



PHOTOS: ORCHID CHAKMA

THE GAME OF GAWSIA

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In a galaxy far far away lies the Bangladeshi equivalent of Mordor, the land known as Gawsia. Feared by many but revered by even more, the strange land seemed like a completely different planet. One fateful day, four friends took it upon themselves to bravely venture into the heart of this land they'd heard so much about. After hours of passing the daunting armada of cars, the scorching heat beating down on them, there they were, emerging through the thick veil of pollution. Facing the maze of narrow alleyways, and looking at the experienced fleet marching on ahead to accomplish their own personal missions, they realised that nothing could have prepared them for the horror that was to follow.

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MISSION ONE: FABRICS

With hope glistening in their eyes and faces still free and unaware of the sweat and pollution that was to mask them in the next five minutes, the four friends set forth into the land of fabrics. It was nothing less than magical since they were basically swept inside by a sea of people. Their mitochondria were given momentary respite as no precious energy was wasted in walking.

Now, in the narrow corridors of Chandni Chowk, the girls met their first obstacle – a middle-aged man trying to sell fabrics of unknown names in double the price. Luckily, one of the girls stepped forward to fight the Battle of the Great Bargain. The rest stared in awe as she slayed the price in half, while the rest of the gang desperately noted down all her strategies and moves.

After the first purchase of the day was done, in the far corner of the corridor glinted a fabric that was probably every millennial kid's dream. It caught one of the girls' attention and she rushed towards that glimmering minty green fabric with razorblade prints and tried out her newly learnt bargaining skills. She emerged victorious, holding the blade-printed fabric high over her head, making her the edgelord she had always dreamt of being.

However, bargaining wasn't the only thing she learned that day. Our girl learned to distinguish fabrics that are used to make dupattas from fabrics used to make kameez. She even learned new vocabulary: words such as "mishiti" colour while describing clothes and most importantly made her transition into a true Bengali woman after finally uttering, "Amake kichu simple er modde gorgeous kapor dekhkan."

MISSION TWO: KAMEEZ

The second leg of the adventure took the girls to the upper floors of Chandni Chowk where their goal was to find one of the girls her perfect kameez. If you have ever been lied to by people in your life and thought that was hurtful, being lied to by kameez catalogues is a whole new level of deception. Glossy look books with gorgeously photographed models displayed dresses that bore little resemblance to its real-life counterparts. Whether the same kameez in a slightly different colour in contrastive materials and weird patterns was still the same kameez or not is a purely philosophical question



PHOTO: STAR

(this is a good time to look up Theseus's Paradox if you're not familiar).

Feeling confident the girls made their way straight to the third floor of the market which turned out to be a maze of liberally sized, sparkling clean shops where shopkeepers requested the girls take their shoes off should they chose to enter. As they scanned the shelves for designs they liked barefoot, the shopkeepers happily suggested clothes by laying them on the floor. Not finding a match and genuinely scared they would trip over the clothes as they walked, the girls made an exit.

The shops on the second floor of the market was home to attires more to the girls' liking yet they developed a new found empathy for Goldilocks as they complained the clothes were either "too fancy" or "too casual", some "too pricey" and others "suspiciously reasonable." Some seemed perfect at first glance with beautiful neck work and material but when displayed fully revealed to have entire forests as the design in the lower half.

Finally after scanning rows of shops, the girl in

search of her kameez stumbled upon a small shop at the distant end of a lane that looked promising. Here they were shown boutique-made kameez in various colours that seemed to check all the boxes. After checking out versions in black, navy blue, a dark blue very different from the navy blue, yellow, a colour that no one in their right mind can categorise as either yellow or green, and of course, mauve, she very predictably zeroed in on one that was pink – a colour that she swore loyalty to.

Even though the shopkeeper quoted a price that would be unheard of in any other mall in the city, she decided to test her luck and bargain on that price because as a true Dhakaite bargaining came as her natural instinct. With great difficulty they managed to marginaly reduce the price which they considered a great victory given how stubborn the shopkeeper was.

Disappointingly, the shop didn't have any mirrors for her to strike a few poses in front of. But it was nothing the other girls with their smartphones couldn't solve. The girls exited the store happily, considering the second part of their adventure a surprising success.

MISSION THREE: ACCESSORIES

After the great success our protagonists had in the dazzling world of silk, cotton, and other fabrics allegedly named after chickens, the four of them dived into the alleys covered with jewellery. A myriad of displays shining with rhinestones sparkling in the glow of cheap yellow lights awaited them. With high hopes, and hopeful (albeit sweaty) faces, they stepped into the bizarre world.

