


22

EXPERIENCE PRANPUR





Weavers in the Raja-Rani  
Mahal in Chanderi; and a  
gossamer-fine Chanderi sari

# FRUIT OF THE LOOM

FINE SARIS, SPLENDID MONUMENTS,  
A BUCOLIC IDYLL. **NANDINI MEHTA**  
REDISCOVERS THE VILLAGE OF PRANPUR.  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY **PUNEET K. PALIWAL**

## PRANPUR

“And this,” says the weaver, unfurling with a flourish a gossamer-fine pink-and-gold fabric, “is the Kareena Sari!” As we wander through pretty-as-a-picture Pranpur village, we’re walking in the footsteps of Aamir Khan and his co-star from *Three Idiots*. The duo arrived in this obscure corner of Bundelkhand completely unannounced, three years ago, as part of their whirlwind tour to promote the film, and Pranpur is still basking in the honour. “*Is bargad ke perh ke neeche baithe thhe Aamir.*” “*Is ghar mein kaafi time bitaavq unhonene.*” “*Yeh solar lights Kareena ne bheja gaonwalon ke liye.*” This running commentary on the doings of the celebrity duo plays like a constant counterpoint to the other sounds of Pranpur—the clack-clack of the looms of Chanderi weavers, the whirr of the potter’s wheel, the clunk of the stone carvers’ chisels and, more faintly, the metallic clang from the homes of Pranpur’s two remaining metal craftsmen.

Pranpur built its small, four-room homestay at the edge of the village. The Amraee Rural Heritage Resort, run by the Pranpur Village Tourism Development Committee, is set in an orchard of mango, khirni, guava and sharifa trees, with the hills of the Vindhychal range as a backdrop. Its cluster of buildings proudly showcases the skills of Pranpur’s craftspersons—from its lovely carved stone jaalis to its rooms hung with Chanderi curtains and its sumptuous thalis of Bundelkhandi specialities made by village youngsters. Don’t expect the usual ‘resort facili-

ties’ here though—there’s no swimming pool, spa or bar dispensing cocktails. Apart from comfortable mattresses and modern plumbing, it’s all consciously no-frills, and strictly vegetarian and teetotal as well. What you get, instead, apart from the idyllic pastoral setting, is an opportunity to experience up close the daily rhythm of village life. Amraee even has a resident village elder, master potter Babu Ram Prajapati, a tount of knowledge on all kinds of local lore from medicinal herbs to Bundelkhandi musical instruments, who can be found holding court on a *chabutra* under a mango tree.

The day begins with a chorus of bird-song and ends under a star-filled sky. Everything proceeds in a relaxed, unhurried way, so go with the flow, reset your watch to Pranpur standard time—about an hour behind IST—and don’t fret if the early morning tea you asked for at 6.30 arrives at 7.45: it’s served with such a shy, eager-to-please smile that you’re instantly disarmed. It all depends, apparently, on when the milkman turns up. Forget about trying to get a signal on your mobile phone; and if the electricity goes off, as it does frequently, abandon your book and stretch out on the platform under the leafy canopy of a mango tree. Large and delicious meals are served at breakfast, lunch and dinner. But there’s





Clockwise from top: a house in Nanoun village festooned with Chanderi saris; a weaver at a loom in Prampur; and a potter in Prampur hands down the secrets of his trade to his next generation



*Folk dancers and musicians entertain guests at night at the Amraoti Rural Heritage Resort in Prantpur.*

red prism—the cotton-wet, loom, bathe the iridescent looms today are engers tell us—mporing of the harden serves for the Com- helped make agam, afo rosted undred mices to Prantpur's weav- re cooperative textiles produced all shop in the v- ne big sari shops in

re journey from deri propels you y hamlet into a

so much to see in the vicinity, you'll have no difficulty walking off a little *poha*, *ladhu*, *mangodi*, *maberi* and *gulis* you've indulged in.

