

# PEOPLE CALLED **AHMEDABAD**

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First published in India in 2017 by:  
The People Place Project

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First published in 2017

Print Book ISBN: 978-1-63587-346-7

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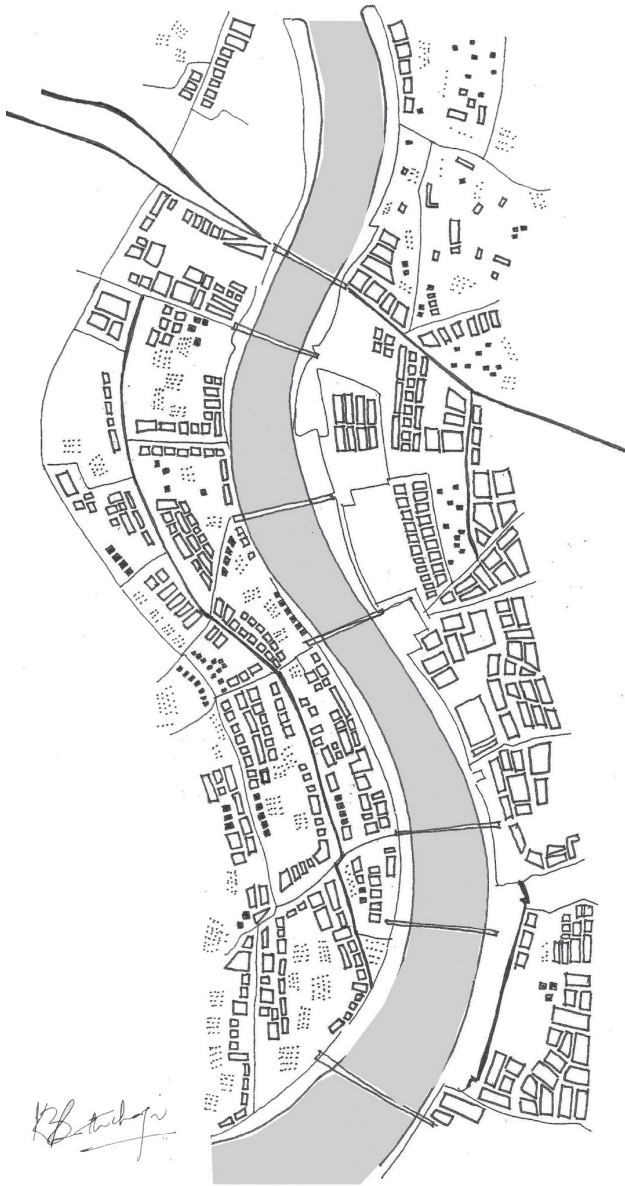
Typeset in Adobe Garamond Pro by Ram Das Lal, New Delhi (NCR)  
Printed and bound at Saurabh Printers, Okhla, New Delhi

Publishing facilitation: AuthorsUpFront

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*Dedicated to Ahmedabad:  
the city by the river, her people and their dreams*



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## Acknowledgements

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In order of our work, we would first like to thank all the eminent practitioners and academicians who obliged to brainstorm with us about the city at our various panel discussions. Deepika Sahu, Jalp Lakhia, Seema Khanwalkar, Vyom Mehta, Zalak Trivedi, Mansi Shah, Snehal Nagarsheth, Deviba Wala, Preeti Das, Paul John, Prayas Abhinav and Shilpa Das. Their insights have been precise and guiding.

We would also like to thank the following people who have graciously engaged in conversations with us about the book and the project: Bipin Shah (Mapin Publishers), SJ Haider (Principal Secretary, Gujarat Tourism), Giriraj Kadia, Setu Goyal (Busker's Corner), Ahmedabad International Literature Festival, Atri Dixit, Manjushree, Sananda Dutta and Subodh Gupta from Wagh Bakri, Krishnamachari Bose, Rajeev Patel and Ashish Mehta from *Diwanji ni haveli*, Bharat Desai and Harit Mehta from *Times of India*, Ahmedabad, Falguni Vasavada-Oza, Prof. Anil Gupta, Umang Hutheesing, Minakshi Jain, Himanshu Desai, Pray Bavishi from Humans of Amdavad,

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Lissa Chazot from Mahatma Gandhi International School, Ahmedabad, Mahesh Shah, Hamid Raj, Raksha Bharadia and Kannan Somasundaram.

A very special thank you from the team comes to Jalp Lakhia, Manish Purohit, Tarun Gupta and Zalak Trivedi who have often stretched beyond briefs and always helped us. Their belief in the project has often been very motivating and reassuring.

The project has been accomplished because of intensive field work and some terrific writing. Having passionately engaged in the project and then patiently borne the brunt of our editing swords – the writers take the centre stage! We would like to thank Dhaval Shukla, Ipshta Karmakar, Lissa Chazot, Manasi Choksi, Niharika Joshi, Pooja Menon, Pramada Jagtap, Saylee Soundalgekar, Shivani Mehta and Sriram Natarajan. Also, a big thank you to our guest writers Deepika, Chitra Unnithan, Pray Bavishi, Parth Trivedi and Shweta. The beautiful illustrations are by Krittika Bhattacharjee.

To give the book its form, it takes a great team effort and endless hours of writing, designing and editing. I would like to thank Teresa Mary Pious, Roshini Ganesh, Priyanka Shimpi and Krittika Bhattacharjee for being efficient and enthusiastic colleagues. The book is as much a product of their hard work, as much as mine and the authors. Our editing and publishing team: Manish Purohit, Arpita Das, Ramya Sarma, Kavita Bhalla and Jyotirmoy Chaudhuri for always making the post-writing part of the work a cakewalk. Also Atri Dixit, Shriti Das, Lavanya R, Apoorva Jeenal Vaz and Saylee Soundalgekar who were a part of the various processes of the book and the conceptualisation of The People Place Project.

To make this research possible, we had done a crowdfunding campaign through Wishberry in the month of June. We would like

to thank their team – Anshulika Dubey, Priyanka Agarwal, Dhruvi Nasrin and Shiv Basin who helped us in the journey. And Meera Warriar, Reshmi Pillai and Tarun Gupta who have been pillars of support and made the campaign successful. Moreover, we would like to thank our backers who believed in the project and extended their support: Anand Gupta, Mustafa Mun, Anjali Mulchandani, Yogesh Gupta, Belverd Needles, Sujit Pillai, Poornima and Ramakrishnan. Warriar, Ajay and Sumitra Warriar, Anita and Dinesh Gupta, Sobha and Balmohan Warriar, Heta Trivedi, Varun Gupta, Sushma and Anil Warriar, Sujay Kumarji, Anjali and Ragesh Warriar, Anitha Raghunath Rudran, Mayur Salunke, Nilesh Mahajan, Preeti and Brijesh Krishnan, Shreya Hazari, Sheeja and Sudhir Variyar, Prayas Abhinav, Rashmi Parkar, Suchita Mundra, Karthik Nair, Manish Purohit, Nishiggandha Kerure, Uma and Vinod Paleli, Mona and Nikesh Shah, Samik Sarkar, Charlotte Rodrigues, Shweta Singh, Rima Parikh, Snehal Malani, Jigar Gandhi, Payal B, Saman Qureshi, Namrata Rao-Gupte, Harish, Mansi Choksi, Aasha Agarwal and Harishankar Gupta.

The team would also like thank Sachi D’Souza, Jaya Menon, Sethumadhavan Menon, Shazia Tinwala, Rima Parikh, Fatema Bukhari, Jigar Bavishi, Shaily Bavishi, Diva Bavishi, Jaya Nair, Prabhakaran Nair, Krishna Pillai, Anita Gupta, Paresh and Mamta Trivedi and Anubhuti Jain for all their help and support. And a final thank you to all the *Amdavadis* who agreed to be interviewed and be a part of this project.



# Foreword

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Cities are the palimpsests. Resolute of the number of overlays. That of its place and people, economics and culture, amenities and infrastructure.

Mutual interdependence and harmonious coordination between these overlays is essential for its vitality and very sustenance. It is this very aspect that lent Ahmedabad its identity and autonomy all through history. As a city 'for', 'by' and 'of' people, its citizens, in addition to economic activities, are involved in civic affairs and development. This has sustained the chain of Individuals, Institutions and Industry – one supporting the other. One moulding the other. How does one tell the story of such intricate maze of these interconnected sub-systems? Its realities and reveries, its food and fashions, its past and future, its nostalgia and dreams, its time and space, its spaces and places, its people and politics, its art and architecture, its clichés and culture, its colours and spices, its celebrations and surprises, its virtues and vices, its problems and promises, in short its life and lessons. Of the experiences and anecdotes.

Travelogues end up as menu cards and do not give the taste of the food dishes. Authored books remain single point perspectives and personal déjà vu. Compilation of essays remain indifferent entities as self perpetuated pastiche of the few. The gazettes remain indifferent statistics without the soul, photo albums remain slices of moments frozen in time. While documentaries are brutal snapshots of too specific space and very particular time.

The format of stitching experiences and anecdotes, as conceived in this current format of “People Called Ahmedabad”, perhaps would come closest to weaving the wholesome and intricate tapestry of multiple threads with the feel of its form, colour and texture. This format is democratic as it comes from any citizen at random: from *chaiwallah* to gate-keepers, from Taraben to Mary Lobo, from hairstylist of Juhapura to the Jewish corner, from *Allah ke bande* to friends from Kerala. Also, by default, it is encompassing every walk of life. The document structure is plural with multi-faceted perspectives of the city’s life, may it be Gandhi and *Khadi* to omelette and *khaman*, malls and marketplaces to mills and merchants, Kala Ramji *mandir* and Clay Club, step wells and Sunday market, heritage and flying lessons.

The book is full of life and feelings as they are personal accounts of personal experiences as anecdotes, narrated in the personal syntax. They are diverse and humane stories: ‘The loss of a homeland’, ‘Not just a love story’, ‘Roofless dreams’, ‘Beyond conflict’ to name a few. The document is an honest documentary as it comes straight from the heart and practically unedited expressions of the people themselves. Thus it speaks the people’s language.

However, the book offers number of paradoxes. Although a random (unbiased) sampling of the character and the content, it

remains fairly representative of the larger whole and the generic phenomenon. Despite being a compilation of biopics, it comes across as lucid fiction, as fifty-five chapters with diverse episodes. Each is a narrative, while short in its read time, it remains long in its post read reflection time. Blank space at the end of the story is not a “full stop” and empty but a “comma” – a potent pause to ponder. To fill space with one’s own conjecture and concurring flashbacks to the narrated anecdote. Thus, although prose, it behaves as an interactive poem, allowing personal interpretations.

Thus it is our story. Story of the place through its people, tale of a city through its citizens and expression of a life through anecdotal experiences. Story of *aapnu amdavad* without the capital “A”. The book is the second in its sequel after “B” for Bombay – or shall we say Mumbai. The next in making is the “C” for Cochin (Kochi) and so on. “Smartness” and image of cities lie not in their quantitative indices of subsystems but rather in their vitality, life experiences and people’s aspirations. The book, like this, helps discover this DNA code.

India is as diverse and as vibrant, that every city’s every episode would be unique to the peculiarities of its place and people, and yet, like the Indian spirit of unity, feel as much as our own, as they essentially mirror human emotions and Indian psyche. I am sure, like the epic, Mahabharata, each one will find some characters, countless moments, several episodes, many metaphors and almost all experiences striking the chord with some or the other part of us, some or the other situations in some or the other times.

December 13, 2016  
Ahmedabad

**Yatin Pandya**





# Introduction

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*At a kitli (tea-shop): “Walk around, get lost in the streets. Talk to people, because Ahmedabad’s history and myths are a part of the collective consciousness of the city. Often we are told these stories as children. There are tales told by the old mujawars, holy men, and even the tramps that roam the city. In this way the city’s mythology is kept alive,” says Hamid Raj, a faculty member at CEPT.*

*And what if each person has a different version of the story? “Well, they’re all equally valid. That’s how stories are. It’s less important to know which one is true, and better to know what each story tells you about the city, and about the beliefs of the person narrating it to you. This is why you should simply wander around the city and talk to as many people as you can.”*

*Raj believes, “If you go around like a reporter, hunting for stories, then they become elusive. What you need to do is to become a wanderer, with an open mind and a willingness to observe other people’s lives. And that means investing a lot of time in the process.”*

This is one of the many conversations we had while unravelling of Ahmedabad. As writers, we were enchanted by the various facets

of the city – the old and the new, the traditional and the modern. And after nine months of research, through chilly winters and grilling summers, over a range of endless *Amdavadi* festivities, we captured and surveyed, adding colour and texture to stories.

A mercantile city founded in the 14th century within fort walls on the banks of the Sabarmati river is now a bustling centre of education, international trade and business. The contemporary coexists and shares a deep and abiding relationship with a long standing past. As the city continues to grow and embrace so many modernisms, it is still very deeply rooted in its own history. And this underlies every story that has been documented.

Seventeen writers – from students to professionals – sifted through the city to find the person whose story they thought best represented Ahmedabad. Each belongs to a collective narrative, falling serendipitously into a compartment that makes up the city's life.

Everyone we spoke to has a unique and often intimate relationship with the city. Their knowledge of the area they call home is often sedimentary, with layers of tales, myths and conversations. Although the city appears to be homogeneous, once the surface is scratched, our protagonists reveal diverse existences within multiple timelines, many little Ahmedabads. The stories were found in the monumental corridors of IIM and the favourite *kitlis* that dot the city, in the new concrete riverfront and in *pols* within the old city. Diamonds were found at busy markets, institutions of modern architecture, plush malls and office lobbies, during mornings at the park, in underground cafes, forgotten mosques and crumbling by lanes...and a few in quiet living rooms.

Each story aimed to understand immeasurable parameters –

aspiration, conflict, joy, angst, success, struggle, belief, tradition, negotiation, shift, routine and more. Through stories of spirited entrepreneurship, conflicts, negotiations, of the past and present intertwined, reinterpretations and the contemporary, People Called Ahmedabad peeks into the many Ahmedabads. We tell you stories about the *mujawar* at Ahmed Shah's tomb, the scion of the city's oldest philanthropic family, a refugee community who now calls the city home, those who still house the *kitli* culture, a boatman on a mission to save people, entrepreneurs who have made the economy of the city tick, internet sensations reviving the love for food, a museum that talks about conflict, a bookseller at the city's famous *Ravivari* and many more.

Essentially this is a compilation of 55 stories, backed up by panel discussions to help develop our curatorial approach. Academicians, journalists, artists, curators and city enthusiasts have told us what the city says to them and to the world. The book is unique to us: along the course of its journey, The People Place Project was formed, a publication initiative that will, we hope, document many more cities across the country in the same way as People Called Mumbai and now People Called Ahmedabad. As before, finding these stories has involved forging relationships with the people who talked to us. Some lives inspired us, some brought joy and some moved us. Many tales may not be included in the final print, even though they are memorable.

And for many of us, as city dwellers who take life for granted, we discovered how important it is to pause, listen and reflect. And in the silence, a city and its people start telling new stories.



*KB. [Signature]*

# Discovering Ahmedabad: From the diaries

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The days are getting hotter in Ahmedabad. The light is piercingly bright, and the white buildings of the city reflect it all like mirrors. The time has come to start the day early, because the summer sun in Ahmedabad is not only uncomfortable, it can be downright dangerous. At around 8:00 AM, I cross over Ellis Bridge, and the sun is already blazing. The Sabarmati looks alluring, and I have half a mind to jump in and have a little swim. I had planned to head all the way to Vatwa, across the city, to visit the Qutub-e-Alam *dargah*, but then decide to limit my exposure to the sun and head instead towards Manek Chowk. There is the *mujawar* at Badshah *no Haji* that I had planned to meet.

Today, I'm looking for stories and myths that constitute the imagination of Ahmedabad's history. Being a medieval city with more than 600 years of history, there are a lot of myths, memories and stories waiting to be discovered in its narrow streets and *mohallas*. The idea really took shape during a discussion with

Hamid Raj, a faculty member at CEPT University's School of Design. Hamid has taught a course called *Rediscovering Ahmedabad* at CEPT, and has spent many years looking for stories that reflect the mythic imagination of the city.

During a discussion at the CEPT canteen, Hamid suggests that it would be a good idea to talk to a *mujawar*, in order to understand the history of the city. "What is a *mujawar*?" I ask cluelessly. He explains that *mujawars* are custodians and keepers of the various *dargahs* and tombs that dot the landscape of Ahmedabad. They are religious figures, but differ from *imams* in the sense that they rarely preach. Their job is to maintain the sanctity of their precinct, and to see to the upkeep of the tombs. *Mujawars* are also storytellers, who have passed down and recorded the history of the *dargah* that they maintain, as well as the history and foundational myths of the city.

But talking to *mujawars* is only a start. Hamid's advice is, if I'm planning to write about Ahmedabad, then there is only one way to go about looking for stories – and that is to lose myself to the city.

"Walk around, get lost in the streets. The best way is to talk to people, because Ahmedabad's history and myths form a part of the collective consciousness of the city. We are told these stories as children – old grandmothers tell their grandchildren at bedtime. There are the tales told by the old *mujawars*, holy men, and even the tramps that roam the city. In this way the city's mythology is kept alive. For example, the entire community that lives in the vicinity of an old *dargah* will know its history and significance."

I agree with Hamid's suggestion, my only worry being that each person I talk to might have a different version of the story, and then I would be at a loss as to what to write about. "Well, they're

all equally valid. That's how stories are. It's less important to know which one is true or the correct version, but rather: what does each story tell you about the city, and the beliefs of the person narrating it to you? This is why it's important for you to simply wander around the city and talk to as many people as you can."

"In fact, a lot of the people whom I talked to and learned from, I couldn't tell you where to find them, because they roam around the whole city. They have no home except for the city and its streets. The city is their home, and they are always moving from place to place."

According to him, one's attitude towards the city in a large way also determines how successful one is in discovering its secrets. "If you go around like a reporter, hunting for stories – then they become elusive. What you need to do is become a wanderer, with an open mind and a willingness to observe other people's lives," he says with a matter of fact shrug. "And that means investing a lot of time into the process."

Manek Chowk in the morning is already a rush of colours and activity. The spice and *mukhwas* shops are open. A man is selling CDs of old Bollywood films out of a tempo minivan. I weave past him and into the narrow lane lined with textile shops. The Badshah *no Hajiro* tomb complex is a simple but elegant stone structure dating to the 15th century. It houses the tomb of Ahmed Shah, founder of Ahmedabad as well as his two sons and numerous grandsons. The square building is surrounded by shops and houses, a little *mohalla* cut off from the chaos and noise of Manek Chowk. Even here preparations are underway for some kind of function. Old bearded men are sitting on plastic chairs outside and people are running about busily, carrying things and

shouting out instructions. I find out later that a local business family has organised a *daawat*.

“Apparently it’s to celebrate the fact that his business is doing well. But more likely, he resorted to dishonest means to earn his wealth, and this *daawat* is an act of charity to absolve himself of sin!” says one of the bearded men with lines on his face and a perpetual smile. I am surprised at his frankness. I quickly find out he is the *mujawar* that I’m here to meet. Following a short discussion, he leads me inside the complex and settles down beside one of the tombs, which has been covered in a green sheet known as the *chadar*. “This is the tomb of Qutbuddin Shah, Ahmed Shah’s grandson,” he tells me solemnly. There are a few other people, offering prayers. “So, you want to know about Ahmed Shah Sarkar?” the *mujawar* asks, looking at me with a curious smile.

“Well, first of all, you may not know that he is a saint. Yes, he was a king, but we consider him to be a saint because of the simple, moral life that he led. He shunned riches and material pleasures, and was known for his devotion to the Divine. That is why he was the saint-king. One often hears stories of Ahmed Shah as a despot of some kind, but nothing can be further from the truth. The Shah was a religiously tolerant man, and a servant of God. Such men are sworn against violence towards fellow men, something that nowadays people forget.”

History has always been a touchy subject in Ahmedabad, where for too long, totalising and generalising narratives have prevailed and coloured its political dialogue and education. So it isn’t surprising that textbooks have often portrayed Ahmed Shah as an ambitious opportunist who destroyed temples, suppressed the local tribes and established a tyrannical rule.



“But everyone forgets that he married a Hindu tribal princess, and it is he who invited the *baniyas* and merchants of all classes to come and set up shop here, thus turning it into a prosperous trading town. Ahmed Shah was a wise man, and knew better than to pit one community against another. We address him with the title ‘*Sarkar*’, which is only given to Sufi saints of great esteem.”

The *mujawar*’s old mind is swirling with numerous stories, some mundane, others fascinating. After a while, he comes to the story of how Ahmedabad was founded. “Have you heard the story of the dog and the hare?” he asks me. I tell him that I have – it is one of the better-known tales regarding the founding of the city. “The story goes that Ahmed Shah had gone hunting along the banks of the river. He sat beside the Sabarmati, and as he waited for his prey, he saw a strange sight. A small rabbit was chasing a dog, rather than the other way around. He realised that the spot was blessed. Here, even a hare had the courage to chase away its powerful adversaries. So he decided to build his new capital here. That is how Ahmedabad was founded, so they say.”

In the book *Ahmedabad: From Royal City to Megacity*, Achyut Yagnik builds on the mythic history of the city, and narrates this story along with a number of other foundational myths. The hare and dog story, Yagnik claims, is very similar to the founding myths of many other cities – such as Vijayanagara in South India and Malacca in Malaysia. He speculates that the stories might have spread through cultural diffusion and trade.

The *mujawar* doesn’t seem to think much of the story. “It seems unlikely, but one never knows. I will tell you a story that I know is true though – and that is because you can still see the evidence of it in the city. It’s the story of Manek Baba, a powerful yogi who

lived in the forests by the banks of the river. He was angry that this land had been chosen for the building of the city. While Ahmed Shah began building the walls of Ahmedabad, he was faced with a strange problem. Every day his workers would raise the city walls, only to find that they had collapsed in the night, and next day, they would have to start again from scratch. This happened for a while, and the Badshah was determined to find out why. It turns out that it was old Manek Baba, using his impressive yogic power. During the day, he would knit a blanket. At night, he would then unravel the blanket, causing the city walls to collapse! In order to pacify the yogi, the Badshah decided to dedicate the main square of the city in his honour. That's how Manek Chowk got its name. Then there is Manek Burj, a part of the old wall that you can see near Ellis Bridge. They say that as long as Manek Burj stands, Ahmedabad can never be destroyed.”

The *mujawar*'s stories do sound like fantastic tales, but their real purpose is to serve as allegories of reality. I find that the Manek Baba story aptly summarises Ahmedabad's conflicts and insecurities. The history of this city of textiles is one of constant unravelling and stitching together. Manek Baba's curse still hangs over a city that is uneasy about its history and unsure about its identity. I leave Badshah *no Hajiro* a few hours later, feeling as if I've only scratched the surface as far as the myths are concerned. Outside, the air is shimmering in the white-hot sun. Time to beat a hasty retreat.

That evening I had planned to meet Hamid for dinner at Khamasa. He has promised to introduce me and a few other students to the legendary *nahaari*, a dish of Afghan origin, that is only prepared in a few places. The dish, at least this preparation,

is unique to Ahmedabad. “It’s basically mutton that has been slow-cooked with spices,” he tells me, with his eyes gleaming. “Trust me, you would never have tasted anything like it. It was the favourite dish of the kings and noblemen.”

Khamasa is well known for its various restaurants that make tandoori chicken and a variety of other meat dishes. Hamid takes us to a corner of Khamasa that I’m familiar with, and we enter a small shop that is very easy to miss. There is no *nahaari* that day, we are dismayed to find – but the variety of other dishes makes up for this. Over dinner, discussion veers towards our notions of culture and cultural value.

The essence of the discussion was that food should be seen as part of an intangible cultural heritage. The way that food is cooked and eaten has defined social values and cultural mores over centuries. Ahmedabad has many unique examples of food culture. One good example is the *barahandi*. Most people identify it as the restaurant near Kalupur, but *barahandi* – which literally means twelve pots – is a traditional dish found only here. Different parts of the goat are cooked separately in twelve pots for many hours. Each has its own mix of spices, and preparation time varies, and they are served during a special *barahandi* feast. Very few places cook the *barahandi* in the traditional style anymore.

“Cooking is a cultural artefact, and definitely a way of understanding the city. Here you are tasting the Afghan and Turkish roots, modified with Indian spices and evolved over time into the *tikka* that you’re eating.” It is a fascinating discussion, and understandably, dinner lasts for well over an hour.

Afterwards, everyone feels that the meal was too short. There’s still much to talk about. “Let’s go to Teen Darwaza for *chai*!”

Hamid suggests enthusiastically, and we are certainly up for it. For Hamid, Bhadra Plaza, between the fort and Teen Darwaza, is where the story of the city starts. As we stand there by the *kitli*, he explains its significance. “This plaza used to be known as the Maidan Shah. There was a European traveller who described it as a grand square with many different fruit trees for shade. Of course there are hardly any now.”

I would find out later that the European traveller was the German Albert de Mandelso, visiting the city in 1638, who describes the square as ‘beset all around with rows of palm trees and date trees, intermixed with citron trees and orange trees’. The Maidan Shah, according to him, was not only pleasant to look at, but also a wonderful place to walk in.

This description is in stark contrast from the overcrowded and chaotic marketplace that Bhadra square is today. The area underwent a major redesign and rebuilding – a project which envisioned it as a modern public square. What has actually happened is the square has become a large informal market. Street vendors often leave behind large amounts of trash, but there is little regular garbage removal. On the whole, Bhadra square exhibits the symptoms of a failed urban rejuvenation programme.

“We don’t know how to conserve our heritage with sensitivity,” says Hamid, shaking his head. “More importantly, in our frenzy to move forward, we tend to walk iron-shod over the past, or disregard it completely. It’s sad because there is so much history right here. There, the Bhadra Fort in front of us was the first structure to have been constructed in Ahmedabad! Can you imagine what this spot might have been like in those days?”

Of course, the most compelling stories about Ahmedabad relate

to the city's prosperity and economic heft. Of all stereotypical images that exist, the one of Ahmedabad as a 'business city' and *Gujaratis* as a 'business community' are most compelling, if not always accurate. There is an element of truth here, since Ahmedabad has always been a trading city, with the merchant classes gaining wealth and influence over the years, and now forming the backbone of Ahmedabad society.

"There is a story about Teen Darwaza that is linked with the prosperity of Ahmedabad. Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity and everlasting wealth is said to live in the city. The story goes that one day, she decided to leave the city for good and so made her way towards Teen Darwaza in the guise of a peasant woman. Once there she commanded the Kotwal, or guard, to open the gates at once. The Kotwal however, recognised her for whom she was. He realised that he had to stop her from leaving the city, if Ahmedabad was to remain prosperous. He requested her to wait until he returned with a formal permission from the Badshah himself. But instead of going to Ahmed Shah, the guard went up to the battlements and beheaded himself, thus forcing the goddess to wait forever for his return. That is why Ahmedabad remains prosperous to this day."

The story's unexpected ending leaves me feeling a bit confused, and I need another *chai*. Is it not ironic that the city's prosperity had been ensured by a violent act of self-decapitation?

Into his third *chai* now, Hamid is in full storytelling form. He informs us that there's a small shrine dedicated to Lakshmi at Teen Darwaza, till this day. "You most likely missed it. It is just a small niche in the wall where there's a lamp lit in honour of the goddess. That lamp has never been allowed to go out. It's a Muslim family that has been charged with maintaining the lamp for centuries. The

most recent in the line was old Jafar**bbhai**, who I believe has passed away now. His widow and son are now in charge of protecting the lamp.”

This story reminds me of my chat with the *mujawar* earlier in the day. I tell Hamid about our meeting, and how the old man had called Ahmed Shah a saint. “Of course! He was the saint-king. He was devoutly religious, but also respected all religions. Ahmedabad only prospered because it was a melting pot of communities. Despite this, historians have often painted him in a negative light. But really it was his great-grandson Mahmud Begada who was a fanatic. Not many people care for historical accuracy.”

Perhaps the problem lies in the way history is interpreted or presented, I suggest. “Absolutely,” Hamid agrees. “The reading of history is often fraught with ideological bias. In this state, those who write history have presented a distorted, communal version of our past. But at the end of the day, history is nothing but stories – Ahmed Shah as a tyrant and as a saint, they are just two versions of the same story. We could argue that representations of Ahmed Shah as a bigoted tyrant are politically motivated, but it is just one reading of history. Because history is just a story, it has many versions – just like Ahmedabad’s myths.”

“In the end, what matters is not what is true or not, but rather, how it shapes a person’s imagination of the city?”

“If someone were to ask, what version of history should I believe, the answer is obviously a history that promotes social inclusion, peace and prosperity, rather than one that is divisive, hateful and ultimately destructive. Ahmedabad’s actual history and its stories reflect a unique syncretism and plurality that serves as a lesson for the problems that we face today.”

It's getting late, and the time has come to wrap up our discussion. We say our goodbyes, and needless to say, I have a lot to think about on the ride home. Next morning I go to Teen Darwaza, to see the lamp of Lakshmi for myself. It was one story that I found especially intriguing, not only because it's an example of the easy melding of different faiths, but also because it perpetuates a daily ritual of the city that has been practiced till today: the daily lighting of the lamp to appease the goddess and bring prosperity to the city's merchants and businesses.

The niche on the wall is much smaller than I had imagined. The lamp is lit, but there is so much trash around, that no one is likely to stop and take notice. Old *Jafarbhai's* widow does come once in a while, a shopkeeper nearby tells me, but she is old and can hardly walk. The lamp of Lakshmi is one of those fascinating stories that is hidden in plain sight, so integral to the city's identity, and yet so easily forgotten. Still it continues to burn, and Ahmedabad's stories will continue to be told, in all its versions, for many more years. I still have a lot more to discover, so maybe it's time to heed Hamid's advice and lose myself to the city.

## Gandhi calling

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The Sabarmati Ashram, Ahmedabad. It is 4:30 AM and Pravin Patel has reached the ashram with his customised bicycle, armed with a photograph of Gandhiji, some snacks for the needy, colourful props and *bhajans*. He sits for his prayers for about 30 minutes, exactly at the same spot where Gandhiji used to. His *Prabhat Feri* for the day is half complete. “I follow Mahatma Gandhi’s ideologies about life, but I am not a *Gandhian*,” says the 59-year old Fine Arts graduate and an ISRO employee – Pravin Patel.

“I am a Gandhi lover. For me, Gandhi is the healer,” says Deepika Sahu, a journalist at *Ahmedabad Times*. While India was celebrating Independence at the stroke of the midnight hour on August 15, 1947, Gandhiji was in Bengal, where the Hindus and the Muslims were killing each other and the cries of their agony could be heard in the darkness of Calcutta (now Kolkata). Deepika hails from Bengal and has touched base in dusty Ahmedabad after living in Orissa (now Odisha), Delhi, and Bangalore (now Bengaluru). We all connect to places in our own little intimate ways. The logical mind may not see much reason in it. But a



place in many ways is a person with a soul. “I have a home and a spiritual home. I turn to my spiritual home – the Sabarmati Ashram – when the insanity around me becomes all consuming... For peace and tranquillity,” says Deepika.

The architecture of the Sabarmati Ashram, with its museum by Charles Correa, follows the same syntax of the Gandhian philosophies. “In a gentle way, you can shake the world,” stated Gandhi once. The low-walled compound of the Sabarmati Ashram has free entry and no security checks; elegance, simplicity, and friendliness ooze, inviting around 3000 visitors daily. Gandhi Ashram is a centre of pilgrimage. It has its own rhythm. It has its own way of standing tall in the midst of Ahmedabad’s fast changing landscape.

“I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any,” said Gandhi.

Sabarmati Ashram, a reflection of the quote, engulfs the best of both worlds. While Pravin Patel finds a simpler meaning; that of hard work, honesty and feeding the poor in the sanctity of the space, the ashram calms Deepika with a sense of peace and tranquillity. Deepika’s late father was an ardent admirer of Gandhiji and his philosophy. During her growing up years in Orissa, she was encouraged to read books on Gandhian philosophy. As she grew up and found a unique way of knowledge gathering, Deepika discovered more about the contemporary relevance of Gandhian philosophy. “I turn to Sabarmati Ashram when I intensely long for my father. When I miss my father, I seek his presence in the Sabarmati Ashram.” Deepika has beautiful memories of their

visits to the Ashram together. “I turned to Sabarmati Ashram in search of peace and sanity when the city went through incidents of mindless violence.” There’s something extraordinarily peaceful about the Sabarmati Ashram. The moment you enter its tree-lined surroundings, you leave behind the clutter and cacophony of Ahmedabad.

Pravin enters the Ashram carrying the cacophony of Ahmedabad, and his social, professional and family life. He comes from a very poor family, in a small village near Kheda district. His father was a farmer and also had a small shop in the village. He studied in a government school, but to survive the poverty and to help his father in generating an income, he decided to take up the profession of a newspaper vendor. While doing the job, he became interested in reading newspapers. It was the post-Gandhian era and the beliefs, thoughts, lessons of Gandhi *Bapu* – the name by which Pravin Patel came to be known – were written about frequently in newspapers. *Gandhiji* never failed to inspire him. Pravin participated in the 26 kilometre Dandi march in 2005 that compelled him to update, enrich and spread *Gandhiji*’s message to India. “I bought a cycle and redesigned it myself; I attached a music system to it where *Gandhiji*’s favourite *bhajans* would play (*Vaishnav Janato Tene Kahiye* and *Raghupati Raghava Rajaram*). It has been eight years since I started this.” Daily at 3:30 AM the Gandhi *feri* commences from his residence. He reaches Gandhi Ashram at 4:30 AM. After that, he tours the western parts of Ahmedabad and completes his 35-kilometre journey at 7:30 AM. “I meet people of all age groups but I target the children and young students because they are the future of India,” says Gandhi *Bapu*. On his way back, Gandhi *Bapu* provides voluntary

help to traffic police at Shyamal Cross Roads, one of the busiest streets of the city. The Ashram and Gandhiji together act as a trigger that kick starts the day of an *Amdavadi*. Needless to say, the Ashram premises creates wonders. The play of earth colours with minimal design elements and materials fosters the feeling of great self. “My soul leaps forward to a larger universe and I hope for a more compassionate society based on non-violence, peace, and humanity,” says Deepika. Gandhiji’s immortal words about life, common good, and universal brotherhood are so beautifully inscribed on the walls of the Gandhi memorial, giving a perspective towards a better India.

Today, it is almost 58 years since Gandhiji left. Ahmedabad still connects with him at an intimate level. His presence is felt in this nucleus of the city, in this beautiful, modest house called Hridaykunj in which both *Bapu* and *Ba* lived, in the monuments of the city, in the books that talk about the freedom struggle and the lifestyle of the *Amdavadis*. “There are times I close my eyes and imagine Gandhiji attending the prayer session early in the morning and the soul-stirring *bhajan*, *Vaishnav Janato* filling the air. My imagination becomes my strength, love fills my heart. My spiritual home elevates me to a higher self. Nothing can be more beautiful than this,” concludes Deepika.

## A stepwell in my backyard

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Ahmedabad is a city of surprises. Every layer that peels off its surface reveals another set of intricately interwoven nuances, hidden under generations of history and development. Ahmedabad of yore boasted of *pols*, clusters of row houses sharing common walls and intricate ornamentation. Even before these came into existence, mystical structures cleaved the earth and led to recharge of ground water. These structures were called *vaavs*, or stepwells, which became places to procure water and find respite from the scorching tropical sun. What they also became were gathering spaces for women, ritual spaces that allowed for community activity, secluded, shielded, buried under the earth and hidden from the world.

The new city across the banks of the Sabarmati, glistening with commercial establishments and business centres, stands in stark contrast to the old settlement with its crumbling *pols* and forgotten structures. The urban sprawl at the edge of the city, even more so. Today apartment blocks and malls proliferate, like in any other Indian metropolis. However, near Vasna, on the outskirts of

Ahmedabad, a place called Gupta Nagar holds a piece of history hidden deep within, under the shanties and the bustling streets – a forgotten *vaav*, an irreplaceable part of the architecture of this region.

Mukesh, a carpenter and labourer by profession, lives in a house that is perched on the lip of Khodiyaar Maata *ni Vaav*. His house spans the length of the *vaav*, and shares a wall with the thousand-year-old structure. “I have no idea who owned the house before me. These shanties were built about fifty years ago and the houses are rented on rotation. I am lucky enough to have rented this house that looks over the *vaav*.” For now, Mukesh is the proud owner of this heritage structure. His wife beams from behind the door, and beckons visitors to partake of an amazing view: to look down into the crumbling, intricately carved structure.

It is almost an out-of-body experience, to stand in a home with broken ceiling fans ruffling newspapers, while imagining the *vaav* to be an active space echoing with women’s laughter, the tinkling of anklets and the gurgle of water within the depths of the ground. Khodiyaar Maata *ni Vaav* is in a sorry state now. “The stepwell was filled to the brim with refuse. It was about nine or ten years ago that people from the heritage committee volunteered to get it cleaned up. The effort has been continued by us, the people in the community and especially those residing in this house, but not by any other government official since then,” says Mukesh.

With the general consent of others from the community of *kadias* or carpenters, they have prevented the complete disrepair of the *vaav*, unlike that in Bhadaj – the oldest stepwell in Ahmedabad that has only two stories visible, the other five having been swallowed by the earth from which it was built. Khodiyaar Maata

*ni Vaav* is comparatively cleaner, though still open to the sky and the elements. It is scuffed by innumerable feet, and the last level has been completely blocked by garbage, the water long dried up. In the tiny niches in the wall, figurines of *Maata* are adorned with vermilion and flowers, the sweet smell of incense a gentle aura. This is the handiwork of Mukesh's wife, who considers the stepwell an extension of her house.

“There are still a number of activities that take place in this forgotten structure. It is used for *poojas* during festivals, with women descending its steps even today. There are local myths that talk about it containing treasure, or it having a secret pathway to the city of Patan. The beauty of this place is that all of it may not be true, or it may be.” For Mukesh, such is the pleasure that history provides, though it is but a narrative, a story. “It is what you choose to believe, because there is no one to prove otherwise.”

There are a number of stepwells in Ahmedabad, all woven into the urban fabric, timeless pieces of architecture that, against all odds, still function. *Maata Bhavani ni Vaav* and *Dada Harir ni Vaav* have become places of worship. Some *vaavs* have been bedecked with tiles and aluminium plates, ornaments of a more modern age, and turned into glitzy temples with speakers blaring *garba* songs. The space is transformed, yet retains some of its charm, irrespective of day, age and use.

Mukesh is blissfully unaware that his home might be torn down if the *vaav* is ever declared a heritage site. He assumes that the government officials frequenting the area are income tax officials. On prodding, he reacts, “These people come and go, but my house belongs to me, the *vaav* in essence belongs to me. I refuse to hand over my house to anyone who will lock the place down and make

it inactive.” Most of the stepwells that have been declared heritage structures are in lockdown, with barred gates and heavy fines. Though they may be spotlessly clean, the echoing depths do long for the chatter of voices, of hands on the rough-hewn stone walls, of water carelessly spilled from earthen jugs carried up and down the steps.

“Most of the people from the old city refuse to talk about the stepwells they live near. There is general fear and wariness of the idea that bestowing heritage status will lead to the demolishing of their houses, since heritage rules prohibit buildings within a 200 meter radius of the structure. Also, tourists bring with them a different kind of culture that often wreaks havoc in the lifestyle of a ‘living’ heritage. The question of whose heritage it is, is all pervading,” says Tanvi, a student of CEPT University, who has worked on documenting Khodiyar Maata *ni Vaav*. Does it belong to Mukesh, who runs a broom over the steps every morning and worships the deities inside, or does it belong to tourists who partake of a slice of history, only to forget it soon after? Or is it the inheritance of the children who have played on its steps? Is it part of a world that only appreciates its beauty from afar as an exhibit of a forgotten world? The ghost of old Ahmedabad echoes from within the earth, buried under a blanket of tarred roads and concrete hovels, waiting to be found.

# The Clay Club

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One of the most important industries in Gujarat is based in ceramics and stone. While India ranks third in the world in terms of ceramic production, Gujarat contributes a substantial amount of that, with places in and around Morbi full of these industries. The area of Gota in Ahmedabad is known to be a hub of shops and craftsmen in the field. The roads are crammed with tiles, stones, plumbing fixtures and clay dust.

There isn't much that sets one store apart from the other here.

But in a small, non-descript alleyway underneath a bridge lies a place that aims to bring a more creative aspect to this world.

The Clay Club, started in 2013, as a passionate hobby by a few creative graduates from CEPT.

