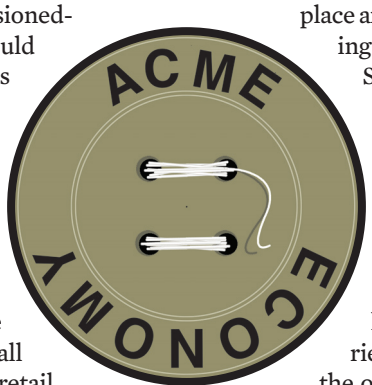
PARIS diary

SHEFALEE VASUDEV

Masstige Matters

"YOU are not born a brand, you become one," echoed the voice of a CEO of a top luxury brand. "Never confuse the image with the identity of the brand," he added. These words were a part of a presentation made at a recent international editors' conference in Paris. As I looked around at the groups of bright and beautiful people taking notes, I realised the days of the journalist-editor are well and truly over. Enter the writer-businesswoman (or man)—who strategically alters the DNA of the readership brand with implants and transplants. That's your new editor.

Paris is like an open university of brandbazi. A walk down Champs-Elysees can teach one how to create and "market" a top quality product that is mythically attractive; available yet elusive at the same time. Never mind if what you must learn to sell is luxury handbags, velvety marshmallows or a publication. The trick is to democratise your product and yet keep it snobbish. Not long back, I would find the boutiques of Chanel, Bvlgari, Dior, Christian Lacroix and many others rather intimidating. Gandhi-disillusioned-with-Gucci butterflies in the stomach would leave me uncomfortable. Now, territories have been remapped. Many brands are cultivating a new respect for the not-so-exclusive customer. Armani, of course, was one of the first to create sub-brands (Giorgio Armani, Armani Collezioni, Emporio Armani, Armani Jeans, Armani Exchange and Armani Junior) to cater to different economic groups. You can see Armani off the catwalk—in the suburban mall as well. Karl Lagerfeld designs are in chic retail shops too, not just in Chanel showrooms. This diminishing arrogance of the brands will determine the new brand wars. The discerning rich may turn up their noses at this destruction of the myth of exclusivity, but in this there's a lesson for the new editor. Masstige—mass market plus prestige (a term coined by *Economist*)—is what it's all about.



R. PRASAD

The Bold and the Black

CLASSES on mass appeal over, it was time to party. The Cafe de l'Homme restaurant and terrace with a stunning view of the Eiffel Tower in the Musee d l'Homme was the breathtaking venue. Live music by the Charlie Abela band provoked the subdued and the energetic alike, and the will to dance took centrestage. In the sea of black suits and black dresses—personalities merged, differences blurred and personal style became a casualty. I fail to understand why the creme de la creme in Paris would all turn up in black. So I compiled a list of the wonders of black by querying people. Here it is: black is slimming, objective(!), influential, mesmeric, magical, bold and brooding, stark and simple simultaneously. It creates an unobtrusive field of fashion to experiment with. It dilutes inferiority or superiority in dressing; it's reassuring and regal. People wearing black are always taken seriously. I was secretly hoping someone would say black could also be boring, unoriginal and took the least imagination in dressing up. Nobody did. I rest my case.

Dreams in Trunks

THE Louis Vuitton workshop at Asnieres, a lovely 30-minute drive from central Paris, is a trip worth your while. Over hot croissants, a petite English-speaking French lady talked to me about the history and psychology of the house of Vuitton. The workshop is alongside the original home of Louis Vuitton, where he lived with family when he came to France over a century back. No one lives here now but the floral, stained-glass windows, the LV trunks before and after the monogram came into being, the blue ceramic fireplace and the way natural light filters into the drawing room said a few things about the owners. Still, the workshop is where the stories lie. After an enlightening tour of the hundreds of details that go into the making of a luxury brand, what captivated me were the special orders the workshop handles from all over the world. Someone ordered an LV trunk to carry a bar complete with crystal wine glasses and accessories, another wanted one for a gold clarinet she carried around the globe. The team told me that the original piece is brought into the workshop for precise measurements. "We don't fit things; we fit dreams into trunks," said my guide.

The Terminators

THE parties were all lavish, including a 'very French' one in an enchanting 17th century chateau. But Suresh Selvaraj, associate publisher of *Marie Claire* India, and I would find ourselves hungry on our return trip each evening. The nouvelle French cuisine was delicious and delicate, but not filling enough for us hyper Indians. So we'd stop by at a restaurant and order peasant food. Alas, the non-English that the French waiters speak can be quite unappetising. Call for the cheque and they would ask "Terminate?" with hands up in the air as if about to conclude a musical concert. On the last evening, when a distracted waiter came back with lukewarm beer and cold steak, it was a hungry and angry Suresh who decided to end the concert. "Terminate!" he said.

(The author is editor, Marie Claire *India)*