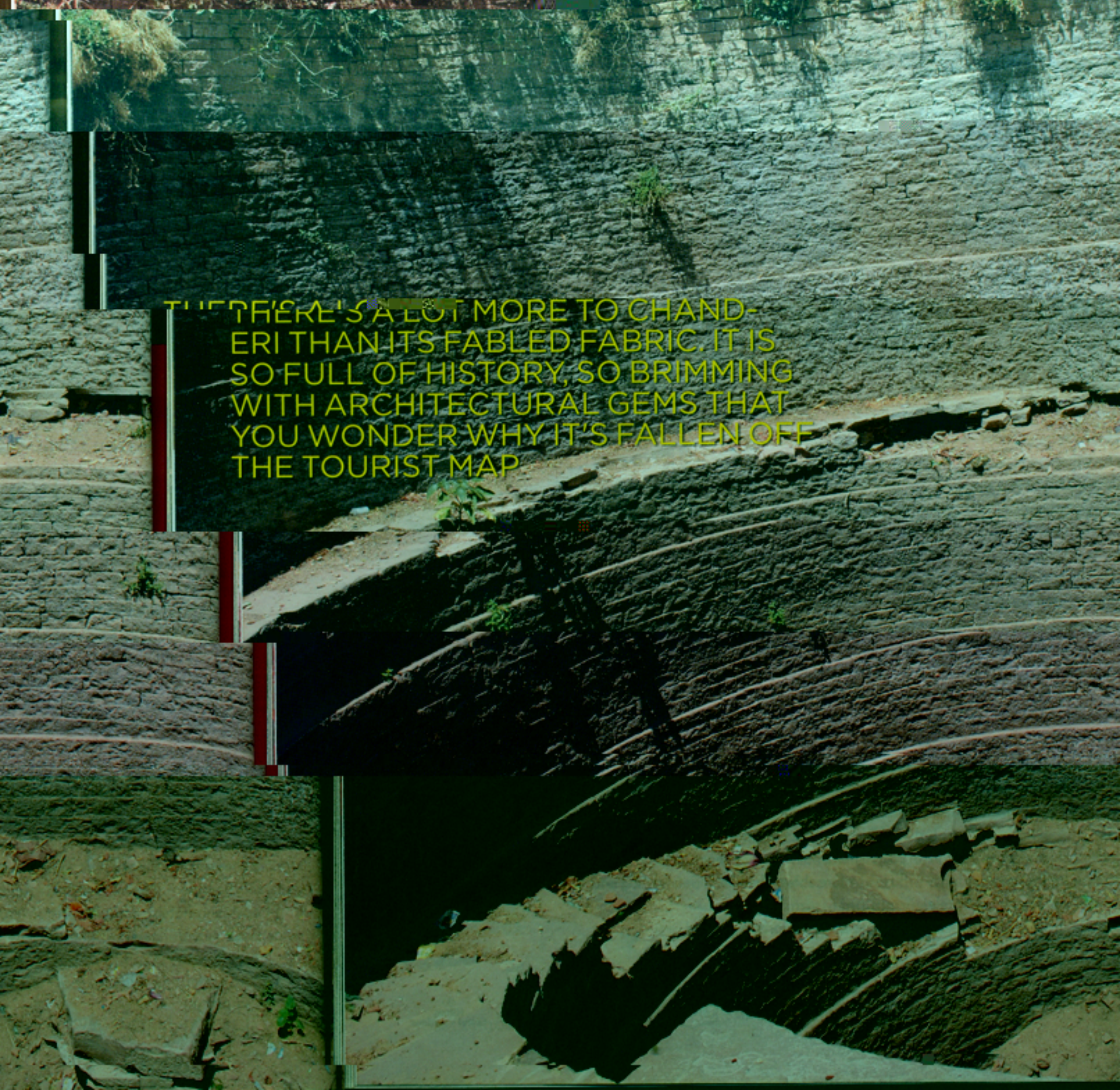
Set aside three or four hours for a leisurely exploration of Prantpur village, with its impeccably clean streets, stone houses washed in pastel colors, its four stepwells (one dating to the Sultanate period), and plethora of *sari* pillars (dating from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries), dotted all over the village. Carved with a *sari* and *mumukh* with doll-like figures of a couple, below them, these stone steles mark the spots where *sari* took place long ago, when this area was covered by forest, some have tumbled and been ingeniously turned into benches or used to prop up a *sari* (in) door frame. At the far end of the village are a *dargah* and a *Ram* temple, probably facing each other. The tiled roofs of the village houses are covered with *bandes* of *tendu* leaves, gathered from the forest behind the village. Prantpur's inhabitants are happy to indulge visitors *swaraaj* away, try their hand at rolling the *tendu* leaves into *beedis* or turning the potter's wheel.

