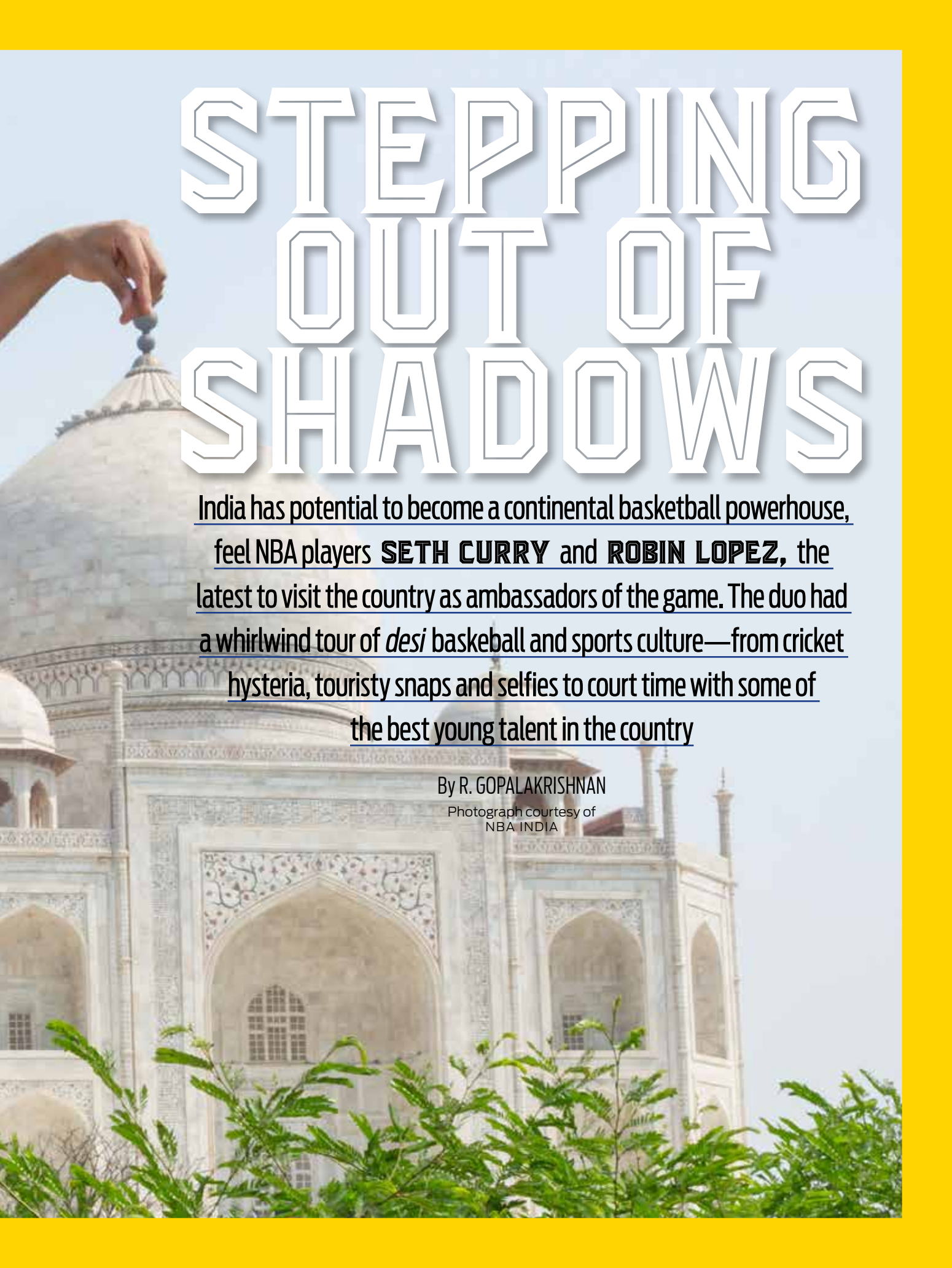


A man with curly hair, wearing a brown fedora, a white long-sleeved shirt, and khaki pants, stands in front of the Taj Mahal. He is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background shows the white marble structure of the Taj Mahal under a clear blue sky, with some green foliage on the left and right sides. A yellow border is visible at the top and bottom of the image.

