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Party zone: (Top to bottom) Dak Bungalow Road, one of the city's busiest thoroughfares, is lined with new hotels and restaurants; and a group of teenagers celebrate Nishant Kumar's (in black) 13th bir

Patna's brave new nights

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Pallavi Singh

Patna's brave new nights

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Close

That hot June afternoon in 1992 left an indelible imprint on Shanker Dutt's memory. "June 5, in fact, let me tell you," he says matter-of-factly.

The professor of English was at Patna University's Darbhanga House, the heritage precinct where postgraduate classes for literature students are held, attending a farewell function for one of his colleagues. "Some of the students wanted to gatecrash. They were prevented from doing so but one of the students broke the glass of one of the doors and fired a shot," he recalls.

The bullet hit Dutt, who was on the dais, in the wrist, "shattering all the bones". Yet, when they took him to the doctor, he was reluctant to disclose how he had been injured. "A bullet wound meant a medico-legal case. One of my colleagues told the doctor I had tripped but the doctor, of course, figured it out," he says.

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It was Dutt's first experience of fear in the city of his birth. By the 1990s, the historical capital was a hub of notoriety and lawlessness, a classic case of cow-belt indiscipline, perversity and despair.

Party zone: (Top to bottom) Dak Bungalow Road, one of the city's busiest thoroughfares, is lined with new hotels and restaurants; and a group of teenagers celebrate Nishant Kumar's (in black) 13th birthday at Yo! China in Bandar Bagicha; Kapil's Eleven restaurant does brisk business on weekday evenings; the Saturday night show at Mona cinema is sold out; Maurya Lok complex is crowded despite the late hour; and the renovated precincts of Chhaju Bagh police station

In the four years since chief minister and Janata Dal (United) leader Nitish Kumar took over, 317 criminal cases have been reported, against 1,393 such cases in 2000-04. Speedy trials ensured a total of 38,824 convictions—in mostly theft, murder, extortion and kidnapping cases—between 2006 and 2009. Most of Bihar's infamous dons are in jail, including Shahabuddin, the former Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) politician who once went live on television, daring the state police to arrest him.

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battered posts has added to police confidence), officials actively attend to routine complaints.



Emboldened by the improvement in law and order, people in Patna have now embarked on a nightlife that assiduously chronicles middle-class ambitions, its appetite for change and hunger for recreational options.



Prabhat Kaushal, a garment shop owner, didn't think it was risky to allow his 13-year-old son Riddiman a night out with friends—unlike earlier, when businessmen were hesitant to venture out late at night for fear of extortion and kidnapping. Kaushal dropped his son at casual dining restaurant Yo! China where bright lights from the wood-crafted ceiling illuminated the faces of 10 teenagers.



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Outside, the evening is just getting started. Mobile vans and food stalls at the Maurya Lok Complex, Patna's answer to Connaught Place, are busy rustling up freshly cooked Chinese and south Indian food, as people saunter in.

Yet, for Riddiman and his friend Nishant Kumar, Yo! China in Bandar Bagicha was just the right place for Kumar's birthday bash. His voice brims with excitement as he explains: "Here, it's air conditioned and we can order till midnight." It was the 13-year-old's first birthday celebration outside his home—but then this year is different, he remarks. "Now, all my friends hang out till late in the restaurants and so my father eventually agreed for me to treat my friends at a hotel," the class VIII student at the city's DAV Public School says. The online call registry Just Dial now has more than 150 restaurants on its Patna list, most of them less than five years old.

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At Mona, one of the city's oldest cinema halls and now converted into a multiplex, all weekend shows for the 9pm to midnight slots are "house full", says manager Ajay Kumar Kataruka. "There was a time when we had to cancel late-night shows. Now, we don't have tickets for people coming in late," he says.

Different service sector players have reached the state, almost a decade after most metros saw the first wave, and consumers have lots of options. Yo! China's many competitors include local entrepreneurs and national restaurant chains such as Kapil's Eleven, owned by cricketer Kapil Dev; for leisurely evenings, there's the Patna Golf Club or the Country Club International.

At the Bankipore Club, Kavindra, a businessman who uses only his first name, has been a member for more than 40 years. He recalls, "People would try to get out early and move together in groups to any specified destination so that numbers give them a sense of strength." Now, of course, the club—like several others—has been revamped and is packed to capacity till midnight. The world where RJD's Lalu Prasad threatened to cancel the lease of the Patna Golf Club seems very distant.

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(Friday Bloom) and Shani Bahaar (Saturday Spring)— have also come up in the last two years.

“Art and culture follow only in a secure environment,” says Kavindra.

At the Cine Society, often fabled to be “as ancient as Patna”, its 50-odd members try to revive “the old days” twice a month—harking back to the time when they would screen rare classics. In the 1960s, the club used to import cinema reels from Europe for film screenings.

Bereft of an auditorium, society members now convert the patients’ waiting room at the Sen Laboratory diagnostic centre into an auditorium for screening movies—the Laboratory owner is a Cine Society member.

“In the 1970s, there were more than 300 members and films would be screened at the very spacious hall of the Indian Medical Academy. There are never too many people now since more entertainment avenues have opened in the city, but we haven’t stopped,” says Dutt, who is a member of the Cine Society.

At the historic bridge over the Ganga on the outskirts of the city, the youth have found their new pulse. Mahatma Gandhi Setu, one of the longest river bridges in Asia, weighed down by years of decay and traffic, now gets a fresh set of visitors after dusk—restless, and often in love.

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