Peering into the home of a Chanderi weaver is like

looking through a col of a superlative silk warp and stretched tight over the room and the weaver in translucent light. The loom busier than ever, the v- Amir and Kareena's eli- Chanderi *sari*, and the C- specially commissioned morwa (in) Games, have this? (ain?) (also) of a se- daily earrings from a h- two hundred and fifty- ers have set up their ow- society, which sells the- in the village from a sm- lige, or takes them to th- Chandori's *Sadar Baza*

**T**he three-kilomet- Prantpur to Chan- abruptly from a sleep-

One of Pranpur's four  
medieval stepwells



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THE TOURIST MAP

## PRANPUR

noisy, bustling town where the sari shops are easy to spot, with their huge billboards of Guess Who. She really should come back to Chanderi to see the power of the Kareena Effect. The weaving tradition here dates back to the eighteenth century, and today some 3,500 families—around sixty per cent of the town's population—make their living from the looms. But there's a lot more to Chanderi than its fabled fabric. It is, in fact, so full of history, so brimming with architectural gems, that you wonder why it's fallen off the tourist map. It wasn't always so; in medieval times, Chanderi was a must on every traveller's itinerary—Al Biruni, Ibn Battuta, Ferishta and many others came here and chronicled its wealth, splendour and importance. And every conqueror of Hindustan wanted to capture its fort, strategically situated on the trade routes connecting North India to South, and to the ports on the west coast.

The fort looms over the town, stretching for two kilometres along the crest of a hill, its architecture bearing the imprint of the different dynasties who ruled it. Founded in 1100 AD by Gurjara Pratihara king Kirtipal, it was successively captured, among others, by the Khiljis, the Tughlaqs, the Malwa sultans, the Lodis, Rana Sangha of Udaipur, the Mughals, the Bundelas, the British and, finally, the Scindias of Gwalior. Our guide, the incomparable Muzaffar Ansari, better known as Kalley Bhai, runs a passionate one-man crusade to get Chanderi recognised as a World Heritage city. But before we begin our tour, Kalley Bhai, who has his priorities right, insists we try the very local and very seasonal delicacies on sale in the bazaar—the bright yellow fruit of the khirni tree, sweet as honey, and green, deliciously tender lotus seeds (kamal gatta).

## PEERING INTO A CHANDERI WEAVER'S HOME IS LIKE LOOKING THROUGH A COLOURED PRISM

Our walk through Chanderi's streets takes us past the magnificent thirteenth-century Jama Masjid and the exquisitely carved lattices of the fifteenth-century 'Badal Mahal Gateway,' the town's signature landmark. Along the way, Kalley Bhai pauses to show us its other wonders—camel caravanserais, stepwells, hammams, temples, the very house in which Ibn Battuta stayed in 1342, grand havelis and palaces. In the sprawling fifteenth-century Raja-Rani Mahal, painstakingly restored by Intach, the NGO Chanderiyaan has set up looms for training the town's youngsters in weaving, as well as block printing and tailoring.

Empowerment Foundation trains them in computeris-



ing design motifs, many of them copied from Chanderi's historic monuments, which can then easily be reproduced by the weavers on saris and dupattas.