“In the first year we had a subject called Basic Design, where they taught us basic skills of designing, sketching, working in clay. But all these activities were supposed to be done in the studio where we did our drawings. Our batch decided that it would find a special place where we could work exclusively with different materials.” The students used a small defunct part of the campus to



experiment and create. “We cleaned up the junk, replaced the waste tiles, made the flooring ourselves and got eaten by mosquitoes!” Those consistently passionate about design and creativity became the first unofficial Clay Club. Gradually, it became a hub for hands-on work and experimenting with design.

Seven years of hard, consistent and passionate work led them to officially start a venture. Now the team consists of six people: Fulchandra Patel, Maulik Oza, Nikunj Vakani, Heena Kokel, Vishnu Kollari, and Pranav Gajjar. Most of these were part of the original team at CEPT; Fulchandra Patel graduated from NSID, Rajkot.

Heena Kokel recalls some of the struggles faced during this time. “It was hard for friends and family to understand why we took longer to do our course,” she said. But they were sure about what they were most connected with. Another hard part was getting people to teach them how to build things. “We would try to reach out to people across the country. We would tell them our budget and arrange food and stay, and asked them if they could teach us with a limited budget for remuneration.” They asked a lot of people; many, seeing their passion, showed up.

Thankfully they had CEE (Centre for Environment Education) in Ahmedabad to help with material. “We could not afford transportation costs, so several people had to walk with bamboo (from CEE to CEPT). By that time we were in the fourth year, so we could tell juniors to do a lot for us.” After a few years, deeply involved with the club, they had to stop and think about what to do next. They decided to continue, but had to move all the tools somewhere else, and found a small shack near a friend’s shop that they could use.

Now the 'makeshift' storage space has become a full-fledged workshop, with tools, a kiln and stacked raw and finished material—the trademark of art studios everywhere. In the three years that the Clay Club has done professional work, the members have had the chance to work on a gamut of projects with a gamut of people. They've taken workshops with schools and colleges not only in Gujarat, but also in Goa, Kerala and countries as far away as Singapore. With a workshop conducted in Navsari, many people joined as staff for Hapacoop, a handmade paper cooperative. They have experimented with a wide range of materials and concepts: clay tiles in temples, handmade ceramic lampshades, ceramic murals, handmade paper notebooks and bags, banana leaf paper, footwear, etc. Currently, they offer architectural consultancy, ceramics manufacturing and customisation, and handmade paper manufacturing and consultation. With all this amazing work, in a short time, they've won awards from Oikos International, Switzerland, and have been invited to present papers in the Future of Cities Forum, Hamburg, and the European Business School, Frankfurt, among others.

Each of the teammates have added a particular flavour to the club. Pranav has worked in for profit and non-profit areas, the social, creative and entrepreneurial aspects from his work, studies and professors influence his approach here. Heena, who has award-winning background in architectural design, is very much attached to design philosophy. Vishnu, whose parents are professional artists, is adept at drawing, and fascinated by acoustics. Fulchandra has a background of interior designing, and worked on many residential, commercial and institutional projects. Nikunj loves working with and understanding structures of clay, handmade paper and stone.

He was born into a family of potters and stone sculptors. For him, architecture is way to connect our human nature to the environment around us. Maulik loves to cook and bake, and has set up kilns and ovens – including a wood-fired pizza oven.

Not only have they added their own flavour, but being in Ahmedabad has, in many ways, been a boon. CEPT, a hub of architecture, planning and design, definitely helps bring in a lot of creative energy. The booming ceramic industry has helped them with raw materials to cut costs. They've also been lucky to find an office in the middle of Gota, which helps them be in touch with the skilled workers – men and women who have been traders, craftsmen, designers or labourers for many years.

Unfortunately, in the creative environment in Ahmedabad there is an isolation of the arts from the rest of the community, be it theatre, dance, film, architecture or design. Generally, there is a niche set of people and places that exist in closed groups. The Clay Club discovered this during the course of their start up days. They could not afford to just be in environments that were 'safe', such as the Maker Fest. "Initially we did a lot of show*baazi* for architects, interior designers, direct (prospective) clients, through stalls, Maker Fest, exhibitions... these are places where fashion and product-oriented brands put up stalls. If people like it, they are going to buy it. They are not going to think about the design, or color, or material. Many people with no design knowledge spoke to us during these exhibitions. That feedback helped us. We initially thought to ourselves, 'If you don't know anything about design, how can you comment?' But slowly, we evolved. We now have a reach to the customer directly. Social media also plays a role. You cannot remain in a circle; you have to talk to a lot of people." This

has made them grounded, and understand that the only way to reach a mass audience is with humility.

Around their shop, there are many traditionally skilled tradespeople and craftspeople who are financially not so privileged. “When we conduct workshops, we inform people (around here), and they send their children.”

In the last decade or so, *Amdavadis* have been exposed to many more innovations and have more money. “Ahmedabad has a lot of well-travelled people. They go to Morocco, the USA, Mexico, Italy...they see something and when they come back, they want to recreate that.” Even with all this exposure, certain barriers are hard to break. “People will appreciate innovation, but it still comes down to “*Kitne me padta hai, ye kitna chalega?*” (How much does it cost? How long will it work?) Ever the businessperson and negotiator, a typical *Gujarati* will still not choose products such as waterproof banana leaf footwear, for instance. The Clay Club has sold many of its products in Europe, where people pay to invest in more environment friendly materials.

As *Amdavadis* becomes more creative, and places like CEPT become more open to experiments, Heena feels that more places like the Clay Club will pop up. Design *ni Dukaan* and Ant Works Furniture are examples of these. With the newly creative *Amdavadi* becoming entrepreneurial, this city is showing promise for a more informed and responsible growth in all areas.

## It's tea time

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“*Chai toh sirf ek bahana hai!*” *Rambhai* tries to explain to the uninitiated about the culture of *kitli*, an inseparable characteristic of Ahmedabad. This is where youngsters unwind, partnerships are born, and ideas are discussed. All over the ‘cutting *chai*’. Of the many landmark tea joints across the city, *Rambhai’s* is particularly popular. Having started his *chai* business in 1982, he occupies a prime place – right outside the Indian Institute of Management (IIM), Ahmedabad, flanking the un-plastered brick compound wall, with a small service window for the B-school students.

We wind back to the late 19th century, at a time in Ahmedabad when the ‘tea culture’ was taking quite a turn. It was almost a century past that the tea culture had arrived with the colonial rulers. In the buzzing commercial walled city district, tea shops were the norm, one of them being Wagh Bakri. “My grandfather Narandas Desai set up his business in the city in 1915. We have customers who for generations have been buying tea from our shops in the old city,” says Parag Desai, the scion who manages this business, which is now the

third largest packaged tea company in India, under Gujarat Tea Processors and Packers Limited.

“Before that he had started his business with five hundred acres of tea estate in South Africa and carried on there for some time. Political pressure and racial discrimination compelled him to return to India.” He came armed with a certificate from one of the most famous political leaders of his times, Mahatma Gandhi, stating that he was one of the most hard-working and honest businessmen. “Having gone to school together in Rajkot with Gandhiji, who had also returned to India and set up his ashram in Ahmedabad on the banks of the Sabarmati, this bustling business city with its mills and freedom fervour is where my grandfather chose to re-begin, with Gujarat Tea Depot.”

Parag Desai explains the interesting story behind the name Wagh Bakri, which means tiger and a goat literally. “Russian circus used to be very popular in the city. So when it came to naming the new venture in the city, it was Gandhiji who suggested this name. It was the symbolic meaning of a brand that would cater to both the class and the mass, envisioning a scenario where the tiger and the goat were having tea from the same vessel, hence giving birth to the name Wagh Bakri in 1934.” And indeed it did.

With the freedom struggle that had gripped the nation, *kitlis* and the *chai* were active participants of the political conversations – becoming the informal spots to discuss news and get updates on the extent of the freedom movement – with no bar of class or mass. The prevalent textile industry scenario also contributed. For the tired workers of these textile mills, indulging in that very *chai* was the respite. This scenario remained intact in the Old City for a good period of time until the 1980s, before the shutting of

the mills. It was around this time that Desai and his sons, who continued to sell tea wholesale as well as retail through seven retail outlets, recognising the need for packaged teas, launched Gujarat Tea Processors and Packers Ltd.

Across the river, the new institutions that had come up (once regarded ‘out of town’) were reclaiming the *chai* and *kitli* in their own way. As design and management students huddled night and day at these favourite *kitlis*, seeking respite from the overload of academics, new creative ideas, life-long associations and entrepreneurial ventures were often forged here. Times were changing, and the story of the *chai* continued – witnessing a city evolving from the older precincts to the new ones, from the older mercantile economy to an entrepreneurial one.

The story of Wagh Bakri is indeed one of them. Drawing parallels to the entrepreneurship-like nature of his grandfather and the *Amdavadis*, Parag Desai says, “The people of this city never take no for an answer. There is always the drive and a ‘never-give-up’ spirit that is the spark that drives this place. For many, the ritual morning tea is very important. It is often called the *kadak badshahi chai*. The energy and drive from this cup resonates with the entrepreneurial spirit of Ahmedabad. “Do you know the founding story of Ahmedabad? About Badshah Ahmed Shah watching a hare chase a dog? *Badshahi* comes from there, the regal way of having your morning *chai*.” This is put aptly by this connoisseur, for whom a very important part of his official work is the tea tasting ritual.

The modern office building at Ahmedabad is where elaborate and intense tea tasting sessions take place to ensure stringent quality controls. Various factors like climatic conditions, topography and

manufacturing process are analysed here to ascertain the quality prior to sale or possibly blending tea. This building, designed by architect Bimal Patel, not only provides the premeditated environment needed for the same, but is also one of the initial sustainable corporate houses to be constructed in the city. “The building remains lit up all throughout the day because of the efficient day-lighting system in our space. We also recycle the water and reuse our goods,” mentions Desai, pointing out that though urban growth is inevitable, we have to take conscious steps toward preserving our environment, and take collective efforts so that the urbanisation is participative and planned.

Even among the new urbane, tea rituals continue. If it is the *kitlis* in the public space, holding meetings and conversations over customary *chai* is integrated culturally. Moving beyond packaged tea, Wagh Bakri has opened tea-lounges across the country. “We call it experience centres. Where our zest for tea can be shared with our customers,” says Parag Desai. Over the delicious flavoured *chais*, the *dhoklas* and *kothimbir wadis*, the purpose of the tea remains the same: an ice breaker to a conversation, a catalyst to evening *addas* or a best friend to a person who contemplates and observes his life while sipping hot tea, away from the crowd.



## The *limbodi* coloured *basti*

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Budhar***bhai*** Bhati rests on a cot, almost hidden among the innumerable Ganesha idols. It stands in a stunning maze of narrow bylanes, with tattered houses, small shrines, hens, goats, and dogs scurrying in and out of doorways. Idols of different deities line the alleys. And within this, people bustle about. Some work on the idols, others surround the tea stalls dotted all through the maze, and a few load their carts with goods to sell.

Hollywood *Basti* they call it. The quaint settlement situated in the Gulbai Tekra area of the city sits alongside the Gujarat University road. Named after a Parsi woman, Gulabi***bai***, the land was given to her by her father as dowry. Almost 85 years ago, a drought in Rajasthan that lasted over six brought a man called Motadada to Ahmedabad with his family. As conditions in Rajasthan worsened, it brought more people to the city to crowd together to make a new community. Gulabi***bai*** started to lease her land, and this *basti* began to grow.

As Budhar***bhai***'s daughter Manju walks out of their little shack holding a plate of *bhaji-puri*, the question of why the settlement

is called Hollywood *Basti* is answered. The rustic beauty of the women here is often compared to that of Hollywood stars. Dressed in a traditional *Rajasthani saree*, thick *kohl* around her eyes and a large red *bindi* on her forehead, she goes back inside to help her mother tie coloured *chawaal* into a handkerchief. “We don’t print *kankotris* as invitations for a marriage. We distribute coloured *chaawal*,” Budhar**bai** explains.

The faint sound of music playing becomes louder...and then the noise of the children drowns it. It is a wedding. The bride and groom sit in a carriage, with a procession of people dancing and singing. Manju blushes as the procession moves along the road and pulls over her *ghoonghat*. “There are four *jaats* from the Bawre community of Rajasthan that stay here. Bhati, Solanki, Parmar and Rathod. You cannot get married into the same caste as yours. The *mandap* is made alongside the road and there are lots of sweets prepared. *Laddoo, halwa, meethi puri, gulab jamun*. The bride and the groom’s parents keep a fast for a day and break it with *laapsi*.”

Budhar**bai** laughs about how Gulab**bai**’s father gave her this entire area in dowry, while all he can give Manju is some jewellery and a cupboard. His is the sixth generation of a family that has lived in the *basti*. His grandfather and great-grandfather had worked on the construction of the Lakadiya Bridge, earning 50 *paise* per day. They sold cots and ropes in the Kalupur Bazaar. The Ganesha idols were always being made, even when his family was in Rajasthan. “We made mud idols till a decade ago, but now we use PoP for greater durability. We order for PoP in large quantities and have trucks deliver it. The *limbodi* colours used to paint the idols, we buy from shops near Teen Darwaza. Almost all the men

living here have jobs as office or college peons, or they sell clothes, vessels, cutlery, *charpoy*s and small furniture on *laaris* or in the Bhadra market. After coming back from work in the evenings, they work for a couple hours on the idols, and two months before the Ganesha festival, they stay home to work on them throughout the day, and even nights. My son also will leave his job in a few months from now and rejoin after the festival gets over. The atmosphere during the time of Ganesh Chaturthi is something I cannot even begin to explain in words,” he smiles.

Gulbai Tekra is famous for the Ganesha idols, but other festivals are also celebrated with just as much gusto. The *basti* gets its own *mela* between *Agrayas* and *Holi*. The *Holi* bonfire is lit, *makai phooli* and *khajur* are sold and there are *pujas* around the bonfire. The next day, *Dhuleti* turns the *Basti* into a riot of vibrant colour. “We play *Dhuleti* till the afternoon. Kids are then dressed in festive attire and taken to the temple. Boys are dressed like *var-rajās* and the girls take a *pradakshina* around the bonfire.”

Divya drops her books and runs in to get her *chanya choli*. Budhar**hai** laughs as he calls her back to study. “Divya and Vishnu study in Pankaj Vidyalaya in Gulbai Tekra, while Hitesh studies in the municipality school. When Manju was young, Raman**hai** enrolled her in school. She went on to take evening tuitions at St. Xavier’s College. A lot of good people like Raman**hai** visit this *basti*. They look after the complete education of some children. I am happy that my grandchildren go to school now.”

Vishnu wants to become a driver, Divya, a nurse, and Hitesh a *daaktar*. They also want to be able to make Ganesha idols after work, like their father. “The kids already know a lot about making the moulds, casting and painting the idols once they are ready.

I hope they continue to do so. I hope everyone here does so. I cannot imagine this *basti* without the idols now.”

The area cannot be imagined without the Ganesha idols. Neither can it be without the humility, rigour and spirit of their makers.

“*Raat na rotla ane khichdi jamva aavso?*” their hospitality speaks, ready to share their humble meal of *roti* and *khichdi*.

There is more to this seemingly simple place. A lot more than just people thrive here.

Colour. Celebration. Hope. Dreams. Life. Heart.

## The loss of a homeland

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To the northeast of the Sabarmati lie Kubernagar, Sardarnagar, Thakkar Bapanagara and Krishnanagar, the *Sindhi* colonies of Ahmedabad. Originally army barracks, these areas were granted to migrating *Sindhi* refugees, just as was Ulhasnagar in Mumbai. This often happens – a set of refugees begin to live in a place for a while. While some people stay, while the others relocate later. And often nobody looks at their histories, because they are considered transient.

Virumalji, a survivor of the Partition and the *sarpanch* of Kubernagar, shares stories of what it was like to travel from Sindh by train or ship and move to a camp in Gujarat. He describes how his community came as completely unwanted people, seeming strange to the *Gujaratis* because their dress and language was different, and very often being perceived to be Muslims.

The loss of a ‘homeland’ during Partition – or indeed any sort of displacement – has deep-rooted cultural and political repercussions. The loss of land results in a gradual decline of the community’s mother tongue, its culture and ancient heritage. Virumalji tells

the story of the *Sindhis* from the time they moved to Ahmedabad and how they dealt with the aftermath of months of frenzy and widespread anxiety. The circumspect *Sindhis* moved ahead in their new 'homeland' with apprehension, but a lot of conviction.

The family had a ration shop in Hyderabad, Sindh. They came from Pakistan to Ajmer in 1947, and then moved to Kubernagar in 1949 and settled there. And they became social workers. Their family still works for the development of the area. "It was a jungle here when we came. There weren't even wells; we would have to walk miles to the river to get water. Sometimes there would be floods, gushes of water washing our feet as we sat on a cot eating *roti* and *chutney*. Yet, during those days, there was a lot of love between people and respect between the young and the old. Everyone was dedicatedly working towards earning a living."

People start creating their own associations with food, clothing or places in the geography of their new homeland. A wonderful time in Kubernagar is during Chetichand, a *Sindhi* festival, when there are *Jhulelal* processions. *Jhulelal* is believed by some to be the incarnation of the Hindu God *Varuna*, and is worshipped by the *Sindhi* Hindus. Postmodern sensibilities are seen in the truckloads of people carrying *Jhulelal* dressed as Christ or Santa Claus! They are not purists in their expression of religion – this is rare and sets them apart from other Hindus and religious practices.

The Kubernagar market area boasts of many *Sindhi* sweets shops that are visited by people across the city, and dozens of cloth stores, mechanic garages and repairs outlets. If you walk along any lane off the *chowk*, you will wind through narrow streets lined with small single-storey homes. Tiles in vivid colours and patterns, line the exterior walls of these structures. Those that haven't been

demolished or abandoned are painted in bright pink and green or hues of blue, adding colour to the otherwise empty streets of Kuberanagar. Unlike the *chowk*, which has a fair number of people going about their daily chores, the rest of the area seems barren, abandoned.

Curious about the social stratification of Sindh in those days, I asked him stories about his neighbours, and about the locality. Lost in thought in a moment, he tries to recollect memories from the era gone by, which gave me time to look around the house. It was of comfortable size, just enough for the family of five. As the *sarpanch* of the locality, Virumalji had a number of collectibles he kept in a glass fronted cupboard in the living room. An orange textured wall facing the entrance backed a large idol of *Sai Baba* dressed in the same shade. Without my *Sindhi* friend on one side constantly adding and translating words for me, it would've been quite a task to understand Virumalji's thick accent. The smell of *Sindhi kadhi chawal* being cooked upstairs in the kitchen caught attention, fuelling already ravenous appetites. My friend tells me it is frequently cooked in most *Sindhi* households and eaten with *papad* or pickle. The community started earning a livelihood by selling homemade *papad* and pickles, gradually moving into other businesses like cloth, repairs, etc. – and that's how the *Sindhis* flourished in India. Maybe that's the reason *papad* and pickles are still indispensable to *Sindhi* cuisine.

Food was so good, Virumalji remembers. “We would buy a goat for a few *annas* and eat such good mutton and fish. In Sindh, people would eat all that. Now they have stopped. They would share all meals with their Muslim neighbours,” he remembers, and often their kitchens would be set up together outside the homes

during festivals. “They would send over large quantities of mutton during Eid and it would be cooked at our house, the *Sindhi* way. In the past few years, our family has stopped consuming meat. When we came to Kubernagar, we couldn’t afford meat most times. Nobody was poor in Sindh. You wouldn’t find a *Sindhi* beggar. We work for our honour and living. We fight.”

While the country was celebrating newly gained independence, *Sindhi*-Hindus were forced to migrate from Sindh to India, leaving behind their homes, belongings, roots, culture, heritage, near and dear ones, money, valuables and above all, their homeland. Yet, with enterprise and hard work they captured local markets in cloth, provisions and sun-dry goods. It is inherent that they would never accept defeat and despite circumstances, emerged with flying colours. Despite having to face unforeseeable circumstances in a new country, they never lost hope.

An excerpt from the book on the lives of the *Sindhi* refugees, *Burden of Refuge* by Rita Kothari is particularly interesting and relevant: “The *Sindhis* of Gujarat may not know, do not know, that even today, *Sindhi* Muslims go to Hindu Sufi saints and pay their respects. They might also want to remember that their parents or grandparents had no memory of physical violence during the Partition. Finally, in their desire to become mainstream Hindus, they might want to remember that their exclusion has come not from Muslim quarters, but from Hindu quarters.”



## The Esther Walk

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Esther David's apartment is beautifully furnished, with an old world charm that reflects her artistic sensibilities. Prominently visible among the various articles on the showcase is a beautifully wrought *menorah*, a traditional Jewish candleholder. It is difficult to associate any religious identity with someone like Esther David, whose eclectic artistic sensibilities and cosmopolitan outlook make such associations redundant. However, she is also not one to shy away from her cultural roots, and her Jewish identity has played and continues to play an important role in her work. Esther is eminent in Ahmedabad's art and literary circles as an artist and critic, but primarily as an author.

The living room is warm and inviting, an ambience more than matched by Esther's hospitality. She brings me a glass of water, and then quickly decides that water isn't enough. "Here, let me get you some *nimbupaani* instead," she says, taking the glass from me. "It is so hot outside!" Though she now lives in the Gulbai Tekra neighbourhood in Western Ahmedabad, Esther was actually born and raised in the old city. She recalls her family home, which was a

*haveli* in Salatwada, a *mohalla* near Dilli Darwaza. “It was actually a half-*haveli*, which accommodated two three families!” She laughs. This early childhood in old Ahmedabad had a profound influence on her life and worldview. “It is the old city, and my experience of growing up there that nurtures my literature. It is where I draw my inspiration from.”

Something that has underscored or defined Esther David’s writings is her Jewish identity, and many of her books have documented the lives of the small Bene Israel Jewish community in Ahmedabad. However, Esther was not raised in a typical Jewish household. “My childhood was quite different from the lives of the people whose stories I tell.” Her father Reuben David was an animal lover and a passionate conservationist who founded the Ahmedabad Zoo at Kankariya. “My dad was non-religious and I was brought up in a liberal, progressive household. He was a modern man who believed in Darwin. As a result, I did not have a very religious upbringing, and wasn’t very connected with my community while growing up.”

But there is a conflicting identity. “Though I spoke fluent *Gujarati* and felt like a *Gujarati*, I had a name that not too many people could pronounce! I’ve always been more *Gujarati* than any of my friends. But despite that, I would sometimes be reminded of my identity. It is very easy to stereotype – people automatically associated my name with being non-vegetarian. So sometimes when I would go to my friend’s house, I would not be allowed into the kitchen. We as Indians always do that, maybe because we live in a diverse society. Earlier it was less, but now it seems to have increased, in a strange paradoxical way.” It is this conflicted identity and confusion that slowly got her interested in the Bene Israel

community in Ahmedabad. “I wanted to get closer to my roots, and also understand the history and culture of my community,” she says.

“My favourite memories of the city are of this walk I used to take. It used to be my favourite walk; my friends call it the ‘Esther Walk’. I would start near Bhadra Fort, right outside the *Bhadrakali* temple. I remember that elephants used to stand. Now with the gates installed, the elephants can’t come in. Along the way there would be women selling fresh *kesuda* flowers. As you walk towards Teen Darwaza, there is a small triangular park, next to the Dena Bank – there used to be so many birds there – mynahs, sparrows and parakeets. I would sit there for a while to enjoy the sound of the birds. In this park, there used to be a bust of Queen Victoria installed. It was a beautiful sculpture, but in a wave of nationalistic fervour that swept the country post independence, many symbols of British rule were vandalised. This statue’s nose got broken. My father later got the bust moved to the museum, where it remains today.

“Back in those days, the AMTS buses used to go right through Teen Darwaza – that’s how small they were! And I would stop and chat with all the *bucketwallahs*, *plasticwallahs* and the *lockwallahs*. They all know me, because I walk that route so often! At Teen Darwaza, *Jafferbhai* used to sit, with his wife. His job is to light the lamp at the little shrine for Lakshmi.” She goes on to tell me a legend of Ahmedabad connected with the worship of Lakshmi in the old city. The city’s inhabitants believe that it is the presence of the goddess in the city that helps shops and businesses prosper – the lighting of the Lakshmi lamp is a very old tradition, something that *Jafferbhai’s* family have been doing for generations. In this

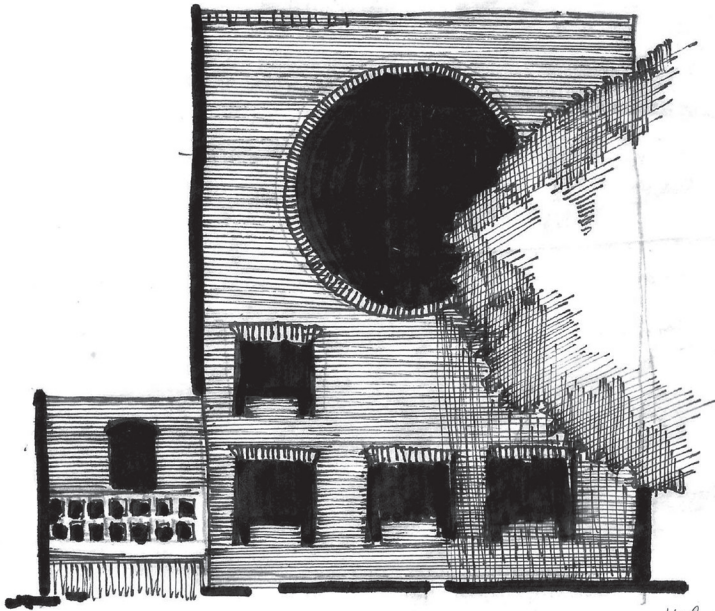
way, the stories of the city merge with her recollections. “Past Teen Darwaza, I walk towards Manek Chowk. I stop to buy *mukhwas* at this particular stall outside Rani *no Hajiro*. Past Manek Chowk, I sometimes head into Maandvi *ni Pol* if I need to buy vessels, then straight on to the vegetable market. My walk ends with a stroll down the busy lanes of Dalgardwad, the textile market. For me, this walk is a catharsis.”

As the city began expanding in a westward direction, the divisions between the different areas widened – especially between the West and the East. Especially after the riots, eastern Ahmedabad began to be perceived as unsafe due to communal tensions, prompting numerous families to shift to neighbourhoods west of the Sabarmati. Though this internal migration has now slowed, it has fundamentally changed the cultural fabric of the city – leading to new perceptions and a different image of the city. “There was a time when people from the West would hardly enter the old city, unless absolutely needed. It became like two separate cities.” This almost schizophrenic identity underlies what it means to be an *Amdavadi*.

“After the UNESCO World Heritage City tag, suddenly it became a buzzword, and *Amdavadis* started taking notice. Nowadays, I hear people say things like ‘*Chalo* let’s go to the Old City for the heritage walk.’ So now we have tourists from Western Ahmedabad going to the old city as if it were a different place, rather than their own city!”

It’s these ironies that somehow prop up the image of a deeply divided and confused city – but underlying these tensions, are the memories of the places, smells, sights and sounds that define the city in our memories. What makes the place valuable to someone like

Esther, who has lived all her life in Ahmedabad, are the childhood memories, the individuals that populate her imagination of the city, and that inextricable bond, either through chance or fate, that she shares with this place. Is the city the object of one's imagination or one's experience, or perhaps both? This is the question I find myself mulling over, as my discussion with Esther concludes, and I step out again into the harsh Ahmedabad afternoon – back into the city, and back into my memories.



*K. B. ...*

## Falguni's Fashion Fundas

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It's the time when you are travelling back home after a long day of work. Cramped up in the confined space of public transport, you whip your mobile phone out of the pocket – your companion for the next half hour. And soon you have indulged in a world of friends, fun and frolic – a world of smart phones and of 3G connections that now rests on our palms. It is in this time and space that you encounter Falguni's Fashion Fundas. A social media space where Falguni, the protagonist of my story, gives one tips and advice about what to wear for what occasion, posts some snapshots of her own fashion for the day, some really stellar and often ethnic designs, all the while spreading a lot of body positivity. How? We will come to that.

Back in the physical world, we decide to catch up one day. It is a breakfast meeting and she has arrived before time and I have arrived late. There she sits, ravishing in a peacock combination of blue and green, and beautiful laser-cut earrings. Cheerful forever, she is quick to console, "Don't worry, I have this bad habit of reaching before time." It's just to make me feel better, but I am glad. As the

yummy South Indian breakfast arrives, we both are raving about our love for food. And what better place to talk about food than Ahmedabad. A professor at the prestigious MICA (earlier known as Mudra Institute of Communication, Ahmedabad), I prod Falguni about why she thought of this online venture.

“We are often appraised by the conventional and standard notions of beauty, one is not often kind to oneself. Through Falguni’s Fashion Funda what I would like is for people to be comfortable in their own skin and, moreover, be kind to yourself,” she simply states. “My fashion tip is always that – fashion comes from within, it is an extension of yourself. And fashion is not always expensive. It is about body positivity and looking beautiful in what you are comfortable.” Falguni, who has been teaching in MICA for 12 years, started Falguni’s Fashion Funda at the insistence of her students who were already hailing her as ‘a local fashion icon’. And now she is a popular social media figure. Everything from the clothes she wears to work, to what she recently wore on a holiday gets numerous likes. “Recently on a holiday in Prague, I wore frocks. This was my first time and I had discovered some international vendors, who designed them with amazing cuts and detail. It is not often that one finds plus size western wear in India.” So high is her popularity and fan following, that often she endorses her student’s creations on her social media page.

In our media frenzied surroundings, where notions of beauty dominate – how tall one should be, what skin tone, what size and so on, being plus size conventionally receives a lot of advice, from diet tips to fitness regimens. Women (mostly) chase these notions, instead of pursuing health and self confidence in one’s own body. How has it been for Falguni? “I have always been someone on the



healthier side. Having always been a scholarly and academic person, these ideas have never been my priority. I have always liked to dress up. And Gujarat is a place with so many textile and accessory options,” says this two-time topper at the University. “However, when it was time to get married, and in an arranged marriage set up, these social prejudices about gender and body are blaring.” Eventually lucky in marriage and love, Falguni is heavily critical of the traditional system where women and men have to have certain pre-qualifying criteria to be sought after in the marriage market.

A shift in perspective is needed, and Falguni credits her profession to have given her that space. “I have often questioned what the role of a teacher is. Is it just limited to class, course work and marks? I don’t believe so. The true role of a teacher is to build perspectives.” Having grown up in Rajkot and begun her teaching career there, she goes on to talk about how being in MICA and Ahmedabad has been fulfilling for her. “In 2004 I moved to Ahmedabad. A lot of my personal development I would credit to MICA. This vibrant inter-cultural space is where I learnt to let go of a lot of my personal prejudices. Having been brought up in a much smaller city like Rajkot, there are always the traps of certain cultural biases, which often affects one’s own image of ourselves. Ahmedabad, in comparison, is a much more open, cosmopolitan and an accepting city, perhaps, owing to the fact that it’s an education hub attracting people from all over the country with institutions like IIM, NID, CEPT, PDU to name a few.”

“Being a part of MICA, I get to meet a lot of motivated youth of our country, as well as some exciting peers.” She adds, “Like the MICA-Vani, a *Gujarati* radio station started by the students, which airs in five neighbouring villages, is not only to

learn communicational strategy but also to use it as a tool for social empowerment.” This kind of engagement and exposure is essential, especially since this top B-school generates numerous media professionals every year. Soon they go forth in their lives and very much operate in an industry that churns out the media content that surrounds us – that subtly shapes ideas and values for millions. In times when social responsibility of the media is being questioned, what concepts and perspectives the institution *instils* can go a long way.

The teacher in this context is not just someone who can talk about a McLuhan text, but also someone who can be a role model. To me, effectively, Falguni is a role model.

We have ordered our final filter coffees, and it's difficult to conclude this little morning rendezvous, as we have just begun talking about our favourite city. Falguni explains to me an interesting tradition, “*Vatki Vyavahar* – which for me symbolises the ethos of Ahmedabad or for that matter a *Gujarati* neighbourhood. *Vatki* means a bowl. Often when something delicious is made at home, a bowl of the delicacy is given to the neighbour. The bowl comes back after a few days with a delicacy that the neighbour has prepared. This simple act of sharing fosters a spirit of comradeship. In fact, we have a saying that goes, *pehle sago padosi*.” Which means, your neighbour is your ‘first’ relative. To that we sip our filter coffees to this city called Ahmedabad.

## Not just a love story

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This is a love story... but it is not the run of the mill love story with a linear narrative of girl meets boy, falls in love and settles down in Ahmedabad. No, this is a love story about two individuals within the tapestry of Ahmedabad's landscape, who found their life's purpose, brought a unique, pioneering school into the world, and led lives of compassion, sharing their knowledge with others. Meet Anju Musafir-Chazot and Dr Pascal Chazot, both researcher-teachers by vocation, whose labour of love is a school called Mahatma Gandhi International School, located in the heart of Ahmedabad. Originally from France and Northern India, they made this city their home and the headquarters of a progressive educational space that reflects the pedagogical ideas of Indian thinkers such as Krishnamurthy and Gandhiji, as well as international thinkers like John Dewey, Freinet, Piaget and champions of the constructivist, democratic and experiential learning approach. "We strived to establish a school that meets international benchmarks, makes quality education inclusive, and creates an experimental space to try out new ideas in education,

practice new ways of learning and bring a much more humanistic approach to education than has been in practice until now,” – in Anju’s words.

Anju came to Ahmedabad with her father, an IPS officer, as a young woman stepping into the threshold of adulthood. Pleasantly surprised by the freedom and safety this city gave to women, which was in stark contrast to Delhi where she came from, she easily assimilated into the local culture and made many friends. Her interest in languages initiated her journey as a French language faculty at Alliance Française. Pascal, a French civil servant, shifted to the city on deputation as the Director of Alliance after choosing Ahmedabad for its close historical association to *Gandhiji*. They found a soulmate in each other and when they decided to tie the knot, Pascal was determined to get married in an old temple by the River Sabarmati.

“We spent many days trying to find an old temple by the river, but we only found new temples or temples located within the city. Pascal has been a great admirer and even a follower to a large extent of *Gandhiji*, and at that point he had finished one of his theses on the educational ideas and principles of Mahatma Gandhi at the Sorbonne University, so we were bathing in *Gandhiji*’s works, having read them and discussed them. One day as we passed the Gandhi Ashram, he said that the Gandhi Ashram was like a temple for him, and since we hadn’t found any suitable temple, we decided to go and see if it was possible to get married there. I was, honestly, quite sceptical; the Ashram is a sacred place, a historic legacy, a museum, a tourist destination... it is many things, but it is not really a place where people get married,” narrates Anju, reminiscing about the eventful day that would mark their life path in more ways than one.

After having a long conversation with Shri Durga Prasadji about Indian astrology, history, Gandhiji's writings and more, their unusual request was met with an unusual response: he accepted to show them around to choose the venue of their marriage! They found a small, old temple on the banks of the river where Gandhiji used to pray, and they immediately knew that this was the place where they would get married. They later found out that one of the divinities in the temple was Guru Datta, the God of Knowledge, and for two teachers it seemed very apt. "When I look back, I think there was some higher energy that was pulling us and guiding us in the direction of Gandhiji's ideas and principles; it was rather intuitive and not deliberate. It was one of the only marriages for non-residents of the Ashram that happened after Gandhiji's demise. We had his blessings and this was the beginning of a path enjoined with the message of Mahatma Gandhi in our personal and professional lives," narrates Anju.

"After Pascal's tenure at Alliance, I was quite keen to leave the city. I wanted to explore new cities and new cultures, but Ahmedabad is not a city that you can leave easily, somehow it pulls you and keeps you." Pascal's job demanded that they travel to different parts of the world and Anju was looking forward to making it a delectable experience. But life had different plans for them. By then their pedagogical experiments at Alliance had proved to be very popular and they were coaxed to establish a school on the same lines, a school where their innovative pedagogical techniques would be put into practice. Pascal left behind a secure, lucrative government job and together they lived on their life savings, and plunged into a project that was to change their destiny forever.

They had lofty ideas of changing the education system inside out and bringing about systemic, sustainable change that would positively impact education, which was in an impasse, following the colonial heritage of the schooling system that was divorced from the needs of an evolving Indian society. But how were they, two teachers with the strong backing of research, no doubt, but two individuals nonetheless, to bring about the change they aspired to? How could they start a school with no funding or support? Anju believed in the project but was appalled by the lack of answers to the many practical problems that the project faced, and when doubt reached its peak, while driving through the city, she turned to her side and saw a big billboard of Tata Yellow Pages with Gandhiji's quote, "Find the purpose, the means will follow". They didn't have the means to buy the land and construct a building, and decided to bypass the ease of accepting the help of private donors and businessmen who would have come on board as investors, but would have brought in a different agenda. "We didn't want to be ruled by any other principle other than the interests of the children and placing at the heart of the project, interesting and meaningful pedagogy." They hence explored the option of working with the authorities and working within the system rather than outside of it. The pedagogical project came to fruition as a Public-Private Partnership with the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation in 1999, which approved the lease of a building for the purpose of setting up the school.

Planting the seed of change created a 'sea of trouble'. Although high ranking officials sanctioned the lease of the building, when

the Municipal Commissioner went away, a big agitation against the project commenced. “I don’t blame people for what they did, as they were misinformed. We didn’t have a choice but to accept what the authorities offered; we didn’t say we wanted this or that; it was up to the Municipal Corporation to decide the best building for the project. We just wanted to show the naysayers who put up their hands saying India is a poor country and they can’t do anything until they have access to better resources and infrastructure, that it was possible to see the cup half full and achieve things with the available resources of our country. We wanted to make the best use of any resource that was made available to us, to prove that albeit with limited resources, anyone can deliver international quality education anywhere in the country. We are grateful for the space they chose, but we didn’t anticipate what it would lead to.” The agitation created restlessness and violence; buses were burnt, there was stone throwing, blood signature campaigns, relay fasts (where people took turns to go hungry for a few hours); there were mobs that surrounded them; they were attacked, and the police was posted there by the court as there was a Public Interest Litigation against this project, in addition to everything else that was going on.

Although misunderstood initially, Pascal was trying to bring in the deeper tenets of Indian philosophy back into Indian education, which had suffered so long under the colonial impact, and to blend new research in education into the fabric of the evolving needs of the 21st century student in India. “It was overwhelming and the easiest option was to quit and go, which is what a lot of lobbies wanted us to do. I was 30 at that

time and this was my first tryst with a mob; it took away a lot of my self-esteem. For many years I struggled with the feeling of being unwanted in the city, I was embarrassed because of the way things were inaccurately projected. Much as I come across as a person who is extremely confident, at that time it took away a lot of my self-worth, but youth has its own idealism and fire, and I was keen to do something to the best of my abilities and not give up just because some people were opposing the project. I knew the worth of what we were going to do. I knew the impact that the pedagogy we wanted to use would bring to the city and the country, and what we wanted to bring to education. I knew that it would bring a lot of joy and happiness to children. What kept me going was the feeling that in my life later on, I didn't want to look back with regret and think that I did not try, even if we failed, which seemed to be at that time a very obvious outcome. I didn't want to give up, giving up would have been a much bigger failure for me, so I continued struggling and trying to convince people, meeting them, and outlining what our ideas for the project were," explains Anju, while recollecting those difficult days.

Living a simple life on their life savings, working 10-12-hour days and refusing a salary for many years till the school was stable, the project demanded many sacrifices in their personal, social and professional lives. Studies remained a constant for Pascal during this period; he continued his studies about Indian culture and education, completed his Masters in Sanskrit, did doctoral research on Ayurveda and the Indian System of Medicine, and wrote his doctoral thesis in the Psychology of



Education, etc. He remained steadfast in refusing to complain about the situation, always somehow finding a way to see the silver lining and be grateful for what they had: a loving family, strong friendships, devoted and loving colleagues, students who cared, a comfortable home in the heart of the city, a great meal... When anyone in the family would complain he would remind them to be thankful and considerate of other people's opinions.

Having named the school after Mahatma Gandhi, possibly the project gathered an energy that is beyond the energy required to set up a school – it was akin to the energy of a movement. Just as people rallied to stall the project, innumerable unknown, esteemed citizens of Ahmedabad rallied together to fight for the project and ensure it came to light. They fought cases for free, fought for the project in their own capacity without any fee and went out of their way to make it come to light. This school would not have existed if it was not founded in Ahmedabad. The city has a historical legacy of welcoming international educators such as Maria Montessori and Erik Erikson, and setting up premier educational institutions in the city. “We can't imagine it being set up anywhere else. We won the case in the High Court and the Supreme Court and the school was born. We would like to believe that MGIS has the blessings of *Gandhiji*.” Though the project was small and the resistance was huge, the impact was equally huge.

