

**ARVIND KRISHNA MEHROTRA (EDITOR): THE LAST BUNGALOW; WRITINGS ON ALLAHABAD**

(PENGUIN INDIA, RS 395)

"Oh Allahabad," writes Mirza Muhammad Asad-ullah Khan, the poet we all know and revere as Ghalib, "May God damn that desolation where neither such medicine may be had as befits the ailing nor regard for those of rank. Its people are nowhere and its old and young are without charity and modesty. Its surroundings are the stuff of the world's notoriety and its ruins are two leagues long. How unjust to call this fearful place a city..." And so it goes. Great cities cause great angers and great sorrows but they sometimes do not summon up great anthologies. But if you read one anthology this year, make sure it is A K Mehrotra's *The Last Bungalow*. Its splendours are many but foremost among them are the pieces contributed by the Mehrotras. There are two essays by Arvind, no mean poet and now revealed as no mean prose stylist. There is also one by his son Palash Mehrotra, who teaches in Doon School (which is, as Saeed Jaffrey tells us in his excerpt, "where rich Indians to this day send their sons to study") and writes with acerbic

wit and a touch of tenderness about sex and the small town. Other wonderful pieces include the ever-reliable Fanny Parkes who was one of the rare travellers who could take other places on their own terms and Rudyard Kipling, being offered *carte blanche*, literally, for his fiction.



**ANITA RAU BADAMI: CAN YOU HEAR THE NIGHTBIRD CALL?**

(VIKING, RS 495)

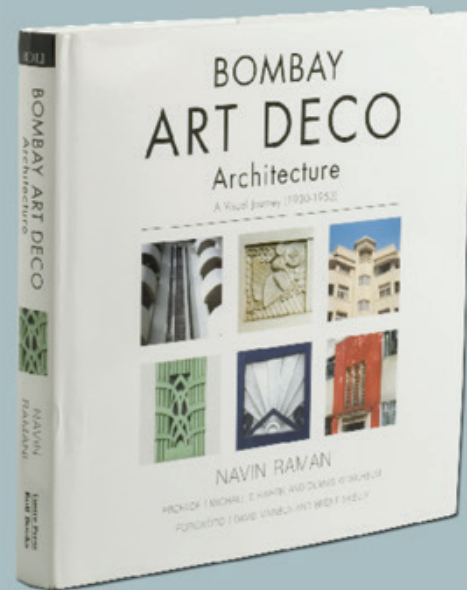
This one has my early nomination for romantic title of the first quarter. No doubt there will be other books called *The Year of the Tamarind Flower* and *What Fragrances Doth the Champa Shed Upon the Charpoy* but right now, this one will serve as the worst title of the year (so far). However, it is not a good idea to judge a book by its cover and this one has what all the other mushy books with glop-py titles does not have. It has a story to tell, it has three strong female characters and things happen to them. They get caught up in the great sweep of history. They respond to these events, not just to the stale breath of their husbands and the delicate nape of their lovers' necks. This makes *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* quite pleasant reading and not as chick-lity as you might have thought.

– JERRY PINTO

**BOMBAY ART DECO ARCHITECTURE: A VISUAL JOURNEY (1930-1953) BY NAVIN RAMANI**

(ROLI BOOKS, RS 1295)

Mumbai's modern-day boxy and characterless skyscrapers gives one the image of a city that is at the mercy of avaricious builders squeezing money out of every square foot of space that they can construct on, rather than a city of architectural masterpieces. But there was a time not long ago, when Mumbai was the playground of dozens of visionary architects – both Indian and international. Starting from the early 1930s up to the late 1950s, following the reclamation from the sea of much of what is now called South Mumbai – Churchgate, Backbay, Marine Drive etc – Mumbai saw a construction boom, which led to the creation of the largest collection of Art Deco buildings in the world. Art Deco refers to the design movement that swept through Europe and America in the early part of last century that combined elements from various styles that were pioneered in that period – cubism, constructionism, modernism, Bauhaus, expressionism, art nouveau etc. The architecture that came out as a result in buildings with sweeping floors, decorative exteriors and opulent interiors using materials which at that time were considered to be modern – steel, aluminium, lacquer, etc.



With hundreds of buildings all around the city that boasts of this style in their design, Mumbai is a virtual cornucopia of this art movement, which began dying in the 1960s, when the minimalist modern style of the likes of Le Corbusier took over.

Navin Ramani, who was born and brought up in Mumbai and now lives in Florida, ironically discovered his home city's beauty in Miami, where one of his jobs is to take visitors on guided architectural tours as a volunteer for the Miami Design Preservation League. "After strolling and sharing my joy at the neighbourhood's historical and design significance, I would often end my tour by revealing how I came from a place of similar beauty, built in the same era, with much of the same style of architecture – Bombay." Lavishly illustrated, and engagingly written, this book presents an entirely different side of Mumbai, which most of its residents are unaware of.