



Antiquity Charms



The owner of Decon Lights is an avid collector of old lamps

Text and photographs by Shantanu Mitra



Facing page and this page: Singh and his antique lamps

When Livinder Singh stopped his taxi on a dark, rainy night in Kolkata in 1975, it was because he saw light. "It was a simple light hanging on a rickshaw and jolly well doing what it was supposed to do," he recalls.

It was, in fact, a low-tech kerosene tin lamp that adorns every rickshaw in Kolkata. It's sold by the scores in Mullik Bazaar. It was to be the first of Singh's massive collection of lamps that now adorns his office and his home in New Delhi.

"Light and the science of lighting has always fascinated me," says Singh, who studied Civil Engineering in Glasgow. Today, he is the designer, manufacturer and retailer of Decon lights.

Singh has watched light closely all his life. And now he puts all his knowledge to the problems of lighting. His head is a huge whirl of filtration, warmth and densities. Hardware and optics. Mood and functional lighting. "I now put my energies into how to illuminate difficult things," says Singh. "Like illuminating 2D and 3D art, jewellery, fabric and a host of other things."

The most mundane and simple lamps find a place in his collection. "One has to rise beyond only collecting things of material value," he says. This is probably why his collection comes up with surprises every time. From second world-war battery lamps to British acetylene cycle lamps, from Dalda tin contraptions to wrought-iron hand-crafted oil lamps from Rajasthan. There are also huge cabby lamps and old Italian Aladdin lamps, miners lamps and doctors' lamps.

His passion for lights has led him to shops, old homes, junk dealers and villages. His gem is an undated intricately carved stone oil lamp. "It was just a paper weight in a *kabadi* shop! Can you imagine that this exquisite piece was junk?" he asks laconically.

At the end of the day, as he dwells on his collection, touching them with a soft look of pride in his eyes, Singh has only one thing to say, "If one has the inclination, a humble lamp can teach us what harmony is all about."