**NBA
BASKETBALL**

MONUMENTAL

Lopez, who plays for New York Knicks as a centre, feels building a proper grassroots set-up should see India rise in stature in basketball.

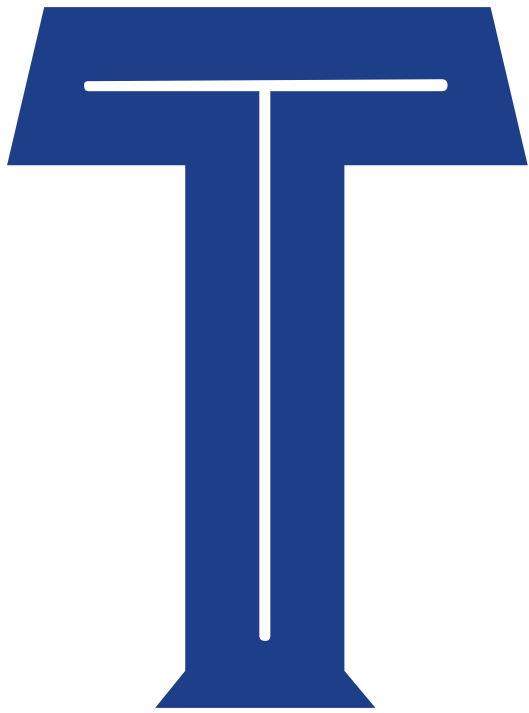
A hand is seen adjusting a finial on the dome of the Taj Mahal. The background shows the white marble structure of the monument under a clear sky, with green foliage in the foreground.

STEPPING OUT OF SHADOWS

India has potential to become a continental basketball powerhouse, feel NBA players **SETH CURRY** and **ROBIN LOPEZ**, the latest to visit the country as ambassadors of the game. The duo had a whirlwind tour of *desi* basketball and sports culture—from cricket hysteria, touristy snaps and selfies to court time with some of the best young talent in the country

By R. GOPALAKRISHNAN

Photograph courtesy of
NBA INDIA



THE FACT THAT IT DIDN'T MAKE HEADLINES is probably the biggest headline. By now news of NBA and WNBA players, past and present, coming over to India every summer isn't a huge deal. It all started with a Kevin Garnett visit back in 2006, followed by some 50 others since then, an illustrious list that includes Pau Gasol, Isaiah Thomas, Chris Bosh, Kyle Korver, George Gerwin, Swin Cash and Tamika Catchings.

The NBA has always used the off-season to send its talent all over the world—like modern-day missionaries—to spread the gospel of the league through its various initiatives. Describing the phenomenon, Robin Lopez, a 28-year-old seven-foot centre with the New York Knicks, said, "It's a very grassroots thing—to work with a lot of kids. No matter where we go, we try to instil in them as much of basketball as possible. To instil a love of sports early on in their lives. I think that's what we would really like to do here [India] or anywhere."

Lopez, and fellow NBA player Seth Curry, 25, a guard with the Sacramento Kings, were on the Indian trail from April 28 to May 1. They travelled to Jaypee Greens, Greater Noida, for the Reliance Junior NBA Elite National Camp, visited the Taj Mahal in Agra, and, in Mumbai, appeared on Sony Six's NBA game-time show, *Around the Hoop*, as well as on the hugely popular *IPL Extraaa Innings* cricket talk-show.

The two have also been binging on street food ("Lots of *samosas*. Also, *ragda pattis*, *vada pao*") and getting first-hand experience of the "crazy traffic".

We caught up with both of them at Atlantis—The Club, the sprawling Jaypee Integrated Sports Complex, in Greater Noida, which has been used as the training base for the Indian national basketball teams. Curry and Lopez were busy interacting with our brightest basketball minds—many of them superstars in their own right such as current senior India men's captain, Vishesh Bhriguvanshi, and former women's captain and coach, Shiba Maggon. Besides these instructors, the camp comprised 120 of India's best under-13 and under-16 boys and girls hand-picked from 10 cities—Punjab, Kerala, Kolkata, Chennai, Delhi NCR, Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Ahmedabad, Lucknow, Jaipur and



"It [cricket] was very tantalising... almost beckons you to learn more about the game. I WAS SEEING ALL THE HIGHLIGHTS (AND) I think I did manage to figure out the basics of it."