Established before the Right to Education Act, which redefined teaching and learning practices across India, MGIS was a lab of research that gave real life data about the viability of changing the

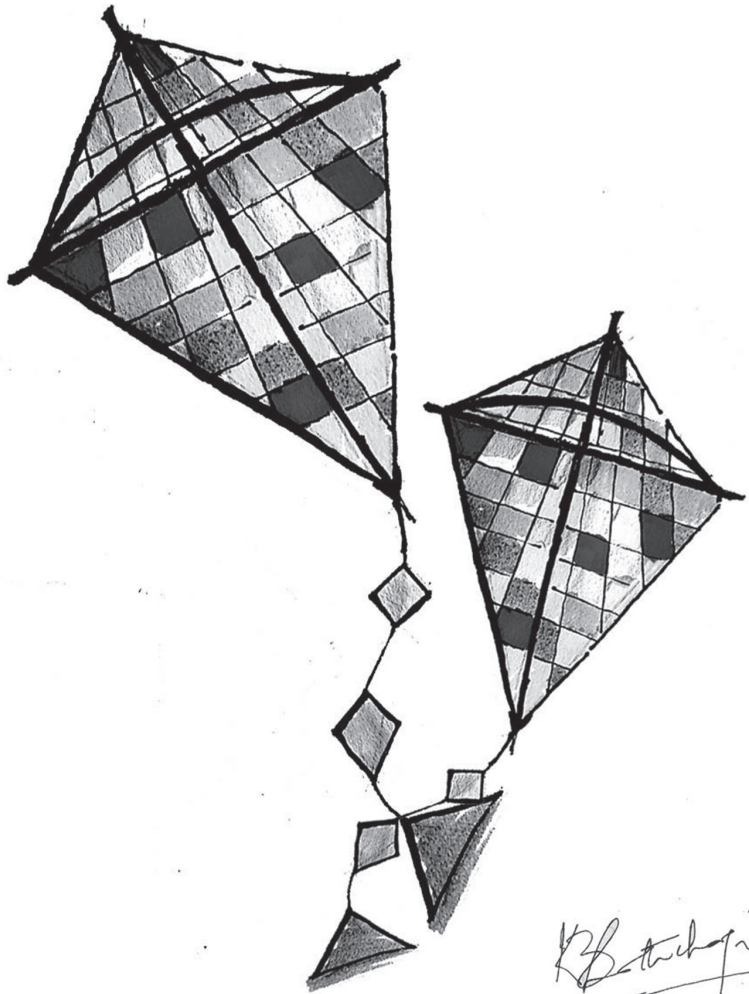
colonial lineage of education. The founding principle of MGIS was to break the apartheid in education, celebrate diversity in the classroom and bring different sections of society together, be it socio-economic, regional, learning ability, or others. Teaching effectively without exams, punishments, fear, homework, uniforms or school bells, through a pedagogy that places the learner at the centre through hands-on, project based learning at a time when these were pioneering ideas in India, these ideas travelled and found resonance with many Indian policy makers, principals, teachers and researchers who have been regularly coming to MGIS to study it since 1999.

A municipal school became the first IB international school in Gujarat and created a different educational space that was more inclusive, democratic, liberal and progressive. It also became the first school in the state to use Apple technology to create student outcomes that met national and international benchmarks, and brought the power of content creation, digital storytelling, technology, creativity and filmmaking to students.

It has been 17 years since the school was founded and life continues to throw challenges at this couple. In the year 2014, they went through a life shattering change when they lost their 12-year old daughter, Tara. Battling loss, grief and pain, finding strength in Tara's metaphysical poems and writings found after her loss, they went on a quest to explore the deeper meaning of existence and reality. Anju who is currently doing a doctorate at King's College London, is also involved with Pascal in creating more meaningful curricula and a pedagogy to spread psychological well-being through teaching, trainings, talks and writings. Anju quotes a line written by Tara, "If it brings a smile to someone's

face, it is good behaviour.” Both, now are busy spreading smiles amongst teachers, children and their parents.

This is their untold story as it unfolded in the hustle and bustle of Ahmedabad city, to bring in a shift in consciousness, using education as a trampoline to prepare the new generation for the unprecedented challenges that lie ahead.



*K. B. Subramanian*

# The Foodaholics

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Ahmedabad as a city is constantly stuck between the battle for preserving a culture and making a new one. As a city, it has leapfrogged through social stigmas and continues its forward journey on a road where what's next can only be expressed by getting there.

But there is one thing about the city that, though constantly changing, by and large remains its only identity and that is food.

The month of June 2016 saw Ahmedabad break the world record for the largest potluck party ever held. As a city, we came together to not only break the world record but pretty much smash it to pieces and make it all the more difficult for the next guy to break. With 1854 people inside a single venue on the day of the event, our only concern was to not let the place overflow.

This event was historic not only because it broke a world record but also because it brought forth the indefatigable energy that one city's passion for food and two people's valour to showcase it in front of the world can do. Two people, passionate about food, and armed only with the frustration of not having the right people to

talk to about their food and the infantry that social media was, decided to open a Facebook group in 2012 and called it Foodaholics in Ahmedabad.

Rohan Bhatt and Esha Shah, a couple more popularly known as the founders of Foodaholics in Ahmedabad, evince few signs of brilliance when you first meet them. It takes some meticulously prepared dishes and a generous sprinkle of love for you to understand how well they know their food. But this piece isn't in adulation of how good they are. This is in adulation of what they did.

Foodaholics in Ahmedabad is a frivolous name, if you ask me. I would've rejected it in the first go. But then so is Nike, and yet we choose to wear the swoosh at as many places on our body as we can. The point being, don't judge it by its name, it gets better, much better.

The group was created with one philosophy: to share, discuss, and grow together with our idea of food. It now has a 35,155 member community (as I type this) that discusses everything from the making of the perfect *dal makhani* all the way down to understanding the right ingredients for a heart-warming chocolate ganache.

"He (Sanjeev Kapoor) asked me, 'So what does your group do?' And I said, 'Well sir, we discover, create, and celebrate food, both old and new,' and I said that with significant pauses, taking time to enunciate the next word. It was Sanjeev Kapoor after all. And he replied, 'Then continue doing that, *na!* Discover, create, celebrate.' And since that day, it has become FiA's (Foodaholics in Ahmedabad) staple. Discover, Create, Celebrate!"

That's what Rohan had to say when asked what the central idea

of FiA is. Though it has the word Ahmedabad in it, FiA has hardly ever stuck to talking about food just from Ahmedabad. The city is too small, and the passion too vigorous to be contained by the name of the group.

In fact, world cuisine is often discussed more than local cuisines or food choices and the group has come around to being the soap box for some of the most prolific home chefs of the city.

The city had an existing food community, which was distributed, disconnected and unconcerned. There were new food places popping up all over the place, its dynamism in terms of both food diversity and the culture had been on the rise since decades now, but the one thing that it lacked was a serious recognition of the efforts behind putting a plate on a table.

That's exactly what Foodaholics aimed at doing: recognizing, celebrating and making the effort more valuable. And it took them a fair while in doing that, but eventually, it all made sense.

"I had taken a friend to taste the Belgian chocolate at Thanco's when I noticed a small fluorescent sticker that they had put up, that said, 'Review us on Zomato and FiA.' That was the day I got real feedback of the impact that we had generated."

That's what Esha had to say when asked about the one day when all the effort that went into creating a place free of internet vandals was well understood in intent and approach.

As you read this, you would still be able to meet a lot of people who do not believe that FiA is a not-for-profit group that has no plans of going commercial in the future. That the only driver behind such a fervent activity about food is passion, is, for some reason, a difficult idea to swallow without a splash of doubt.

Soon after its formation, FiA turned into a local sensation, and

if you are to agree to what Rohan has to say, the people of the community form a much more crucial part of the experience of being in the city's most active food discussion group, than the idea of the group itself.

Now that would be true for any community, from Facebook and YouTube themselves to your local debate club. However, what makes FiA unique is their resilience to change. It was easy, and to an extent ethically acceptable for them to give in to the pressure and attraction of becoming a media house that types for money. But the wonderful thing is that they never did, and going by what they say, they never will.

The world is full of people who set out to do something good. The real question is, how long do they keep doing it? FiA has done it for four long years and if I am to believe the spark in Esha's eyes when I ask her what the future of the group looks like, you can lean on a writer's judgement to say that it only gets better.

In the middle of all the rush, we all take that small break. Stop by the side of the road and grab a *sevpuri*, drive a little more after that meeting for a *samosa*, stop by a place along the way to grab our favourite *khakhras*; as a city, we love our food in more ways than I can write about. And Foodaholics in Ahmedabad did nothing but give us a place where we can collectively realise this passion, forward it, and spread some love.



## Of grassroots and innovations

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As a globally renowned scholar in the area of grassroots innovations, Prof. Anil Gupta has scouted the length and breadth of India to bring genius minds to light. But his heart is in Ahmedabad, the city that he has been living in since 1981.

“I always feel that I may not have been born in Ahmedabad but I want to die here,” says the Professor at IIM Ahmedabad and the founder of Honey Bee Network.

Ahmedabad was an extraordinarily pleasant experience for Prof. Gupta from the day that he arrived to work at IIM Ahmedabad.

“I had rented a house near Jodhpur Cross Road from one of the staff at IIM-A. My luggage had arrived in a truck from Delhi a day before I reached. When my neighbours realised that there was nobody at home to receive the luggage, they took down all the luggage from the truck and kept it with them till I came the following day. It was a social debt. To a stranger they had never met, they were so kind. So, my life in Ahmedabad began with an extraordinary experience of the culture of the city,” says Prof. Gupta while remembering those days.

He stayed in that house for about four years with his wife and two sons. “It was a low-income colony but a very nice environment for children to live and learn in, and my children had good interactions with the neighbourhood kids there. My children have studied in Ahmedabad, socialised with and imbibed the values of lower middle class children,” says the Prof. Gupta.

During his early years in this city, Prof. Gupta and his family used to visit Law Garden, have *pav bhaji* and sometimes have a Saurashtra *thali* at Ashram Road. “We have eaten at *laaris* too. Near the White House, there used to be a *Dilli Chaatwallah*, who used to sell amazing *jalebis* that were dry outside and moist from inside,” says Prof. Gupta.

During *Navratri*, Prof. Gupta and his family would park their motorcycle at a venue and enjoy watching people perform the *garba*.

“This culture of partaking in the joy of celebration without any restriction is a very extraordinary feature of the culture here,” he says, while adding that he had many other pleasant experiences. For example, once his motorcycle broke down in the rain and a stranger offered to drop his wife and child home. “Now you have to really trust a person to let him drop your wife and child home (laughs) while I wheel my motorcycle along. So, you have to trust and it was okay... I am grateful to the city; my experience helped me embrace this place, that has given me so much. The fact that it has a small town culture... there is something in this place that makes people take note of each other, greet and respect each other and share,” he says.

As a faculty member of a prestigious management institute and as the founder of Honey Bee Network, Prof. Gupta has

enriched the lives of many *Amdavadis* through various initiatives. He managed to get former president Dr APJ Abdul Kalam to visit Ahmedabad three times a year and also teach a course to IIM-A students. During those visits, many *Amdavadis* had the privilege to meet and talk to the country's President, which may not otherwise have been possible for the common person. Last year, Prof. Gupta and his team managed to get the Hon'ble President of India, Pranab Mukherjee to visit Ahmedabad and felicitate young innovators.

"It is not easy to get an appointment with the President but the people here managed to meet him. The cultural and institutional life of Ahmedabad gets enriched and many times, we have been able to help artists showcase their work to the President," says Prof. Gupta, who has also played a key role in creating Prayas, a school for underprivileged children, which is now run by IIM-A students.

"I remember when Prayas was conceived over 17 years ago, and the first class was held on the premises of a temple beside the Blind People's Association. Then Prayas moved to Vastrapur Primary School, where our students used to teach after school hours and later it moved to IIM-A, where it is currently based," says Prof. Gupta whose organisation SRISTI hosts an organic food festival for *Amdavadis* at the IIM-A campus every year.

Ahmedabad played a big role in the conception of Honey Bee Network. "The first meeting for Honey Bee Network was held at my house with eminent personalities of Ahmedabad, including Natwar**bai**, the former education minister and Gandhian. Honey Bee Network would not have been born without the congenial environment that the city provides. If I was able to do something, it was because the system was so accommodating and reciprocated,"

says Prof. Gupta, who has felt the connection with the Gandhian spirit of the place.

SRISTI and GIAN – the organisations under the Honey Bee Network – has young, devoted and grounded employees from Gujarat.

Praising the resilience of the city, Prof. Gupta says, “The years 1992, 2001 and 2002 were difficult times for Ahmedabad but the city has great resilience, all said and done... The city bounced back to its original character and in some sense, has a tremendous capacity to regain its strength.”

Talking about the nature of *Amdavadis*, Prof. Gupta says that there is a rich culture of maturity.

“One good thing I like about *Amdavadis* is that they never crib about each other, and do not point out faults or flaws in each other. This is perhaps the only place where, whether someone likes a person or not, they will not waste time complaining about others. People mostly mind their own business and help each other. That is why this is a fertile ground for sprouting new initiatives,” says Prof. Gupta who also feels that the general sense of non-intrusiveness and non-pettiness is what makes the city so warm and inviting to outsiders.

“Not just me, but I have seen that in general, people who come here from other regions don’t want to go back. This is a place that can absorb outsiders so easily... There is no *Gujarati* or non-*Gujarati* business and this place knows how to get the best out of people,” says Prof. Gupta, while adding that one should not use a few unfortunate incidents to whip the whole culture of this place.

“There is no culture of showing off here. Exceptions apart, most people don’t flaunt their wealth. If you meet people like

Zydu Cadila's Pankaj**bbhai** Patel or Torrent Group's Sudhir**bbhai**, or Prafull**bbhai** or Sanjay Lal**bbhai** of Ahmedabad education society you will see that they don't have to make an effort to appear normal. People here are very humble and this is the great feature of this city," says Prof. Gupta, as he laughs, adding, "As you can see, I am a great fan of this place... I will not go anywhere else."

He says that the thought of leaving this city has never crossed his or Sadhana, his wife's mind. "The city has evolved over the years and there is a blend of rural and urban culture here. A lot of non-*Gujaratis* have set up enterprises here. The educational standards are not great but then you cannot get everything in one place. This place knows how to support and invest in ideas for people who create public goods for the larger, social good. People here are not very discriminatory, otherwise how would so many non-*Gujaratis* have settled here?" he asks.

Besides the city's contributions to the professor's life, it has also shaped him as the person that he is today. "I was very intolerant towards laziness but the city has mellowed my anger (laughs) This place has let me be, it did not remove my angularities nor did it make me compromise. If I wanted to do something and needed support, the city has always given me that. It has let me take more risks and get away with an excess of adventures," he says.

Praising the trust factor that everyone in the city holds – right from the vegetable vendor to a high profile businessman – Prof. Gupta recounts an experience. "Once, I went back to the shop with a can of oil that had started smelling bad within a few days of purchase. The shopkeeper, without a second thought, took the commodity back and asked me to take a fresh can. It is a strange place... where else would you find a shopkeeper being responsible

for a commodity that he has not manufactured. There is no hassle or argument and vendors here will replace oil or vegetables that are of poor quality... There is a great deal of trust and the best part is that nobody will take advantage of that trust," says Prof. Gupta.

The only thing that Prof. Gupta feels needs to be changed about the city is the traffic. "Ahmedabad traffic is an exception and that is partly because people think that the city is their courtyard. Anyone can stop anywhere in the middle of the road or just walk in the middle of the road, as they please," he says, laughing.

## Flying lessons in the 1960s

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Hobbies are activities that an individual chooses to do, for enjoyment in leisure time. And in India, as anywhere else, hobbies, too can be subject to being stereotyped. What are the images that flash in front of your eyes the moment ‘flying’ as an interest is mentioned – a swanky white commercial carrier, with a male pilot? And could flying have been a leisure activity in the 1960s?

Sitting at her desk in her home-office in Ahmedabad, Minakshi Jain shows off a folder of old newspaper clippings. “I was always a sportsperson, playing *langdi*, *khokho*, *hututu* and the like, and the shift to flying seemed very logical to me.” A veteran architect, and the first woman to get a flying licence in Gujarat in 1964, she carefully arranged the clippings so they can be photographed. There is also an old, tattered flying licence. It is a thick hard-bound booklet, pale blue in colour, the size of a passport. Its pages are torn and ragged, taped in transparent red and green. “I used to have one more folder with some more clippings. I cannot seem to find it. You can take pictures of these for now,” she says.

Jain starts her story with a happy twinkle in her eyes. “My

father came across an advertisement in the newspaper regarding flying lessons in Baroda. My elder sister and I both applied, but since my sister was slightly shorter than me, her feet could not reach the throttle. But I qualified and thus started my lessons.”

Born and brought up in Baroda, Jain pursued a degree in architecture from the Maharaja Sayaji University (MSU), Baroda, while training to fly. “Those were difficult times. Things were not as easily accessible as they are today. Owning cars and drivers was very uncommon back then. Hence every morning I had to get up at around 4 AM for a 6:30 AM class. I would cycle eight or nine miles to the airport in the dark. In spite of all the strenuous work, it was not given that I would get to fly every time! The flying depended on the wind direction; if the wind direction was as required, I would get to practise. The practice would last only for ten or fifteen minutes, as there were other students too – two or three girls who left mid-way. It was a two seater, single engine, small propeller plane.” Jain is distracted by monkeys loitering on the cosy entrance porch.

“After the flying lesson, I would attend architecture school. I was also the university sports captain and was representing the university in several sports. The daily architecture classes were followed by practise for the respective sports and then only could I devote time to complete my submissions.”

Jain started training in late 1962 and continued for one and half years. “For anyone to get a licence of ninety hours, one had to fly the plane for forty-five hours solo and forty-five hours with the instructor. Out of the ninety hours I flew, for forty-five hours I got a scholarship. Being an architecture student, I was very efficient in reading and interpreting maps. Hence I became a favourite of my



instructor and bagging the scholarship hours! Flying was obviously not very popular back then, so I flew all my relatives and friends around. At the end of the ninety hours, I became the first woman to gain a flying licence in Gujarat!”

It was an exciting time, Jain remembers. “So once one gets the flyer’s licence, one goes on to pursue the commercial pilot’s licence. There definitely was a point in my life that I was considering flying commercial flights as a career prospect. But the thought of doing the monotonous activity of flying day in and day out felt very boring and drab to me. And yes, architecture was far more exciting. After my first degree in architecture, I went on to pursue my master’s at the University of Pennsylvania under Louis Kahn. My licence, of course, had not much value there. Later, while working in the USA, one of the firms had an airplane and my colleagues would joke that ‘If any calamity happens Mina will fly us out of here!’”

Jain talks about her various other interests, like ceramics and embroidery. She empties her large, heavy pen stands, points to a flower bowl, showing off beautiful and earthy artefacts she has made. In a jewellery box are kept ceramic earrings, pendants and rings. “I started learning ceramics at fine arts school, while doing under graduate architecture school and continued to learn while working at Boston. I have made a lot of ceramic artefacts. I could not bring all of them back, as they were heavy. I also used to do a lot of embroidery and have stitched clothes for my daughters when they were kids. Our times were different. With no entertainment, we would do all these extra activities in our free time”. She brings out a purple translucent *saree*; the *pallu* has pretty patchwork in red, yellow, green and blue.

Short hair, a big *bindi* on her forehead, a warm caring smile,

wearing a simple *salwar-kameez* with a beautiful *khadi dupatta*, Minakshi Jain defies the concept of flying being a man's job. Her ambition, determination and passion are reflected in her journey to pursue her hobbies. And she does all of it with utmost ease and comfort.

Her professional work as an architect, teacher of architecture at CEPT and her contribution to architectural conservation has been applauded. For her conservation efforts of the Nagaur Fort in Rajasthan she received the 2002 Award of Excellence of the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation and was shortlisted for the 2013 Aga Khan Award. She is presently involved with the conservation of a few forts in Rajasthan. Her many hobbies – ceramics, embroidery, flying – speak of an intriguing personality. Just like the city of Ahmedabad, a blend of the typical and atypical.

## La Bella: The story of Mary Lobo

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The essential aspect of good food is the love and care with which it is made and served. This is the very reason that the ‘La Bella’ restaurant is much more than just a place to eat – especially for the large student population in the city, for whom it is almost a second home. In the more than half a century of its existence, the eatery has become something of a landmark. No story about Ahmedabad can be complete without a mention of the restaurant, and Auntie – as everyone knew Mary Lobo – the beloved owner who, along with her assistant Anna, has been whipping up delicious Goan style curries served with rice that have filled the stomachs of generations of college-goers.

La Bella is a bit unexpected for the city of Ahmedabad. It sits on the ground floor of a large derelict building facing the street. Its white double-swing doors are stained by age. To find it, you must know your way around the inner streets of Mirzapur, in the old city. The decor is just as unexpected as the location – as one walks inside, the first thing one notices is the wall on the left, entirely covered in graphics and with a large black and white portrait of

Salvador Dali, leering cheekily at the diners. The red plastic chairs, the Coca Cola advertisements painted on the walls and the wooden *jaali* near the door, speak of another era. This small room has seen many a lazy *Amdavadi* lunch. After a full meal, we would lounge inside, waiting out the harsh afternoon sun, all the while chatting with Auntie and Anna about life and everything else.

Once upon a time, La Bella would often become an informal venue of sorts – for impromptu screenings of short films by NID students the day after their juries, loud discussions about freedom of expression and even a post-match team meeting during college football tournaments. In the background at all times was the presence of Auntie – her short, frail frame pottering about in that tiny kitchen, always wearing a knee length skirt and socks, even in the summer. Auntie is a beloved figure amongst Ahmedabad’s student crowd, especially outstate students with occasional chicken *cutlet* cravings in the predominantly vegetarian city. She is beloved for never raising the prices of dishes, even when ingredient costs went up, because she wanted it to remain affordable for students. She is beloved for never forgetting her regular customers and doting on them as if they were her own children.

This time when I made it for lunch, it was only Anna sitting on the bench outside the kitchen, with a chubby cat for company. Anna has been managing the restaurant by himself for the last two years. “After Aunty had a fall two years ago, she has been unable to come to the restaurant. She finds it difficult to climb down the stairs of her flat. She lives very nearby, inside the Surya Mills compound. Come, finish your food quickly and I’ll take you there. It’s just a five minute walk!”

Half an hour later, as I walked up the steep, broken steps of

the housing block she lived in, I noticed the paint peeling of the walls and the general air of neglect. On the second floor, Anna raps quietly on a worn old door, and asks me to wait. Auntie's eyesight has deteriorated, but she never forgets a face, and she recognises me soon enough. "Come inside quickly!" As I enter, she quickly shuts the door and locks it. "It's not safe to keep the door open for too long. And these neighbours also I cannot trust!" she says, as she pulls up a chair for me. Auntie's fear is understandable. Surya Mills compound was one of the worst affected places during the last riots. The area had a sizeable Roman Catholic population, despite the fact that they had been migrating to the western side of the city for years. But after 2002 all the remaining Christian families moved out of the area. "All my old neighbours left, and new Muslim families moved in. I still don't know them and don't interact much," Auntie tells me, shaking her head. Many people have tried to convince her to move out of the tiny flat and to the western part of the city, but she isn't interested. In fact, she seems almost resigned to her fate as a resident where she lives. "I have a flat near St. Xavier's High School Loyola Hall. But who'll carry me and all my things there? No, better to stay here."

As we talk about the restaurant, and the story of how it all started, she began to get excited. "Wait, I have some pictures of La Bella soon after it started!"

I watched as she fished out some old photographs carefully preserved inside plastic sheets and paper envelopes, and placed in a box beside her bed.

I realised that she didn't often get the opportunity to take out these memories. "Here, this is from the seventies. That's Anna and myself in front of the restaurant." Another photo – "This is my

husband. This was taken just after marriage.” And another – “My father, Diego Dominic Fernandes.” She shows me the picture of a handsome man, dressed in a smart suit.

After a little while, we got talking about how she ended up in Ahmedabad in the first place. “I was born and raised in Arpora, Goa. I had no relationship with Ahmedabad at all! I didn’t know anything about it and was reluctant to come. But my husband got a job with Jupiter Mills. You must’ve heard of it. It was once one of the largest textile mills in Ahmedabad.” Her husband, Antony John Lobo, had been offered a high position with a lucrative salary, so the newly wed couple arrived in Ahmedabad in 1962.

“A lot of people think I started the restaurant. That’s not true. La Bella was established in 1964 by four Goan businessmen. The chef at that time was well known for his curries. However, one day he had to leave and return to Goa – so one of the four partners, who knew my husband, asked if we would be interested in helping out. At that time, I was a good cook, but didn’t know too many recipes – but he believed that I could take over the kitchen. In 1967 I joined La Bella. Before he left, the chef taught me all the recipes, all typical dishes from North Goa, like the chicken *masala* and *cutlets*. In 1969, all the four partners handed over the business to my husband and returned to Goa. And just like that, we became owners of the place!”

And there was more. “Later, when the mills closed down, my husband lost his job – he began helping out at the restaurant. During that time, the restaurant started doing quite well. We needed help, so we employed Anna – who was just a boy. Back then, a lot of people would come. Almost all the eminent personalities of the city have visited La Bella at some point in

their life.” Her eyes had a faraway look, and I could see she was somewhere in the past.

I thought about the lunch I had eaten. The place had been empty, it seemed like I had been the only customer that afternoon. “It’s been like that for a while – business is low,” Anna had told me. Maybe nowadays there was more competition, or maybe the newer generation of students simply didn’t know about La Bella. In any case, it was no longer the vibrant, overcrowded joint it used to be – and Auntie’s absence has not helped. As I made my way down the steep, worn out stairs, I remembered Auntie’s shining eyes, lost in the past, and I thought about how things start, and how things ebb away.

## No celebration denied

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“I know about all the festivals that take place here. I know about relatively unknown festivals that were hardly ever celebrated over the past ten years, and I know about the intricacies of the festivals that were denied to me, and others of my faith, in a hostile city, simply because of my profession. I am a facilitator of celebrations by profession,” says *Anwarbhai*, owner of Shop 07 on the street near Dilli Darwaza, in the heart of the old city of Ahmedabad.

The street that runs off the shoulder of the Dilli Darwaza, a heritage gateway, is an integral part of the history of the city. Functional for over 50 years now, the street houses a number of shops lined up one beside the other. What makes the shops so special is their ever-transient nature. “We sell the ‘apparatus’ that is required for every festival. Since there are numerous festivals that are celebrated in the city, and requirements for each differ, our products keep changing constantly. We stock firecrackers during Diwali, *pichkaris* during Holi, *manjhas* during *Uttarayan*, and so on. And in between, there are marriages. That is one constant that can never change. People keep getting married, and



the demand for noisy crackers has never diminished,” he grins, winking.

Anwar**bhai** pays a rent of Rs 1,000 per year for the corporation-owned shop. His wares are bought from wholesalers who come all the way from Sivakasi and Raipur, and each item calls for a different wholesaler from a different part of the country. Anwar**bhai** is in touch with all of them, and he knows the shifting trends in the trade – which firecracker enjoys a higher demand in any given year. Years of experience have made him a master of his trade, the business of commercialisation of festivals, something that shouldn’t be about money at all, he feels.

As he perches on a makeshift stool near the shop, Anwar**bhai**’s deeply lined face betrays the fact that his life has been like a kite, reflecting the unbound happiness of flying in the sky, unhindered. He is the third generation of his family to work in the shop, and future generations have their destinies tied with it too. He doesn’t consider the possibility of his children studying and having aspirations to become anything else. “My grandfather came into the city from Rajasthan in search of better prospects. The drought in our village forced us to come to the city of entrepreneurs in search of a better life. This shop has sustained us for generations; it is unlikely that my children will want anything else. It is our *dhandha*, a family business that needs to be nurtured.” He speaks in chaste *Gujarati*, all traces of his lineage wiped from his language, the *Amdavadi* business sense all-prevalent.

The *Amdavadi* sense of assimilation has also been ingrained into him. Ahmedabad, a city comprising mostly of *Gujaratis*, has seen a surge of migrants from other states seeking greener pastures. This is evident in the cultural assimilation of migrant festivals into the

*Gujarati* palette of celebration, which in turn is mirrored in the street that runs off the shoulder of Dilli Darwaza. The bustling crowds today demand not only *manjhas* and *dandiyas*, but *modak* moulds for *Ganesh Chaturthi* and bristle-like plastic trees for Christmas.

Anwar**bai**, who has seen changes happen through the years, muses on the transitions, which mean good business for him. “But to be honest, the shopkeepers here are from different parts of the country, all masters of their own trade. There are people from every state of India, you name it and its there. What is ironic is that, bound by the elation of the trade, there is no competition between us. Our professional and personal lives are separate. After the day’s work, we might even go to each other’s places for dinner. There is unity, a certain sense of community that has developed on this street.”

He talks about specifically this street, because Anwar**bai**, a resident of Shahpur in the old city, has lived through the riots and makes no bones about the constant fear and prejudice that they have to suffer in the city. “This street makes me feel that I belong. You see, I sell the equipment for the happiness of my clients, who do not question my identity, or my right to sell these products to them. I am a businessman, and that is the only part of my identity that can be peddled on these streets.”

The joy that his profession demands is perhaps drowned by the hostility towards his faith, but his face is a mask, an unrelenting stoic presence that deals with it all.

As he speaks, Anwar**bai**’s voice is almost drowned out by the bustle of the street behind him. Ahmedabad is gearing up for *Holi*. There are jets of water being sprayed on the streets, and

colour stained patches make paintings on the ground. The revelry will be over in a day, with the city going back to its busy life before gearing up for the next festival on the calendar that will add colour to humdrum lives. It is a joy to be part of these festivities, to see laughter spread over faces, families coming together and communities becoming one. *Anwarbhai* will be here, at his shop, hawking his wares, a permanent presence in the moments of happiness in the city.

“I will be here tomorrow, the day after and for a long time. Just come find me at the same place.”

## An honest promise

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A hot burning day in the month of May in Ahmedabad had cooled off. It was six in the evening and, as the dusk settled in, the city lights flooded the shopping lane outside the 'law garden'. Walking along the shimmering shops brimming with traditional and urban wear, cartloads of fancy low-priced *chappals* and a small rack with hundreds of gleaming accessories, at every few steps, you will find hawkers selling different kinds of snacks. A trail of aromas and sounds draws you in to both healthy and not-so-healthy delicacies. One *gaddi* (cart) is called 'Honest'; its wares have been tickling the taste buds and filling the stomach of *Amdavadis* since 1975.

"Indian urban street food went through stages," says Vijaybhai Gupta. The 1950s sold *jalebi*, *pakoda* and *bhajiya*, followed by *bhelpuri*, *paanipuri* and then *pavbhaji* in the 1970s. "We chose *pavbhaji*. We brought it from Mumbai and blended it with the traditional *Gujarati* specialities. It is timeless, we believe," he explains. "My father set up a cart in Navrangpura, on the outskirts 40 years ago. A lot has changed after that, but with every passing day we improved our quality and gained our customers'

trust. Our customer is our lord. While the foundations of the *pavbhaji* and *pulao* brand were laid in Ahmedabad, the ladies of the household would demonstrate how a perfect taste could be obtained. In the olden days, if the *pavbhaji* or rice did not taste good, the customer was the most apt critic. If I want my men to work, I have to work more than them. We work because we want to work. We have a work culture. We teach people who want to work with us. We are eight of us across 62 outlets. Each works equivalent to four.”;

*Food, in the end, in our own tradition, is something holy. It's not about nutrients and calories. It's about sharing. It's about honesty. It's about identity.*

– Louise Fresco

Honest is all about good food cooked with love and simplicity. The food is defined by taste, involvement and the skill of the cook and quality of materials. Made solely with Amul butter, the *pavbhaji* at Honest is a unique and rich amalgam of fresh spices, vegetables and dry fruits sourced directly from the fields. “Back in 1970, we came from the middle class with a zest for business. *Aaj 50 pavbhaji plate sell hue, toh kal 55 karne hai.* (If we sell 50 *pavbhaji* plates today, we have to sell 55 tomorrow.) Ever since, a culture that spoke of hard work, persistence and customer satisfaction was established, it continues, even today,” says *Guptaji*. In a world dominated by visuals, the Honest *gaddi* has fresh vegetables and packs of Amul butter on display. In addition to salt and pepper, the table is adorned by a *mirchi* pot.

“I grew because the economy grew.” In 1960s Gujarat, even in

a metropolis like Ahmedabad, a couple or a child eating outside was considered taboo. The elderly would feel offended. The culture and the economy in the 21st century in Ahmedabad has taken a sharp U-turn, where a family eating at home over the weekend would be ridiculed. Neighbours feel sorry for them. A woman working hard for the home and family throughout the week needs rest and a break from chores, hence go out to eat, is the thought.

The first formal Honest shop was established at White House, CG Road. Since it was street food, “Who will eat *pavbhaji* in a restaurant?” a customer asked. “Your business is a Chowpatty culture. If you upgrade it, *log tumse dur ho jaayenge*.” He explains that his customers would feel distanced. Indeed. But people come to Honest for the food and not for the brand. “I am with the masses – a bullock cart driver and a Mercedes owner, both should dine in the same place, all the time. We are committed to people, to customers, committed to give *pavbhaji* with lustre, dry fruits, and Amul butter.” The pride in Vijayji’s eyes is obvious. “Lustre!” he stresses. A sense of want for that food, a desire to eat it and the gleam of satisfaction that runs across a face after satisfying the hunger is what really rates the food. Lustre is what Honest strives to achieve. “We do not run behind perfection. Here food is made by humans. With the lustre of the food that we offer, all we aim for is that the customer should be happy.” With a decentralised management and supply of vegetable and spices, there is no frozen food. There is no preservative that will dominate and neutralise taste. The newer generation doesn’t know what hampers the taste, the tongue.

Vijaybhai is a humble man. “*Hum* food industry *mein* last *khade hai*, all are ahead of us.” With an income of about one crore, he does not aspire to the premier class – instead, he wants to stay with those he started, the middle class.

## The whiter sheep

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The dust and grime floating in the hot afternoon air stuck to her face, but it didn't dampen her excitement as she walked through the Sunday afternoon crowd at Lal Darwaja. The wooden carts with colourful umbrellas over them and the screams of the vendors was thrilling, as was the realisation that her feet were traipsing across the *Amdavad* that was over a hundred years old. The back of her hand dashed across her forehead as she felt the unsurprising August sun work its way over her face and down her back.

She dodged people as she looked all around her. She smiled seeing women negotiating with and harmlessly threatening vendors, demanding that they lower the prices of whatever they were selling. She walked past carts piled with clothes, caps, sandals and shoes. The colours reminded her of a dozen rainbows come down to earth. She smiled and politely refused offers from the *rickshaw-wallahs* to give her a ride. She walked until she was confused about where to go and turned to a vendor who had been screaming and inviting every passerby to glance at his wares. As she stepped up to him, she saw his eyes light up with the expectation of making a sale. She had



to admit that the bakery biscuits he was selling did smell good. She asked him the way to where she wanted to go and before she knew what was going on, the vendor from the adjacent stall had joined in to tell her the shortest route. She grinned as she experienced the speciality of Gujarat: friendliness. The *Gujaratis*, she knew, were friendly and felt a sense of pride in stepping forward and helping. She walked on enthusiastically and grinned as watched the traffic. Only the people of Ahmedabad could wind their way on two-wheelers and in rickshaws around other vehicles and succeed in overtaking in the tiny lanes. She dodged her way around them and stopped abruptly as she looked up.

She was finally looking at the top part of the old *Mahakali mandir*. She took in the sight of the beautiful temple architecture and imagined for a few seconds how it might have been seen back when it was just built. The walls had started to peel off now and the white colour had turned to the palest yellow. Her eyes took in the sight of thronged devotees, beggars pleading cunningly and vendors selling lotuses, coconuts, red chiffon scarves with gold borders, or *Mata ni pachedi*, and other items required for *puja*. She walked up to a vendor who seemed to be in his late 50s, clad in white *kurta-pajama*, his hairline receding and lines of experience incised into his face, and initiated a conversation by asking him about the temple, how old it was. He smiled. His eyes wrinkled and, for an evanescent second, she wondered how often he had been asked that question and whether he was tired of recounting the same story over and over again. But she was taken by surprise at his enthusiasm.

The temple dated back to the year 1415 AD, he said. Her eyebrows went up as she looked at the building once again. She

glanced back at the vendor and asked how long he had had his stall there. His chin lifted a little as he told her, “forty”. He informed her that his father had initially started the business and that he had proudly succeeded him. It was not his choice of profession, but he had mouths to feed and had practically grown up next to the temple while his father had been sitting there selling his wares. He spoke honestly when asked why he had chosen a place outside the *Mahakali mandir* when there was a *Ganapati mandir* right behind. He logically stated the fact that the *Mahakali mandir* was very close to the market area, which meant that there would be more customers clustering around his stall.

The *Ganapati* shrine was a little way away and thus would not be an ideal location for sales. He had to be practical in making such decisions. The *Mahakali mandir* held the idol of *Kali Mata*, for whom no special day of the week is allotted for worship or fasting; devotees would turn up any and every day. But the *Ganapati mandir* held the idol of *Lord Ganapati*, and was worshipped most on Tuesdays, limiting the crowds from coming there otherwise. His eyes gleamed, she noticed, as he talked to her. She saw the devotion and satisfaction etched upon his face. He told how nothing but the condition of the brilliant piece of architecture had changed over the years. He told her how it still attracted tourists and devotees in huge numbers, even during weekdays.

When she asked him if he visited the temple every day, he laughed and shook his head. He proudly said that he had ultimate and unshakable faith in the Goddess, but that didn’t mean that he had to visit the temple every day. He never felt the reason to do so when he could pray right from where he was sitting. He didn’t need to give coconuts or other offerings to the giver herself. He

was sitting there at his stall simply because he knew that devotees wanted to offer coconuts and various other gifts to the deity. The utter honesty of an old man, a simple vendor outside a temple, who probably earned just enough to make ends meet, who earned perhaps barely the price of two meals a day and who sat there under the scorching sun of summer, in the freezing winds of winter and even when the skies cried buckets, touched her. He seemed to be uneducated, and yet spoke of his belief simply and without shame. She understood that only a person who believes in the Almighty can be truly happy and satisfied, even if it means he owned very little and had no luxuries.

He spoke with faith as he called the Goddess his provider and informed her that he never asked for a single thing from Her, never made deals to give away something or walk barefoot to somewhere in exchange for a wish fulfilled. He told her how he had asked the Goddess for just one thing: to stay by him through thick and thin, through the ups and downs of his life. Her eyes watched him with nothing but respect for a man who showed her that knowledge is not just about books or the internet. She smiled at him, realising how easy it was to ignore such huge lessons hidden within such ordinary people. He thanked her for listening to his story. She took a selfie with him after she bought a coconut, and thanked him profusely before walking to the temple. She turned back to see him smiling and helping his customers to buy what they needed. She stopped abruptly as it dawned on her that she had not asked his name. Rushing back, she waited for his answer. He laughed good-humouredly as he told her, "Dinesh Geri".

## The keeper of gates

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Few people are content with the everyday work they do. Sometimes, they contribute their whole life to the service of mankind, not thinking of what they will get in return. Ahmedabad is lucky to be home to one such human being who is selflessly dedicated to doing something that most fear: walking the dead through the last gates.

During partition, Mithalal*dada* came to Bombay from Pakistan with his family. He was just 15 years old and did many odd jobs to fight poverty and survive. Later, in 1957, he moved to Ahmedabad and started a small business using his savings. Mithalal sold fruits in the Maninagar area of Ahmedabad. He had a friend named Nyaldas Sindhi who was a vegetable vendor. Mithalal and Nyaldas ate lunch and dinner together and slept on the pavement. This continued for two years.

One morning Mithalal went to wake Nyaldas but his friend didn't respond. It took Mithalal a while to understand that his companion was dead. Nyaldas had no family or friends who could perform his last rites. So Mithalal asked the *mukhya* (leader of

the vegetable vendors) for help, but the man refused and said it was not his business. Nobody would take on the responsibility, so finally Mithalal decided to perform the last rites and cremated Nyaldas himself at the ground near Calico Mills.

