

*January 22, 2006*

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## **Bling it on!**

**W**e stood there forever it seemed, oblivious to the heaving mob around us and the exhortations to move on, lost in the piece of history and allure before us. Perched innocently behind a glass case, it was such a dazzling beauty that treasures worth about \$ 4 billion displayed around -- a collection of rubies, emeralds, pearls and common gold -- appeared tawdry. At long last, Deepak Kavadia, my partner in this diamond fixation, emitted a soulful sigh and declared, "That, my friend, is a D plus."

Of course, there is no such thing as a D plus, as anyone in the diamond trade will tell you. Of the four C's used in evaluating a diamond (color, clarity, carat and cut) alphabet are employed to denote color. D stands for colorless, describing the most pristine diamonds of the highest grade. You know you've got the best when it's a D flawless.

Kavadia, of New York's Nice Jewels, had seen a few beauties in his life time. But even he was blown away by the Jacob diamond. So was I, and my sightings included the Hope Diamond at the Smithsonian and the Regent at the Louvre, both more famous but less dazzling. Although Jacob is reckoned to be only the seventh largest diamond in the world at 184 carats, it is clearly a cut above the rest.

We had met in Hyderabad on the sidelines of the Pravasi Bharat bash, brought together by a common interest in diamonds. By a happy coincidence, the event coincided with a rare display of the famed Nizam's jewels at the Salar Jang Museum. So while many pravasis were moaning about India's collapsing infrastructure, some snuck away one evening to feast on the exhibits.

The 173 pieces of jewelry on display were stunning enough, but nothing had prepared us for the radiance of Jacob, surely the most faultless diamond ever. As we exited the museum that evening, Kavadia, who had carried a five-carat bling on his person and had checked it in casually at the museum locker, joked that he felt like throwing it away.

Of the top ten diamonds of the world in terms of fame or size, more than half come from India, all from the legendary Golconda mines. Most of the biggies are outside India now. The much-rhapsodized Koh-i-Noor is with the British crown jewels, the Orloff with the Kremlin, the Dresden Green in Poland and the Hope and Regent at the Smithsonian and Louvre respectively. Ironically, Jacob's journey was in reverse; it was discovered in South Africa, made its way to India, and has remained here.

Every great diamond has a story behind it, but few have such a quirky legacy as the Jacob, especially towards the end of its private life. It is said that the last Nizam was so blasé about it that he used it as a paperweight. His heirs found it tucked away in an old shoe.

In 1995, the Government of India, an entity you would not associate with enterprise, acquired the Nizam's collection, including the Jacob, for around \$ 45 million after a protracted legal battle. The stash, worth more than \$ 4 billion in the open market, resides in the RBI vaults. The Hyderabad show is only the second time it has been on display.

For many pravasis, the exhibition alone was worth the trip home. Among some, it provoked angst about why other great Indian treasures still lie outside India. Not even a ruinous sortie next day to Golconda Fort, where graffiti-scrawled walls and slaughter houses within the complex bespeak supreme indifference to our history, robbed them of the glow from the Jacob experience.

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