Mumbai. The campers were then put through their paces.

Different stations had been set up across the three indoor courts at the facility for shooting, passing, strength and conditioning, ball handling, defence, attacking from the wings, and post plays.

The two NBA ambassadors were impressed by what they saw. "People here are athletically inclined, they play various sports like football and cricket, so there is great potential for basketball in the country," said Lopez.

COURTESY OF NBA INDIA



CUT ABOVE THE REST

What makes Curry and Lopez's stories unique is that in a league where only 0.03% of all American high schoolers make the cut, they aren't the only NBA players in their family. Curry's elder brother, Steph, is the reigning two-time Most Valuable Player (MVP), while Lopez's brother, Brooke, plies his trade at the Brooklyn Nets.

With the NBA being aired in over 200 countries and engaging 320 million fans in the social media, the pressure to perform is immense. But for Curry and Lopez, the competitive drive began right at home. Their fathers were professional basketballers—Curry's father, Dell, was with the Charlotte Hornets and Lopez Sr. was a professional player in Cuba—and both have elder brothers who taught them the basics.

There have been around 60 sets of siblings in the history of the 70-year-old league. But in Lopez's case the brother bond is extra special because he and Brooke are one of only seven pairs of twins to have ever played in the NBA. "Growing up, I played basketball with my brother. We both watched our older broth-

BIG BOYS' CLUB

Lopez feels Satnam and Bhullar, the two Indians in the NBA D-League, have more than just size working for them. "They have the soft touch," says the big man.

ers [play in] a lot of games in high school. We would be running around in the gym, so excited about the whole thing—people in the stands, the game. In the half-time and breaks, we would always try to shoot baskets. As we grew older, we used to play in the driveway in highly contentious matches that would always end in a brawl!"

The twins finished their sophomore season at Stanford before entering the 2008 NBA draft. Brooke was considered the more bankable talent (NBA All-Star, NBA All-Rookie First Team), while Lopez became recognized by his antics (which involved frequent manhandling of NBA mascots) and distinct physical appearance (afro alert!).

The NBA is now more international than ever, with 100 foreign players from 37 countries featured on the 2015–16 opening day rosters.

One country still missing from this list is India. Last year, Satnam Singh was drafted by the Dallas Mavericks and immediately sent to its D-League Affiliate, the Texas Legends. A year before Satnam, a Punjab-origin player from Canada, Gursimran 'Sim' Bhullar, was

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signed by the Sacramento Kings. Both are towering centres over seven feet tall, but Lopez believes there's more to these two than just their size. "I think people need to realise how skilled those two players are. They have really soft touches, [and] they have great moves as well. So there is definitely more to it than just size."

Satnam and Bhullar are currently sweating it out in the D-League, the official minor league of the NBA. This may be considered a setback when viewed from the eyes of an average Indian sports fan, but is an expected detour in basketball. The two of them still have a lot to do to develop their speed, and strengthen their gargantuan physiques that pose higher risks of ankle, knee and lower-back injuries.

The journey from the D-League to the NBA is one that Curry has made on his own. The Duke alum in fact had it tougher than Satnam, having gone undrafted in 2013. He then signed a short-lived 10-day contract with the Golden State Warriors on his birthday and subsequently made his D-League debut with the Santa Cruz Warriors.

Curry has spent the 2015-16 season with the Sacramento Kings, a team with a prominent Indian connect through its owner, Vivek Ranadive. He wears No. 30, the same as his father and elder brother, and just like them, is a lethal sharpshooter, providing the Kings with much-needed outside scoring.

INDIA CALLING

The activities of the NBA in India are increasing, starting from the now defunct multi-city Mahindra NBA Challenge, to the always popular 3x3 Jam events, and the Reliance Foundation Jr. NBA Programme. The latter has now engaged 1.5 million youth and close to 3,000 coaches and instructors. In 2014, NBA India launched its first online merchandise store powered by Jabong. On TV, the NBA received a viewership that touched 50 million through the 2014–15 season, aired daily on Sony Six. Just last month, NBA India launched a completely revamped website that promises customised content for the local audience.