The unexpected loss of Nyaldas, the person closest to Mithalal, made him realise that there were countless people in the city who died every day, with no one to perform their last rites. As per the city commissioner's office, Ahmedabad deals with one unclaimed body every four days. These corpses are never claimed and the police usually must give them their last send-off. Mentally challenged people, beggars and street dwellers usually meet with such a fate. This spurred Mithalal on to wind up his business and start a new occupation: to perform the last rites of the unclaimed dead. It has been 57 years now that he has been involved with this social service. He has bid farewell to around 550 bodies.

The deceased may belong to any religion, Hindu, Muslim, Jain or Christian. But for Mithalal there is only one religion: humanity. He doesn't believe in any other. Whenever a body is found, the first thing he does is to look for a sign or symbol that indicates the dead person's religion and then performs the last rites accordingly. He also looks for information related to the family – a number on the mobile phone or a piece of paper or photograph in a purse. But as Mithalal says, the bitter truth is that families often act as if they don't know the dead person and refuse to have anything to do with the situation.

If the deceased is a Hindu, then he takes the body to VS Crematorium. If it is a Muslim, it is taken to Jamalpur and if Christian, a graveyard is its resting place. Mithalal transports the dead on his pedal rickshaw. He hasn't ever taken his share in any

property, because he has never been interested in material things. All he needs is a pedal rickshaw. Today it costs around Rs 1500 to perform the last rites. He incurs all expenses by selling *bajra* on the pavement. Mithalal says, “For society it might just be an unclaimed dead body, but for me, if it’s an aged woman, then she is like my mother. If it’s a young boy, then he is like my son; a middle-aged woman would be like my younger sister. I couldn’t perform the last rites of my own father, but I don’t feel sad about that anymore. For me, all those who die are my family in some way or the other.” Mithalal has one son and a daughter who run a roadside fast food restaurant. They also have a house, but Mithalal refuses to stay there. He lives on the pavement near Ellis Bridge, one of the seven bridges across the Sabarmati River, because he believes that it is the only place that people will easily find him whenever he is needed.

The river was once a ghat to wash clothes, a place where slum kids would bathe, a stretch of water afloat with waste and sewage. It is now one of the finest riverfronts in the country, with international level infrastructure developed around it that has also boosted tourism in the city. On the banks of this river, near the Subhash Bridge, is another keeper of the gates.

This one is a middle-aged man, often seen sailing his small boat across the river and enjoying his ride. Meet Prahlad Solanki, a man who is on a mission to save lives. Prahlad**bhai**, as he fondly called, says that he was born and brought up near the Sabarmati. He lives under Subhash Bridge and worships the river daily, considering it his mother. His father was a fisherman, so Prahlad**bhai** would go with him to the river every day. While his father caught fish, the lad swam and played with his friends in the water. He was just

ten years old when he started swimming without anybody's help or guidance.

As he grew up, he occasionally saw the horrible sight of people jumping from the bridge to die. That saddened him greatly. He couldn't bear to see people reacting to losing loved ones. He was just 17 when for the first time he rescued someone from drowning; the satisfaction he got in saving a life was immeasurable. That day he decided that he would go to any length to save anyone from drowning in the river. When asked how many lives he had saved, *Prahladbhai* said with a spark in his eyes and a wide smile, "So far it has been 35 years and I have saved around 250 people who have jumped from either Subhash Bridge or the Railway Bridge." He insists that nobody really wants to die so early, not even the most discouraged person. It's just a moment of madness that drives people to take such a step of suicide. Even while they are jumping off the bridge, they do have hope that someone will save them.

*Prahladbhai* has bought a boat from his own income, one that can easily carry around seven or eight people. The boat is small yet fast and lightweight so that he can reach the spot quickly. The boat has helped him save several precious lives. There have been moments when he has reached the victim earlier than the fire brigade or the rescue team. Some victims that he has saved have returned to thank him for saving their lives.

*Prahladbhai* shares a memorable experience with us: "One time a woman jumped into the river to end her life – she was mentally ill and didn't want to be a burden to her family. I rescued her and took her to her home. A few months later she came back to meet me with her family and told me that she is on her way to recovery. She thanked me again for saving her life. Incidents like

this make me proud of the work I am doing. My wife and kids are supporting me too.” Prahladbhai was offered a job in the fire brigade when he was just 18 years old, but he loved his river and his work so much that he refused and continued saving lives.

“My aim is not to earn lot of money or have a big house. My only aim is to save as many lives as possible. I don’t do this work for any words of appreciation or fame; I just do it for my own conscience and I will keep on saving people till my last breath.”



## Connecting the dots

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Sitting upright, a large *bindi* decorating her forehead, with short hair, an exotic *saree* and a heavy pendant neckpiece, Archana Shah catches your gaze with her poised eyes lined with *kajal*. They say that women in Ahmedabad are born with entrepreneurial qualities. There are many who have joined the family business, while some excel as artistes of homemaking. One group practices, preserves and promotes the unsung arts of the state of Gujarat. A passionate traveller, Archana Shah is one of the first women entrepreneurs that amalgamated these three kinds of women into one whole and established Bandhej in 1981. “I hardly recognise myself as that,” she laughs.

As a student of National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, the play of colours, fabrics and handicrafts always fascinated Shah. An abundance of all this and more in the areas of Ahmedabad, Kutch and Saurashtra was the catalyst for her first steps towards the creation of Bandhej. “I established myself when there was hardly any competition in the fashion world in Ahmedabad. I was fortunate to be here before the retail boom took over. It led me

to a better appreciation of the newness in the market and take up upcoming trends to my advantage.”

Gujarat shares its border with Pakistan at a mere distance of 300 kilometers from Ahmedabad. The tragic events of Partition brought various groups of people into the state. One such community that settled in Ahmedabad was the Meghwals, known for small hamlets made up of colorful, round mud-brick huts. The Meghwal women boast of the traditions of intricate mirror inlays, weaving and embroidery of wool and cotton, detailed costumes and jewellery and woodcarving, all of which continue to uphold the integrity of the community. Born and brought up in the previously ‘small’ town of Ahmedabad, Shah wandered through every nook and corner of the area in search of arts and crafts. She found what she was looking for in a refugee camp where the Meghwals lived. The Sindh-Meghwals refer to the region of Sindh in Pakistan as *apna mulk*, connected to their home turf through their embroidery patterns, food, music and dance.

The Meghwal art and the persistence and skill of the people who practiced it led Shah to bring together the first group of artisans that still works with her even after 35 years. With many of the women she began the play of dots and a romance with fabric. What more can be done with a mere dot – it is this challenge that has kept Shah going. Each intricately designed and hand-embroidered fabric takes a minimum of ten days, thereby generating immense opportunities for employment. Ahmedabad, though progressive, still faces gender stereotypes in the lower income groups. Shah finds pleasure in partially eradicating these and improving the lives of thousands of women.

“With three stores in Ahmedabad and an experience of 35 years,

it has been a long journey. I wish to retire now. With a single store in Ahmedabad, I wish to go back to the small. I wish to write more and rest in the city that I was born, grew up and evolved in. I wish to keenly observe and reflect all that has changed. The old families no more rule the city of Ahmedabad. The old backbone of the city – the mills – have gone and are replaced by something very ugly. You don't have to wipe off everything to be innovative.” Saddened by the city's transformation, Shah says, “When I began, people had ‘taste’. They would look, study and appreciate the fabric, the art and the artisans. The last decade in Ahmedabad has seen a boom in reckless purchasing, purchasing anything that is highly valued in monetary terms. However, something is changing. Environment, sustainability and a connect to the birth soil has regained importance.” Innovation lies in the perfection that evolves from the primitive. Archana Shah regards herself fortunate to have seen the best and the worst of both times.

## A small way to serve

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As I ride in the lift to the fourth floor of the Shopper's Plaza opposite Municipal Market, flashes of a memory from several years ago come to me, and I smile. This is the place that hosted my first surprise birthday party on the day I turned 22. The funny thing is, I hardly knew the people who had hosted it for me were, and yet they had made me feel the love.

Seva Café has welcomed me and so many others, not just with open arms, but with hugs and *tikas*. As soon as you enter, you are greeted with warm colours, enthusiastic smiles, and you instantly come to realise that, this isn't just any eatery. In fact, the food is *not* the most important part here. There is a genuine smile from those who serve and cook, and if you are lucky, you may see a small performance on the stage.

If you are alone, you are welcomed, encouraged to sit at a table with an unknown stranger. No, it is not a blind date. It is about connection, a heart-to-heart bond that we all yearn for, but do not often find. As you look around, talk with those who are serving and you will realise that they are all volunteers; no one is doing it

for the money. There are sayings painted on the walls, like: Food + Love = *Prasad*, “*hum sab ek hain*” (We are all one). If you ask for the prices, they tell you that your meal has already been paid for by someone else, so you don’t have to worry about it. After the meal is over, you get an envelope, and you can contribute whatever you want to, perhaps to pay for someone else’s meal, or maybe write a message. When you leave, you will probably have a smile on your face and satisfaction in your heart. This concept of giving and receiving with love is age-old, but in the modern urban setting, it has been renamed as ‘Gift Culture’. Thousands of people all over the world have taken structured initiatives to promote this concept, and Seva Café is one such space.

Bhaskar**bai** has been a part of the core team since day one. He explains how even though this was started in 2005, the idea was born much earlier. “[There was a] small walk on the banks of the river *Narmada*, on which they decided that [the *yatris*] would serve anyone and everyone who came along. As the *yatris* moved towards the interior, it was more and more apparent to them that they received more than they gave; that the culture gave importance on giving as well as receiving, not on money. In fact, they felt that [people from the village] served them with divinity. No expectations, just basic, innate humanity.”

“*Atithi devo bhava*, which literally means our guests are our gods, is a tradition, a value in our culture. Every day, before service starts and the guests come in, the team the day gets together and prays. They pray to set intentions, they pray so that the people that they are serving are served in the best way possible, they pray so that the culture from the villages, of *atithi devo bhava*, can be revived in the city as well. These days people give a lot of importance to finance

and money,” Bhaskar**bhai** says. “They focus on money more than each other’s hearts. There is a lot of rush; people are always busy, so they don’t have time to share the love with people. We saw this culture, these values of humanity in the villages, and thought that amidst this hurried lifestyle in a city, how can we set up something where we take care of people, where we touch each other’s hearts regardless of where they are from or what they do?”

Touched hearts, they have. For many college students, even dishwashing becomes refreshing after days of studying because of the energy at Seva Cafe. Bhaskar**bhai** shares, one way he has grown as a human being: “While it can be easy to feel and express love and compassion for those that are close to me, to express the same compassion for people I am meeting for the first time here and connecting with their family – that is something that I enjoy doing. That is one of the biggest differences I have seen in myself. Many times, there is a wall that we put up before we meet a new person – we have lots of questions and ‘what-ifs’ about how they will perceive us, but that wall has pretty much gone for me. Whoever it is, regardless of social strata, the clothes they are wearing, how they talk to me, etc, when I go outside, I once felt a bit reluctant talking to strangers, but now I am *bindaas*. I don’t think much about what they think about me, but I know what I want to think about them: with love.”

He tells a story that has really touched him. “About four or five years ago, there was a man who, while travelling to Rajasthan from the South, decided to come here because he had heard a lot about this place. In Rajasthan, he had a large catering organisation; he would make food for 200-250 people, so he was quite adept at handling large kitchens and loved to cook. Even though he

didn't give advance notice to volunteer, as we require nowadays, his intention to work here was so powerful that we invited him to make something. He made a great salad. As soon as he started working here, he told everyone about blood donation. Whoever he met – in serving, in dishwashing, during cooking – he would strongly encourage them to donate blood, organise camps and help others. During dinner, he told guests that he had donated blood countless times over the past many years, but seeing all the people and the service here, he felt that for the first time in his life he had received blood (energy) from this space.”

Many people have connected to Seva Café by just being there. Bhaskar**bai** talks about one of his regular volunteers. “Rajpal**bai** worked as a doorkeeper at the Woodland store [downstairs]. If you ask anyone who knows him, they will first talk about his smile, his way of greeting. To come to Seva Café, you have to pass by Woodland, and he would always greet you with a smile. He is incredibly inspirational. Once his shift there was over, he would come here. We don't have any expectations from him, but he helps here and there, and we give him a small honorarium. Several months ago, he was laid off, and now runs a *cholafali* stall near the bus stand downstairs. As soon as his work ends, he comes here and helps with cleaning, packing up, cleaning windows, etc. He really trusts this place, feels very close to it, because he himself is so compassionate. Before going home for dinner, he will religiously come here to help, to spread the love with his smile. It's not just about what he does; you can feel the love in his presence here.”

Indeed, when I go downstairs, I make a point to spend a few minutes with Rajpal**bai**. I understood immediately what Bhaskar**bai** meant. His wide, toothy grin would melt anyone's

heart. As he told me his story, he brushed away struggles that he has had, such as living in the slum nearby and supporting his children back in Rajasthan for their education. He says, “Smiles and love—that’s all the world needs. If we smile, the world will smile back. All this stress and hurriedness we have these days, all the diseases caused by that, it will all go away if we keep spreading love.”

After each service, the volunteers gather in a circle to pray, share and eat. They talk about how it felt to serve customers, if they found a particular moment inspiring or challenging, and whether there needed to be changes in the way the whole experience would be next time. Over the years, they have changed the way the contributions are made, the way they welcome people, the way people come to volunteer and more. At one time they had a gift table, where guests were asked to give anything they wanted to anyone. All of this is designed to make the experience of being at Seva Café more valuable and touching.

Volunteers not only help with cooking, serving and washing dishes, but also with welcoming, decorating and creating an ambience. There is no fixed way to do this, and people from schools, businesses and organisations have contributed their own flavours and sounds.

Seva Café has become a symbol for trustworthiness, kindness and compassion. Bhaskar**bai** explains, “I wouldn’t say that we were the first to do this, but people in Ahmedabad, and indeed all over, definitely have taken some inspiration, some energy from here and started something of their own with similar values. People definitely have started respecting us. In this area, people know that if you have worked at Seva Café for some time, you are a person



who can be trusted and are warm. In other similar experiments around the world, people in the vicinity have felt an air of trust.”

Finally, Bhaskar**bai** has a message: “A lot of people think *seva* is a huge thing. They hear the word and think of large, formidable ideas. But *seva* is everywhere, in so many small things. At a *kitli*, if you see a dog, you will probably feed it some biscuits. You may offer some water to your rickshaw driver. We forget to see these small acts of kindness that we already do, being preoccupied in this rushed life. As long as you do something with love, that is *seva*.”

## One way ticket to Ahmedabad

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Over fifty years ago, Sowbhagiabati Menon arrived in Ahmedabad as a young bride from a small village in Kerala. She started a whole new chapter of her life in this dusty city, so very different from the lush green village dotted with beautiful houses that she knew. Today, she starts her day with a cup of tea and two *Gujarati* newspapers. And she loves her eclectic mixed neighbourhood of Khanpur, in the walled city of Ahmedabad.

She looks back in time with a sense of fondness and recalls her journey. “It was my first train trip and everybody in my family thought that I was really going too far away. We all had heard of Ahmedabad only through the news. The first house I stayed in, in this city, was on rent. It was a small house, but I was surrounded by wonderful neighbours who wholeheartedly welcomed a young *Malayali*.”

The *Gujarati* language sounded like Greek or Latin to her. But she was hell-bent on learning the local tongue. So she sought the help of her neighbour’s school-going daughter. With a paper and pen, they walked around the kitchen, noting down the names of

vegetables in *Gujarati*. Later on in the day or whenever she found some time, she diligently practiced on her own, saying words gently and deliberately: *bataka* (potato)...*dungdi* (onion).

In Kerala, she was used to eating boiled rice and in the initial days of her arrival in Ahmedabad, she couldn't stand the smell of *basmati* in her friends' homes. In the beginning, she stayed with a *Gujarati* friend for a couple of days. Her loving hosts were miserable that their guest refused to touch any of the *Gujarati* delicacies they offered her. Then one day, her friend went to a small South Indian restaurant to pack a meal of *masala dosa*, *idli* and *vada* for her. That gesture was perhaps more precious at that time to Sowbhagiabati than any piece of gold jewellery she owned.

But she has come a long way since. Today she loves her share of *thepla*, *methigota*, *khichdi*, *poori-aamras* and *undhiyu*. In fact, her children and grandchildren now ask her to make *Gujarati khatti-meethi dal* and every *Uttarayan*, she gets up early in the morning to prepare lip-smacking *undhiyu*. From her kitchen now comes a regular spread of both *Malayali* and *Gujarati* cuisine.

She loves being in Ahmedabad, a city that has given her a home, friends and beautiful memories. With a sense of love, she says, "*Gujaratis* are nice, warm people. They are affable and made me feel at home from the beginning."

So what has she enjoyed the most about her life in Ahmedabad? "I felt a sense of freedom in Ahmedabad. Here I moved around freely with my friends, went for late night movies, shopped for *sarees*. There were no restrictions on movement, like I had in Kerala, and I enjoyed the freedom to explore life. My neighbours taught me the art of saving money. They taught me the art of compounding interest. So that has definitely made my life better now."

“I have also enjoyed celebrating festivals like *Diwali*, *Uttarayan*, *Navratri* and *Bestu Varash* (*Gujarati* new year). And yes, I was a true blooded *Malayali* before, wanting my food cooked in coconut oil. After more than four decades in Gujarat, I have lost my taste for coconut oil.”

Does she miss Kerala? “Oh, I miss Kerala’s magical monsoon. Even after so many years, Gujarat’s dry long summer feels really tough. In these months, I long for Kerala’s rains. I also miss the fabulous celebrations of *Onam* in my village. Though I try to cook an elaborate meal on *Onam*, it just doesn’t feel the same.”

But then she trails off, “Many of the people with whom I grew up in Kerala are gone now. The ancestral house of mine needs constant attention. Life in Ahmedabad feels much easier now. And did I mention the uninterrupted power supply in Ahmedabad? Oh, how can I not talk about this huge blessing of life here!”

## Weaving heritage

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His hands found a gold thread and a needle in Radhanpur village in Patan. This art of *aari* embroidery that he was born into, moved with him to the city of Ahmedabad.

In a *zardozi* workshop in the Juhapura area of the city, Shahid Husain Ansari learned a slightly different kind of embroidery for over five years. “I started my own workshop quickly, and gradually started hiring other artists as work started increasing. Our *zardozi* and *aari* work on garments and bridal dresses started being displayed in showrooms and boutiques. By 2005, quite a few years into this business, I had twenty artists working with me,” he recalls. “It was only two or three years after this that handwork all over the industry started getting replaced with machine embroidery. Since common people didn’t know the difference between the machine and the hand, the artists working with me started to leave, and very few remained to practice the skill. My work stopped. I had to shut my workshop, and I was unemployed for over two years.”

After gathering experience in this field for almost 20 years, Ansariji had every intention to keep alive the art he knew so well.

It all started when he set up a stall that displayed his collection of *sarees* and *chanya cholis* as part of a heritage-based event in Ahmedabad. “I didn’t know anything about heritage till then. There was an entirely beautiful culture within the city I had been staying in for so long, that I had missed.” A chance meeting with Debashish Nayak, the Director of Centre for Heritage Management, Ahmedabad University, who works for the preservation of heritage, made him realise that he needed to preserve his art as well.

His new found interest in the city heritage led to Ansariji combining the two. That is when he started to weave heritage monuments as frames. It took him to the twelve *darwazas* of Ahmedabad – Karanj *Chabutra*, Sidi Saiyed *ni Jaali*, Bhadra Fort and Sarkhej Roza, among others. From studying the structures, sketching and understanding the materials used, he experimented with different kinds of threads to capture the same finish. “Each structure required a different texture and colour,” he explains. “I remember for the Bhadra Fort, I left my threads out in the sun for a month to blacken them.”

It was during an exhibition by Alliance Française Ahmedabad in the World Heritage Week in 2014 that Ansariji’s collection of the Ahmedabad heritage in *zardozi* and *aari* was displayed. Since then, he has been working on his next collection – UNESCO World Heritage sites across the world. The Taj Mahal, Great Wall of China, Eiffel Tower, Golden Temple and Red Fort are only a few monuments of the forty on his long list.

To foster his hope of keeping a dying art alive, Ansariji works far beyond just practising it. Teaching *zardozi* and *aari* to students

from institutions like NID and NIFT, he believes this intricate art will spread. “I wish to spread the knowledge of the skill to as many people who share this passion and interest, and open up opportunities for them through a school. This craft very much belongs to our country, and deserves the recognition it has perhaps lost with time. The city of Ahmedabad is where I first learned about this art, and more importantly, about heritage. And I wish it could become home to a museum, a space for crafts to thrive.”

Very recently, the Heritage Department of Ahmedabad University sponsored him on a seven-day trip to Spain, to study the heritage there and capture it through his elegant language of threads. *Ansariji* does not know what new culture he will explore after Spain. But he is optimistic that there is more to come.

Heritage lives so deeply within him now, that no matter where he will go, he will always come back to the city that made this possible.





## A costume drama

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On the canvas of Indian theatre, long before cinema was born, when women were not allowed to perform on stage, men played feminine roles. At the birth of the 20th century, the charisma of Bal Gandharva enchanted Pune, Maharashtra, where musical theatre brought solace to the auditory and visual senses. “I might be poor and dressed in tatters back home, but my role as Lord Krishna’s wife, Satyabhama, on stage should have me dressed in the royal traditional fabrics of *Paithani* and *Shaal*, irrespective of the company budget,” said the maestro, Narayan Shripad Rajhans, Bal Gandharva himself.

With colour, costume jewellery and distinctive *saree* draping that made even the royal women envious, the stage shook to the reverberation of music and drama. This imperial legacy of costumes runs across states, languages, religions and faiths, inviting amateurs and professionals alike into its artistic folds. In a culturally evolving and seamless India, Bansari Shah and Chandrakant Sonawane have made their mark on *Gujarati* cinema. She was born in Gondal, Gujarat, he in Jalna, Maharashtra. They studied fashion designing

in Pune and moved back to their maternal roots – *Gujarati* and *Marathi* cinema respectively. Bansari's first movie as a costume designer was *Citylights*, a short, silent film. With sets and locations within Ahmedabad, the story spoke of perceptions. With that, systematised research was introduced to *Gujarati* cinema. A man dressed as a *tharki* had to act against the backdrop of the inside of a bus. "That was the first time I researched what a *tharki* was and what the prerequisites of being one are," laughs Bansari.

How much can you tell about a character from the clothes? Researching is all about observing. The old city of Ahmedabad is a framework for a fairly primitive lifestyle, despite urban influences. They will avoid wearing modern clothes. Cotton is the most preferred material. Social caste and religious influences are prime. A Patel boasts of individualist peculiarities – he will be habituated to wearing sports shoes irrespective of the genre of clothing, with white socks. The *Rabari* women have dots engraved on their skin, be it a small *aum* or *om* on the wrist or a bold engraving of dots on a whole body part. The daily wear of communities of Kutch – *Maldhari*, *Jatand* and others – have intricate embroideries and distinct motifs. A costume designer designs and delivers the wholesome experience of lifestyle, food, habits and customs. Films are about all that and more.

For the *Ranjhar* and *Saneda* families in the Sanjay Leela Bhansali film, *Goliyon Ki Raasleela Ram-Leela*, Chandrakant speaks of the varied fabrics, embroideries, patterns, colours and jewellery of Bhuj, Kutch and Ahmedabad. "I was dealing with the locals of Gujarat to understand their culture and costumes better, I think that's the best way to go about it, to understand the pulse of the state," he says.

“A majority of the *Gujarati* films are based in local literature. On the sets of a deeply influential biopic on Sardar Patel, the costumes we made were either in white or *khadi*. A character in the Independence movement was not expected to wear a brand new white *kurta*,” narrates Bansari. Ageing of the clothes was an issue. The director, an *Amadavadi* and a lover of *chai* came up with a brilliant idea: “*Chai patti ka pani karo and saare kapde usme bhiga doh*,” rendering the clothes brownish. At times, the garments measured and for one actor were reused for another, with a few adjustments for size. With no digitalisation, the films showed a repetition of sets – roads, homes and furniture – but no one pointed fingers. “Hailing from Gujarat, Ahmedabad and *Gujarati* cinema has always been my comfort zone,” smiles Bansari.

Chandrakant came from the rich soil that nurtured the Marathas and the Peshwas. “I absolutely love handloom fabrics, especially *Paithani*, and my dream is to save the handloom industry from becoming obsolete,” he says. As a student, Chandrakant was drawn towards old and antique designs with historic value. It was a feather in his cap when he was approached by Sanjay Leela Bhansali to design costumes for *Goliyon Ki Raasleela Ram-Leela*, *Bajirao Mastani* and now *Padmavati*. *Ram-Leela* had a myriad of traditional fashions, of rugged bold colours coupled with shimmering mirrors, *latkans* and *bindis*. The imposing and magnificent background of elaborate costumes from back home in Maharashtra was a base, craftily blended with that of the *Kutchis* and *Amdavadis*. It all started with the script, then came the vision of the director. Bhansali held detailed discussions on the era, the story and the characters. Chandrakant thought about how best to go about complementing

the set with the costumes to enhance the reality of the script. Then he started with sketching for each character and made multiple options for the director to choose from, before developing patterns, fabrics, the colour palette and finally finalising selected designs for stitching. One important thought behind the making of any costume was that it had to be universally loved. “There were times when I was unable to find the desired fabric for my costumes; in such a situation I needed to actually start from scratch and get it handmade. The same held true for the colours as well.” A costume is designed to be in-tone with the drapery, the set and the location they will be used in. The vivid *ghagra* worn by Deepika Padukone against the faded white *sadra* on Ranveer Singh, the black *kedio choli Baa* wears contrasted with the imposing red of the other women’s clothes was reminiscent of the primitive garments of the *Gujarati* framed against a backdrop of arid sand dunes. “It is more than just a profession to me,” Chandrakant says, “It is a reflection of Indian grandeur.”

“*Gujarati* cinema and drama have seen difficult times,” Bansari explains. She entered the industry in 2009, when Gujarat had not yet explored the field of costume designing very deeply. “I remember during the release of *Kevi Rite Jaish* (2012), the crew members and the director went door-to-door at the cinema halls, to just prove that the movie was good, worth screening in Ahmedabad. The *Gujarati* cinema industry has grown up to a very urban level,” she says. *Kevi Rite Jaish* was the one of the first urban *Gujarati* films, one of the first movies with a designated costume designer as a part of the crew. Until then, costume assistants were hired from *dresswallahs* with a designated dealer and the cast decided its own choice of garments. “I always wanted to design a full-

fledged traditional *ghagra choli* costume, but unfortunately had no opportunity.” Bansari now sounds hopeful about the future of her career in *Gujarati* cinema.

“As a fabric, handloom is extremely pure, which adds to the richness of the costume, and it reflects our culture beautifully. It is an old Indian art which is slowly diminishing. I really hope that I am able to save the industry through films,” says Chandrakant. “It has so much to offer and the variety that any handloom fabric would give you is very varied, which you won’t find in any machine made cloth.” On one hand is the shimmering drape of Bollywood that tries to encompass and evoke the cultural and community depths of Ahmedabad and Kutch, while on the other stands the regional, small-scale *Gujarati* cinema that moves outward, towards urban sensibilities and global acceptance.

## An art opening

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I met Sanket Patel that summer, when I was doing a French course at the Alliance Française. I remember how we started talking to each other. It was lunch time and I was going to eat somewhere close by. He seemed to have the same plans. I thought maybe we could have lunch together. I was maybe fifteen years old then. I said hello. We introduced ourselves. And then I asked what he did and he said what I heard as ‘finance’. It was only later when I asked him why he was trying to learn French while studying finance that he corrected me – he studied ‘fine arts’, not ‘finance’.

This was the first time I had ever met anyone who identified themselves as an artist.

I had a lot of questions for Sanket. From the very basic – “How do you make money?” to “Can you do anything you want?” – to what I thought were the big questions before choosing a career, such as, “Do you have to finish high school to become an artist?” Sanket answered as many questions as he had patience for, but after a point he started bailing out and seemed uncomfortable – or maybe just tired.

At that point I was pretty idealistic. Sanket found my idealism funny and often challenged it. As we got to know each other better through the duration of the course, he started sharing his real situation with me. His parents were in the United States and he planned to join them some time. He was being quite honest with me when he said that as an artist there were few things he could rely on. There was really no concrete livelihood that he could hope to earn while he stayed in India. He had enjoyed the easy, carefree years of being an art student. But now, having finished his studies, his best bet was migrating to the United States and helping his parents with the business that they had managed to start there.

His reading of the working scenario in India and what possibilities it held was dismal. I was myself living inside a bubble and somehow felt that no matter what the facts, I would somehow be able to survive.

By the end of the summer I had started seriously harbouring thoughts of identifying as an artist. The first few experiments I started doing were in visual art. I started sketching and painting and then I took up photography as well. I didn't have any idea about how I would eventually take these interests towards a professional practise and a livelihood. But at that point I didn't seem to be bothered by that fact.

This story started off with how I drifted into the world of art. But the figure who influenced me in this movement was himself not sure of the possibilities the field held, in terms of being able to make a living. I still struggle with some of these questions and when I think back on Sanket and his own struggles, I realise I might have taken more than just an influence from him. At that

time, there was no flyover on the MJ Library road and the area with the Alliance Française had a good bookshop called Kitab Kendra.

The artist in India is a figure who is not connected in any way to the logic of how society otherwise operates. There is no understanding of what role contemporary art plays in the life of the man on the street. It is a bubble that is a global corridor for the movement and flow of a certain kind of capital and power. The power reflects through how it can explain things that no one understands. I am not in touch with Sanket now. But the question that he seeded in my mind in a way, is still alive and still unresolved.

The question is unresolved, because it is very big question. It is not that I have not spent enough time thinking about it. It has evaded any kind of resolution. The question of livelihood is tricky. But where do you draw the line? How good is good enough? Will enough ever be enough? Maybe, like in earlier times, the choice of being an artist should have come along with a lifestyle prescription. Only a simple monastic life is offered for supporting the desire of being an artist. No promises are made about a life in which the joys of human company, of fatherhood or motherhood, of brotherhood or sisterhood. Such a prescription would have been possible to achieve.

Sanket Patel belonged to a business family. The reason he had to think of giving up an artist's life and take up his family business (motels) in the US was because he wanted to marry and set up a home. He wanted all of that. And found that an artist's life could not afford him all of that.

But today I think that sometimes lives are more than lifestyles. They maybe wanting, they maybe imperfect and lacking, they may be full of anxiety and insecurity, but that's the way they are and we have to make uninformed decisions about what we want to do



with our time. We cannot hope for all the data to be presented to us before we make a choice.

Sanket made objects. He was a sculptor. He used the round glass of tubelights and tiny metal-casted figures. Later I started drawing and went to meet him in Baroda and showed him my work. He looked at them and said, “Prayas, do not stylise at this stage. Work on getting hold of the techniques first.” It was exactly what I did not need to hear. The way I was developing, I was getting more interested in the symbolism inherent in art practice. Maybe at that point I had a form, but I did not have any relationship with form.

And his comment distracted me away from the struggle to even arrive at my own visual form. I took another few years to return to this struggle. I did not know how to take Sanket’s input in a constructive way at the time. There were only two alternatives that I was prepared to listen to: either what I was doing was exemplary or not interesting at all. I took his feedback to mean the latter and this led me to develop a complex about my visual work. I never felt it was good enough. It took me a few years to realise that visual art is more about how closely one’s personal perspective is linked to the form than any rigid framework that measures its quality. The artistic process is a personal process, meant to help individuals arrive at their own language. It is not linked in any way to the external world that only equates form to value derived from the social standing of the artist.

Over time I grow to value framework of art lesser and lesser.

I think that we need to stop making art entirely. If something is made to do nothing and if it does nothing, it is doing as expected. The ability to withdraw and create something outside the framework of reality is itself a very indulgent thing to do.

## The omelette *ni lahri*

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“There are times when you have difficult situations at work and you end up uttering your deepest aspirations aloud. In those moments, I would state that if nothing works, I will start my omelette *ni lahri*. So here it is: SandwichworkZ – the fusion street café, my very own omelette *ni lahri!*” Himanshu Desai, the owner of the eatery, is possessive. “Being the eldest in the family, I had to help my mother in the kitchen, right from buying groceries to cooking, but I thoroughly enjoyed it! At fifteen, I could differentiate between a good and a bad vegetable, fresh and stale produce, something a lot of adults cannot do at times. And then ever since I was in college, the whole family would eat what I cooked every Sunday. It became an event to look forward to for friends and family, as I would be cooking special meals.” He talks excitedly about his interest in cooking.

SandwichworkZ is located along one of Ahmedabad’s busiest streets – Dr Vikram Sarabhai Marg, or IIM Road. Tall and warm-hearted, Himanshu Desai has run this café with his wife Takshashila successfully since 2012 in the youthful locality of Panjra *Pol*.

“I am the most *Gujarati* anyone can be! I was born and brought up in Navsari. My family then moved to Delhi when I was ten and I went on to complete a BA with honours in English Literature. I am three years older than Shah Rukh Khan,” chuckles Desai. “I came to Ahmedabad after college and started working in the textile industry and got married to my wife, who is from Ahmedabad. I was with the textile industry for several years. After a brief stay in the USA I pursued a course in textiles and bagged a job in Singapore. Unfortunately, that lasted only for six years and I had to come back to Delhi and work for some time at Gurgaon. That company shut down and I had to look for a new job all over again. With the urge to do something of my own, I thought of establishing a hotel there. However, it did not work out the way I wanted it to. I went to the USA to try something there. But the USA does not accept our degrees and hence starting from scratch was required, for which I was not prepared. In addition to a love for food, I was also immensely interested in *Hindi* and *Urdu* literature. The USA, in that sense, had no buyers for that. So I returned to India, fifty-two and jobless! But you know, luckily for me, my passion to cook scrumptious meals stayed on, through all these events. Sandwiches were always my best bet and hence the name SandwichworkZ,” Desai laughs.

Ahmedabad is widely known for the magical festival of *Uttarayan*. The city transforms from being still, slow and drab into a buzzing, colourful and vibrant environment. The beautiful winter skies make for a brilliant backdrop to colourfully soaring kites and the ever-ebullient hopes. The festival ends with the dark night lit up with twinkling *tukkals* floating upwards to signal the end of an exhausting day of kite flying. The festival and the city worked

in rather the same way for Desai. After an exhausting life playing the role of a trader, the city became the brilliant backdrop for his passion. “We had come to Ahmedabad to celebrate *Uttarayan* in 2012. The plan to own and run a hotel of my own was a big flop in Delhi. I happened to enquire about real estate rental rates in Ahmedabad and found them to be amazingly lower than Delhi. I then toyed with the idea to start something here, and hence was born the idea of a café in Ahmedabad!”

The menu at SandwichworkZ includes a range of food items: sandwiches, egg *dosas*, *kathi rolls*, *shakshukas*, *parathas* and an elaborate breakfast list. Unlike most restaurants in Ahmedabad, the café offers non-vegetarian options. “I have always been a non-vegetarian. I believe vegetarian *Gujaratis* that moved out of the state at a young age learned to accept meat easily. My father left the state at a young age for college. From there his job took him to different parts of the country, hence accepting meat came naturally to me. So having meat on my menu was obvious. I have made it very clear everywhere that we cook and serve the dishes in the same set of vessels and the same kitchen. I love non-vegetarian food and that is my expertise too. My wife, on the other hand, had never had any exposure to meat before we were married. With respect to the café too, we had to face a lot of resistance for being a ‘non-vegetarian’ café, but we managed and here we are running it happily.” He beams, looking at his establishment proudly.

It is difficult to ignore the buzz of the café, even when empty. The room is flooded with bright summer sunlight beaming through simple glass windows. There is a hint of playfulness in the colour palette of the interiors-white, earthy yellow and orange. The white walls are an encouraging backdrop to artwork by upcoming artists.

The café has no Wi-Fi, but racks of graphic novels and books from *Hindi* to English literature and a tack board announcing various art events, lectures, poetry readings in the city and more keep its customers connected. There is a low hum from people working in the kitchen.

The clients are of all age groups, some youngsters chatting, an old man reading and a group of middle-agers in a seemingly formal business meeting. “Mornings sees a lot of old people coming in to have breakfast. You know, the oldies who love their tea and milk separate. Then there are people coming after walks, or generally those who want a decent breakfast. All types of people come here.” Desai comments on the variety of his clients. He walks around the café, talking to customers, socialising, suggesting food or making general small talk. One eye is always on the waiter taking and serving orders. “We are open from 8:30 AM to 11:30 PM and the café is buzzing throughout the day. I open in the morning, go home and rest in the afternoon. My wife takes over in the afternoon, until night. We recently started another restaurant called TandoorworkZ. So now we are juggling the two restaurants and I enjoy that thoroughly.”

Desai is very particular about the food served at his restaurant. All the dishes on the menu are his creations. The best meal is the ‘Young man’s breakfast’, along with other favourites like *aloo paratha*, chicken curry and rice, milkshakes and more. With such warm heartedness, art, food, literature, colour...it truly is a ‘fusion café’.

## The monk and the layman

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Amidst the crowd of *chhatwallahs*, *dhokla* and *khaman* peddlers of Ahmedabad, students of the National Institute of Design in Paldi trek through the dingy, musty streets of Paldi Cross Road through a Muslim-dominated area, to enter Amdo's kitchen. Sherab, the owner of this obscure Tibetan eatery, rolls out dough for *momos* while bubbling vats of *thenthuk* and *thukpa* billows smoke out of the tiny tears in the plastic covering his shack, mingling and creating plumes through the traffic outside. He is oblivious to the chatter of people occupying his home and eating his food.

The idea of Amdo's kitchen was to sell authentic Tibetan food in the most homely of environments. Ahmedabad's student population, a major percentage of which comes from other parts of the country and is longing for home cooked meals, finds solace in this tiny diner. Food is served in the living room of Sherab's home. The kitchen is attached to the shack that the Tibetan gent lives in, producing wafts of fresh, warm smells, and the sounds of an India-Bangladesh match from the box-like TV, all orchestrated to the whirrs of an electric fan.

“My friend started this place. I have been managing restaurants in Manali as well. Hence I am unable to keep this place open beyond the months of autumn and winter and the sun is harsh too. I have lived my life among the mountains. I am used to the breeze, the nail-biting cold, the toil and struggle of life. Life in the city enthrals me, but it suffocates me as well. But this is the city that has given me sustenance, and with time, it has become my home,” says Sherab. At the age of 16, he escaped to India from a village called Khamba in Gawa, Tibet, to become a monk. It was the early 2000s, and Tibet was slipping into silent submission, cowed by the influx of Chinese immigrants and the Chinese way of life. With full understanding and knowledge of the fact that the boy might not come back home, Sherab was sent to Khushinagar in Bengaluru to achieve enlightenment, and to escape war.

“The life of a *lama* is very difficult. It requires a lot of discipline. More than that, it requires a purpose. I was a displaced person in an unknown country with only a smattering of Tibetan language to sustain me. Purpose was hard to find, even harder to achieve. It was after twelve years of study of the toughest Buddhist scriptures that I committed a cardinal sin: I fell in love with a woman.” Sherab, now a married layman with no real shrine in his house, is a symbol of how for refugees, religion has become more of a way out than a spiritual quest. It was after he was thrown out of the Gumpa that Sherab learnt to cook, thereby realising his true calling.

“I could have gone to Mumbai, Delhi, or any other place. I chose Ahmedabad, because as a city of entrepreneurs, it instilled hope in me. As a layman, and as a businessman in Ahmedabad, I managed to achieve a certain degree of stability and independence.

I adopted a language, a way of dressing, a way of conducting life, very different from life of my monkhood.” Even though he was not an Indian citizen, Sherab managed to buy a home in Ahmedabad, albeit in a ghetto, and, more surprisingly, found acceptance in the city. And also assume different identities.

“Many people I meet have no idea about Tibet or our war. I am a *Nepali* if it gives me work, a *Cheeni* if it compels customers to come to my place. I integrated vegetarian Chinese dishes into my menu to appease the vegetarian customers of this city – something that I thought I would never do!” Irrespectively, Sherab remains a proud Tibetan, travelling every five years to cast his vote for his government-in-exile in Dharamshala, and sitting in protest for the country that he is still denied access to.

While he lovingly serves the food of his land to people who do not understand it, Sherab awaits the call from Tibet that would tell him of family recipes that he could incorporate. Meanwhile, the bubbling vats of spicy food sit hissing, almost as if voices were raised and united in a *sutra*, a prayer.

Ahmedabad is gradually becoming a place that invites migrants, a far cry from the *Gujarati* merchant communities that have made their home here. Some would say it is the premium educational institutions that usher in hordes of students from all over the country, while others believe that it is the umpteen opportunities in this city of entrepreneurs. Ahmedabad is also a halt for nomads, Tibetans like Sherab included.

