, once known as the land of scholars and knowledge, still has the best literary festival in the world.

The writer is a best-selling novelist.



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