



BREACHING THE BERLIN WALL

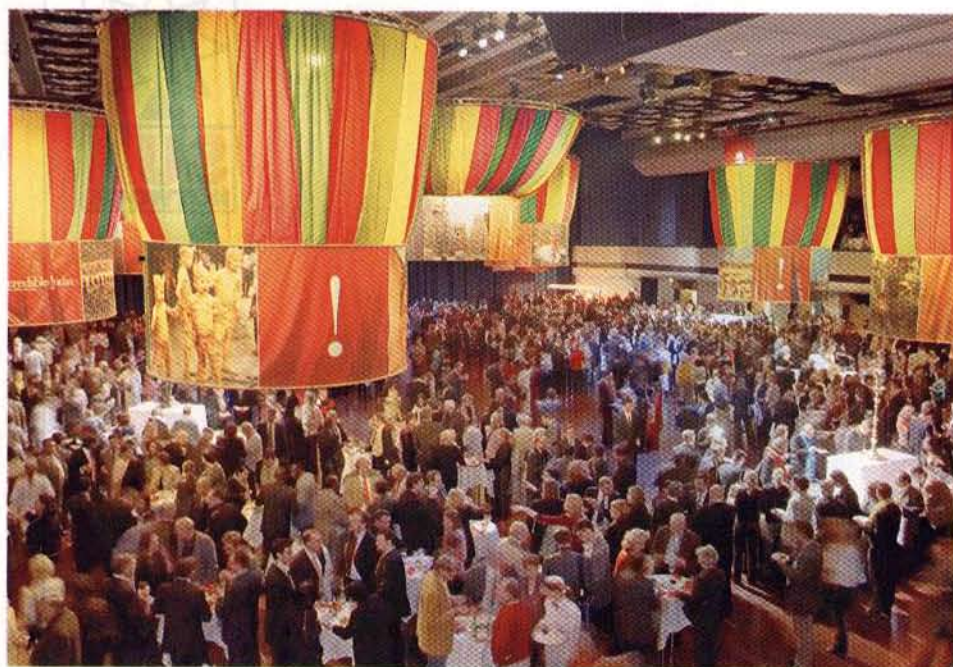
India hardsells itself at the world's biggest travel fair with style and a stunning display of dance, fashion and food

■ By Dilip Bobb in Berlin

The Incredible India poster at the entrance to the International Tourism Bourse (ITB) in Berlin said it all. Against a striking red silk background was a one line slogan: "Open for Business". It was impossible to miss the symbolism at last week's ITB, the world's biggest travel and tourism exposition. This year, India opted to be the partner country and did so with style, panache and a dazzling display of fusion dance and fashion along with mouth-watering food prepared by top chefs from the country's leading hotel chains. Berlin is the city that best symbolises the end of the Cold War with the demolition of the Berlin Wall and, judging by India-related events at the ITB, it seemed that many a bureaucratic wall had also tumbled down. The main organiser of the show was the Ministry of Tourism but it was



BRANDING: Incredible India posters splashed across Berlin (above) and the gala India evening at ITB showcasing dance, fashion, music and food (top)



anything but the traditional yawn that Government of India performances tend to be. Whether it is India's rapid economic growth, an expanding global profile or increased self-confidence, there is a new energy and purpose in government circles that is embracing innovation and happily making space for partnering with the private sector.

From the time you landed at Berlin's Tegel airport, the result of that new-found enterprise literally hit you in the face. The colourful, clever, creative Incredible India campaign was strategically positioned at the passenger exits and all across the city. From giant billboards on landmark buildings to taxis and buses, Berlin was awash in the myriad images of India. It was **hardsell** but without the snake-charmers, sadhus and the ubiquitous Taj Mahal. Even the concessions to Indian imagery were done with sophistication, like the cycle rickshaw at the entrance to ITB's sprawling acreage. It was trendy, classy and hi-tech with an iPod and speakers for the benefit of passengers. At the inaugural India event before 4,500 prominent delegates and invitees, India unfolded in layers of sound, colours, culture, fab-



HARDELL: The dinner venue (top) and Soni lights the lamp at ITB

rics and food, with the glamour quotient provided by top models draped in Ritu Kumar's creations.

That a lot of thought and creativity had gone into the evening's event was evident. In most cases, a performance by 75 folk dancers, ranging from Bhangra to Manipuri to Assamese Bihu dancers would have been a nightmarish prospect. Instead, the ministry outsourced the job to a top professional choreographer and the result was something rarely seen: a medley of folk music and dance, mercifully short but brought together in such dazzling fusion that even the normally phlegmatic Germans were tapping their feet in time to the dholaks. That innovation was the key had become clear earlier

when Tourism Minister Ambika Soni, elegant of dress and speech, didn't dwell on the traditional tourism draws but focused on themes like wedding tourism, with a mention about the "Liz Hurley-Arun Nayar wedding happening in India". Marriage tourism is a new concept but with its growing popularity, it's an idea whose time has come. Even the Ritu Kumar show was not so much about design—Berlin's Ku Dam has every major international designer brand—but highlighted fabrics and embroidery.

The piece de resistance was the food. The moment the folk dance was over, the curtains parted to reveal 49 chefs with folded hands welcoming the assembled guests to an unforgettable dinner. Accompanied by Grover wine and Kingfisher beer, the Oberoi, Maurya, Taj and Hyatt chains unveiled signature dishes like Bukhara's Sikandari raan, Dum Pukht's delicacies and a range of Indian desserts, all served in a fabulously decorated hall and with enough food stations so there were no wedding-type rugby scrums.

Involving the private sector in a major way is clearly the way to go. The ITB attracts some five million visitors and is the ideal place to sell hotels and tours and make deals. India had 500 exhibitors from the country, from chains to single property owners like Dushyant Singh, MP and son of Rajasthan Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje. Germany is a prime market. German tourist arrivals in India were 1.29 lakh in 2005, a 69 per cent increase in five years. From a mock wedding in one corner to the hi-tech stalls with flat screen displays, CD-Roms and aggressive salespersons, this was showcasing a new, modern India. As always, there were sceptics who wondered whether the momentum could be maintained. For now, breaching the Berlin Wall was victory enough. ■