And now Kalley Bhai, his shock of orange-hennaed hair standing out among the crowds in the bazaar, leads us to Chanderi's most dramatic site—the Kati Ghati, where an opening was cut overnight through a gigantic wall of solid rock, a truly superhuman effort, to allow an invading army to enter the lush green Chanderi valley. The road from Kati Ghati leads to a seventeenth-century pleasure palace, Ramnagar Mahal, overlooking a vast waterbody, the Mehjatiya Lake. Babur camped at this lakeside the night before he stormed and took Chanderi Fort in 1528. As we sit on a balcony overlooking the lake, a sudden storm whips up, and sheets of rain lash the lake's surface where a tiny boat bobs about helplessly. When the boat finally makes it to shore, we discover that the boatman has two fat carp in his net—and they are ours for seventy rupees. The resourceful Kalley Bhai forages for some fallen twigs, haldi, salt, lemon and oil, takes over the palace chowkidar's kitchen, whips out his Swiss knife, and in ten minutes produces the freshest, most

*An NGO facilitates lessons in traditional crafts for village girls at the Raja-Rani Mahal in Chanderi*



Clockwise from far left: a room at the Amraee resort; the Amraee resort; Kalley Bhai makes a fresh fish fry; and a kachori vendor in Chanderi's Sadar Bazaar

delicious fried fish that we will ever eat. By now, the sunset hour approaches, and Kalley Bhai insists we see one more site before heading back to Pranpur. A forty-five-minute drive out of town brings us to the prehistoric rock shelter at Nanaun, at the edge of a vast, boulder-strewn plateau covered with scrub and thorn. There, beside the Urvashi river where giant crocodiles snooze on the banks, are caves with Stone Age paintings of animals and stick-like figures. And beside them, the names and mobile numbers of recent visitors. Kalley Bhai, with an impish giggle, leaves us with a thought to ponder as we come to the end of our trip: how will future archaeologists interpret this bizarre juxtaposition of Stone Age and Phone Age graffiti at Nanaun?



## THE INFORMATION

### GETTING THERE

Pranpur is in Ashoknagar district, in the Bundelkhand region of Madhya Pradesh. Chanderi is 3km from Pranpur. BY RAIL The nearest railway station, **Lalitpur**, is 35km from Pranpur, and several trains from Delhi, including the Dakshin Express and the Gondwana Express, stop there. Or else, one could take a train to **Jhansi**, a major railway junction, from where Pranpur is 110km by road.

BY AIR The nearest airport is at **Gwalior** (168km).

### WHAT TO SEE & DO

> IN AND AROUND PRANPUR: Explore Pranpur's wheat, jowar and maize fields by bullock cart. Watch a performance of the lively local dance and music forms, **Raee** and **Sehra**, at the Amraee Resort. See the spectacular sunrise at **Rajghat Dam**, 10km from Pranpur. Amraee can also arrange 5- to 10-day **workshops in weaving, pottery and metalwork** in the village.

### > IN AND AROUND CHANDERI:

The **ASI's Chanderi Museum** has a superb sculpture from the eighth to the twelfth centuries, and also the only clean public toilet in the town. In the Fort, see the **Khilji mosque** with its exquisitely carved mihrabs, the **Nokhanda Palace** and the samadhi of the great singer Baiju Bawra. On the outskirts of Chanderi is the impressive fifteenth-century **Koshak Mahal**, like a vast roofless cathedral.



Tribal metalcraft on sale in Pranpur

### WHERE TO STAY

The **Amraee Rural Heritage Resort**, run by the Pranpur Village Tourism Development Committee, works in partnership with two organisations that create and promote ecologically responsible tourism destinations, **India Untravelled** and **Travel Another India**. **TARIFF** ₹1,500 (doubles), including all meals and taxes.

0810318384 (resort manager Rajpal) or see [indiauntravelled.com](http://indiauntravelled.com) and [travelanotherindia.com](http://travelanotherindia.com).

to twelfth centuries, similar in style to Khajuraho. Excavations are still going on.

### WHAT TO BUY

**Chanderi saris and fabric**, of course. At the Pranpur Weavers' Cooperative you can buy for less than ₹4,000 in Delhi or Mumbai. Village potters sell utilitarian pots and tawas as well

as clay toys. Chunky and pretty brass diya at the homes of Pranpur craftsmen.

### TOP TIP

Before you make your own and requisition the superb, estimable guide, **Muhammad Raza Khan** guide@...

■ NANDINI MEHTA