Before they even got the chance to pluck earrings like a vulture, one of them lost her footing and sprained her ankle, during which she proceeded to fall to the ground in front of the mass. It seemed as though the world had stopped moving during those few painfully long seconds and she was the only person who was not stationary, but kept moving in slow-motion. During the fall, she could faintly hear "O Fortuna" ringing in her ears as she looked around and saw the disappointed faces of the seasoned soldiers. However, their faces were veiled with concern as she finally hit the ground with a loud thump.

In a desperate attempt to save face, she tried brushing off the incident as merely a scratch. But she did not estimate what a powerful enemy her low blood pressure could be. As a result, her vision started getting blurry and overexposed in the light. The faces of her friends turned into glowing blobs with dark eyes and she could finally understand why cartoon characters see stars when they hit their heads.

As she quietly accepted her somewhat dramatic death, an angel appeared out of the blinding sunlight holding a small bottle of Beshi Pure Fruit Drink in one hand and a bar of Not Mars Chocolate in the other. Another angel dabbed the sweat off her forehead with scented tissue paper followed by a third angel who helped her find a seat. She finally started feeling like a bad excuse for a person again, which meant that things were back to normal.

After her revival, they all wasted no time and set out for their mission. It was a pleasant surprise to all of them when they saw that they didn't have to push or shove their way through crowds, but it was an even bigger relief to the injured soldier because there was a good chance she would have fainted in dramatic Victorian-lady-finding-her-murdered-husband fashion.

Eventually, she managed to find two lovely pairs of earrings, in good price, and her near-death experience seemed to be almost worth it.

MISSION FOUR: SHOES

Following the glittery abyss of trinkets and accessories, the girls found themselves heading towards the external side of the market where they had noticed the blue and orange fortress of shoes when they entered. Each step towards the exit felt like a calling to leave the shadows of the alleyways and go out into the open where the sun could shine on them once again. Alas, the mission was yet to be completed, and their task unfulfilled. So, they stood in front of the bright blue tent, filled their lungs with as much air as they possibly could and entered with their goal in mind.

Each corner was occupied by a vendor with boundaries between each stall, only visible to the eyes of the vendors themselves. In between the stalls were poorly lined ramps where people swiftly tried on the shoes they liked and tried to walk on the jagged surface of the walkway to check if the overall agility and tensile strength of the belt and buckles matched up to their necessities. The wide smiles and energetic bargains

once again pumped our shoe-hunting soldiers up with all the inspiration they needed to set out to search for the exact shoes.

With the tent soaking up a good amount of the sun that would have otherwise turned their heads into living examples of heated frying pans, they started looking into the piles of shoes. Realising that the piles were categorised by the level of bling added to them, the girls quickly moved to the piles containing the least amount of bling (subject to their bland taste, not that anything is wrong with a good amount of glitter or stones). As they scanned through the stack, one of them noticed the names and logos of the supposed shoe brands to find Cucci and Chanel lined up right next to each other.

After a quick survey, she found herself attracted to a pair of beige and silver Engorgio Amrani slippers, perfectly suited to her regular wear. She had to stop herself from falling in too deep for these sandals as the chorus of Maroon 5's "This Love" kept playing in her head. However, the song quickly turned into the sound of glass shattering as the vendor asked her, "Apa, 5 naki 7?" This was the moment of truth, if the shoes were truly meant for her, they would be available in her size. "11," she replied in a low voice. She saw the vendor's eyes broaden and almost fall out of its socket, following which he quickly made himself busy looking for the unfortunate size.

After what seemed like an eternity of all the vendors looking into their secret stocks hidden below the displayed ones, and pairs of shoes flying about from random places, the vendor shook his head indicating that they didn't have it. Sighing, she walked out of the tent to the few shoe shops at the gate to see if she could get the idea of the beige Amrani out of her head.

IN THE END

After hours of sweating, shoving, bargaining and complaining, the girls finally walked out of the market with heavy bags and a renewed sense of self-worth. After all, they had just accomplished a magnificent feat. They emerged as brand new women ready to both navigate and negotiate their way through life. All in all, they can vouch for the fact that a trip to Gawsia and Chandni Chowk with friends truly is a must-have experience. However, it is crucial to be well-prepared before embarking on the treacherous journey, as one does not simply walk into Gawsia.