The League may now be synonymous with basketball the world over, but in India there is a yawning gap between avid followers of all things NBA, and those who choose to make a lifestyle out of the sport. A majority of the "professional" basketballers in India come from rural or semi-urban areas, often from middle and lower middle-class families. Their aspirations end with representing the country and landing jobs with public sector undertakings.

As things stand today, Indian basketball remains in the shadow of its big Asian brothers—China, Iran and the Philippines — who regularly qualify for the World Championships. To make things harder, the Indian basketball system has been mired in administrative issues and power struggles for over a year. In March this year, the Basketball Federation of India (BFI) got removed from the list of recognised National Sports Federations (NSFs), further constricting funds, and



affecting the conduct of national competitions. The confusion even led to the last minute cancellation of the basketball event from the 2016 South Asian Games—a shocking development considering that India were sure-shot gold medal contenders.

Despite the backroom debacles, Indian cagers have been performing reasonably well. In the 2015 FIBA Asia Championship, the men finished in the top eight for the first time in 12 years, while the women are ranked among the top 40 in the world. Interestingly, last year also marked the beginning of a private basketball league in the country, following in the footsteps of other sports with leagues such as kabaddi, cricket and football. However, until a BFI-backed league comes up, the larger struggles will continue.

Bringing Lopez and Curry to India is significant in more ways than one. Lopez is the first centre/forward of note to come calling since Miami Heat's Bosh in 2013. Back then, Bosh had spoken about how basketball is not the most popular sport even in the US (that honour goes to American football), something that Indian basketball fans can take heart from. Even if hoops can never attain the popularity of cricket, it is no excuse to not provide a nurturing environment

REACHING OUT

Curry (above), who plays for the Kings, and Lopez visited and inspired kids such as seven-footer Aashay Verma at the Jr. NBA elite camp during their visit to India.



BARRY GOSSAGE/NBA/E VIA GETTY IMAGES (ABOVE); COURTESY OF NBA INDIA



for the game.

Visiting NBA players inevitably get bombarded by questions about the gentleman's game. Lopez tried coming in prepared by watching a documentary on the West Indies cricket team (*Fire in Babylon*, maybe?) during his onward flight. But the adulation commanded by India's No. 1 sport took both of them by surprise. Lopez said: "It was very tantalising... almost beckons you to learn more about the game. I was seeing all the highlights [and] I think I did manage to figure out the basics of it." Curry added, "It's hard to watch but I would like to learn and read more about it."

There's only so much that can be expected from fleeting stopovers in India by NBA stars. To make things better, the change has to come from within—right from grassroots coaching to competitive exposure to facilities. But these visits are definitely impacting certain lives.

Ambati Prudhvishwar Reddy, a 20-year-old former junior India player, was one of the young coaches mentored at Jaypee Greens. He considered the meeting with Curry as one of the high points towards his own eclectic basketball journey that stretches from Nalgonda to Barcelona, then Texas and now back to India.

"I feel so lucky to work with him during the 'dribbling selection' and he was a real cool dude. Seth is the first NBA player I ever

"People here [in India] are athletically INCLINED AND PLAY A LOT OF SPORTS. Basketball has a lot of potential."

met and hopefully the count starts from now," read his Facebook post, replete with pictures of him with Seth and tags that read #ballislife, #dreamchaser and #SethcurryIndia.

In terms of NBA's work in India, the next major development will be to conduct a pre-season exhibition game. Around 160 exhibition games featuring NBA teams or players have been held in 18 countries across four continents, but sadly, as of today, India does not have a facility considered worthy enough to host one.

Both Curry and Lopez are seeing a steady rise in their on-court production, with recent career highs in single game three point shooting and rebounding, respectively. The two have words of inspiration for aspiring young Indian basketballers. Curry recalled advice passed on to him by his superstar brother. "He always tells me to be myself. He knows that people are always going to compare me and that I should not compare myself to other people." Lopez keeps it simple. "You just gotta keep your head up, keep working hard and stay ready." It's all about coming out of the shadow. □

R. Gopalakrishnan is an independent writer based out of Bengaluru, and the co-founder of Ekalavyas.com, India's leading basketball news website.