



INSIDE INDIA

The old man and the tree

This octogenarian is the last surviving master craftsman of the fading likhai woodwork tradition of Kumaon

BY GUSTASP & JEROO IRANI

A million wrinkles crease his face; his eyes are clouded with age. But 89-year-old wood carver Ganga Ram stands straight as a pine tree, his toothless smile bright and welcoming when we meet him at his home in Kumaon's Diyari village after a steep climb up a twisting, slippery, gravelly path.

As dogs bark, roosters crow and Bollywood songs blare from his neighbour's home, we settle down to chat with the master craftsman—Nainital's last surviving artisan of the vanishing Likhai tradition.

Yielding no more

"I don't have the strength to hew and chisel wood any longer," says Ganga Ram as he shifts a heavy window frame carved by his apprentice, Lalit. When he was young, the wood seemed to surrender to his chisel; today it is hard and unyielding, he says.

Ganga Ram brings out a much-thumbed sheaf of photographs of his

work. His pieces, it turns out, adorn many of the over-century-old stone homes in and around his village. "I am inspired by the mountains, the forest and birds. My guru used to live across on that hill," he says, pointing to a modest dwelling in the horizon, not dissimilar to the other homes in the area with its double-arched window frames, pillars and doors decorated with delicate floral and geometric motifs, images plucked from nature.

In his youth, Ganga Ram would hunch meditatively over a piece of wood from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., breathing life into it, oblivious to the sun arching across the sky.

Likhai, once an integral part of the cultural history of this region, is en-

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dangered today. The craft, which has religious roots—often featuring carvings of gods, goddesses and kings and queens at one point—is slowly dying because of the dearth of artisans willing to take it up and also from the unavailability of toon (local timber) wood.

Ganga Ram's skills were first discovered in the 90s by Aarohi, an NGO working in the hills. Its founders realised that he was no ordinary wood carver but the inheritor of an art passed on through generations.

Most sought after

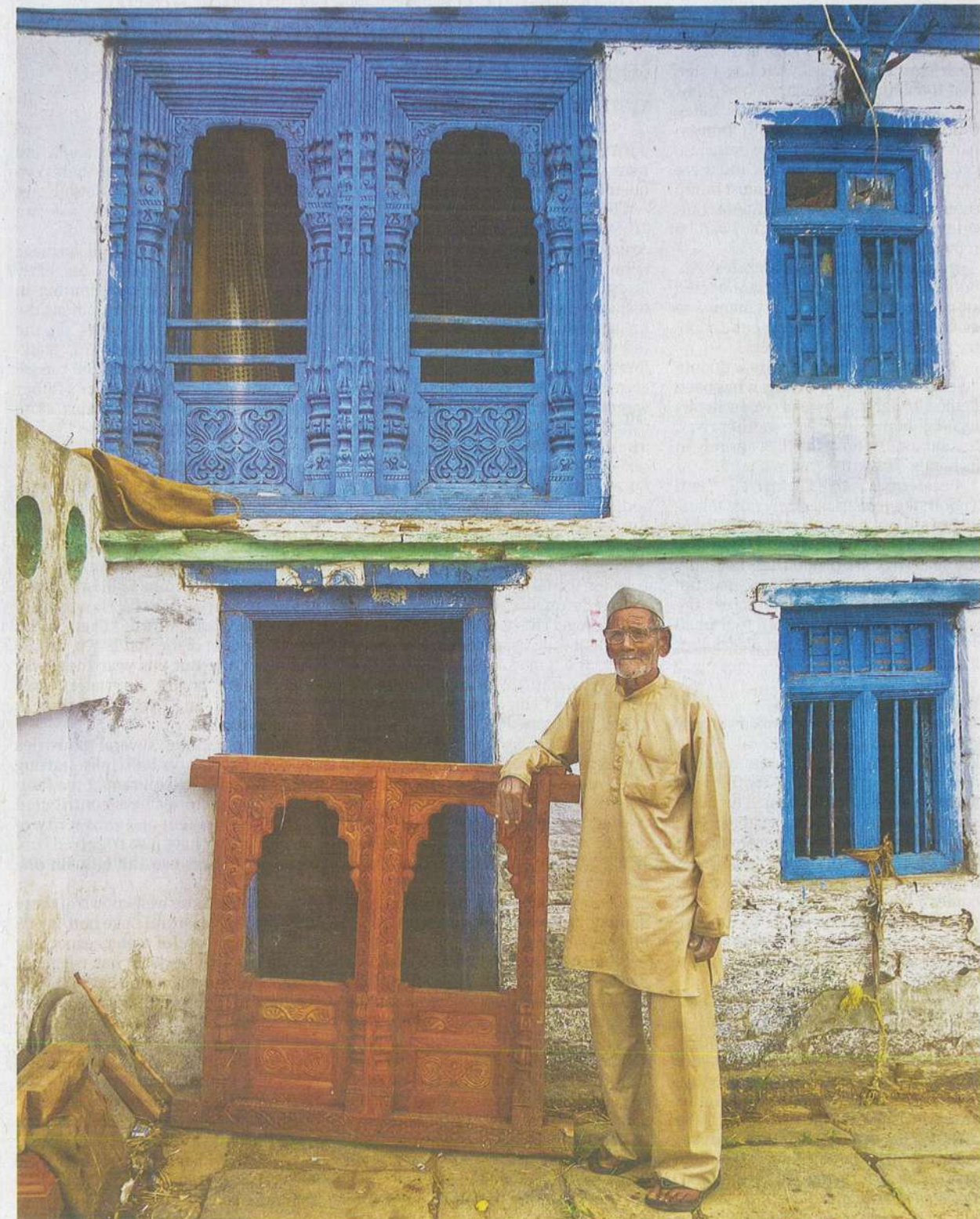
Subsequently, two more bodies—Delhi-based design and architectural firm SpaceMatters, and Alaap, an organisation involved in forest conservation and preserving local culture—chipped in to save Likhai.

When SpaceMatters founder Amritha Ballal, with a passion for vernacular craft, happened to come to the hills and learned about Ganga Ram, she recruited him for her architectural projects. Sheeba Sen, founder of Alaap, scoured the hills in search of a youngster willing to learn the craft from Ganga Ram and recently located a youth from the master craftsman's own village, who had been secretly dreaming of becoming a Likhai artisan.

"Ganga Ram is not growing any younger," says Sen. And after him, the craft will be history if there was no one to carry forward the baton. "We are making a conscious effort to give the craft more visibility," says Sen. "We want people to incorporate it into their lives; to adorn their homes with it."

Almora, 62 km from Nainital, was once the cultural bedrock of Likhai work, but the dying craft's revival will now likely be centred around this non-descript hilltop village of Diyari.

The writers are travel junkies for whom Mumbai is the city they call home.



Last likhai Ganga Ram poses with a carved frame in Diyari village; and (left) craftsmen at work. GUSTASP & JEROO IRANI, ALAAP