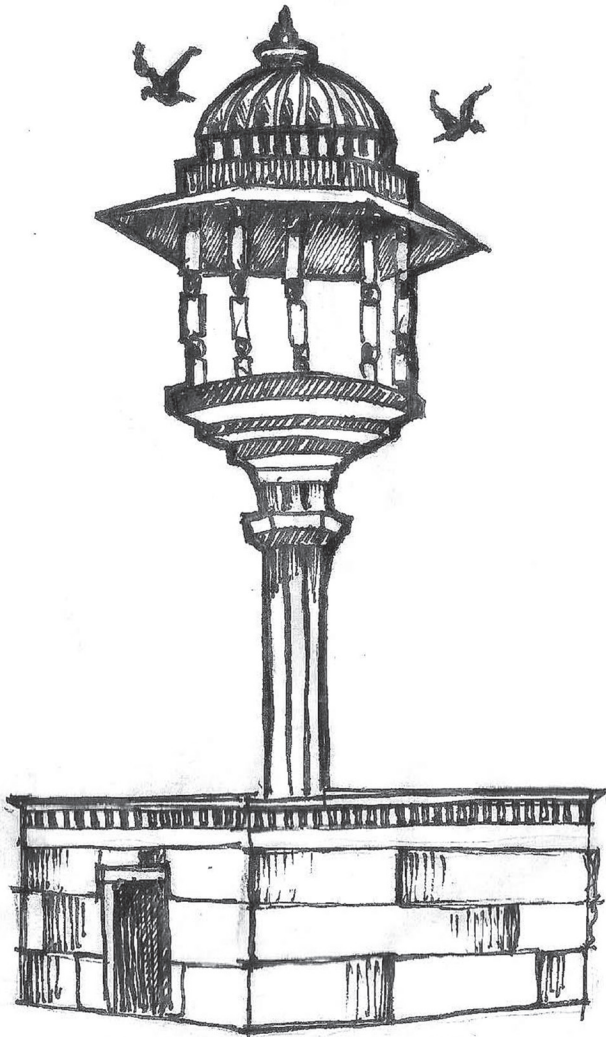
The Tibetan woollen expo, held during the winter months, sees the population from the high valleys turning up in large numbers, abandoning their usual practice of agriculture to sell woollen shawls and hand woven sweaters. Several hundred *Amdavadis* turn



up to buy cheap sweaters from a foreign people, and the vendors disappear just as they come, silently, with no fanfare.

“I meet the people of my country during the expo. Several of them are *lama* dropouts like me, familiar faces from Khushinagar, some even from Tibet. They talk about the life of a layman, life as a refugee, life in a vegetarian city! Some talk about identity, some talk about the idea of assimilation in the Indian and *Gujarati* culture.”

Sherab has been hounded by students and adults alike who know a little bit about the Tibetan issue, to talk about his experience, and it has made him wary. But more often than not, he goes unrecognised. “I think I am forgetting how it was to be a Tibetan, a monk and a refugee. This city has become a home in a way that it gives me the gift of obscurity. I am a face among millions, unnoticed. And that gives me peace that is beyond prayer.”



*KB. 2014/12*

## Mills, merchants and memories

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Peeking into the textile markets of Ahmedabad could prove to be difficult if you don't have the right people showing you around. But if you do, it is a window into one of India's most prolific markets. Ahmedabad as a city was for the longest time known as the Manchester of India. Textiles, their production and their processing was the main reason for this sobriquet.

The enterprising spirit of the *Gujaratis* is not something that needs reiteration. However, that spirit is not uniform; it has its own shades, its own variations – every struggle is a tale in itself and success is seldom earned without paying a price. The textile markets of Ahmedabad gave birth to numerous millionaires in the city, many today perched at the top of the fashion value chain, like Jade Blue and Aso Palav. Consider the story of Umang Shah, a man who saw life from many levels, rising up, falling down and then rising up again.

Umang Shah is the son of Rasik**hai** Shah, a resident of Ratan *Pol*. The old city of Ahmedabad had small but artistically rich housing complexes that accommodated hundreds of people in

its narrow lanes and even narrower wooden staircases. These locales were called *pols* and today form a prominent portion of the heritage walk through the city. Ratan *Pol* is one of the many such *pols* and is the home, the breeding ground and possibly the cemetery for the Ahmedabad textile market.

“We have been trading textiles since the time when Ratan *Pol* didn’t have roads,” says Umang**bhai** as he starts to recollect the early days of their business. “My father started off selling *papads*. He would stay up all night, make the *papads*, and then go to restaurants around there early in the morning to deliver them.”

The journey started and grew on from there. “We moved into the business of shirting and suiting in the early 60s, shortly before I was born, and in no time, launched a wholesale store in the same market.”

At the time the textile market in Ahmedabad was booming. Mills popped up everywhere and demand shot through the roof. Most of the textile industry before this had been centred in Bombay, but the salt content of the water in the port city was unsuitable for processing cotton and printed fabrics. The closest, most prepared and well equipped replacement was Ahmedabad’s budding textile industry.

For one, the raw materials were readily accessible. Secondly, the yarn manufacturing and cotton processing units were already in place, so logistical expenses were lower and the exponentially rising demand for printed fabrics fuelled the boom in Ahmedabad.

“We established a brand called *Danish* and started supplying fabric to almost all of Ratan *Pol*. There would be days when customers would walk in and buy a hundred rolls of fabric before

leaving. The 60s and 70s were truly an age of growth for the textile industry.”

The Shahs grew their brand and business rapidly in that period to eventually set up a cloth mill in Dholka, a region south of Ahmedabad. With a land of over 1,00,000 square yards and hundreds of *jamfal* trees, the mill was a magnificent sight. But that was not to last.

As of 2016, the mill industry of Ahmedabad is bleak, almost dead. There are a few big names like Vimal who are still making huge profits, but most mills are non-functional and have been replaced by other commercial properties.

Why? “Expenses. Mill owners were some of the richest people in their time and the boom in the industry made a lot of first-timers bloom very fast. The mad rush for money and fame left them dazzled and hampered their ability to take the right financial decisions. Excessive spending, over staffed offices and unoptimised operations led to a lot of mills closing down once the markets normalised,” explains Umang**bai**. This is why the family mill also had to shut down.

“My father always told me, ‘No matter what business you eventually enter into, no matter what the cost might be, never stop the original fabric business that we started.’ And that’s a sentiment that I share. We have now grown into a lot of different businesses, but I still have the shop from where it all began. I still keep my feet where my roots are and there is something oddly satisfying about it.”

Gheekanta, an area adjacent to Ratan *Pol* is home to the largest conglomerate of textile and garment traders who sell to independent fashion houses across the country and the world. There are close to

2,500 independent manufacturers in that region, with companies having turnovers to the tune of over Rs 200 crore every year. What they sell has drastically changed over time; who they sell to has changed too, but the ones who sell and control the markets have remained constant.

As the purchasing power of buyers went up, more people started preferring finished garments as against tailor made clothing, which meant a steady and slow demise of the business that Umang**bhai's** family had controlled for a long time. A strong business sense allowed them to divest into areas that could help hedge the risks involved in the textile business, real estate being one such.

Textiles still is a central economic driver for a lot of households in the city and while finished garments have taken over the market, the volume has also increased tenfold and given the city many more millionaires.

And while the market is a dynamic landscape that keeps shifting with the tide of supply and demand, it is more important to understand that what kept entrepreneurs like Umang Shah going wasn't the textile market, but their own ability to make hay while the sun shone.

Ahmedabad has its way with people and vice versa. The tallest buildings were built after the biggest earthquake, the richest people prospered right after the economic recession and some of the bravest men became known after gruesome terrorist attacks. The *Amdavadi* has never let problems come in the way of letting himself become a better person, perhaps just a little better than yesterday, but not as good as tomorrow.

## Taraben

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In the wee hours of September 17, 2015, people exchanged hugs at the newly-built T20 international airport in Mumbai, just before they boarded their flight to Sweden. Twelve Gujarat shuttlers belonged to the Indian contingent that took part in the VII World Senior Badminton Championships held in Helsingborg, Sweden, from September 20, 2015. Indeed a matter of great pride! Standing in the huddle, that pride was writ large on the wrinkled face of Taramati Parmar.

Anyone would have been forgiven for thinking she was a grandmother holding her grandchild's badminton kit.

But this was no ordinary granny. The 56-year-old 'girl' was about to fulfil a dream that was conceived some 30 years earlier. By taking the flight to Sweden, *Taraben* fulfilled a lifelong dream of donning India's colours, albeit at the ripe age of 56!

Though she lost in the first round of women's doubles, the gritty lady was all smiles after finishing her 15-day sojourn to the Scandinavian nation. The India Post employee has a long story to

tell. It begins with how she started her career as a sportsperson and how representing India made her proud.

Born into a *Dalit* family in February 1959 at a government hospital near Kalupur railway station, *Taraben*, daughter of Ramji and *Maniben* Parmar was one among eight children – four elder brothers and one elder sister, with two younger than her. “My father, an ordinary worker, took good care of our family of ten. We lived in a one-room *kaccha* house in Khasipur area near Raipur Darwaja. He gave me the freedom to express myself when I was young,” she reminisced. “As a toddler, I fell off the bicycle I rode for the first time. I hurt myself, and my mother wanted me to abandon the thought of getting back on the cycle.” *Ramjibhai* told his wife: “Let her fall today, she will stand up tomorrow.”

*Taraben*’s first acquaintance with sports happened after she began her job as a postal assistant with the Department of Post in Ahmedabad in 1982. “During my time at the foreign post office, I was introduced to badminton. In an open court, as a 26-year-old, I first held a racquet in my hand under the guidance of Imam Khan Pathan, my senior and my first coach,” she said. “My first national tournament was in 1987 at the All-India Inter-Departmental badminton meet in Delhi. I was part of the winning squad of the women’s team and got a women’s doubles title as icing on the cake,” *Taraben* strolled down memory lane.

Innumerable medals and many increments in her job which came by way of her success on the badminton courts were enough for *Taraben* to keep going on and on and on. Despite all the success she earned for her department, she itched for just one more high-play for India. “In 1987, when I brought the winning shield to my house, my father went around the whole area distributing sweets



and announcing my success. He put the shield in front of *Mataji* and prayed for his daughter's success as an international player."

While she could not realise her father's dream while he was alive – *Ramjibhai* died in 1996 – the fond daughter marshalled a good performance at the Senior Nationals Badminton meet held in Dharamsala in 2015 earning her a ticket to Sweden. It was her first and perhaps the last chance to live her father's dream, even if it meant she had to withdraw Rs 1.5 lakh from her General Provident Fund. "Look at the irony. My father was the one who showed me the way and when I did accomplish the feat, he was not around to see it."

*Taraben* also credits her success to the support of her department. "I became a sportsperson due to my job; they gave me special leave time off all this while, so that I could bring back laurels for my department."

Now 57, *Taraben* recently took part in the 35+ women's doubles event at the Open State Badminton Ranking tournament in Rajkot in June and won gold there. "My sole aim is to continue to play for as long as I can. Age, for me, is just a number. Even today, I practice for two hours a day and want to set an example to society," says the waif-thin *Taraben*, who has stayed below 40 kg for the last ten years. "It's because of the game that I have managed to stay light," she remarked with a grin.

Apart from being a seasoned shuttler, *Taraben* has tried her hand at table tennis too and is currently a qualified state-level badminton referee.

So when is she retiring? "Not anytime soon. I want to take part in senior nationals in 70 above. I am sure I will."

Currently living in a *pucca* three-storied house with her two

younger brothers and their children in the same area, *Taraben* is a figure of grit and perseverance among the *Dalits*. “Every year on April 14, they honour me. That is enough for me. I want more players from our society to play and outshine me,” *Taraben* says about tomorrow.

## The amazing Karwals

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He brought the first Cyclothon to Ahmedabad as the Joint Commissioner of Police of the city; she, as the Chief Electoral Officer, mobilised a record number of voters from all sections of society – from newly-wed women to centenarians, transgender electors to tribals – to come out and vote in big numbers. He, as JCP Traffic, reversed a problem into a solution by introducing blue uniformed traffic assistants to man the junctions of Ahmedabad through a Public Private Partnership; she set up the single stop window system for public services through a Jan Sewa Kendra for citizens of Ahmedabad, as Collector of the city. He was the Ahmedabad *da puttari* who put the Indian civil services on the map of international mountaineering, by becoming the first bureaucrat in India to scale Mount Everest in May 2008; she was the scribe who told this remarkable story to the world, weaving her own voice into the narrative. As a dynamic duo perpetually at work, dealing with crushing pressures and a demanding schedule, the unusual IAS-IPS couple are remarkably Zen and joyful, always finding the time to meet friends and do things that fan their passion.

Anita and Atul Karwal first came as Officer Trainees of the Gujarat cadre in 1989 to the State Administrative Training Institute, SPIPA. Their first postings were as Assistant Collector and Assistant Superintendent of Police, respectively, at Dholka sub-division of Ahmedabad district. “Dholka was a small town in Ahmedabad district. We used to drive down every fortnight to have our favorite ice-cream in Municipal Market and enjoy the ‘big city’. Although our postings took us across the state, Ahmedabad remained the leitmotiv of our lives, especially after 2003.” They worked their way up from the grassroots level and went on to love what the city had to offer them as parents, as officials, as social beings and as individuals with aspirations and dreams.

Atul is a fitness, sports and adventure enthusiast. Aside from his activities of skydiving, scuba diving and ultra-marathons, he began to learn martial arts from his *guru*, Donald Melville, in 1993, when he was posted as SP of Valsad. Settling down in Ahmedabad made it possible for him to seriously pursue this interest and acquire a first degree black belt in Wing-Tsun Kung Fu. Anita explains, “Atul had dreamt of scaling Mount Everest from his childhood. Although our schedules didn’t allow it, and we lived in an urban jungle, he was able to prepare for the epic challenge by climbing stairs of the ‘tallest’ buildings of Ahmedabad over 20 times every other night after work. He would also walk the roads of the city with a 30 kg rucksack, from 11 PM to 4:30 AM twice a week, to ‘practice’. I think all the roads of Ahmedabad have a huge contribution in his success!” Inspired by his Everest adventure, Atul started the initiative of a ‘Walker’s Mall’ in the city, encouraging people to walk and play on the roads once every month. A section of the busiest road was closed for all vehicles for the day, creating a

festival opportunity for children and pedestrians to enjoy a vehicle free day, thus reducing pollution and celebrating the culture of the city. Music and plays, food stalls, skating and cycling took over from bumper-to-bumper traffic and blaring horns.

Anita continued, “I, on the other hand, was a yearning artist but didn’t know what to write until I co-authored a book entitled *Think Everest* with Atul about his Everest journey. It empowered me to start writing more regularly; I started writing columns for *Ahmedabad Mirror* and later for DNA. I even indulged in poetry now and then. My second book has just been released.”

As a family, Ahmedabad provided the stability required for their young children. “It is the school, MGIS (Mahatma Gandhi International School), which turned out to be the brighter side of our lives. Because of our postings and many transfers, by the time both the girls were 12-13 years old, they had been to more than ten schools each and it was beginning to affect them negatively. When I put the kids in MGIS, life changed for all four of us. Suddenly there was time on hand, suddenly the children were more confident, they were hungry for knowledge, they were happy with school, and I didn’t have to struggle with their complicated homework or make charts on the solar system after work. A calming balance came into our lives. I am grateful to Ahmedabad for giving this school to us.”

Anita, who was the Deputy Municipal Commissioner of Ahmedabad in 1997 when Mahatma Gandhi International School was set up as a public private partnership model, was a signatory on behalf of the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation on the trust documents of the school. Unknown to her at the time, as a bureaucrat she had set up a quality school for the city, which she would revisit as a parent in 2003. Although sometime later they

were both posted in Gandhinagar, the Karwals decided to continue to live in Ahmedabad for the sake of their children's education. After their daughters completed their schooling and went to Delhi and Bengaluru for further studies, the girls experienced eve teasing for the first time. "Ahmedabad is so safe for women!" They are so clear about it.

For Atul and the girls, the city offered many opportunities to delve into sports. "Atul would be sky diving into the Kankariya Lake and my daughters would want to do that; they would find out a marathon was going on and enroll for it, or they would know about an upcoming Cyclothon and start preparing for that... Ahmedabad is such a vibrant city. We have seen my favorite artists live in Ahmedabad, we have seen some of the best theatre in *Gujarati*, *Hindi* and English in Ahmedabad... we can't imagine anything missing from our lives."

When she became the Chief Electoral Officer of Gujarat, Anita spent time working to identify the needs and gaps of the city and the state in relation to electoral registration and turnout. There was severe urban apathy towards both. People had the mistaken notion that if they have an election card, they were registered, so electors had to be made aware of the methods of registration and cross checking of names. They also had to be motivated to come out and vote. After confirming that electoral registration was low in specific pockets, and in certain categories of people – newly-wed women, 18-19-year olds, citizens living in old age homes and the LGBTQ amongst others. With her team she identified the medium that would resonate with the urban and rural demographic: newspapers, television, radio, street plays, etc. Using these media, she wanted to get across to the people of Ahmedabad and the state. And for this she needed partners.

The first partner who signed on was MGIS. “I mentioned it to the principal, Anju, what the mandate of SVEEP (Systematic Voter Education and Electoral Participation) was, and what I wanted to do, but didn’t know where to start. She offered to help with her students. The school children made advertisements for local cable television and *Doordarshan* that struck a chord with people, and from there our creativity for SVEEP started flowing.” Thereafter, many others came on board: CSOs, NGOs, cooperatives and also banks, notably Bank of Baroda. The Lions Club, Rotary Clubs, the Medical Association and even all the radio jockeys joined in the cause. RJs Devki, Dhvanit and Kunal became brand ambassadors and would talk everyday about voter education on their radio shows. “Devki went to the extent of painting a flyover, collecting a crowd there and writing slogans about voting. She put a voter meter on one of the heaviest traffic junctions and anyone who pledged to vote without taking a bribe was made to press the button; she got more than 3 lakh hits from the enthusiastic Ahmedabad crowd,” recalls Anita. After addressing all age groups above 18 as a part of their voter education mandate, they decided to spread the word through children, by making them carriers of the message. They devised a *Sankalp Patra* which the MGIS students helped design. This pledge letter, which was a clarion call for action, demanded that parents take care of their children by assuring their future and going out to vote without taking a bribe. More than 75 lakh *Sankalp Patras* were signed in the state, and in Ahmedabad itself there were more than 5 lakh pledges made. It had a very good impact, and was a unique contribution by the young citizens of the country.

“I still remember, on the day of voting my subordinate came running to me saying that he hadn’t voted yet and would need to

take leave right away. We were in the middle of some statistical analysis, so I suggested he go later in the afternoon, but he insisted, saying he had signed the *Sankalp Patra* and his daughter had commanded that he go right now. I had to relieve him to go and vote. That is the power of a single citizen! All these small and big interventions changed the way people look at elections in Ahmedabad and Gujarat.” The city and the state had a record turnout of voters in the 2012 Assembly elections and the 2014 Parliamentary elections.

Currently the Karwal family is spread across the world, with the elder daughter Janvi in Bengaluru working as a filmmaker, Tanvi, the younger daughter is at John Hopkins University pursuing a PhD in Theoretical Physics, Atul is based in Srinagar heading the CRPF amidst ongoing strife there, and Anita stays in Gandhinagar as Principal Secretary to the government of Gujarat. The family remains strong and rooted in the city, regularly meeting in Ahmedabad on important occasions. The Karwals have created long lasting friendships in the public service sector as well as outside it.

“The city makes us feel so rooted; we just can’t imagine leaving this place and settling down anywhere else. The city makes you feel safe, culturally vibrant and socially connected, as you are surrounded by the warmth of friends. It gives you the opportunities of a big cosmopolitan city, while retaining the home-like quality of a small town.” This is a testament to the quality of the city in retaining people of high calibre and making them feel at home while giving them a canvas to implement new ideas in their profession that can and has created ripple effects across the country. Our city is lucky to have such upright officers serving the nation, and adopting Ahmedabad as their home turf.



## The bibliophile of Sunday market

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The residue of a city and its many processes, its living heritage and repaired items, often find themselves washed up on the shore of its flea markets. These remnants of lives led in the city, of used furniture and unused toys, well-worn books and fresh crockery are put on display in these markets.

One such bustling *bazaar* thrives on the east bank of the Sabarmati River in Ahmedabad. This is the *Ravivari*. The name *Ravivari* means 'that which happens on a Sunday', since this Gujarati *bazaar* or second-hand market is open to trade on Sundays alone.

There is the most unlikely collection of wares on sale. From agricultural implements, household utensils, cycle rickshaws, electronic goods, domestic animals, and spare parts, to more exciting things like antique items, books, raw foods and lanterns. Rummaging through rare and used books is a personal favourite.

Here by the shores of the Sabarmati, I found a scholarly fisherman with a catch of time-worn books.

The *Ravivari* is organised chaos. The area of booksellers comes after a series of stalls selling antiques, paints and domestic goods.

After weaving through narrow passages shaded by parasols, littered with the smell of *nimbu-paani*, *daal-haleem* and sometimes assorted animal dung, one arrives at the booksellers. Instant *vellichor!*

While there are about 7-8 different bookstalls, each with an assorted collection of irresistible finds, Mohammad**bhai's** bookstall has always been unique. Perhaps this is because of the various bold yet beautiful signs and posters that annotate the space. Or, maybe, it is the unabashed devotion of the bibliophile-turned-bookseller to the written word.

Mohammad Hussain**bhai**, the bookseller, fell in love with reading when he was a young boy, and the romance still continues.

“My parents were illiterate. My *Ammi* would give me 4 *annas* as pocket-money, and I'd save it to buy books. A passion for literature led me to pursue BA, MA, and BEd degrees, and I became the principal of a school here in Ahmedabad. My parents weren't educated, yet I taught 10,000 children as a school headmaster. That's the power of reading! *Yehi woh lagan, woh passion hai!*” he says.

The entire riverfront market seems to thrive on the principle of ‘one man's trash is another man's treasure.’ Quite literally, for our beloved bibliophile bookseller, who buys most of his stock from *pastiwallahs* (scrap-dealers). The books are bought by the kilo, sometimes from local dealers on carts, or from the *chor-bazaar* in Mumbai, where Mohammed**bhai** travels often.

Commenting on our reading habits as a society, he says, “A husband buys books, and the wife gives it away to the scrap dealer! *Samjhe?* So some very good, priceless books come my way because of people who don't understand the value of those books!”

As we continue our conversation, he recommends several

interesting items to various customers. “Take this Collected Histories of Poets, it has illustrations. Here, this is the book on dance I kept aside for you, *behenji*. No, there are no gossip magazines here!”

Mohammed**bhai** has been a part of *Ravivari* since 2001. Over the years, he has understood the attitude of customers, and has learnt to brush away those who ‘don’t take reading seriously’!

Thus, a wide range of signs and quotes have been collected over the years, as a response to haggling customers. He believes that one must buy books with love and openness, otherwise not. Bargaining and half-hearted buying of books shall satisfy no one. The variety of signs include, ‘Greedy eyes shall never have satisfied stomachs.’ and ‘No comments. No photos. No bargaining.’ Although, even during the course of our conversation, almost every visitor to the stall asked for some concession or other, and soon the ‘Go Away Bargainer’ board was displayed by Mohammadb**bhai**. It seems that the guileless *Amdavadi* shopper is impervious to strong and rude signals to stop bargaining!

To one design student who approaches him, bargaining over a book on architecture, Mohammed**bhai** reads out the following sign:

*Love money and go to Hell.  
A certain miser has two houses well,  
One in heaven, the other in Hell.  
His house in Heaven was offered a higher rent.  
Soon the good house had a rich and worthy tenant.  
Now to end the story and it’s moral to tell,  
Our miser friend went down to live in Hell.*

For a first-time visitor, like I was several years ago, the aggressive ban on bargaining, and Mohammad**bhai's** supposed irritability might be a bit uncomfortable. However, spending time with this scholarly man reveals an extremely kind, humble and incredibly patient side to him.

“You can never be wise unless you love reading. You will never feel alone with a book. Never dull. Your partner or companion may offend you, but a book will not!”

He switches effortlessly from English to *Hindi*, *Urdu* and *Gujarati*, reading out proverbs on ‘beauty’ in one language, and reprimanding a haggler in another.

We speak a little more about his business. Usually the selling price is worked out to one-third of the original price of the book. But in case, and very rarely so, if Mohammad**bhai** finds one to be a voracious reader gushing over his special books, generous discounts are given!

In between reading the *Gitanjali* and discussing the nature of secularism in India, I come to understand his thoughts on the *Ravivari*. “This market is a museum.” There are so many interesting pieces of history here. One needs only to take a stroll around, to understand the essence of this city.

The unique aspect of this market is that it has something to offer for all sections of society. For the common masses, the items sold here are basic domestic essentials, sometimes luxuries. For travellers and tourists, the experience of the space could be more powerful and attractive than the items on display. While the elitists may argue about the quality and authenticity of products sold and the overall crowded experience, such markets have long been the source of interesting articles for artists and designers.

With the *jugaad* mindset picking up both in art and design, many designers nowadays source their raw material from the *Ravivari* in Ahmedabad, and the similar *Shukravari* in Baroda.

Recently, the organisation of the market has undergone a change or ‘redevelopment’. Over the years and the countless visits to the market, a dramatic shift is easily recognisable, not just in the form and structure of the place, but also in the mix of visitors. About this, Mohammad**bhai** says that many young people and students who visit the market out of curiosity, engage in buying mostly educational or study-related books. Yet, perhaps genuine book-lovers are becoming a rare species, and even more so are readers of vernacular languages.

The avid reader that he is, I ask him whether it is difficult for him to part with certain special books. He smiles, and confesses his personal collection of books that he keeps aside. I wonder about the nature of this personal library...its contents, location, size. On weekdays, he can be found at a stall near MJ Library, selling the same lot of books, but indulging visitors with different stories. “Come there,” he says, “we can talk at leisure.”

It is refreshing and reassuring to find a person so passionate about literature, in this city of thriving commerce and industry. Ahmedabad is deeper than it may seem, and its many layers unravel at this riverside market, on a sunny Sunday morning.

## From Armani to *Khadi*

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As one arrives at the iconic Hutheesing *Haveli* located in Jehsingbhai *ni Wadi*, one experiences the hustle, bustle and charm that a 600-year-old city, once the largest and wealthiest of Medieval India, can exude.

The Hutheesings have played host to many a royal dignitary, Jodhabai-Akbar, Jehangir, Shah Jahan, Shivaji, several Maharajas and political leaders right down to the modern days – Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel and Narendra Modi. The family has welcomed cultural and artistic personalities to their home – Raja Ravi Varma, Kalapi and Rabindranath Tagore – to name a few. The spiritual leaders Dalai Lama, Osho, Sahajanand Swami as well as several Jain and Hindu saints have graced the *Haveli*.

The Hutheesings' outreach to the West was equally influential. When Umabhai Hutheesing arrived in London, the London *Times* carried an article titled 'Prince Uma arrives in London'. When Ajit Hutheesing got married in London, the wedding was attended by Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip, making it front page news

once again! During the mid-1800s, Albert Kahn, the French millionaire sent photographers around the world to capture historic and artistic monuments and they arrived with the first camera in India at the *Haveli*. In 1881, the British authorities introduced the American artist and interior decorator Lockwood de Forest and Louis Comfort Tiffany to Maganbhai Hutheesing and they started a pan-India design firm, which is now the famous Tiffany & Co. Together, they executed exquisite interiors of the East Wing of the White House, Kensington Palace and several landmark homes and estates in Indian style in the West at a time when European influences were dominating the world.

In the World Expo in Paris in 1900, when the Grand Palais was built, the Hutheesing Design Company (HDC) won nine gold medals for its design excellence. In 1904, at the World Expo in New Orleans, Hutheesing presented an exquisite wood-carved Jain temple, which introduced to the Americans the craftsmanship of Indian artisans. The temple was then placed in Las Vegas and as a gazebo and is now reinstated in California by a Jain community as an important place of worship. In Manhattan, the beautifully carved *Amdavadi* style *haveli* is a landmark building protected by the government and functions as a Jewish centre for New York University. The Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum has reopened its doors after many years of extensive renovations in 2016 and viewers can see the magnificent ‘Teak Room’ designed with exquisite *Amdavadi* craftsmanship, made and exported from Ahmedabad over a century ago, a testimony of Hutheesing’s artistic influences in America.

The Hutheesing family has a known history of over 1200 years – one that is deeply intertwined with Indian history. Originally

a Kshatriya family bearing the last name ‘Sisodia’, they were the rulers of Osia in Rajasthan. It was during this period that successive invasions from the Khyber Pass were devastating the Indian landscape. Osia was plundered several times and the people having experienced the horrors of war, adopted *ahimsa* in the 8th century and moved to Khambhat, an important port for international trade and the city of gemstones.

They adopted the philosophy of ‘better to buy peace than fight war’ and during Humayun’s rule, the family migrated to Ahmedabad. With their network and , influences they became India’s most prominent banking family of the era and financed Mughal emperors, the Maharajas as well as the British East India Company. They later played a key role in supporting the Mutiny of 1857 and finally called for Swaraj under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. After the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the Hunter Commission was appointed to prosecute Gandhiji and the Hutheesing family intelligently hosted the Commission of judges and ensured, with their generous hospitality, that Gandhiji was absolved of the allegations against him. It was with Gandhiji’s blessings that Raja Hutheesing married Krishna Nehru, the younger sister of Jawaharlal Nehru and Shrimati Hutheesing married Somendranath Tagore, nephew and protégé of Rabindranath and founding President of the Communist Party of India, thus, linking the Hutheesings, Nehrus and the Tagores.

In 1835, Gujarat witnessed the Great Famine. Over six lakh people migrated to Ahmedabad. To provide employment to these migrants, Sheth Hutheesing, the son of Kesrasing, started building temples and hospitals for their families and educational institutes for their children. The 250-year-old Hutheesing Temple – one of



the most famous Jain temples in the world – was also initiated by Sheth Hutheesing. However, he passed away soon after and it was because of his wife Harkunwar Sethani's determination, that this 52-*jivalaya* heritage structure with 238 stone images, 83 metal images and 21 *yantras*, was completed. Harkunwar Sethani also built the first school for girls in India – at a time when schooling for girls was discouraged – and the first home for destitutes and widows in the country. Queen Victoria recognised her contribution to humanity and honoured her with the title Nek Namdar Shekhawati Bahadur Harkunwar Sethani. As Sheth Hutheesing was a popular philanthropist because of the large trusts he built, his descendants took his name as their surname.

The entire Hutheesing family lived together in their palatial residence, Hutheesing *Haveli*, a massive palace built by Sheth Hutheesing in the walled city. The mansion continues to be an oasis of nature, art and intellect.

Even today, HDC – now managed by the Hutheesing scion, Umang Hutheesing – continues to provide employment to artisans and at the same time export premium wooden furniture. Umang works on the revival of royal Indian textiles and costumes. He manages the HDC from its original studios and today, in 2016, has been the only Asian designer to have created and showcased more than 300 pieces in important national museums of the world. In Paris, at the YSL Pierre Berger Foundation, his exhibition opened the Year of India in France; and Paris Fashion Week was attended by the then President of France, Nicolas Sarkozy and two former presidents as well, besides several grand personalities from the fashion, political and social worlds. He is a key player behind the India Fashion Week.

The Hutheesing family has, over the centuries, built several temples and monasteries, and supported the creation of education and welfare institutions such as the Ahmedabad Education Society and Tagore's university town of Santiniketan in West Bengal. The eponymous Hutheesing Heritage Foundation is their creation. Their philanthropic zeal led them to build the Civil Hospital in Ahmedabad and animal shelters which till today serve the people. They are also leaders of trade and industry. "I am trying to follow the large footsteps and the value systems that I have been brought up with," says Umang, whose kind eyes and friendly demeanour are a reflection of his family values and philosophy.

He returned to Ahmedabad after studying in Japan and having lived in the United States for over nine years. Soon after the earthquake in Ahmedabad in 2001, Umang devoted himself to the service of the affected.

"Our ultimate goal is to build the country and not just the company," says Umang, who contributes and creates with a global outlook, but with an Indian mind and an *Amdavadi* heart.

While taking his leave, I wonder aloud why the creator of royal designs wears a simple *khadi kurta*. "There are some Gandhian principles that we are proud of. I still wear *khadi* and don't waste food or water. Each individual in our family is encouraged to take up a private philanthropy project," he signs off, as he walks me out to the huge golden gates outside his office.

## A labour of love

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Every once in a while, when one becomes disillusioned with the violence and endless suffering faced by humanity, it is easy to imagine that human beings have forgotten about love and compassion. But it goes without saying that amongst us are many brave men and women who don't care for riches or success as much as they desire to make this world a better place. Arzoo, a small organisation based in Ahmedabad that works to educate children from disadvantaged communities is a good example of what determination and compassion can achieve in the face of great odds. All it needed was a visit to Arzoo's main centre to restore my faith in humanity.

When I first contacted Sulekha Ali, the founder of the NGO, she informed me that I might have to postpone my visit. "I'm out of station, and I heard there is no power in the centre, so not much going on at the moment. Hopefully in a week or so, things will be back to normal." Still, I hopefully called Gulnaaz, one of the teachers whose number Sulekha had given me, and was surprised to hear her enthusiasm about my visit. "Of course you can come!

Yes, there is no power, but we still meet there – this Sunday the children are staging a talent show where they’ll sing and perform dances! Do come if you can!”

The Arzoo Centre in Jamalpur isn’t much – just a basement hall in a decrepit commercial complex, right next to a barbershop. There is no signboard. The place is rather dark, and devoid of furniture, but the echoes of children laughing can be heard from outside. Arzoo was founded in 2002, in the aftermath of the riots that ravaged Ahmedabad. Sulekha Ali decided to set up the school for orphans and children whose families were suddenly impoverished – having lost their businesses or homes to the violence. Amongst her first students were Gulnaaz and *Bhartiben* – both of whom now teach at the school.

The talent show is in full swing, and some boys are grooving to a Honey Singh number as the other kids cheer. Gulnaaz, who looks much younger than I imagined, joins in with a few moves of her own. I look around to see walls covered in the energetic bursts of creativity by the kids, and despite the dinginess, the air feels bright and positive. About an hour later, after the show, I sit down with Gulnaaz, *Bhartiben* and Dhruv Sharma to talk a little about Arzoo, and the work that they do here.

This hall, I find out, is now only used for special occasions, and most classes are conducted in different localities across the city. Dhruv explains why that is so. “Arzoo started out small, and at that time this hall was sufficient. But over time the number of students increased, and space became an issue. It was difficult to handle a large classroom. Another problem was that many parents found it difficult to send their children to school – either they had no time, or lived too far away!” As a result, Arzoo began to set up

community schools, with individual teachers attending to smaller groups of students in each neighbourhood, or *mohalla*. Classes are often conducted in the teacher's own house if no other common space is available.

While the joy of teaching keeps her going, Gulnaaz recounts some of the challenges they faced while trying to get children to attend the school. "We had to go from house to house and request families to send their children – just ensuring that they attend on a regular basis is a task. Sometimes parents don't understand, because they aren't educated themselves," she says, shaking her head. The schools that Arzoo runs are meant to complement the government-funded community learning centres, or *anganwadis* that exist in many neighbourhoods, rather than replace them. Though started for riot-affected kids, the focus of Arzoo has shifted over the years – today, most children come from underprivileged families who can't afford regular schools, or go to municipal schools.

Despite its growth, the NGO has always had to operate within a modest budget, and frequently finds itself short of funds. However, donations from many philanthropists and charity funds have helped keep things afloat. "Recently, our founder Sulekha ma'am received a scholarship, and is currently doing a PhD in Kenya! I hope that someday I can also go to college," Gulnaaz says, her eyes shining. During the talent show, I had watched her and Bharti**ben** manage a gang of fifty children with ease. They handled the kids with maturity and maternal compassion, but I was amazed to learn that both of them were hardly past their teens themselves. Dhruv laughs, "When I first talked to her over the phone, I imagined that she must be a woman in her fifties, experienced and managing an

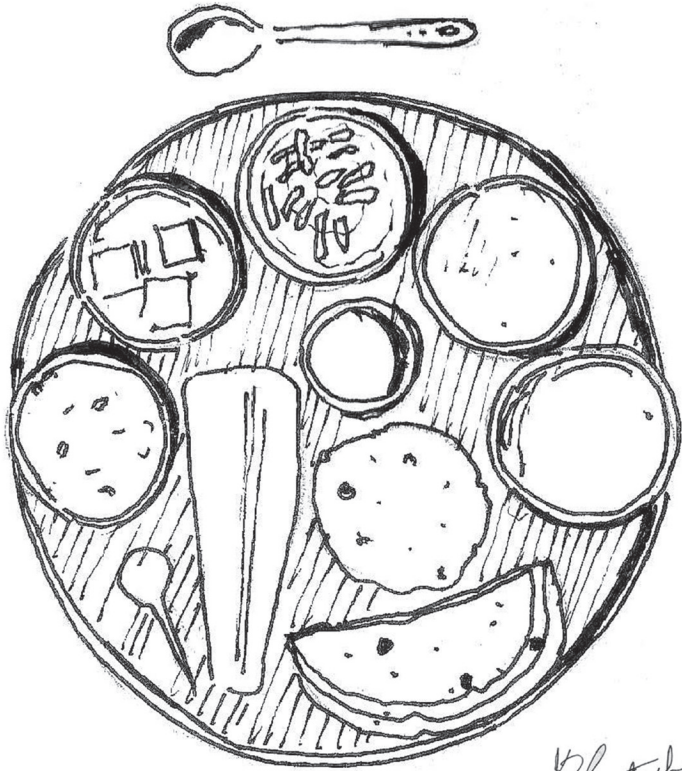
NGO all by herself. Imagine my surprise when I got here and met her for the first time!”

Gulnaaz berates him for that, and suddenly I see the little girl in her – all of eighteen years old, full of energy and enthusiasm, untouched by the cynicism of old age. The same goes for Bharti, who I don’t feel like referring to as *ben* anymore. She is only twenty-one, and also dreams of going to college. “Just a BA is enough, I’m not being too ambitious.” She is quiet and rather shy. She tells me that her family owns a *vadapav* stall at Kankariya Lake, and invites me to come sample some.

The most talkative of them is Dhruv – an energetic and engaging young man originally from Delhi, who has strong opinions on the poor state of the Indian education system. He received his Master’s degree from Nirma University, and during his time there became convinced that his heart lay in social work. “It was a hard decision to take because I’m not from a rich family. There was always pressure to find a job and start earning. But I realised that working for society gives me the greatest happiness! I could go for a six-figure salary in some big company, but if I’m miserable in life, then what’s the point?” Dhruv now lives on a tight budget, but is able to save enough for himself, and loves his work besides. “I plan to go work in a larger organisation soon, but Arzoo is where I started, and it’s where my heart is!”

The three of them together give hope for a better and brighter future for these children, and it is heartening to see them carrying out their work with selfless dedication, without expecting anything in return. “I myself studied here, and Arzoo has given me a lot. I just felt that I had to give back in some way,” Gulnaaz says. Bharti pipes in, “I wasn’t very interested in studies. I would come here to

play with some friends who studied here. But seeing them have fun and learn at the same time inspired me and kindled my interest for studying. I am thankful for that!” Arzoo has at least four other teachers on the roster, besides these three, and together they manage everything from teaching to management and outreach. “This is a labour of love, so nobody just does what they’re getting paid for. It’s a collective effort – and we are like a family!” With that, I thank them for their time and take my leave, my heart light, and the music of laughing children still ringing in my ears....



*KB*



## ***Khaman* – a tradition**

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It is not an uncommon sight in this city of food lovers – roads lined with food stalls, with tempting aromas wafting through the air and people flocking around trying to find favourites. One such lane in the Maninagar area of Ahmedabad has a big crowd, each customer awaiting their turn outside a small shop called Das Surti *Khaman*.

Standing proud and delicious, Das Surti *Khaman* was established in 1922 by Pitambardas Kanjibhai Thakkar. Das, as he was called, worked in a local *khaman* shop in Surat, and later moved to Ahmedabad and opened his own outlet there. The journey of the humble *khaman* had only just begun. A concoction of *chana dal*, *hing*, red chilli powder and peanut oil has been taken far beyond the conventional recipe by four generations of the Das family. It was only 500 grams of *chana dal* that Das made his first ever batch of *khaman* with in the shop, and in the 94 years that have followed, the store prepares and sells 50 to 100 kilogrammes of the tasty treat every day, the amounts changing depending on festivals, weekends or family gatherings, frequent in the life of a *Gujarati*.

