

# Enchanted in NY

At the NY launch of his book, Salman Rushdie just wanted to eat, drink and be with old friends

Assem Chhabra is a freelance writer based in New York who has previously written for The New York Times, The Boston Globe, Philadelphia Inquirer and Time Out, New York

Last week, in the middle of a conversation with Salman Rushdie at the Rubin Museum of Art, Shadia Thanoor turned to the audience and declared, "I want you all to know that according to Salman Rushdie, Jodha Bai did not exist."

"No, historically Jodha Bai did not exist," Rushdie said, which led Thanoor to ask the next question, "And Ashwarya Bai didn't exist either?"

"No, Ashwarya Bai exists, unfortunately," Rushdie said, as he laughed at his own joke. The audience of nearly 300 people, half of them South Asian, all laughed along with Rushdie.

This was the New York City launch of Rushdie's new novel *The Enchantress of Florence*, organised by the museum and the India-American Art Council.

Rushdie went on to explain that according to his research, Empress Akbar was married to a Rajput princess whose Marathi name was *Maharan-uz-Zaman*. And Marzan was the mother of Prince Jshaurig, he added. Another piece of information from *Su Salhan Koshile*—Jodha Bai was the name of a minor wife of Jahangir. "All the Mughal kings had Rajput wives," he said.

Rushdie acknowledged that to the common man on the street, in South Asia and in films, Jodha Bai remains Akbar's wife.

In reality, there is more confusion on this. Willigeda, the source of all information (source of which is often incorrect) on the Internet maintains that Marzan-uz-Zaman is a name also had another name—Jodha Bai.



This is a



The Enchantress of Florence tracks Rushdie's contention that Akbar's capital Fatehpur Sikri was linked to Florence

not eroded the thread of conversation by saying, "Only Salhan can get away with it." And Rushdie seemed pleased with that conclusion.

On another note, Thanoor asked Rushdie about his perspective about Islam today, not only because of his clash with the fundamentalists, but because he raises the issue of religion and God in his latest book.

Rushdie appeared contemplative when he said that he remembered his childhood, growing up in a Marathi family, and what it meant to be a Muslim in India. He mentioned that his family initially chose not to migrate to Pakistan. He further described the state of Islam today by giving the example of Beirut.

"When we were young, Beirut was referred to as the Pearl of the East," he said, looking towards Thanoor. He suggested that the current brand of fundamental

Islam was to blame for the state of Beirut. "Now Beirut is a basket-case. It is a tragedy and a self-inflicted wound and America didn't do any of that."

*The Enchantress of Florence* is the result of seven years of research. The book tracks Rushdie's contention that Akbar's capital of Fatehpur Sikri, a hedonistic city as the author describes it, was connected to the sensual city of Florence.

Rushdie includes a bibliography at the end of the book and, as Thanoor pointed out, this was a first for the author. Rushdie responded, "I wanted people to know that this world is known by the name. It wasn't made up. If people like the book, they can continue the journey. But I don't know why people are being-up over the bibliography. It appears at the end of the book and you don't need to read it."

The Rubin Museum event started with a short musical recital by Alby Reddy, Tinas Basu and Supriya — an Indian-American tabla player who is also a friend of Rushdie. And Rushdie was introduced by Aroon Shirshant — the executive director of IACC. Shirshant pointed out that the launch, which included a 20-minute reading by the author, was actually an excuse for everyone to party. All Rushdie wanted was to celebrate the occasion, and eat and drink with his friends.

And the friends did show up, including hotel rames from New York's South Asian literary and artistic community, like Subhas Mehta, Kisan Desai, her mother, Anita Desai, and actress and cookbook writer Madhur Jaffrey. The no-expense-went-on-untillate in the evening at the museum's cafe — with the bartenders serving delicious concoctions, including Zen Margaritas, and an assortment of nouvelle cuisine. Rushdie looked pleased, talking to the press, posing for pictures and signing books.