Avneesh**bhai** Thakkar wraps two kilos of *dahi khaman* in newspaper and hands it over to Ramukaka, a regular customer. A framed newspaper article about IIM doing a case study on Das Surti *Khaman* hangs on a wall by the counter, with another in which the *Times of India* declares Das Surti *Khaman* the ‘Best Farsan Shop in 2008’, alongside. On the wall opposite hangs a mouth-watering menu that has made all these accolades possible.

The kitchen at the back is an interesting scene. Stoves loaded with pots holding red and green gravies bubble away. The room is filled with tantalising smells, hints of *pudina*, spice, tomato, *hing*, floating in the air.

As the crowd increases, Avneesh**bhai** busies himself with packing *khaman*, answering phone calls about whether he could cater for 40 ladies for a kitty party on Thursday and listening to orders over *Kem cho, ketla vakhte dikhaya!*” (How are you, seeing you after so long!)

Each generation of the Das family has introduced to the city new varieties of *khaman*, using different ingredients and cooking methods. *Mari khaman* – with the addition of pepper, *tamtam khaman*-fried with a tangy tomato puree, *dahi khaman* – marinated in curd and then shallow fried, green fry *khaman* – with a gravy of coriander and *pudina*, are just a few of their twists to the humble snack. About six years ago, Avneesh**bhai** started the concept of the live counter for events. “*Gujarati jamanvaars* are incomplete without *khaman*,” he explains. “There is no fun in packing large quantities of *khaman* for catering. The live counter allows people to select their favourite flavours or ingredients, and eat them hot and fresh.” *Khaman chaat* and toast *khaman* are experiments that have found success among youngsters. “Now I am trying pastry

*khaman*. Still a savoury dish, but I want to play with layers and textures. Our customers always expect us to come up with new dishes, and I would never want to disappoint them or my great grandfather.” Avneesh**hai**, as the fourth generation looking after the shop, is very happy with his inheritance.

Originally a dish that belongs to Surat, *khaman* has an almost-century-old history in the city of Ahmedabad. Avneesh**hai** beams, “That is the great part about the city. Different *Gujarati* food items have their very own stories here. The stories are simple. Years ago, a *Gujarati* started with a small business, and being an entrepreneur as every *Amdavadi* is at heart, now has everyone loving his food.”

Food is never looked at as just something to eat. Das’s *khaman* has become tradition. And like all food in the city, it is now a celebration.

## Ahmedabad-America-Ahmedabad

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For a long time, Indians have been moving to first world countries for a 'better' life. People are willing to give up all the luxury and comfort they have at home to find something new outside. Though some have made it big elsewhere, owning businesses, jobs and homes worth millions and never looking back at the motherland; many find themselves living hand to mouth and not being able to afford a ticket back to where they come from.

The city of Ahmedabad is dotted with billboards touting 'study abroad', 'GRE and IELTS exam classes' and the like. Almost every family knows people in the USA, UK or Australia, even Kenya. For a dominantly business class community, the attraction to move to lucrative destinations is tempting. So what does someone do, when he is financially stable, independent, strong and ambitious and earns a Green Card in the USA? Live the life it comes with, or give it up to stay back in the luxury of family, friends and domestic help?

This is the story of Deepal Chokshi.

"Today I successfully run a pregnancy class: Pregnancy 101.

It is more like an activity class for pregnant women. I go there twice a day, while my parents and in-laws babysit my two-year-old daughter Shriya. The idea of the class is to aid normal delivery, support fragile and naive women, help them find support in others like them and so on.” She has just finished explaining what her start-up is about when her little curly-haired daughter walks in. Deepal coaxes her into singing a poem on a teddy bear. Little Shriya chirps a few words and clings to her mother, swaying to the tune.

“So let me start at the beginning. I dated my husband for a long time. I was acquainted with his family since about 2004, when his sister got married. I was never a ‘lovey dovey’ person, nor was I someone who would agree to an arranged marriage. But we were best friends and extremely committed to each other. We had both just finished a Bachelors in Commerce (B.Com) and the USA was never on my mind, frankly speaking. But then came the golden news. My family, parents, my younger sister and I were granted Green Cards. And so began my love-hate relationship with the land of opportunity.”

“In matter of few months we all flew to the USA and decided to live there for a trial period of a year. I have always been very ambitious and hence decided to do full justice to it and tried looking for a job. Our initial few months were in Florida and I got a well-paid marketing job there. But due to unavoidable reasons we shifted from Florida to New Jersey. I immediately got a placement at Burger King. I worked there for exactly a day and realised that I was meant to do better. I had this thing at the back of my mind that if I could get a well-paid job in Florida, in a field I enjoy, I should be able to find something in New York too. After

desperate attempts and waiting, I eventually landed myself a job with a good company as a marketing officer and started pursuing it with all my heart and soul.

In that one year I experienced the USA in and out – new places to see, visit and work in. Each day was an adventure. I loved it. Luckily, I lived with my uncle and aunt who pampered me like their own daughter, and I hardly had to struggle like new immigrants did.

But there were things that were going on at the same time. My mother and my sister could not adapt too well in the USA and returned to India. And so my support systems – boyfriend, sister and mother – were in Ahmedabad and my father shuttling between the two worlds. My husband-to-be was sure that he did not want to come to the USA, as he was doing his CA. My mother was sure she wanted us to be engaged at least. And my father was the only one who was travelling back and forth between India and the USA. So I started rethinking. After a year I returned to India almost heartbroken, but the joy of being with family kept me optimistic. I kept my Green Card, which meant I had to be in the USA every six months.”

For Deepal it is not easy to keep a tab on the amount of trips she took back and forth from the USA to Ahmedabad as to retain a Green Card one needs to be in the USA every six months. She calls her sister to confirm the chronology of events.

She explains the several degrees and jobs she pursued between 2004 to 2014. “I came back, got engaged. But me being me, I could not sit idle or do a boring 9 to 5 job. I wanted to do something, but not CA nor Masters in Commerce, so I thought MBA was a good option. I gave the entrance exam, cleared it and

got admission at the NR Institute of Business Management and started an exciting journey in marketing. By the end of the course, I got the best campus placement through the institute at Reliance Mutual Funds with the best salary package available. I worked for two years at the company and climbed the ladder rapidly. That was around 2009, which is when talks of our wedding began from both families.”

To give an idea of the complexities she deals with, Deepal explains the family background. “I was brought up in a nuclear family and my husband, in a joint family of ten, complete with parents, grandparents, uncle and aunt and cousins. My husband has three sets of parents and so I have three mothers-in-law – my husband’s mother, aunt and grandmother! After the engagement, I felt that it was my duty to live up to their expectations and I too had responsibilities towards the family. They needed to retire. With this at the back of my mind, I continued my job. I got promoted. With the new position, the job got extremely demanding and I would leave early morning, but reach home only after 9 PM, tired and famished, with almost nil contribution to the family affairs. After my wedding I had to choose. There was no pressure from family, but the guilt within that I was not contributing enough... so I chose family. It was of course a difficult decision. The brain knew the reasons, the heart yearned for the opposite. But today when I think of it, it feels like the best decision I took.”

“Newly married, I definitely wanted to do something. At Reliance, I was largely involved in training. I felt I was good at talking, socialising, explaining and teaching. A profession that allowed me to pursue my interests and helped me give time at

home would be perfect. And so I decided I would do something related to teaching. After some research I opened up another stream of knowledge to be pursued: a Bachelors in Education (B.Ed.).”

“Meanwhile, my husband continued his rigorous attempts at the CA exams. He had almost given up, as he was exhausted. You know how CA is, right? The number of students that pass the test is in fractions! But luckily that year – I think 2012 – the two of us got our degrees together, mine as a B.Ed. and his as a Chartered Accountant. But inspite of a sense of contentment with what I had achieved, the USA bug had not left me. I had to keep going there every six months, as the Green Card was still valid. The restlessness in me made me file for my husband’s Green Card too. Frankly, we never had any intention to move there. I think that thought never crossed our minds. But just because I had it, I thought let us just try it. And just as all bad things happen together, all good things and news too come together. To all our surprise, he too got a Green Card!”

So far, so confusing. A B.Com degree, a ‘trial’ one-year work experience in the USA, MBA, two-year work experience in a corporate in India, a wedding, a social shift in family lifestyle, yet another degree, and then she decides to try to move to the USA with her husband. Phew! So much strength, ambition and sacrifice!

The rollercoaster ride began again. Deepal’s husband had heard a lot of stories of how the struggle for immigrants is difficult and taxing. From an affluent family in Ahmedabad, he knew his limitations and was aware of the benefits he had in India. His attachment to family and friends was also a



consideration. So 2013 was the testing year for the couple. They decided to give the USA a shot. Deepal had lived there for a year and could manage things. She wanted to make sure that her husband's stay there was as easy as possible. She moved away a month before his arrival and made all the arrangements. They loved it. The freedom and the novelty was fabulous. Since they were there on a trial basis, they did not rent an apartment, but stayed either at their friends' place or at a cousin's. It was almost like a live-in relationship. But one thing kept nagging them: their families back home. For Deepal, her parents' well-being was a concern. For her husband, the attachment to family was prevalent. Since she loved both worlds equally, she left it to her husband to choose: family or fun.

And again, there was something happening in Deepal's parallel world. Her mother refused to even visit the USA. Her sister had already given up her Green Card. And the expiry of her own Green Card was imminent. She had to decide whether she wanted to keep it or give it up. After all, to travel to the USA every year just to retain her status was not easy.

Deepal knew that "For me, my parents are everything. I need to be around them and I need them around me. I had to be there as they needed me and vice versa! We knew a lot of middle aged parents who have three or four children, all away from home. We knew how it was and we did not want our parents to go through any of it. And so, after a successful trial, we happily returned to Ahmedabad."

It was not a difficult choice. Deepal remembers, "After our return to India, I started work as a teacher for a few months at St Kabir and taught kids from 5th to 7th grade and became pregnant.

I was content with whatever I was doing. I was pregnant with all possible support, teaching with immense happiness and in India! And that is when I decided to give up the Green Card. The decision was followed by countless bits of advice from friends, cousins and family. But I felt that hanging on to the Green Card was pointless. I did not have any fascination for it; financially my family is stable, and hence for me it was not a very difficult choice. People even told me to go to the USA for my delivery and make him/her a citizen of the USA. I felt that if I invested in India the amount I would spend in going and living and delivering there, by the time my child grows up, she will have enough to go to the USA herself!”

Some things were very clear for Deepal: “I did not want to steal memories from my in-laws and my parents. I wanted both sets of parents to experience my baby’s arrival. I wanted them to help me nurture her, to help her learn, to celebrate her presence. I definitely wanted her to experience the love and care of grandparents. Money and citizenships are okay and can be done in the future, but missing the love of grandparents and great grandparents is so not okay!”

She is happy with her decisions. “And here I am, having a weird set of degrees and jobs to my credit, having a wonderful and supportive husband, a lively family of ten, a lovely daughter, amazing parents and sister and happily having given up my Green Card and choosing to live in India. It may seem as a difficult decision that I took but now that I look back, I think it was the best and perfect thing to have happened to us three as a family.”

To find someone like Deepal is rare. It is commendable that she could embrace the discomforts that came with a joint family

with so much conviction that it is difficult to believe that she was raised in a nuclear setting. It requires immense strength and will power to walk away from a tempting chance, to swim against the powerful current of 'western ideas', to accept and understand the good for the self and the people around you. And of course, it needs a lot of love.

## The teacher

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The adage says: ‘What a teacher is, is more important than what a teacher teaches.’ Ahmedabad has remained, perhaps for the longest time, a teacher to architects from all over the world. It has sustained complex mentorships between luminaries such as Louis Kahn and Le Corbusier and protégés such as BV Doshi. It is here that Doshi fostered an institution that would teach what he had learned to generations of budding architects. Joining the first wave of students at the new Centre of Environment Planning and Technology was a young student from Nairobi, Neelkanth Chhaya. Today the name evokes reverence from students who see him as an approachable and knowledgeable architect, academician and, first and foremost, teacher.

“I was born in Nairobi in Kenya. When I came to India to pursue my professional education, I had the choice of colleges like the Sir JJ School of Arts in Mumbai, or in Baroda, but I chose to study in Ahmedabad”. Was it because there were great architectural buildings in the city that time? The works of Louis Kahn and Corbusier had changed the face of the city. “I did not even know

the names of Le Corbusier and Kahn! I chose the school because on my first visit I got a sense of freedom and exploration, rather than stuffy established traditions. This was also the place to which I returned to teach,” says Prof. Chhaya.

He is seated in his home dressed comfortably in comfortable shorts and t-shirt, just out of an intense reading session with architects and interns from his firm – he invites them over for discussions and debates on Sundays. He talks animatedly about where to create a squash court in the old city, building on a mischievous thinking of reimagining ordinary urban spaces.

“Ahmedabad was home to a huge number of thinkers at the time that I was in CEPT. I was involved in classical music, and also in college functioning. CEPT allowed me to assimilate into this city, as an outsider. After my education, I returned to Kenya for a brief time, but the country was embroiled in ethnic turmoil then. I had the option to start my practise in Ahmedabad, and so I chose to return.” So it is here that he started and continued his practice, creating architecture that is thoughtful and rooted in the urban sprawl it emerged from.

Starting his teaching career at CEPT in 1987, his retirement after twenty-four years elicited disappointment and nostalgia from his students, many of whom were already successful architects. “I have always remained deeply involved in CEPT,” he says. The recent demolitions and alterations were actively contested by him. He participated in an early general petition that urged care while extending the campus so that the character was maintained. Similarly, he has protested the building of a structure in front of the Sanskar Kendra that was designed by Corbusier. This protest successfully prevented the defacing of Sanskar Kendra.

Prof. Chhaya, has been actively involved in the processes shaping the city, his eye constantly trained to its functioning, engaged in discussions that go beyond the role of an architect in the city or in any city, for that matter. In a metropolis populated with structures like the Sanskar Kendra, IIM, NID, ATMA and Sangath, the role of contemporary architecture is exceptionally difficult to define and sustain.

“Ahmedabad worked on a system of patrons. The wealthy mill owners or the *seths* brought in architects to enrich the city, with the intention of philanthropy. The patrons of yesteryear were enlightened and aware. They were also demanding. They expected certain devotedness to the architecture, and they did not skimp on cost. However, the idea of patronage in Ahmedabad has died today. The idea now is: Am I breaking even? What is my brand?” This is evident in the way that the city is growing now, in a haphazard burgeoning growth that threatens to consume the city. Ahmedabad is overreaching its boundaries, expanding, growing, building new avenues. Today Sanskar Kendra has become ‘heritage’, as much as the *pols* of the old city are. The works of the greats are becoming barricaded objects of art, with the grudging acceptance that the best has already come.

So how has CEPT contributed as a nation builder, since it is the alma mater of so many big architects of the country? “I think CEPT has helped widen the discussion about architecture from the purely professional to a level where we now discuss architecture in relation to societal and environmental realities. The institute was an early attempt at making ‘the question as important as the answer’. It also pioneered in making the relationship – between the architects’ work and cultural history – a key factor in thinking

about architecture. This open minded exploration was a hallmark of Ahmedabad in the 20th century, as a place where modernity was interrogated side by side with tradition. Today neither Ahmedabad nor the nation have that ambition or search, and are content to adopt a second-hand image of the modern,” explains Prof. Chhaya.

Prof. Chhaya regularly lectures in universities all over the country. His talks range over a variety of topics pertaining to the relationship of architecture and urban development. Architecture shapes, builds and moulds cities. The architect holds exemplary power to create social change, to become a catalyst for dissipating communal tension, or to celebrate life within the space he creates. Every act of building is the product of experiences, instincts and gambles that will set in motion the urban chain that is invariably connected to it. The teacher teaches you to wield such extraordinary power, in a responsible, relevant way. The playing ground is Ahmedabad, writ with history of the greats, but calling for the intervention of many more.

## The world's a stage...or screen!

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The world of *Gujarati* film and theatre is on a rise. Riding a new wave of enthusiasm, the people of Gujarat are watching more films, have more artistes, and are going to more plays than they have in over two decades. The elders talk about how they miss the old movies, but many are optimistic that a new era of *Gujarati* films is on the way.

Theatre and cinema have always existed in Gujarat, both mainstream, commercial theatre and parallel, experimental productions. The first full length sound film *Narsinh Mehta* was released in 1932. For many years after that, the *Gujarati* film industry was more or less static, rooted in storylines geared towards a rural audiences. Between the 60s and 80s, producers and directors like Arun Bhatt and Ketan Mehta, among others, heralded what some people call the golden age of *Gujarati* cinema.

Over the last two or three decades, there has been a visible decline in quality, even though the quantity of films being made and released has increased. The Gujarat government had ambitious and well-meaning, but misdirected policies to promote the industry;



that allowed the release of many low quality films. With themes that rode upon superficiality and cheap humour that was often sexist, it was hardly comparable to the *Marathi*, *Bengali*, *Malayalam* and other regional cinemas and theatres of the day.

As veteran Gujarat theatre artiste Aditi Desai points out, “Gujarat has a culture of business. We get influenced easily by market forces. Doing theatre and cinema against the market force is incredibly tough.” Work culture is about tedious, tiring work, while films are a medium to release stress. “After the earthquake, there is an air of trying to forget about worries and just enjoy,” Aditi remarks. “Even the [colloquial] word *jalso*, which used to refer to a night of cultural entertainment, has after 2001 come to mean a state of not being tense, of enjoyment.”

Desai has performed, written and directed numerous plays in various theatre techniques, all connected by a fierce commitment to social equality. “My father was a communist. For a long time, he used theatre as a medium to raise awareness and translated a lot of notable works. Through that he spread ideas of equality and democracy... In that time, very few women worked in theatre. Because of that, he wished that if he had a daughter, he would train her in theatre.”

Her values have been influenced by how she was brought up. “My parents were quite an unusual couple. My mom was a successful doctor who could have earned tons of money if she had a private clinic, and [unlike most] my father would be at home during the day. We all helped in the kitchen, cleaning the house, etc. All this was so natural that I didn’t know that there could be a different environment outside... Even with the theatre artistes who would hang out with us, there was no

concept of someone excluded, someone higher and someone lower.” To help spread these values in the theatre that her father helped her imbibe, she founded the Jaswant Thaker Memorial Foundation (JTMF).

Along her journey as a playwright, she was influenced by theatre for the masses – forms of street and participatory theatre. One strong influence was Badal Sircar. “On stage, actors are on a higher level, and audience are on a lower level. Badal Sircar felt that there should be no distinction between audience and actors – we should remove the barrier between them so that they are on the same level. He came to conduct a workshop on this type of theatre in Ahmedabad. I attended that, and understood how to use actors’ bodies and voices.”

Desai dabbled a bit in television and radio as well, and through this became aware of how powerful theatre was as a tool for giving a voice and visibility to the unheard and invisible. “When I went to college, my professor Dr Ila Pathak had an organisation called AWAG (Ahmedabad Women’s Action Group). When I was in the second year, there was a huge incident in Ahmedabad: a girl named Varsha Dixit was burned alive. Prof. Pathak told me to do a street play on that. She gave me a file that had actual newspaper clippings of incidents of violence against women. I couldn’t sleep the whole night after reading it.”

The next day, she started work on the play, later titled *Stri-Savdhan*. “Our first show was near Paldi bus stand. After the show, an old man came crying to me and told me that his daughter was abused a lot and begged me to save her. I directed her to AWAG, where they have a support group, lawyers, a counselling centre, etc. That’s when I realised the power of theatre. If theatre

can really help people like this, then it is powerful. Just doing a play for the sake of it would be damaging. After a year, we did a play again at Paldi, where we saw that the effect of the previous year's production was gone. For focused effort, we decide to rent a particular area behind Kochrab Ashram. We did plays, worked with the people and tried to help them." She was well connected to NGOs that worked for marginalised and oppressed sections of society. As she did more plays and experimented with different forms of theatre – such as Theatre of the Oppressed – Desai was able to deeply touch all communities, including tribals, adivasis, urban poor and the middle class. Many of these plays were in the local dialects and languages, each different for different tribes and regions in Gujarat.

She has also seen that people, especially in the current individualistic, fast paced generation, are sometimes averse to depth, emotions and social issues.

Because of this, and with her strong values from her childhood, her commitment to bring to life experimental theatre with a social impact became fierce, and with plays like *Kasturba*, *Akoopar* and *Samudra Manthan*, Desai was able to bridge the gap between experimental and commercial theatre.

She has faced struggle, with the popular market of cheap entertainment drawing crowds away from her productions. Artistes from her foundation, JTME, and Saumya Joshi's *Welcome Zindagi* are able to do this, while institutions such as Darpana Academy of Performing Arts, Scrapyard, Gujarat Vidyapith and others have been instrumental in taking experimental theatre to large audiences. "Many mainstream theatre artistes would sell their shows to a private club, perform for a private audience and earn

money through that. The only money that we get, however, is from the ticket box office.”

There is another box office story, that needs to be spoken about. Abhishek Jain, one of the forerunners in the revival of the film industry, says that of the recent *Gujarati* films that have been released, those more connected to roots, to the people's childhood, to the feeling of familiarity are what cinema goers seem to flock to. Films that try to mimic traditional Hollywood and Bollywood films are not popular.

Along with Mikhil Musale and Nayan Jain, he started Cineman Productions. Abhishek has directed modern day *Gujarati* films such as *Kevi Rite Jaish* and *Bey Yaar*. His third film *Wrong Side Raju*, released on September 9, 2016, in collaboration with Bollywood's Phantom Films.

Abhishek, an *Amdavadi*, worked in Mumbai with Bollywood production houses before deciding that he had to come back home to help fill the gaping void in *Gujarati* films, especially those made for urban audiences. He says, “With Cineman Productions, since inception, the idea was to make a brand, a production house that encourages talent, makes directors, creates productions out of raw talent and then produces movies.”

Many, including Aditi, credit him as being a pioneer of the change. Desai says, “Abhishek Jain has shifted the market. He is a visionary, has determination and had the support of famous mentors.”

Jain himself is more humble, saying that the revival was bound to happen. “Every regional film industry has its cycle. *Marathi* films are doing great now, but they weren't so a couple of decades ago. If social media had existed back in the 70s and 80s, *Gujarati*

films would have made a lasting mark on the film industry. Of course, they had made a mark then as well.”

He has worked hard and passionately to make his dream a reality. “Technically, I am a *Marwadi*. But I don’t identify myself that way. I am more of an *Amdavadi*. We were taught that stories come from our childhood, our roots, and all my life I’ve lived in *Amdavad*. So my stories came from my city, my *Amdavad*, my relatives, my friends, neighbours, everything. For me, it was very obvious that the set-up of my films had to be *Gujarati*. Because of my background, I can also have an objective perspective to these films. Since there was not much happening in Gujarat, It was a stupid idea at that time to think like that; when you are working with some of the biggest directors in Bollywood, you don’t think like that! But now it is backed by conviction. Also, there is a dialogue in *Kevi Rite Jaish* taken straight from my life: *Jo hu India ma raish to hue ek hazaar ne ek banish, ane tya jaish to ek hazaar maathi ek banish*. (If I stay here, I will be one of thousands, but if I go there, to the USA, I will be one – unique – amongst the many.) Inspired by him, several *Gujarati* production houses have cropped up, and after *Kevi Rite Jaish*, a number of modern and urban films have been made. In fact, after about a dozen hits in 2014-2015, box office collections jumped from Rs 7 crore to Rs 55 crore.

These films have focused on many themes, including romance, coming of age, migration, LGBTQ rights and more. Abhishek and many others have used the *Gujarati*’s hunger for comedy, the desire to connect to their childhood and simple relatable themes to raise the quality of films and to cater to a larger audience.

The industry still faces resistance. Exhibitors and other stakeholders are still skeptical about the film industry in Gujarat,

which is admittedly on a smaller scale than *Hindi* and English films, especially in non-comedic genres. But Abhishek is optimistic.

*Amdavadis* have always been an adaptable bunch, and love to experiment with food, dance and films. As they travel more, get access to more resources and exposure, the shift from narrow business mindedness to an open, experimental and creative climate is evident. While there is a lack of institutions that help build creative talent, groups of artistes like Aditi and Abhishek are encouraging people to go out and explore, be it non-*Gujarati* theatre, amateur filmmaking or other aspects of the arts.

Abhishek Jain and Aditi Desai believe that going for a film or a performance is not just about having fun, but about engaging with the other emotions as well. It is time more people experience theatre and cinema, become better connected to their roots, be more of a community and thereby, understand other people, nature and themselves.

“If you would like to support *Gujarati* theatre and cinema, please do see screenings and performances of plays. JTTF would appreciate it if you could help to market, raise audiences, setup and host stages, and,” signs off Aditi.

## Love at first lick!

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“It all started when one of my many dogs suffered a canine dysfunction,” says Roma Rajan, an enthusiastic volunteer at Jivdaya. An animal lover and a faculty at the aviation college in Ahmedabad, she spends as much time possible at the animal welfare centre. As she rides through the Panjrapol entrance on her two-wheeler, her face glows with an unseen smile. She feels at home and as she drives in, a stream of dogs circle her to say hello. Back in 2009, when she admitted her dog to the hospital for surgery, she came across a centre that offered an unexpected taste of humanity – Jivdaya. Other private doctors hesitated to touch the dog as it was the *Indian Pariah* breed which is commonly known as Indian ‘stray’ dog. “The centre closes at 6 PM,” she says. However, back then the doctors carried on till 8 PM so that the operation was successful.

Post-surgical procedures took another hour and she was touched by the dedication of the employees to an animal. She asked a doctor if he lived nearby. “My home is almost a two-hour journey from here,” he replied. Later, when her pet was under observation,

for the next few days, Roma drove around many people who work here, thus understanding their lifestyles and their deep involvement with the centre. “I made up my mind to devote my time at Jivdaya then. Whenever there is an emergency, they call me. We treat animals free of cost,” she says.

*The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.*

– Mahatma Gandhi

Jivdaya: The organisation dedicated to animal welfare was started by Giraben C. Shah with her father Hasmukh Shah, two trustees, and four employees. It provides medical care to stray domestic animals and also runs a rehabilitation centre for wild birds and small mammals. It helps suffering animals and tries to nurture them back to a healthy and happy life. When it began in 2007, Jivdaya was nothing but a field full of grass, snakes and one big room, sans a van, driver or animal catchers. Then a Save the Birds campaign was launched and an avian operation theatre was built. Injured birds flocked in – doves that bled, crows and sparrows with cut wings. With them came volunteers and help. An X-ray machine, air purifier, and autoclave were the first bought for the centre, followed by three kennels and three cages. Jivdaya was considered successful!

“As soon as I enter, I feel that I experience heaven on earth. I have nothing on my mind. I get and give selfless love,” says Roma. “We admit every animal as a patient, just as any human would be taken care of.” There is a van that brings in animals and birds after verification of a mishap; a case paper is filed and



then the right doctors are informed. The animal is taken into the operation theatre, ICU or ICCU, as required. “Dogs are much more than faithful servants,” she says. A dog donated blood to another once and the team of doctors and Roma sat beside it over the weekend to make sure that the healing process was complete. As she proudly showed us the centre, every dog – the injured, the healed, the operated-on – rubbed its empathic face on her, showing love and respect and most important, a sense of gratitude. She walked past a black dog, completely blind. Growling at first, he sensed a familiar smell and calmed down. As she caressed his face, he snuggled against her and a tear trickled down from his eye.

The oversized net boundary managed by Shrikant hosts and cures royal birds – like the peacock with a broken foot, flamingos and more. A flutter of over 250 pigeons was divided and tagged. Some awaited release after recovery, others were more long-term residents, some had a cut wing or leg and could never fly again, while a few had terminal illnesses. They all had one thing in common: they were well fed and content.

*Uttarayan* is the busiest period for bird care, the staff says. “We are as strict with hygiene as we can be with existing resources. Everything is sterilised, biomedical waste is taken care of, masks are provided and instruments are maintained and cleaned regularly. With the 30-40 birds that undergo simultaneous surgery during *Uttarayan*, there is no single set of equipment which hasn’t been sterilised. Three or four autoclaves are constantly in function. So as soon as one set is used, the volunteers replace it with a clean and sterile set immediately.” *Giraben* Shah is proud of the work being done.

*Ushaben* cooks 100 *rotis* every day. She feeds pure milk to every

animal and *paneer* to the weaker dogs. She knows how and what to give each one. It is almost as if she is one of them. “We believe in love at first lick,” exclaims Roma. “Society is changing. It is getting tolerant.” The *Amdavadis* now know that there is someone to share the responsibility of curing stray dogs and hurt birds. Unlike the noisy neighbours who would abuse an annoying puppy, citizens adopt, nurture and train them. Unlike the youth that would spend their evenings cutting *manjha* during *Uttarayan*, a group now acts as volunteers. “Something is changing,” Roma knows. And as she zooms past the cow shed, she is saddened by the plight of the cattle that crowds at the Jivdaya gates for water and food.

## Unfinished wonders

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Perhaps the most deceptive aspect of Ahmedabad is its size. I've never been able to grasp just how big it is. It seems like a relatively small city compared to India's other metros – it even lacks an intra-city rail network. Of course, my years there were largely confined to the western part of the city, where the educational institutions are located, and for a long time this constituted my imagination of Ahmedabad. In reality, it's a city of considerable sprawl, with its outermost edges spreading far beyond the notional borders in my head.

The moment I set out to explore Ahmedabad and discover its many wonders, my perceptions changed, and I became aware of the surprising diversity of places that constituted the city. It turns out I really didn't know much about Ahmedabad, despite having spent six years here. For example, I knew nothing about the vast green expanse of the zoo at Kankariyan or about the Murugan temple in the South Indian bastion of Maninagar. Every discovery was unexpected, and therefore so much more rewarding as an experience.

Ahmedabad's many wonders include the numerous historical monuments spread across the city. Tombs, *dargahs*, temples and mosques dating to the medieval period can crop up in the most unexpected places. Some have been well preserved; most are falling into ruin. Almost all of them are invisible and lie forgotten. One such monument that I'm eager to visit is the Qutub-e-Alam *dargah* in Vatwa, a little known place with a fascinating history. I have never been to Vatwa before, but the BRTS buses can take me there comfortably, sparing me from having to sweat it out in the morning heat.

The first part of the journey takes me past familiar sights, but as we pass the main railway station, I realise that Kalupur has always marked the eastern limit of the city in my head – everything beyond that is unfamiliar territory. Half an hour later, I'm still passing through busy neighbourhoods and the city seems never-ending. When I finally get off at Vatwa, I'm not sure if I'm in the same Ahmedabad anymore.

It's a bit of a walk from the BRTS stop to the *dargah*, and I find myself in a working class neighbourhood. There are no signs that a monument of historical significance lies somewhere ahead. A simple archway, with a sign in Urdu – that's all there is at the entry. I have to walk through a narrow street flanked by shops and houses in order to reach the complex.

As soon as I see it, I'm struck by the *dargah's* unique proportions. The main tomb consists of a square structure with an arched colonnade on all four sides. There is an inner two-tiered colonnade, topped by a white dome. Beside the main structure are smaller tombs, belonging to Qutub-e-Alam's sons. The building is in a considerable state of ruin – there are even

a few plants growing on the walls. But there is no mistaking the fine construction and intricate details. It gives one the sense of decayed splendour. Of course, despite the finer architecture, the Qutub-e-Alam is not an exceptional monument. Others in the city have more elaborate carvings, or are better preserved. What makes this monument unique, however, is the fact that it is incomplete, and there is a fascinating story about why it was never finished. The incompleteness is evident as one walks circles the building, and it suffuses the place with an aura of mystique – as you explore it, you will be constantly confronted by visions of what might have been.

The Qutub-e-Alam *dargah* stands out as an epitome of unfulfilled ambition. Dedicated to the Sufi saint Sayyid Burhanuddin Qutub-e-Alam, who founded the Bukharia sect of Sufi Islam, the *dargah* initially consisted of a single shrine. During the reign of Mahmud Begada, the shrine was significantly expanded and restored. Begada, the great-grandson of Ahmed Shah I, was a devout Muslim, committed to funding the construction of new religious institutions and expanding existing ones. In particular, he had ambitious plans for the *dargah*. He had great respect for Sarkar Qutub-e-Alam, and his vision was to build a monument of unparalleled size and beauty in the Saint's honour.

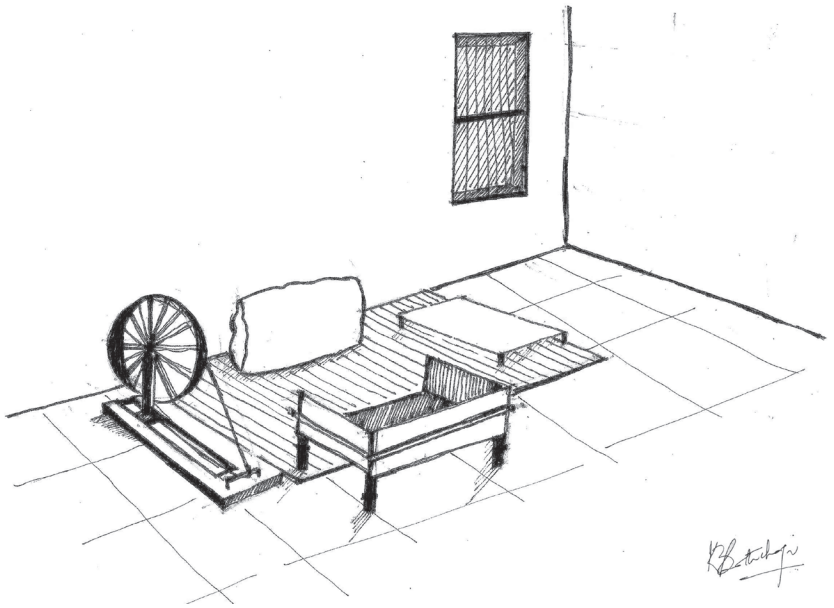
What exists today only hints at the extent of the monument as it was originally conceived. The outer colonnade, though roofless, is much more massive than the inner layer, suggesting that it was meant to support another tier of colonnades on top as well as a much larger dome, which would have been built over the present one. That was the intention, and this in itself would have been enough to mark it as a unique structure. But Begada actually

planned to build five more layers of colonnades around the present one, each surmounted by dome bigger than the last. The structure, if completed, would have consisted of seven domes, one inside the other, all stacked up like a monumental set of Russian dolls. It would have taken an impressive feat of engineering to accomplish, not to mention tonnes of material and considerable labour. The width of the existing columns in the outer colonnade is nearly a metre, so one can only imagine what the scale of the completed building might have been. In fact, Begada is said to have claimed that he would build the outermost dome so large, one would be able to see the Mecca from its top.

If this grand vision had been even halfway realised, then the Qutub-e-Alam mausoleum would still have become a monument of great repute, perhaps even as iconic as the Taj Mahal. But at the end of the day, it became a victim of its own ambitions, and Begada's vision could never become reality. Perhaps this was because he diverted his resources and attention elsewhere; Mahmud Begada did earn a reputation for being a monument builder, specifically for the numerous structures that he later built at his new capital of Champaner, which today is a UNESCO World Heritage site.

The Qutub-e-Alam tomb may be only a shadow of the impressive architecture seen in Champaner, but the fact is that its story is far more compelling. Today it stands almost forgotten, deep inside a *mohalla* in the far side of Ahmedabad – a monument that could have been. It is an interesting building from an architectural point of view, but apart from architects and the religious-minded, I can't imagine anyone else wanting to see it. In fact, as I walk around the main structure, I can see that there is hardly anyone around. The inner hall is locked and deserted. Where is the *mujawar*? Perhaps it

is a good thing, because I can't think of anything to ask him. The building itself speaks volumes, and I'm content to simply observe it. Thanks to its isolation, the Qutub-e-Alam *dargah* will always remain a surprising secret of the city – and that in itself makes the long journey to Vatwa worthwhile.



*K. Botkin*



## Friends from Kerala

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Two underprivileged children from Kerala with 20 per cent vision had seen nothing but misery all their lives, until 2014, when these siblings were discovered by a member of the Malayali Friend's Group (MFG). Today, not only is their education sponsored by a fellow *Malayali* from Sydney but they will also have a shot at restoring their vision, thanks to sponsorships from *Malayalis* in Dubai and Saudi Arabia.

These sponsorships have been possible with the efforts of one *Malayali* from Ahmedabad, through the internet. MFG was founded by Gopal Nair in early 2009 as an email chain of just 10 members. It operated simply by circulating mails, akin to viral marketing. By the end of year 2009, MFG had 13,000 members and was giving a tough fight to established portals that provided services for accommodation, jobs and marriages. Currently, MFG has 1.51 lakh members from 82 countries, including the US, the UK, New Zealand, the UAE, South Africa, South Korea, Australia, Canada, and Bangladesh, among others. It also has some influential members on its advisory board, including people like Padma Shri

PT Usha, leading actress Shobhana, scientists, industrialists and IAS officers, among others.

“Our work is entirely internet based, which means that we have no office or paid staff or any expense, for that matter. When I circulate an email for a noble cause, it gets sponsored within minutes. MFG never accepts any extra money and sticks to its requirement for each cause,” says Nair, who has facilitated everything – right from 150 eye correction surgeries in Gujarat to even a sex change operation – absolutely free of cost.

Besides arranging funds, MFG also has a legal cell and a health cell, which organise training programmes and camps and offer free advice to those in need. Among the interesting initiatives by MFG are the matrimony and career assistance programmes. The group has played matchmaker to solemnise marriages, helped secure jobs and even accommodation for fellow members and their relatives and friends.

“We have members from around the world. To avail our services, all one has to do is send a mail for registration. Once we receive the requirement from that member, we circulate the message to our members on email,” says Nair, who came to Ahmedabad 38 years ago in search of a job and has since made this city his home.

Having come from an economically weak background himself, Nair had to struggle a lot during his childhood. He, along with all his siblings, managed to study till class X as schooling was free till class X. After his elder sister got a job in Ahmedabad with a cousin's help, Nair bought his first pair of slippers and boarded a train to Ahmedabad. The city welcomed him with open arms and he found a kind employer, who supported him steadily as Nair

juggled work and further studies. Later, he met his wife Latha, a *Malayali* raised in Ahmedabad and a staunch supporter of his work.

“Once I was financially independent, I came up with the idea of giving back to society what I generously and unconditionally received in my time of need,” says Nair, who is now working towards his project of giving vision to poor children by facilitating eye operations. He attributes his success to the generous nature of Ahmedabad and its people.

“I came to Ahmedabad with literally nothing. Ahmedabad gave me everything in life and today I lead a comfortable life. If you are a hard worker, Ahmedabad is one of the best places to live in,” he says.

Success stories abound.

Ajay Krishnan, a 13-year-old boy from Palakkad, was blind since birth. He had lost his father at the age of one and though he had been operated at the age of four months, he lost his vision again with time. Doctors recommended another surgery but Ajay’s partially blind mother – who works as a daily wager – could not afford it. Later, MFG volunteers made arrangements for the surgery and today Ajay’s vision is 60 per cent and improving with time.

Besides supporting young blind children, MFG has also sponsored the study expenses of students from rural areas. For example, two young girls from poor families are today studying to become a doctor and nurse, respectively. For the first time, MFG has undertaken the project of building a one-room-and-kitchen set for an elderly couple for Rs 3 lakh.

Till date, MFG has arranged funds worth Rs 13.4 crore for

various causes, including Rs 2.4 lakh per month to 180 poor elderly people. Besides arranging funds, MFG has played matchmaker to 53 couples and arranged jobs for 452 people, mostly in the Middle East, absolutely free of cost.

These friends from Kerala, coupled with an *Amdavadi* business spirit furthered by philanthropy continue their journey forward.

## The mistress of spice

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“I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth, literally. My dresses and footwear was made with silver and gold borders, I was my father’s favourite child. I was not supposed to be, since I was the third daughter, but I was his lucky charm. After my birth his business of silk *sarees* reached unimaginable heights. Till I was eight years old, our shop in Devji Sarya *ni Pol* was doing wonderful business and so we were very very prosperous,” says Ansuya Shah, entrepreneur. Drive straight down from the Jodhpur *Char Rasta* and halt at a society with three-storied white-washed buildings. On the ground floor, behind the SBI ATM, a modest cozy home is where she trades her products.

A mixed scent of powdered *masalas*, packaged condiments and raw spices hits the nostrils at the door of the shop, which is the living room of her home. Wearing a simple pink cotton *saree*, Ansuyaben welcomes everyone with a broad smile. The living room is an interesting setting, with the sofas becoming customer seating, the swing being a display zone-counter, the space below the sofa

and TV storage unit turned into temporary storage spaces. There is much stacked in the shelves, commotion in the living room, customers, her husband and herself, but there is an absence of chaos and a presence of immense love and passion that emanates from her.

*Ansuyaben* was born in 1950, after one brother and two sisters. Her initial childhood years were extremely adventurous, since she was naughty and stubborn, celebrating her academic failure in 2nd grade with ice cream, and ruining a room full of fresh guavas to be gifted to Brahmins with a bite taken out of each. *Ansuyaben* was brought up in an affluent but spiritual family. “We had certain rules. Every year we would watch atleast one spiritual movie and visit our family priest in Dakor and spend the summer vacations there. So till I was twenty, I frankly had no idea about love and life. There was no inlet for it in my growing years. My family experienced great prosperity till I was eight years old. In 1958, my father’s *saree* shop caught fire and was burned to ashes. The story of our overnight journey from riches to rags was published in the newspapers.” *Ansuyaben* remembers that. “During that time we started selling samosas worth 3 *paisa* at the same shop where we sold *sarees* worth 5,000 rupees!”

From then on, the entrepreneur sense in her was ignited. “In my family we expose our children to business at a very young age. The child is allowed to sit through all ‘adult’ discussions regarding money, deals and other matters. With one condition, of course: the mouth should be shut, but the eyes and ears are to be kept open. And so I would assist my brother in his catering business. From a very young age, entrepreneurship

interested me. I have always had good management skills and an inclination to keep busy all the time. One thing was clearly etched in my thoughts – to always be the alpha one in whatever I do. I think all of this has helped me in my life to be a success,” she says modestly.

After fire destroyed the *saree* business, the financial crisis her family had to face and her keen interest in business pushed *Ansuyaben* to attend college and hold the full-fledged job of ‘punch operator’ in the Gujarat Technical Board of Education, along with helping her brother. “But I wanted to do more, to be at a higher post on the technical board. After some enquiries I realised that I need to do exams to reach that post and the result statistics of those were very low, worse than even CA examinations. There was another hitch – there was no reference material available in any bookstore or library for these exams, it was just general knowledge from office tables and areas that I did not understand. Once, while travelling to Gandhinagar to find out more about the exam, a co-traveller offered to help me with a supply of reference material, but on one condition: I had to return the books on the date he specified. In those days there were no photocopy machines or computers; I had to study before the date he demanded. I worked very hard for the exams. I would wake up at 3 AM, study from the books, help my sister-in-law with chores, help my brother with catering orders, attend college and then go to the office. Slowly I managed to clear all the six papers and reached a very high post on the technical board, along with a degree in commerce. My brother’s catering business also took off to such profit levels that he could restart

our *saree* business. Of course, we were very famous caterers too!” *Ansuyaben* is very proud.

Hardwork has always been her route to success. But there are three major ingredients in her life: love for business, love for God and love for humanity. She never starts or ends anything without a prayer. She strongly believes in the idea of karma and loves her husband totally. The story of how she decided to marry a differently abled person is as inspiring as her entrepreneurial qualities.

*Ansuyaben*’s husband is polio affected. He now helps her do odd jobs like filling *masala* packets, pricing them, keeping accounts, talking and inspiring customers to buy their products, attending Amway meetings, inspiring other people to join the Amway business and more.

She recollects, “Being of marriageable age and yet being unmarried was a big taboo in those times. But I was not bothered by these ideas. I was always very spiritual and compassionate. I would take a bus to my workplace from home. And on the way from home to the bus stop there was a school for the blind – I would always help a needy person or two to cross the street. While doing so, a friend teased me, saying, ‘Instead of holding hands and helping random men cross the street, why don’t you marry one?’ It was very hurtful, but I took it in a positive spirit. I ignored her stupidity but that thought stuck: to marry someone in whose life my presence makes a difference forever. That is how I thought I should marry a differently-abled man and be his support. I met my husband, got engaged and then married in a few months. Till date I do not know which of his legs is



polio affected. It did not bother me then and does not matter to me even today. After marriage, we moved to Kanpur with my husband's family, where they had a textile agency. Till the birth of my first daughter, everything was very good. There was love, happiness and prosperity." She recollects.

Ansuyaben's current business deals with forty-two items – *masalas*, condiments, mouth fresheners, fryums, *papads* and pickles. She has over 1,700 customers, a staff of seventy women who work out of their own homes and at their convenience, a car, two scooters, the SBI ATM and a cozy home with a dutiful son, two lovely daughters and a devoted daughter-in-law.

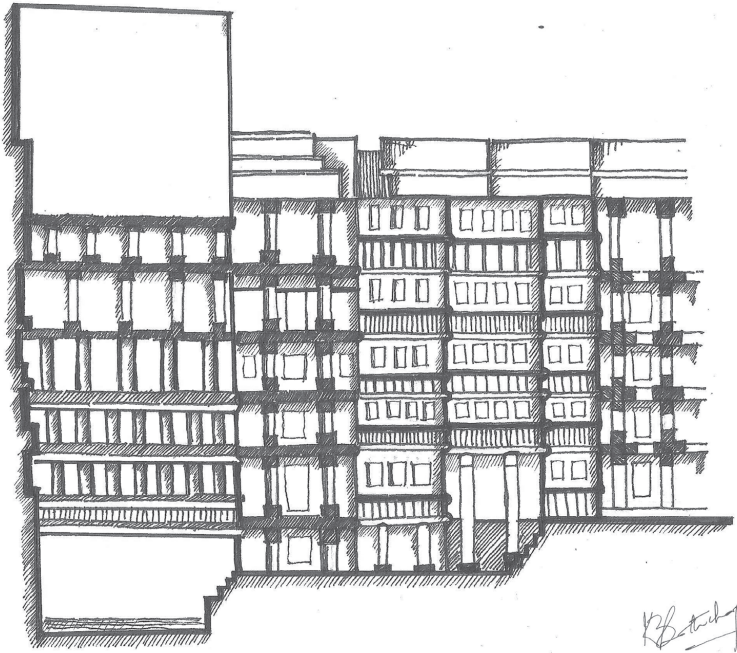
"It has taken a long time to reach here. Life has been like a rollercoaster ride. Till then I had only done business with my brother and family. I think the real struggle began only five years after marriage. And that is when my real leadership qualities took shape and helped me mould my life and family to this stature." Saying so she gulps a glass of *matka*-cold water to cool her throat.

"The most enlightening struggle was after my father-in-law's textile agency shut down at Kanpur and we had to move back to Ahmedabad overnight. Due to family and financial issues, my father-in-law could not take the stress and would be ill very often. There was not much source and scope of income. And hence I started my first independent business with chilly powder. I had a friend who had financial problems in her family. She needed money, but did not want it be known that she was fending for herself since her family was conservative and would have disapproved. She had an interesting proposal for me. She said

that her brother had chilly farms. He would grow and monitor the farms, grind the chillies and package the powder. My job was to handle the sales and marketing, in today's terminology. I had no shop or a ready clientele, so I took to selling chilly powder door to door. Initially I was very embarrassed that I had to stoop so low. But then I felt, as long as I am true to my family and earn for them, nothing matters. One thing led to another and slowly I built a string of customers. My other family members – *mama*, *mami*, sisters-in-law, sisters, and brothers – played a crucial role in finding me customers. But I could do this business only in the summer. So I started doing seasonal business. Diwali snacks in winter, kites and *manjas* during *Uttarayan*, bed sheets and dress materials in other months. My entrepreneurial sense along with my immense faith in God has always given me luck in the business I do. I somehow manage to sell whatever I buy and have rarely suffered a loss. Today I sell forty-two items. I did not know how to make all these initially. I was only a good sales and marketing person. But eventually I tried my hand at it. The customers taught me some recipes. Some were learned through acquaintances, some through well wishers. Besides that, we also manage a new found business scheme in Amway. My entire family is in both these things.”

“Now I dedicate maximum of my free time to Swadhyay. I take up classes, visit rural villages and spread the message of the Gita. I have also done three courses of Vipassana. I am still curious, still enthusiastic about business, about new items to introduce, and still young at heart. This is my entire life story – I don't feel it is extraordinary.” *Ansuyaben* ends a two-and-a-half hour conversation with touching modesty.

What makes *Ansuyaben's* story so interesting? She is a very successful and efficient businesswoman. But there are so many beautiful colours to her character that it leaves you wondering what makes her more desirable – her entrepreneurship, her compassion, her faith in God or her positivity? Or simply the fact that she placed her entire life story on record with simple honesty?



B. B. B.

## The culture strike

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Surendra Patel and his triad of friends rode on their motorbikes and sat on the outskirts of the old city of Ahmedabad on the west side of the river Sabarmati, along one of the highways that gave a panoramic view of the upsurging new city of Ahmedabad. They saw the city growing. They saw the high-rises shooting up like cardiograms. They saw the spreading sprawl of commercial spaces and the interweaving network of institutions. They saw that the fresh, airy highway that they were now sitting on would meet a similar destiny and later be victim to ‘development’. The development that would perhaps grip the humans working in those mammoth edifices. “I had to build something somewhere that would never stop this passage of fresh air. A place where the visitor would get psychologically cured, devoid of doctors, medication or alcohol. I resolved to build a human environment, outside four walls, natural and powerful,” says Surendrabhai Patel, founder and owner of Vishalla.

Business skills are said to run in the veins of every *Amdavadi*. With a silver spoon of enterprise establishment techniques, a lack

of money did not hold Surendrabhai back. “I had two rupees in my pocket, and we were a group of three.” One fine day, a meal was cooked with the minimal utensils, signature spices and essential vegetables gathered. A few friends had come over and ate a hearty meal at under a banyan tree *chabutara*. The news of three young men cooking delicious food travelled across the town of Ahmedabad. A place was rented and Vishalla was born. Surendrabhai, an interior designer and graphic designer by profession, conceptualised, visualised and created a village within the town. His dear friends, Kamleshbhai and Rajubhai stood as foundation stones for Vishalla.

From a small eat-out, the abode has now expanded to a full-fledged classic rural setup with a restaurant, museum and art displays and workshops. It is what engages a customer to the space, and leaves him energised for the week ahead. It is the food that makes its mark on the tastebuds, and the overall experience that makes the visitor crave for more. The success of this hotel rests on the broader skeleton of the concept food and the activities in the kitchen. While designing the interiors, Surendrabhai investigated what it meant to have a balanced diet. He studied how oil, *ghee*, sugar and chilly, used extensively in *Gujarati* culture, can prove harmful to health. He learned that storage in a deep freeze lowers nutritive value. He designed the menu accordingly to be a hybrid. “Here in Ahmedabad, food is a mode of entertainment. Eating out is routine. Then why not make the most of it?” The introduction to Italian, Chinese and American food could not overpower the *Amdavadi khana*. “*Shaadi mein macaroni bhi rahegi, handwa bhi rahega* (In weddings there will be macaroni and *handwa* served). The children will still want *fafda* after a heavy breakfast of pancakes.”

Food is the religion that empowers the *Amdavadi* to conserve his culture.

The *thali* offered at Vishalla is ‘wholesome’. It is reminiscent of a bygone glory and a promising future. A *Gujarati thali* meal is a sensory, stimulating activity. Welcomed with fruit juice, you find yourself eagerly awaiting food to be served in your *thali*. Smells have been tickling your nostrils for a long time. You crumble the *farsan* and *papad* in your fingers and crunch happily through every morsel. *Makai na rotla* and *makkhan* melt in the mouth. You slurp the *kadi* and the *dal* to quench your hunger and thirst, only to find yourself craving a sweet delicacy. By the time it is over, you are soothed with a digestive *chaas*. The sweets and the oil do not harm you, because you eat a little of everything, in a balanced meal. “We practice *atithi devo bhava* and you end up blessing us with *annadata sukhi bhava*,” says Surendrabhai. The longing for good food and a designers’ mind led him to explore the world in a way never seen before.

Creating a place where time stands still, the utensil museum provides a snapshot into an everyday life of the past. The pots that once brewed slithery curries, the steamers that whistled to break the silence of the dawn and the nutcrackers on *pan thalis* that witnessed one of the craftiest games of gambling in the royal and local households now stand still, watching time pass at Vechar, the utensil museum. The birth of Vechar (Vishalla Environmental Centre for Heritage of Art, Architecture and Research, a charitable trust) after three years of the inception of Vishalla, happened in 1981. Surendrabhai’s thirst for adding value to food served took him to Saurashtra, where craftsmen were forced to melt brass utensils to sell the base metal for much-needed money. He recognised the

heritage value of routine items and bought all that he could find. “Some of the vessels’ designs leave you open-mouthed with the implied logic in the mind of the maker. For instance, you are sure to gasp at the structure of the milk pot, which is made such that when it is touched, it wobbles but does not fall,” says Surendrabhai. “The water *ghangala* curvature was perfect to fit against a woman’s waist curve at its lower end and the bend of her wrist at the upper end. The utensils include metals like brass, copper, bronze, zinc and German silver and they are categorised according to the purpose they served; they include vessels for water, for milking, to store ornaments, those used for travelling, household items, vessels for worship... Made in sync with the human ergonomics, they have stood the test of time.”

Walking through history presented in the contemporary exhibit, the *gama* at Vishalla now burps with the contentment of conserving heritage and serving healthy and tasty food.



## Beyond conflict

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“Because it is so important to protect their core belief, they will rationalise, ignore and even deny anything that doesn’t parlay with it.” Frantz Fanon’s hard hitting quote, underlying the basic reason for any conflict, is set in a quiet place at the former Gool Lodge, a decrepit, crumbling mansion once owned by a Parsi lady called Bachuben Nagarwala. It has almost been forgotten in the hustle and bustle of the old city of Ahmedabad. Its crumbling façade is flanked by a *peepal* tree creating tapestries on the wall in the sunlight. The squawks of caged birds being sold near the *haveli*’s gates echoes through the quiet. A sole sign heralding ‘The Conflictorium’ beckons the true seeker to a one-of-a-kind museum in the city, speaking unabashedly of the various conflicts and controversies the state has witnessed. The house had thrown open its gates to all the artists and poets in the city who want to meet to talk about a cause.

Shefali, a young volunteer looks after the working of the Conflictorium along with Avni Sethi, artist and dancer whose brainchild this novel concept is. “People don’t want to talk about

conflicts. People want to talk about conflict resolution, without understanding the situation or confronting and accepting the conflict. We are a neutral party. We do nothing except put the issue on the table for discussion. Because without accepting the existence of a conflict, achieving resolution is futile.” The Conflictorium is an archive of all the clashes that have occurred in Gujarat since its inception, including that during its separation from the Bombay Presidency in 1959 and the events of 2013. The museum painstakingly chronicles every riot, every argument, every skirmish and every disagreement between parties, binding them into tightly bound scrolls that are locked in cabinets fitted along the wall and stored deep in the memories of those who have lived through the violence.

“Ahmedabad is known as the city of conflicts, mainly because of the 2002 riots that scarred our memories. The biggest skirmish between Hindus and Muslims and the consequent class and racial discrimination that followed has divided Ahmedabad. Another division that Ahmedabad faces is of the new and old cities. The new city is a hub of the arts—with exhibitions also and arts and design colleges — that compels a certain kind of intellectual discussion. The old city, on the other hand, has the general aura of being stuck in time. There still exists a perception that the old city is the trigger for most conflicts that take place in Ahmedabad. The Conflictorium was started to bridge the gap between the two. The location is apt, because it is near a *dargah*, a *mandir* and a cemetery. Manual scavengers and government officials alike reside in the area. The Conflictorium is the epicentre of it all,” says Shefali, a graduate of Conflict Management from Banaras Hindu University. The museum may be seen by some as an open wound, bleeding,

throbbing, drawing attention to the pain that news dailies attempt to gloss over and neutralise, but it exists nevertheless.

“One of the most important rooms within this space is the one that holds the original copy of the Indian Constitution.” In the museum, all the exhibits are open, free to be touched, felt and experienced by visitors. The Constitution of India can be leafed through – it was, after all, meant to be accessible to all, but became veiled by generations of red tape. The rooms in the Conflictorium are interestingly named: Moral Compass, Empathy Alley, Perspectives and Gallery of Disputes. There is a memory lab, where an entire wall of glass jars holds exhibits and wishes from visitors. Some proclaim ‘love’. One writes about ‘dignity’. Another speaks of the fundamental rights of human existence. The *peepal* tree outside has been dubbed the Sorry Tree, cards bearing names of people and apologies mingling with its leaves. The house is quaint, bearing tell-tale signs of once having been a home. There are basins in the corridors leading to galleries; an old dresser drawer has been converted into an exhibit. The spaces that once echoed with the sounds of children running, that smelled of cooking, that splashed with washing and resounded with the cacophony of marital disputes now bears witness to the cries of generations that have been oppressed, whose voices were drowned but are allowed to be heard once more.

“We hold poetry meetings, artist workshops and talks on a daily basis. There are times when an issue gets heated, because there are always two sides to a conflict. One team may agree and the other may not. There was an issue once, of a gentleman who objected to the colour of the walls, which were then painted green. He exclaimed that Muslims had their colour painted on the walls, but

the orange of *Hindutva* found no place in the museum. It was a coincidence that sometime later the cabinets were painted a shade of orange!” Shefali also talks about research and the validity of the conflicts shown, because in such a delicate atmosphere it becomes essential to absolutely confirm the authenticity of the exhibit. The Centre of Social Justice verifies each article by law and only then is it put up for exhibition, to be presented objectively.

Ahmedabad may be known for its internal violent altercations, but *Amdavadi* society also boasts of a strong network of NGOs that work collectively as a tightly knit group, for the betterment of its people. Navsarjan, Nyayka, Drishti and Natrani are NGOs that have made use of information that the Conflictorium provided to offer legal and monetary help to the conflict struck, people who are brought to the forefront through the museum. “There was a workshop conducted some time ago by women who had been abused and subjected to domestic violence. They were asked to sketch comic strips to portray their plight. Nyayka managed to fight one woman’s case in court, and won.” Shefali speaks with a certain pride in her voice. The Conflictorium has made a difference through art and dialogue, to some extent achieving what it set out to do.

One exhibit called the ‘Power of New’ states, “If two entities have to occupy the same space, must one of them blend into and become subservient to the other? Is there a third space that is beyond polarity, but opens up the possibility of something new?”

The third space is of acceptance. Perhaps it is reluctant, forced acceptance. But it is always followed by healing.

## *Allah ke bande*

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*Jumma.*

It is 8.45 AM.

The acropolis of the Sarkhej Roza has woken up long before sunrise.

Women in brightly colored *salwar-kameez* and a mandatory *dupatta* covering their heads, kids with even brighter coloured clothes and men with *Imammah* are strolling in the thirty four-acre expanse. The stone in shades of brown, beige and black stands frozen against the backdrop of the dynamics of the blue sky and the jostling leaves. The seventeen-acre lake with stone steps and richly decorated supply sluice is dry. A man wearing a pure white *salwar* and *sadra* scurries through the pillared corridor. Washing his feet, he picks up a peacock feather broom and cleans the periphery of mausoleum of Ahmed Shiekh Ganj Baksh Khattu. Gently chanting Sufi hymns of La Illaha Illallah, he then rests on the *chabuttra*. He observes every visitor that passes from the quadrangle to the mausoleum. He greets everyone with a gentle smile, as if he knows what they will

demand from Allah. He spots a Hindu girl hesitating entering the mausoleum. “Allah *koi bhed nahi rakhta*. Leave aside all your doubts and step in,” says Usman Ali, with the same gentle smile. This is the same Roza that is said to have played host to the festival of *Janmashtami* for an unbroken series of 590 years. The festival was celebrated with a *qawwali* evening that included citizens and eminent personalities of the Roza.

Seventy-two-year-old Usman Ali, who looks 60, hails from a Hindu community in Rajasthan. He embodies the best of both worlds. He is easily identified by the *mehendi* colored hair, white beard and Nokia phone in his *sadra* pocket. With a large, *Rajasthani* family of ten grandchildren, six children and wife back in his native village, Usman has been a part of the Roza for two years. He has no permanent residence in Ahmedabad, but oscillates from the *masjid* guest rooms to being a paying guest in nearby Muslim homes. All the locals are very warm, he says. He begins his day at 4:30 AM with *namaz*, followed by sweeping the premises. And then, until the afternoon *namaz*, it is his ‘self-introspection’ time. What brought him to a place that is said to be a *mélange* of body and spirit (*jism* and *ruh*), a place of beauty, history and architecture, a place that is extremely holy and serene? It was “God’s call”, he says, with a twinkle in his eyes.

In 2005 Usman owned and drove a truck that carried cargo from Rajasthan to Bangalore (now Bengaluru). En route, travelling through the forests of Madhya Pradesh, he had a near-death experience. The truck with 18-tonne cargo tumbled 130 feet down the valley at 12:30 PM. With the steering wheel in his abdomen, he got police help, was operated on and had regained

consciousness within a matter of 24 hours. Back in Rajasthan, he could walk and drive on the fifteenth day and soon started his new profession as a permit tourist vehicle driver. This took him to a number of mosques, but he never ‘met’ Allah. A wish to go closer to God to thank him for the miracle took form as a dream in which Allah called him to Sarkhej.

Sarkhej Roza is a fine example of a blend in architectural styles, capturing the best designs of the kingdoms that ruled in that era. Sarkhej was a village with a population of weavers and indigo-dyers, most of whom were Hindu. With the early Islamic architectural culture of this region, those stylistic influences contributed to a fusion of Persian style with indigenous Hindu and Jain features, hence affirming the Indo-Sarcenic genre.

The Sarkhej building complex is reminiscent of the truths of life. A man with a holistic living demands stability in his home, personal and social connect as well as a connect to the higher self. While palaces and pavilions represent the grandeur of the era, the arcaded verandah, the pillared hall and the periphery are grounds for social interaction. The most tranquil space of the mausoleum talks of spirituality. The saints’ tombs and the mosque are symbolically paradoxical, representing the truths of life and death. “Science lacks answers for miracles,” Usman says. “These answers are found here, when you are so close to the God. *Bande ka pass kya hai? Jo bhi chahiye, inhi (Allah) se farmao, jo yahi naaram farma rahe hai.*” The sixteen-pillared Badari tells the tales of Sufi folklore. The mausoleum extends into a hall that is used for study by the young and the elderly. This is where Usman spends afternoons reading and understanding the holy books.

It is 11:30 AM. From dawn to noon the sunlight plays through the pierced stone trellises. Sufi songs reverberate in the hall, through the arcades and into the *dargah*. The sounds of children playing cricket in the lake bed that once was full to its brim with clean water bring the Roza alive, as Usman waits for the mid-day *namaz* to begin.



## Musings of an *Odia-Amdavadi*

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Where are you from? This is the question I have faced constantly since I left my home in Odisha (then Orissa) 20-odd years ago. I have lived in Delhi, Bengaluru and now in Ahmedabad. I still face the same question, but now I smile and say, “You can call me an *Odia-Amdavadi*.”

A part of me still wants to run away from the concrete jungle and open a café in the mountains. Another part wants to own a home facing the seductive Bay of Bengal. Yet, at the end of the day, when I open the door of my seventh floor apartment in western Ahmedabad, I feel a sense of home. I feel happy to be in a city that lets me take an auto/cab in the middle of the night without batting an eyelid. The streets of Ahmedabad do not feel like a violent stranger wanting to grab a part of my body. I feel at home on the neon-lit streets, I feel at home within the four walls of my home. I feel at home in this fast-changing dusty city called Ahmedabad.

My love affair with Ahmedabad has taken more than a decade to settle down. It has not been an easy journey. I moved to the city after the killer earthquake of 2001. Friends and colleagues in

Bengaluru thought I was crazy to move to a metropolis that was still recovering from the ravages of nature, still dealing with death and destruction. But then sometimes you let life choose for you. And the next year, I lived through the horrors of the 2002 riots. But like a quintessential *Amdavadi*, I have learned to wade my way through *kem cho* (how are you) and *maaja ma* (good). Even when the going has been tough, the city has taught me not to lose hope and instead pick up the threads of life and weave on.

Coming from a state obsessed with government jobs, it has been refreshing to see the way Ahmedabad celebrates entrepreneurship. From ordinary women starting their humble *naasta* (snacks) business to corporate bigwigs setting up industrial estates, this city has made me aware of pushing boundaries and doing something independently. Any idea can be turned around and given a ‘biz’ tag, and if you are willing to work hard and think out of the box, you can taste success.

It’s Ahmedabad that has taught me both austerity and generosity. Ahmedabad celebrates money. There’s a saying in Odisha that Lakshmi and Saraswati can’t stay in one home. So without having much choice, we celebrate Goddess Saraswati in Odisha. On the other hand, Lakshmi really rules in this dusty city – Ahmedabad worships money. It earns money and saves money. I was never taught the art of saving. It’s only after coming to Ahmedabad that I realised that putting money aside for another day is a good thing. Thank you, Ahmedabad.

Money speaks everywhere in this city. Ask your plumber “Will you come tomorrow to repair the leaking tap?” If he says, “*Sau taka* (100 rupees),” be sure that he will be there. His commitment is expressed through the language of money. It is perhaps that love

and respect for money that makes the service sector here work efficiently. It's almost impossible to find a plumber/electrician in Odisha who will provide service on time. The standard answer is *aasuchchi* (I am coming). Even God can't predict when.

It's strange how a city becomes a part of you even without you realising it fully. Interestingly, Ahmedabad sometimes decides on its own to change my surname from Sahu to Shah, thereby adding an authentic *Gujarati* touch to my *Odia* self. And like any other *Amdavadi*, I now pick up the phone and say comfortably, "Yes, Deepikaben speaking." I sometimes wonder to myself, "How far have I come!" There was a time when I simply refused to be addressed as *ben*. I protested vehemently every time somebody did so. Like the city, over the years I too have changed. Embracing bits and slices of the urban *Gujarati* ethos. Sometimes consciously, sometimes not. And there is always reason to celebrate. The serene Sabarmati Ashram offers peace when the soul aches; the bylanes of the walled city handing out a surprise at every turn; days and nights of uninterrupted power supply (anyone from Odisha will understand this!), metres of colourful *gamthi* cotton dress material baled neatly in shops; the young and old alike swaying to the beats of *dandiya* during *Navratri*; and of course, a plate of delicately rolled *khandvi* and piping hot *masala chai*.

For me, looking at Ahmedabad also means looking at all the yesterdays curled up within myself. Where is home? How far do we have to travel to find it again? Rice, fish curry, mashed potato with a dash of mustard oil and chopped onions, pouring rain, carefree days with parents – those are memories of growing up in Odisha. Sitting for hours near a window and soaking in the beauty of rain lashing against the lamppost still warms my heart. Now,

in the never-ending months of dry and soul-destroying heat in Ahmedabad, I long for that intoxicating smell of wet earth of the beautiful land I left years ago. Every gruelling summer I take refuge in Alexander Frater's book, *Chasing the Monsoon*. I make desperate attempts to soak in the memories of Odisha's magical wet season.

And when the rains arrive in Ahmedabad, I celebrate the falling raindrops with hot *dal vadas*, green chillies and thickly sliced onions. Then suddenly, it feels like home.

## A small slice of China

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The setting sun is turning the sky orange as I make my way through the quiet suburbs of Paldi, towards the house of Dr Kaohung Siao. I am greeted by Chow, Dr Siao's adorable black Labrador, who jumps at me as soon as I pass through the gate. "Come. Come this way," says the doctor, inviting me into the house. The living room is beautifully decorated, with porcelain vases and Chinese scroll paintings. It is evident that he retains his Chinese heritage with pride, and yet, Dr Siao is Indian at heart. He was in fact born and raised in Ahmedabad, and has lived here all his life. He is one of a tiny community of Chinese in the city, which consists of just two or three families.

Chinese immigrants have been settled in many parts of India for more than two hundred years. During the colonial period, many Chinese came to work in the mills and docks of Kolkata. These were the first Chinese immigrants in India, and the community slowly spread from there to other parts of the country. However, not too many Chinese migrant families made Ahmedabad their home, unlike Kolkata or Mumbai, which have sizeable Chinese

communities. Dr Siao tells the story of how his family came to settle in Ahmedabad. “My family is originally from Hubei province, in central China. I think my family left after the Maoist revolution, which took place in 1949. My grandfather was a cloth merchant, who came to India via Ceylon for trading purposes. He decided to settle down and start a business here. But our family, they didn’t come straight to Ahmedabad. They first settled in Madras, and later moved to Bombay (later Mumbai), Moradabad, Delhi and finally Ahmedabad!”

The doctor remembers a peaceful childhood, reliving a time when the city was not so big and life was slower and simpler. He finished his schooling at the Gujarat Law Society School, and later moved to Bombay to study dentistry. “Of course, a lot of things about dentistry cannot be taught, because it is more of an art than a surgical procedure.” He then returned to Ahmedabad to set up the Chinese Dental Clinic in Behrampura. Today, Dr Siao heads a successful practice, but it wasn’t always easy. “Life throws all kinds of difficulties at you. So one has to struggle. But there is hope. Hope is very powerful. To come to where I am, you know, it was a journey. I have practiced for the last 35 years – my practice grew mainly by word of mouth. I didn’t use any advertising. You see, good work speaks for itself. When I first started my clinic, I got the place on rent, but eventually I could afford to buy it – so I now own the place.”

As a long time resident of the city, Dr Siao has nostalgic memories of yesteryear Ahmedabad – when many neighbourhoods still retained their natural beauty and things weren’t so commercialised. “Once upon a time, one of the most attractive places in the city was Kankariya Lake. It was beautiful, a great place to just go and

relax. There were many trees along the banks of the river, and in the evenings, there would be a cool breeze. One could sit there for hours. Nowadays you can pass Kankariya and not even realise there is a lake over there! Commercialisation is destroying the city and the environment.”

Dr Siao’s wife soon joins us, bringing tea and biscuits. Her name is Shaio Shiew. “But people here call me Usha, because my name is hard to pronounce! So now I am *Ushaben!*” Like Dr Siao, she is also from a family settled for a long time in India, and was born and raised in Chennai. She is fluent in *Tamil*, and after all these years in Ahmedabad, also speaks *Hindi* and *Gujarati*. “My *Tamil* is a bit rusty these days since I have no one to speak with!” She goes on to recount her childhood in Chennai, insisting that she cannot live without *idlis* and *chutney*. “I still make *sappadu* once a week, with *sambar* and *rasam!* Now, my husband is used to it. But before he would ask for *dal* and *rotis!*” she says, laughing.

The Chinese diaspora in India has always maintained a strong cultural identity, and have proudly preserved traditions and way of life, while also integrating with the local community. For example, they have always maintained their language, something that binds together and defines community identity. Several festivals are celebrated, with the most important one being Lunar New Year, which happens in mid-January. This is a time for families to get together to celebrate, and many people travel across the country to be with family.

Dr Siao doesn’t think that his Chinese identity has ever caused problems for him. “Even during the 1962 India-China War, I faced no problems. A lot of Chinese families in other cities like Bombay and Kolkata were harassed during that time. It became quite an

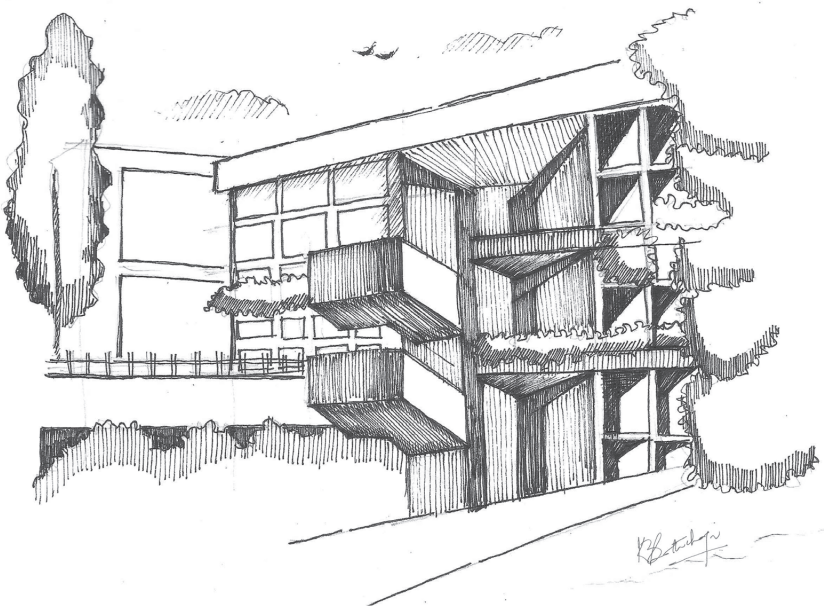
issue – and recently the minister Rajnath Singh even issued an apology to the Chinese community.” Most of the couple’s extended family live in India or has settled abroad. “We have some relatives in Hong Kong, but none in Mainland China,” Dr Siao tells me with a shrug. “So China for me was like a foreign country. I went there for the first time in my life in 2006, along with my wife. We just went to visit – and went to cities like Shanghai, Beijing, and Tianjin. But of course we also speak a different dialect, which is from our native Hubei province, so I often couldn’t understand what people were speaking!”

The couple has considered moving back to China, but then decided against it. “It didn’t make sense. I have worked hard all these years and now have a comfortable life. Going to China would mean starting all over – and I don’t want to do that.” They have two daughters, who now both live abroad. In recent years, more and more young people have been moving out of the country, either for work or education. “It is because there are better opportunities outside,” the doctor tells me matter-of-factly. The conversation soon turns to the infrastructure and quality of life in Indian cities.

While Dr Siao loves Ahmedabad, he is concerned about the way the city is haphazardly expanding, thanks to profit-driven development, which he feels has destroyed the natural beauty of the region. “In this country, we talk about development, but a lot of people don’t have respect for that. See, I might not be of Indian origin – but I’m still Indian, because I’ve lived here all my life. I love this country, and speaking as a concerned citizen, I’m saying that we don’t respect it. We don’t even try to keep our public places clean. People wilfully steal or damage public infrastructure – then what do you expect the government to do?” This is one reason



why Dr Siao doesn't venture outside the house much these days. "I am at the clinic by day and then come straight home. I like to lead a quiet life with my wife – and Chow – for company. We are growing old now, so I don't need much else. I am content!"



## Seeing without eyes

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The ability to set aside yourself and help anyone in need is one of humankind's greatest virtues. It can be tough, but when acted upon, works wonders. To support those with any need is to support our society, and people across Ahmedabad, across India, and the world have dedicated their lives to this cause. The Blind People's Association, Ahmedabad is one such institution.

As I enter the campus, it is buzzing with activity. Nestled on the busy Vastrapur Road, it is quite apparent that visually impaired people – or people with any disability, for that matter – can easily call this home. Any fear or inhibition about their disabilities seems to melt away as they walk in. There is a true confidence in the air. This I see as true empowerment. The BPA, or Andh Jan Mandal was conceptualised many years ago, but took its modern format in 1975. It is now the largest NGO in India to work with disabled people.

Jagadish**bhai** Patel, a *Gujarati* born in Kolkata, became blind during a meningitis epidemic in 1936. He decided that he wanted to do something for other people like himself, and started a simple

recreational club at a house in Kameshwar *ni Pol*. Gradually, the group expanded to provide vocational training, produce Braille books and much else. Many of *Amdavad's* industrialists were well-known philanthropists, and with the support of Arvind Lalbhai, Manubhai Shah and their like, the club grew. They had support from the Sabarmati jail to make Braille books, and during this time they convinced the education board to allow its first blind student to participate in the secondary exams. From 1975, they decided to include other disabilities in their area of work.

Now BPA works with a huge spectrum of disabilities: the visually impaired, the hearing and speech impaired, those with mental and neurological illnesses, amputees, persons with disabilities, etc. They have units that range from vocational and skill training to legal aid, psychotherapy and counselling, to employment assistance, schools for children of all ages and training for teachers and regular schools to understand how to accommodate impaired or disabled youngsters. They provide interventions to help identify those who need physiological or psychological help, and assist them in the best way possible so that the individual gets the best treatment and the community understands how to take care of him or her. They provide a huge range of equipment and assisted vehicles for the persons with physical disabilities.

It took a great deal of hard work to do this. As Dr Bhushan Punani, Executive secretary of the BPA says, "It took years of performance, of showing results that helped people trust us. Now, as one of the biggest and most trusted NGOs, people from all over Gujarat are ready to collaborate with us." The philanthropic attitude of *Gujaratis* also helped the NGO to reach such success.

Dr Punani has been part of the BPA since 1979. There is an air of discipline and of humility in his office. With his no-nonsense attitude, he is highly critical of the innumerable quacks in the medicine business around India, who have misled people in small villages as well as in large cities. Thankful that the state of Gujarat has strict laws against this, he also knows that diligent work has paid off to make his a trustworthy organisation.

A significant factor in growth is not just money, or results in numbers. It is also the people. Families, friends and communities have started realising that their loved ones are to be loved, and not to be sent away to institutions never to be seen again. In poorer families, where cases of disability are higher, it was even harder to inculcate this. But Dr Bhushan sees a clear shift over the many years that he has spent working here.

“Parents are more aware than before... Initially, we saw once the child is admitted here, the parents never come. The whole year children would stay here, eat, play, sleep. It was like a shelter home, [which] we are not. We cannot step into the parents’ roles. Then we decided that each parent had to sign a bond that every vacation they would take the children home and bring their children back only when the school reopens. We faced a lot of opposition to this. They said it would disturb the peace at home. Many of the children also complained. They didn’t get the same toilets, the same food at home, as they got here. They were from poorer families. But we felt, what after schooling? They will have to go back to their homes.”

Dr Punani explains that “After 30 years, things have reversed. Every Saturday evening, about 50 per cent of the students go back home. On other holidays, even more. Now students want to go

home on holidays. We do not need to push them. Parents have understood that it is their responsibility and the children stay in touch with their parents. After they complete school education, they know they will go back home. The parents feel belongingness towards their children.”

He knows that “This is not just because of us. This is because of the change in environment. Because of education and awareness, parents are accepting them more. While we are increasing our intake of students, our intake of the hostel is going down drastically. After five years, we may not have a hostel programme. They do not need to come to a large city like Ahmedabad. Now the concept has changed. But again, this is for the more aware parents. For many poor children, we have a long way to go.”

Along with the community, policies change as well. The BPA has been instrumental in helping change those. Dr Bhushan was on the drafting committee of the Right of Persons With Disabilities Bill, 2014, which is expected to be implemented soon.

“In the early 40s and 50s, disability was seen as an object of charity... to give them money and to feed them. Gradually, people realised that this is not the way to go. We need to go towards progress; we need to give them education, training, etc. After Independence, schools and training centres were established, and equipment to help disabled people started to be used. That also didn't help change much. From there, we moved to rights, understanding of rights of disabled people. Principals could then deny giving admission to disabled people. Now, with the rights model, each child, disabled or not, has a right to education. Now, with the Right of Persons with Disabilities Bill, 2014, it does not stay as compassion, as sympathy, it becomes a right. The future

fight would be for human rights. This is the strongest form of rights. Rights are being given because they are human beings, not because they are disabled.”

For Dr Bhushan, service was in his genes. “My father was a very well-known and respected social reformer who was known as Bhagatji. His respect was not because of money, but because of his deeds and values. I was so influenced by his life and my mother’s life. And I had a small thought – that if you can study anything, why can’t education be used for a cause?”

This was quite an unconventional thought at the time. Dr Bhushan is a highly qualified MBA graduate from IIM, could have gone anywhere else, but he realised that money was not everything. “Instead of selling soaps or *sarees*, one can sell good thoughts and do something humanitarian. Mercedes *me ghumo ya* Maruti 800 *me ghumo* (travel in a Mercedes or a Maruti 800). It makes no difference to the world. It is your own psyche and pride. *Ek* posh air-conditioned 5-star hotel *me sone jao, ya khule hava me aasmanke niche, chhat pe jaake so* (Sleep in a posh air-conditioned 5-star hotel or under the stars on the roof). Probably the second option is much better.”

Luckily for him, for this superior position in BPA he was perfectly qualified. “When I joined, I told them very honestly that I was fully committed for two years... If in two years things change here, then my joining is worthwhile and I would continue.”

This placement happened in 1979. And he has never looked back. “It will be wrong on my part to take credit. No credit goes to me...The credit goes to the people of Gujarat. The trustees were very good, very loving. I didn’t know *Gujarati*, I didn’t know disability, I didn’t know the culture of this place. I was an outsider.

I ‘only’ had a very... I had a very good academic record. They could accept that very well. From the first year itself, we started growing at a fast pace... Then those two years never ended; I have never looked back. It has been a very inspiring and satisfying journey. I am glad that I had that courage. We all have been given one life... and in this one life it is up to you how you want to spend that time.”

So long focussing on growth and empowerment of disabled people has helped Dr Bhushan personally. “When I joined, I was very aggressive. I felt that MBA gives you everything. But that is not true. In this job, you have to be very humble. I cannot get offended if someone with a disability says something which (normally) they should not. You learn that everyone, despite their disability, can offer something. Unlike someone with a corporate job, I do so many things on my own. I drive my own car. We have hardly any peons in this office. Also, this field is so dynamic; we are constantly learning new things about disabilities, about psychology, about technology. We need to constantly be learning, constantly be open.”

As I talk to people around the campus, this attitude is everywhere. It is rare to see humility and ambition work hand in hand, or a commitment to something that is constantly dynamic. Dr Bhushan tells me that it is a challenge, nonetheless, to keep these values in each person, but he seems quite happy with how the values of the organisation have percolated down to staff members and volunteers. “They have a certain attitude right from day one of their work here. Those who don’t may come in, but after sometime they find it too challenging and move out.”

One example of this attitude of confidence and empowerment



was given to me by a former intern, Mitali Verma. “I remember sitting on a chair in tailoring department when I saw a man walking without a stick. I didn’t know he was blind, until he banged into a table and got hurt. But he smiled and started to walk again. The smiles on the faces of all of the people and the spirit of never giving up on anything and taking life as it comes with dignity is inspirational.”

But no organisation is too big for its own share of challenges. As an organisation that deals with disability, the dynamic nature of getting results that balance rationale and emotions is always a problem. As an NGO, BPA needs support from well-wishers and donors.

BPA is large because it is supported and trusted. More people are understanding that it is not individuals, but a collective, people who need to look at neighbours and at society and think beyond their own selves. With this, the idea is to empathise with everyone: peers, neighbours, or anyone with a visible disability. Sympathy is like charity, and it does not empower. While people like Dr Bhushan, Mitali and many others have defined a part of their lives to work for others, we others still have a long way to go.

## A place for the displaced

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Along the Vasna Narol highway is a towering landfill site. Almost 15 metres tall, it is inhabited by vultures, flies and large trawlers that heave the garbage of the city of Ahmedabad onto the stink pile every day. What no one could have imagined is that this dumpyard is home to people too. People who are a legitimate part of the city, and those who have been forced into the situation by communal tensions.

This is Citizen Nagar, a resettlement colony formed after the riots of 2002. It comprises around 200 houses built by the Kerala Muslim Trust, though many more people than there is place for, have found refuge there. It is one of the biggest ghettos in Ahmedabad, a largely Muslim population that had to rebuild its collective life after the violence and destruction of their original homes. Amid the flies and the garbage, narrow unpaved streets crisscross through leaking and derelict informal settlements. Within these godforsaken conditions, a community thrives.

Haseena Bano has been living in Citizen Nagar ever since

the riots displaced her from her home in Naroda Patiya. “I stayed in a refugee camp at Shah Alam, and the conditions were miserable. We had to live in tents, food was scarce, and there was no information about what had happened to our homes back in Naroda Patiya.” She says this with no emotion in her eyes, as if it has become a clinical truth to be repeated mechanically to the many journalists that flock to the landfill to make a ‘poster child’ of these dystopic conditions. There is a non-feeling vibe about the way people usher me in, as if the remembrances of what was probably the most tragic time in their lives are merely an irksome incident that they are not allowed to forget.

Haseena perks up when she talks about her true ‘place’, her house in Naroda Patiya. “Back in that house, we had large *otlas* in which we could play, and there was communal harmony. I had friends of all faiths, and we spent our weekends in the nearby Kuber Nagar markets, or the Chota Kankariya Lake.” These were the true ‘places’ in their homes, the *genius loci*. They signified the families standing in the city then, as users of public infrastructure, or buyers in the economy of the city. Today, in this new area that she has to rebuild a home in, Haseena’s idea of the *genius loci* of the place is the dumpyard.

“The dumpyard has made life difficult. The smoke from the burning of waste penetrates our homes, and a lot of us suffer from lung diseases. The water that we get from bore wells is also polluted by the dumpyard chemicals. But this is what we have now, and we are grateful for it.”

The dumpyard has become a source of employment as well. “Around 40 per cent of the people work as informal rag pickers within the yard,” says the AMC official who runs the landfill

operation. The residents have become the new guardians of waste in the city. The people of Citizen Nagar, ironically, feel nothing but gratitude that they at least have a safe place to stay, away from communal violence. They seek entitlement to their houses, which they haven't been granted yet, so they can start to create homes. They are refugees within a hostile city, and the only refuge they have is this.

How they came up to be within this area is also the explanation of the displacement policies of the city. After the carnage, the Muslims within Ahmedabad lost their homes and had to find refuge. With no help from the state government, NGOs and private developers took it upon themselves to resettle the victims." We wanted to remain within our own community. We didn't trust the city anymore, and we did not believe that we were safe," says Mohsin Khan, a neighbour of Haseena. So they were given homes next to largely Muslim localities, which happened to be on the fringes of the city or at dumpyards, low land value sites.

Today, what was intended to be a way to create safe havens for people of the same faith has become a ghetto system separate from the rest of the city. Resettlement colonies in Vatwa and Juhapura are no different. It is no lie that Ahmedabad's infrastructure does not stretch to these areas. These sites also suffer from a lack of any collective or organised body to take decisions and fight battles, since the act of displacement has destroyed the mutual kinship that these people may have formed when their lives were more stable and happier.

When I look around, I feel that cities of today are becoming war zones. They declare war on communities, create refuges

within their own boundaries. Under the façade of growth and development, it is essential to look at the cities' marginalised, the subalterns. If one Haseena Bano doesn't get access to infrastructure, the development model has failed. If she today doesn't feel welcome in any public spaces, or if she is characterised as 'other' in every aspect of her life, the city has failed her.

## The hairstylist from Juhapura

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“*Dekho, ye main Dilip saab ke bed pe baithela hai. Ye wala Madhuri ke saath Dil Toh Pagal Hai main,*” exclaims a proud Babu alias Muhammad Sherif Sheikh. He is seated on a plush sofa, at his customer’s home, dressed in an old *paan* and hair dye stained cream shirt and formal pants.

“There was a lot of *taqleef* (stress) at home. The type of stress where there is no food to eat. Where you sleep hungry, wake up hungry and live hungry.” He starts his life story thus. His hair well groomed, neatly trimmed, parted and jet black, he today runs a full-fledged salon called ‘Salman’ in the Juhapura area of Ahmedabad. He says it was once a notorious area. “After the Modi Sarkar has come in, the conditions have improved. It is no longer a ‘danger’ area.”

Babu was born in Bhopal and brought up in a small town called Sambal near Delhi. Due to a financial crisis, like so many others, he ran away from home at the age of thirteen, to an elder sister living in Ahmedabad. He was fascinated by the art of hair dyeing, hair styling and other beauty services, but with no money

he could only do meagre jobs at salons. A person with great self-worth, Babu skipped through ten jobs at various salons. “One of my bosses commented that I just do not have it in me to be a skilled labourer – a *kaarigaar*. *Ye baat maine dil pe le li.*” He took it to heart.

With immense passion for the art, he committed himself to the profession in the 1980s. At his eleventh job, his boss gave him the responsibility of managing a salon named Paris, near Lal Darwaja. Chewing the tobacco stuffed in his mouth, he proudly claims, “The salon dominantly ran due to my skill. I would have a line of customers waiting for me. Other salons would tempt me to work there and pay me more. But I was committed to my boss. After a few years, due to a tiff with him, I just gave him the keys and left. Since then I have not worked for anyone.”

Babu set up several shops with different partners before his six sons were old enough to handle his own establishment. All of them did well due to his skill, but for some reason or the other, the shops shut down. In one partnership, he was accused of murdering his partner, beaten up, and even jailed. Fortunately, one of his customers – an underworld don – helped him get bail.

He says that he has had very high-end customers who are part of the underworld. Babu names several *bhais* and *Khans* that he knew, personally going to their homes to give them beauty services. Today he does that only for few of his special clients.

When asked why he stayed in Ahmedabad he says, “I wanted to do something big in life. I wanted success – *taraqqi*. I did consider moving to Saudi Arabia, but decided not to, as around the same time, due to attacks in Kuwait, the Indians living in the Gulf were returning. Mumbai was an interesting option – I got a lot of offers

to join a makeup team in Bollywood. I gave it a try and worked with the big names like Aamir Khan, Sanjay Dutt and Madhuri Dixit.” He takes his phone out of his pocket and shows off pictures of him posing with the glamorous people. He was awe-struck by the glamour world, but did not like the *mahaul* of Mumbai and decided to settle in Ahmedabad.

Babu explains that he is not only experienced with behind the camera, but also has some exposure in front of it too. With austere features and a thick moustache, he is often offered roles in regional films. He is again distracted by his phone and plays the video of a song in which he has the role of a Christian priest. “I still get a lot of offers to act and feature as a villain. But my blood pressure shoots up, so I avoid all the extra stress.” Babu chews on his tobacco.

“*Namaaz* should be read five times a day, but I do it only three times. But on Fridays, I do the strict five times *namaaz*. Else none of the people of my faith will talk to me!” Babu is sure about one thing: “I definitely want to go to Haj. It is like a rebirth. Whoever goes there, comes back purified. It is believed that the Haj is located at the centre of the earth. So many people even die in the stone throwing custom. Apparently, the people who do the Haj are not supposed to swear, lie, and do any bad things. But the irony is, I have seen people lie, swear, do all sorts of bad things even after they are back from Haj. That, I do not like.” He speaks very seriously.

While discussing the issue of inter-religious rivalry in Ahmedabad, Babu says, “Seventy-five per cent of my customers are Hindus and twenty-five are Muslims. It does not bother me. When the riots happened, we had to shut our shop. But this Hindu-



Muslim rivalry is wrong. I am glad it has reduced so much today. The best thing about people in Ahmedabad is that people forget the fights and the riots. It helps. But it should not happen.”

Today he runs his shop with five sons – one works in a mutton shop. He is very proud of their abilities. “My sons just need to see the technique and the styling once. They can copy and recreate any style brilliantly!” One young man is also interested in dance. Despite all the pride he feels, Babu ends the conversation saying that since he gave his children everything on a plate, none of them have his character: the urge to fight back, the ability to withstand the *taqleef*.

Babu’s will to make it big, his determination and commitment towards his profession and the ambition to be his own master mirrors the spirit of Ahmedabad.

## Roofless Dreams

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*Could you dance and draw imaginations?  
Could you help decide someone's ambition?  
Could you hold a little finger and walk?  
Could you sit there just to talk?  
Could you ask the little guy just to dream for his own?*

Sanjana, a teenaged volunteer in the organisation Samvedana writes poetry. Samvedana, a word in *Gujarati* and *Hindi*, means compassion. Started by Janki Vasant in 2002-03 in Ahmedabad, Samvedana is a physical form of compassion that was born out of two powerful occurrences in the history of India.

Just outside a beautiful home at Thaltej, Ahmedabad, soothing chimes of the doorbell herald a warm and soft spoken voice welcoming you in. A multifaceted personality that is Janki, her family and the noteworthy turns in her life make up the rock solid foundation of Samvedana. Janki says, "I have to take you back to September 5, 1986, when the Pam Am Flight 73 was highjacked to Karachi and 360 citizens were saved thanks to the valour of

Neerja Bhanot.” Janki Vasant, then 19 years old and unmarried, was heading to the US with a group of 16 other girls. Excited and enthusiastic, they spoke of their aspirations and the performance that they would be giving representing their motherland, when the plane was captured. Neerja and the crew were in the battlefield for over 20 hours.

“The recent Bollywood movie ends where Neerja gives up her life saving numerous others. My story starts after that,” says Janki. She was in Karachi for most of the night and the next day. “I was hurt.” They were four best friends travelling together. The girl sitting on Janki’s left died because a grenade fell on her and blew up. Janki was taken to Jinnah Hospital, Karachi, to the trauma centre. In a large hall with countless bewildered Indians, two resident doctors sat beside her. “I was scared. I didn’t know anyone and I couldn’t move.” They began asking about her family, her city, her country, her taste in music, culture and films. Their knowledge of India astonished her and made her a little more comfortable. “And then I told them that I had this excruciating pain.” One of the doctors was a *Shia* Muslim and other, a *Sunni*. But they were both doctors treating a patient, and the walls between them dissolved. They treated her well and kept her under observation for a day. That night Janki needed someone and expected the least. “What more would I expect from Karachi?” It touched her deeply to find that humanity was something beyond religion, country, profession, a philosophy that existed beyond what she knew. She went back to India, where she got married. Life went on.

In 2001 Gujarat was shaken by the Bhuj earthquake, tremors of which were felt in Ahmedabad. Post-earthquake, Janki’s husband established a relief camp, also supported by architect PK Das.

The couple spent around 14 hours per day there and hosted 700 people on a daily basis. There was so much help received from the volunteers that it was difficult to manage the resources. “It established in me compassion. To see people die is such a big trauma. And you value life much more.” Within a few years, Janki’s father passed away. He used to run a social programme in the street slums of Vadaj. She continued his legacy and started working with children – she ran a non-formal education programme with them. With passion for children and deep seeded desire to uplift the city and a trust that education can empower, she founded Samvedana.

Reminiscing her early days in slums she shares about a special session – ‘I am great and I do great’ in which every child had to write down one great thing that he did and say which great personality he aspired to become. A girl wrote, ‘I clean regularly’ and ‘I wish to become Kalpana Chawla’. She was a grade six dropout and worked to support her family. “What was I doing?” pondered Janki. “I was giving dreams to those who have goals but have no path to reach there.” Thus began the academic programme a formal education plan at Samvedana. She was supported with space at municipal school by the school board rest was then history which created big change for that part of the slum dwellers in the city! She asked the chairman of the municipal school to give her space to teach. Starting with 30 street children, Samvedana now gives dreams to over 6,500 kids. They moved from an informal to a more formal mode of education. The Mission Education project aimed at the upliftment and betterment of children residing in the slums of Vadaj in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. The centre has adopted a holistic approach towards the development of these underprivileged children. Though the area has experienced visible

progress, it was observed that municipal schools had barely been able to provide quality teaching and learning to the children. The centre holds regular sessions for classes 1 to 9, with special remedial classes for children with basic learning problems. With syllabus oriented studies, special focus is given to the English language, art and craft, music, computer and value based education and health check-ups.

Janki shares, “I was born and brought up in the city. I love this city. It grew from the East to the West. When I was born, we had a house in the *pols*; my *dada* (grandfather) stayed there and my father was born there. When my father got married, he lived there. Then they moved to Ashram Road – that is one of the first localities in West New Ahmedabad. The home in the *pols* stayed functional. When I was born, we would go and stay there. When I got married, I stayed at Shahibag for four or five years. Just three decades back everyone knew each other. Now the city has grown phenomenally. But there is something about the city, its culture and moods which remains unchanged. The people are foodies, fun loving and delight in celebrating festivals. The greatness of the *Amdavadis* lies in their generosity.

Samvedana is a charitable trust with tremendous support from the city. The charity also fosters a major event – ‘Sahyog cricket’, a fund raising corporate-funded match that raises around Rs 10 lakhs per edition. People here are highly philanthropic. People want to work for society, but anonymously. “The greatness, I would say, flows from the Sarabhai families,” says Janki. “It is a mode of inclusion if you plan it sensitively.” Janki is humbled as she sees the youth of Ahmedabad working with Samvedana instead of hanging around at a coffee shop – they invest their time in social

work. They give children the power to dream and a helping hand to fulfill their aspirations.

*Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high  
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.*

—Rabindranath Tagore

## A sumptuous legacy

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“Every Sunday morning, it was an unspoken tradition to have *nashta – jalebi and fafda* at Chandravilas,” recalls Jalp Lakhia, 43-year-old *Amdavadi*. “As the new city developed, we left our ancestral home in the *pols* for the plush lifestyle of the metropolis. However, the *pols* were quite alive in our memories. Sunday morning my father was given the duty to pedal from Vastrapur to Manek Chowk for a fresh stock of *ghee ni jalebis*. He grew up and as a teenager, he purchased the best quality *fafda* available at Vastrapur and reached home at a given time. As the *fafda* crumbled in his father’s mouth, he froze. “Go to Chandravilas for the Sunday *fafda*,” grandfather yelled. “I will have breakfast only then.” Decades have passed, yet the family still sits together after 40 years to relish the sumptuous legacy every Sunday.

Chandravilas hotel in Manek Chowk has been serving its customers for the past 118 years. The aromatic fragrance of the *ghee ni jalebi* has mesmerised the food street since the eatery was opened. Suraj, the grandson of Chimanlal Joshi, now sits at the counter, and recalls the golden days of Chandravilas. “My grandfather started

this place with a *chai* shop, expanded to *jalebi-fafda* and finally to the wholesome *Gujarati thali*.” With an approximate 30 × 30 feet hall, the hotel is constructed in *sal* wood. The robust rafters, the immovable wooden floor and the broken roof above have a tale to tell. The flickering oil lamp in the corner is a symbol of the immense faith that the *Gujarati*’s have in God. It is said that along with the images of Laxmi, Ganesha and Jalarambapa, there is also a shrine to a Turkish Sufi saint called Sakhi Datar, covered with a green *chaddar*. An *akhand divo* has been burning there since the hotel was established! Chandravilas was once a large kitchen with a dining hall extending vertically over two floors. Those were the days when there were six cinema theatres close by. Once the show was over, the *veeshi* or dining hall would be flooded with customers. “*Abhi koi cinema theatre nahi. Abhi woh sab bahar chala gaya.*”

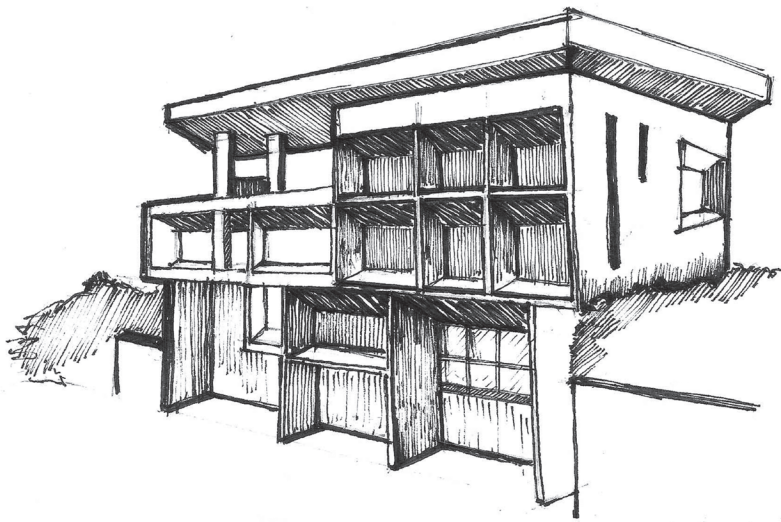
Suraj explains that “Starting from this shop up to the Ratan *Pol* is our property.” The shops are given out on rent. The surprising fact is that Suraj and his family are quite comfortable with the primitive rental system that demands a tiny amount of Rs 240 as rent per month. “*Aaiyan kaai naya manas nahi aavse aur koi purana manas chodke bhi nahi jaata.*” They are going to be here till they die, protecting the heritage of the old city.

But why is there no *thali* on the menu today? Where did that go? What happened to the three-storied hotel? It all happened in 2002, during the Godhra riots. “The fire ate up our hotel, our property and our people.” The flames spread through the *pols* so fiercely that it burned the top floors of Chandravilas, the adjoining shops and a few of the cooks too. “What we have today is thanks to the *akhand divo*.” The signature *dal* that was said to tease the



taste buds of tourists, residents and the owners is not produced anymore. The fire took its exclusive recipe too.

The Chandravilas has been declared a heritage structure. Where the Municipal Heritage Walk ends at Manek Chowk, a new story begins, of the *dal*, the *jalebis* and Chimanlal, who started a journey called Chandravilas.



*K. B. ...*

## Finding a new identity

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Chharanagar. Several years ago, if you were an *Amdavadi*, that name would have probably evoked a sense of foreboding, of danger. Infamous for bootlegging, thievery and other rumoured crimes, it was considered a place that nobody should visit, especially at night.

But the Chharas – a community that has given its name to this area – have recently started fighting hard to regain their identity. They want to establish themselves as part of the community as a whole, and to show the world that they are people with dreams and values, skills and talents, who deserve the same rights as anyone else.

One such movement gained ground and importance under the guidance of Prof. (Dr) Ganesh Devy, a linguist and tribal activist, and Dr Mahasweta Devi, the noted activist and *Bangla* author. They are part of the DNT movement, a movement to gain rights for De-Notified Tribes, both in legal systems as well as in people's minds. They helped establish a theatre group and community centre called Budhan.

“Budhan was a man from West Bengal, from the Sabar tribe (a de-notified tribe) whom the police beat to death. With the guidance of Professor Devy, we decided to do a play about him and his issues. The International Convention of De-Notified and Nomadic Tribes was organised here in Chharanagar in 1998, and we performed our play here too,” recalls Dakxin Bajrange Chhara, one of the founders of the collective. Through this they established what is arguably the most important centre for theatre in the DNT movement. It became the main medium they would use for this movement.

Why theatre? To understand that, we need to go back in history.

The Chharas are part of a nomadic group of people whose roots were around Rajasthan. Their language is *Bhantu*, similar to *Marwadi*. The Chharas are also known as Sansis, Kanjars, Kanjarbhats and Adodiyas in different parts of the country.

In the colonial era when the British were pushing industrial development in India, they decided to pass an act to criminalise certain tribes that they felt were a threat. “These tribes had to wander. That was their lifestyle. But the Britishers (*sic*) were afraid of them being a hindrance to their security.” This act was called the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. Chharas and other ‘notified’ tribes were considered criminal by birth, and forced to be even more discreet.

One would expect that when India gained Independence, these acts would be revoked. An act passed by the Indian government de-notified the community, but inadvertently assigned it the label of ‘habitual offenders’. While these groups are legally not criminal tribes, they are still stigmatised by society and police. People from DNTs were not allowed to go near a village occupied by other people.

Because of the constant stigmatisation, many people were forced to smuggle or steal for survival. Their style was unique – as one community member said, “It was an art” – and they used techniques similar to those used in acting, influenced by the fact that Chharas seem to have an innate sense of performance. So theatre became natural to them.

Dakxin himself studied theatre, and had the opportunity to work with Dr Prem Prakash, a noted playwright and director. “He came here in the 80s, and saw that we had this art in us. Nobody would come here to visit us at that time. But he did.” With him, they played Badal Sircar’s *Spartacus*, a play about slave uprising in Rome. Gradually, more people decided to participate in theatre, especially plays written by Badal Sircar or Prem Prakash. These artistes mainly worked with stories that were about communities that had been suppressed or stigmatised.

“In many stage plays, you require props, lighting, etc. You are far away from the audience. But we wanted to connect with the audience. So our technique was Grotowskian theatre – only the actors are necessary, with no props, no set, etc.” This style heavily influenced Dakxin and the community as the issues that they played out were similar to those they faced in real life.

As time passed, and more people became involved in theatre, the perception that *Amdavadis* had about Chharanagar changed. Their influence is so strong that “Now the local government supports us. They want to stage plays and show that they are doing this... I was so happy about it that I willingly allowed them to take credit so that the Chharas and DNTs get more encouragement!” There is reportedly a department in the Gujarat government for DNT’s because of the influence of organisations like these.

Of course, when you run a movement like this, clashes with the government are inevitable. As members of the organisation make films on issues, they face resistance in the form of censorship and permissions denied. But with their confidence and a level of backing, it doesn't bother them much.

Through all this, there is a deeply fundamental process going on. Dakxin emphatically points out: "Empowerment is not about earning money. It is not about getting sewing machines or making candles, like many NGOs do. Money can only get you so far. Empowerment is self-realisation. We do not do this for others. We are not doing to get others' sympathy. We have enough of that; we don't need it. It is about self-realisation, about our identity." He gives the example of a woman who could easily have joined her family's illicit brewing business, but decided to work as a librarian. "People join this because they come back to their roots. They realise their strength – that they are not victims."

Chharas and DNTs around India have understood that they needed to see themselves as members of society, not as victims, and to capitalise on their talents and skills.

"Along with self-realisation comes self confidence," Dakxin says. "And we have dignity. Some people make money by being a driver. Some are businessmen. And some are thieves. Everybody has their way of making money. What I am doing to feed my children – that is my right. I can now say, without loss of dignity, that yes, my family has been involved in crime. But we are not criminals. And we have moved on from that." Dakxin emphasises that one cannot judge others based on their professions without context. He is irritated and offended if people look down at the community as criminals.

Along with studying and working, more people have become involved with the theatre group as well as different professions – not the thievery and bootlegging that they were once forced into, but as advocates, teachers, artists, etc.

Their confidence is tangible, and inspiring.

Now, 18 years later, the theatre troupe and the organisation are famous. The artistes perform all over the country, in academic institutions and on the streets. People from all over Ahmedabad and indeed around the world visit the centre at Chharanagar to understand this movement. A lot of the street theatre across Ahmedabad is performed by Chharas living in communities around the city. The library is full of books for volunteers and the community – books on theatre, politics, history, fiction, etc fill the shelves. A map of Chharanagar created by students of Ball State University, Indiana, USA, hangs on the wall in the library. Indeed a big shift from the danger the name once carried!

Despite the thousands of shows that have been performed or inspired by the organisation, and the lakhs of lives touched by these shows, Dakxin doesn't let numerical success go to his head, or to anybody else's. The Chharas' and other DNTs struggle is still incredibly relevant. "Justice is not easy to achieve in India," Dakxin says. "To get constitutional recognition and rights, and to change people's mindsets may take a few decades, or even a lifetime." He calls himself an optimist, sure that change will happen, that basic rights will be guaranteed.

Instead of focusing on the goal, he sees the process of theatre as a voice for social change, and as a tool for self realisation that is the most empowering part of the movement.

He has a message to share: “Theatre is not just entertainment. It is not an event that happens at an annual function of a school. Theatre needs to happen in each school, in each community, in every city, every slum, every village. It can be a tool to demonstrate, spread awareness and moreover discover one’s identity. Anyone can give as many speeches as they want, but theatre is personal. It is intimate and emotional. We Indians are very melodramatic,” he laughs. “We can use that melodrama to fight.” And the battle: to create change, in ourselves and the world around us.



## A movement for the people

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As you log on to the website 'Truth of Gujarat', the tag line is absolute: 'Lies are transient, Truth is eternal'. This social media portal of the civil liberties organisation Jan Sangharsh Manch has an immense following and is managed by city-based techie Pratik Sinha. "We have been a part of many people's struggles from the early 1980s. It was my late father Mukul Sinha who was the founding member of this organisation, along with my mother Nirjhari Sinha." An online initiative that now not only offers to a keen citizen perspectives other than the popular media propaganda surrounding our national political scenario, but also participates in the struggles of the minority and the underprivileged by highlighting their issues via social media.

We begin at the beginning, as Pratik shares the story of how it all started – a small incident that grew and led to the formation of a number of organised labour unions in the state under the banner of Gujarat Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) and the civil liberties organisation Jan Sangharsh Manch (JSM). "My father, a scientist, was doing his PhD in Physical Research Laboratory (PRL)

in Ahmedabad; my mother was already a research assistant there. One day, when my father was coming back after lunch, he saw one of the *safai kamdars* – who was taking a nap – rudely being kicked awake by one of the managers. My father intervened and told the manager that this was not the way to wake up someone, and that he should treat others, irrespective of their work profile, with respect and dignity. To this the man retorted, “*Tum scientist log iske beech me mat pado.* (You scientists should not interfere in this matter)”. It was then that my father went to the PRL director and it snowballed into a big issue.” At that time, unions were not allowed in scientific institutions. The underlying factor here was not just a class difference, but baggage from an age-old caste system.

Eventually, they formed a union and for the first time they started fighting for issues of the Class 4 workers working in PRL. “When the movement started, my father lost his job at PRL. He fought a case against this for a long time, but eventually lost in the Supreme Court. The movement was started around 1978, and by the time the judgement came in 1982, this ‘union movement’ had already spread to other places – educational institutions such as IIM Ahmedabad and NID, and also to factories such as Gujarat Steel Tubes. He decided that there was no point of going back to science and did his LLB and became a lawyer,” explains Pratik. “Now under the banner of GFTU we have unions all over Gujarat, from *safai kamdars* and Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation to Ahmedabad drivers and conductors and the Ahmedabad transport service. Presently, Amrishi Patel is the General Secretary of GFTU.”

Pratik sums it up: “So essentially it was sparked by this small incident in PRL that led to the formation of union there. That

eventually led to the sacking of my father, thereby propelling him to formalise a larger movement. Soon they realised that this trade union movement and talking about labour rights was not enough; it was important to address civil liberty issues as well. This was right after 1992, when the Babri Masjid demolition happened. Gujarat was always sensitive to Hindu-Muslim issues and at this time the contradiction was much more visible.”

How was it that he got engaged with this people’s movement? “It was 2nd of July in 2013, when the CBI finally released its charge sheet in the Ishrat Jahan case. This happened just two or three months after I came back to India. In fact, I had been away from Ahmedabad for around 14 years. Even though I was constantly in touch with what was happening, there is always a difference when you are actively participating. When I came back, I saw the pile of information we were sitting on. That’s when I suggested this should all be public, especially since there was an urgent need to counter the BJP’s propaganda on the Ishrat Jahaan issue. Since I was a software engineer and had been involved with social media and blogs in the past, I sort of had an idea how to go about it. That is how ‘Truth of Gujarat’ (ToG) website was born. We also opened the whole jing-bang of social media properties which included a Facebook page, Twitter account and Google plus account. We started putting up all the details about the Ishrat Jahan fake encounter and other such incidents that happened in Gujarat.”

Though ToG is not aligned to any political party, it became part of many endeavours that were political in nature during the 2014 national elections. For a nation where social media access had started to become ubiquitous in urban populations, the campaigning for

2014 elections saw a lot of social media propaganda. “There was a huge propaganda regarding the Gujarat model – how it is the best in the country, how everybody should follow it. Having been involved at the grassroots level in Gujarat, we knew that the model that was being projected was far from truth. So we started writing about facts and figures, such as the state of farmers, employment, minority, *Dalits*, etc, which exposed the flaws in the Gujarat model.”

On May 12, 2014, Mukul Sinha, the founding member and Pratik’s father, passed away. That was a big setback for the organisation; however, they continued their work. It was after Narendra Modi became the Prime Minister that the focus shifted to national politics instead of being focused only on Gujarat. Also, ToG started covering various people’s movements across the country. “Typically, what happens in people’s struggles is that the narrative never finds its way to the urban audience because of the class difference. Like the struggle of Kodaikanal thermometer factory that led to mercury poisoning, but did not catch the attention of people at large till Sofia Ashraf made a rap song about it which went viral. People living in urban areas are usually ignorant about these things. The news channels also never pick up the issues of the people and they never reach the national audience. For example, if there is a *Dalit* issue in Gujarat, the people in Uttar Pradesh won’t even know about it.”

“They will only cover that issue if something extreme happens. For example, in the recent *Dalit* movement in Gujarat, there was a march from Ahmedabad to Una. For the first four or five days, there was hardly any media coverage. There was only one guy from the *Hindustan Times* who was present. But otherwise, even the local

media ignored this. But eventually journalists from all over came to cover the last few days of the rally,” says Pratik. “This happened because we constantly used our social media reach to let people know what was happening in the 10-day long march via pictures and videos. This made people question why the mainstream media was not covering such an iconic movement. ‘Truth Of Gujarat’ or ToG wishes to become the ‘online’ voice of peoples’ movement across India and especially the movements in Gujarat; it wishes to become the ‘online’ voice of the oppressed classes.”

So what does the city mean to him? “As a kid, Ahmedabad meant a great deal to me. By the time I had to leave Ahmedabad, I was 17 years old. This is where I grew up and made my closest friends. From that point of view, Ahmedabad means a lot to me. But then I also saw the world outside. I went to Bangalore (now Bengaluru), the US and Vietnam. Even though I have been to several places, I still relate most to India. Similarly, I relate the most to Ahmedabad of all the Indian cities, there’s a definite sense of attachment. But then I have also realised the drawbacks of the city – such as the fact that the development of the people hasn’t been economically proportional and is becoming increasingly disproportionate. As a freelance software engineer I have a choice to be here or any other city, but I prefer to be in Ahmedabad, because it is where I grew up and this is where my heart is. *Gujarati* is the language I speak. I want to work among the people of Gujarat. Whatever little work I am doing on the ground or on social media, for people’s movement, it all stems from here, this city,” Pratik signs off.

## A Jewish corner

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The Ahmedabad sun was blinding, but I was lucky to be inside the air-conditioned BRTS bus, watching the city outside buzzing with life despite the heat. On SV Road, where the BRTS line cuts through many neighbourhoods of the old city, the contrast between old and new is striking – the modern glint of steel and concrete that is the BRTS stop rubs shoulders with the brick and crumbling stucco of the buildings around it. My stop is Khamasa, usually known for its eateries, which undoubtedly make the best tandoori chicken in the city. Not many people know, however, that Khamasa is also home to two important places of worship – a Parsi fire temple, and also the city’s only synagogue. Both are located right opposite each other, in a narrow street off the main road completely hidden by the numerous stalls the line the street.

I remember first discovering the synagogue as I walked down the street a few years ago, and today, as I dodge the bicycles and auto rickshaws on the street outside, I see that not much has changed. The main gate is locked, and I make my way in through the side entrance. I narrowly avoid a rubber ball whizzing past

my head as I enter. Some boys are playing cricket in the little courtyard beside the worship hall – one of the boys wears a *kippa*, the traditional headgear worn by Jewish men. He smiles and apologises quickly, before getting back to the game.

The Jews in Ahmedabad belong to a distinct and ancient community called the Bene Israel, or ‘the Children of Israel’. Their history is as fascinating as it is obscure, and one that is still leads to disputes among the Orthodox denominations. They trace their roots in India back to more than 2,000 years, though the exact date remains unverified.

The origin story of the Bene Israel goes that they arrived by ship and first landed on the Konkan coast, to the south of Alibaug in present-day Maharashtra. Unfortunately, they lost their books at sea, and thus lost many of their religious practices. However they maintained certain distinct customs, such as observing *Shabbat*, that is rest on Saturdays, and following *Kashrut* – which are strict dietary guidelines that Jewish people are required to adhere to. They settled in small villages along the Konkan coast, and took to the profession of oil pressing. It is this association with *Shabbat* and oil-pressing which gave them the name *Shaniwar Telis*. While they lived in separate villages and rarely inter-married with locals, they did adopt the local language, dress and lifestyles.

When the British first arrived in India, they had been completely integrated with the local culture and the people. There were, however, some unique and identifiably Jewish practices that enabled English missionaries in the 18th century to identify them. Several Rabbis from other prominent Jewish groups such as the Cochin Jews, as well as the British and Dutch, then went to re-

educate the Bene Israel in their faith, and thus began a process of regaining their Jewish identity and integrating once more with the larger Jewish diaspora. Today there are conflicting accounts about the possible origins of the Bene Israel. Some believe, for example, that they may be descendants of one of the ten lost tribes of Israel, while some other Orthodox Jews don't identify them with the Jewish faith.

As fascinating as their history is, I wonder what the community is like today, and I hope to discuss this with Mr Pingle. Unfortunately, 'Uncle Johnny', as he's fondly known, is rather busy today – running about and presiding over a small meeting at the office. He is not only in charge of upkeep and administration, but also presides at religious rituals and events such as marriages and *bar mitzvahs*. However, Uncle Johnny is not a Rabbi – since the Bene Israel have no Rabbis, one feature that distinguishes them from other Orthodox Jews. Uncle Johnny is in fact called the *Hazzan* or the Cantor of the synagogue. Besides leading the prayers, he also teaches Hebrew prayers and the art of blowing the *Shofar*, or ram's horn to some young boys, which is played for certain festivals. He is also highly respected among the community for conducting rites and rituals in the correctly prescribed manner. When I go to him with a request to look around, he generously tells me to have a look inside the synagogue, and come to him if I have specific questions.

As I enter the worship hall, I can't help but admire its well-preserved interiors. The Magen Abraham Synagogue was built in 1934. Unique for its Art Deco design, it also stands out as a beautiful piece of architecture, possibly inspired by synagogues built in Mumbai. The ancient ceiling fans on the upper floor



haven't been changed since they were first installed. I soon bump into Aviv Divekar, a wonderfully amiable man, who chats with me about the community. Aviv is quick to dispel any notions that the Bene Israel are foreigners. "First of all, you should know that the Bene Israel are a *Marathi* speaking people. We use Hebrew for prayers of course, but we are essentially Maharashtrians. All the Bene Israel in Ahmedabad also speak *Hindi* and *Gujarati* fluently – so yes, we are Indians first and Jews second!" Aviv goes on to explain the significance of the synagogue to community life. "It is the centre around which our community life revolves. See, today we are distributing free notebooks and stationary for families who have children going to school. After Sunday school, the boys play cricket out at the back – I'm sure you saw. This is also where we meet up and relax, so it is as much a social space for the community, as it is religious."

The Bene Israel depend on this social life to keep small and dwindling community together. "There are only some 40-50 families here in the city. Everyone knows everybody else – and every occasion is celebrated!" I ask Aviv what it is that sets the Bene Israel apart from other Jewish communities. "Well, firstly, we are Conservative, but not Orthodox. There are many traditions we have which are not part of Orthodox Jewish tradition, which we follow – not because we understand them, but because our forefathers used to follow them. In that way, we do not question traditions but carry them forward faithfully. We have *mehendi* and *sangeet* ceremonies before a marriage. These, and other typically Indian rituals set us apart. Orthodox Jews sometimes complain, but we cherish these traditions as part of our identity. The Bene Israel are very proud of their history and heritage, but we do not

show it openly. In fact, if you met a Bene Israel on the street, you would never guess that he was Jewish!”

Aviv’s description echoes what Esther David, the renowned author, had told me while talking about her Jewish heritage – that Jewish life in Ahmedabad is a secret life. They are a very home loving people, and only practice their religion from the confines of their home. It is very hard to tell a Jewish person on the street, because they never exhibit any religious symbols, and since hardly any kosher meat is available in Ahmedabad, 99 per cent of them are also vegetarian. All the important festivals are conducted at the synagogue, so the average *Amdavadi* has no idea what Jewish cultural life is like.

Is there anything unique about Jewish cuisine, I ask Aviv. He shrugs, “Yes, we do have our own Jewish traditional cuisine, but we tend to mostly eat *roti-sabji* and other Indian food. I love *rotis*!” We are generally vegetarian – but Uncle Johnny is also a *shohet* – that is someone who is trained to cut meat in the religiously prescribed way – so that if we do eat meat, we ensure that it is kosher.”

Today the community is a small and rapidly dwindling one, with only about 5,000 Bene Israel left in the country. Many members of the community have emigrated to Israel and other parts of the world in recent years. Many of the older generation only move because the rest of their family is there. “Most Jews left the country when Israel was formed and we got the call to help build the nation. Some people feared that after independence, the Jewish community would face discrimination in India, though that was never the case. India is perhaps one of the few countries where Jewish people have lived for centuries without persecution.” Aviv

himself is well settled and has no interest in leaving, “But most of the family is there, you know.” Israel is in fact home to the largest number of Bene Israel, with about 30,000 people.

Strange, how religions and cultures can intermingle, and yet remain distinct and unique. Only in this country, I thought, was such diversity possible. As I say goodbye to Aviv, and walk out of the hall, Uncle Johnny dashes past. “Any questions?” he asks me quickly. I shake my head and thank him for letting me hang around. As I walk out, the boy in the *kippa* flashes a mischievous smile, before getting back to his cricket, that one thing that is common to all of us, irrespective of cast, creed or religion.

## The limitless musician

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“I don’t call it a struggle. I am not a struggler. I love music and hence am doing it out of my interest, so how can it be a struggle? It is all a learning experience.” Kushal Chokshi appears to need to convince himself. Twenty, restless, frivolous and an upcoming singer, dressed casually in a yellow Hollister T-shirt and jeans, he relishes his lunch of *aamras* and *dhoklas*. With occasional peeps at his iPhone 6, he finds his own story very uninteresting and drab.

Kushal has had immense support from his joint family of nine to get to where he is today. As the youngest in the family, he is loved and pampered by all. Finishing his lunch, he gets up to put his plate in the kitchen sink. Sitting back at the dining table he says, “I have been learning Hindustani classical music since I was four years old. I have completed the *Visharad* level and I sing and compose songs with absolute ease. Apart from that, I have been a participant in two reality shows – *Chak de Bacche* in 2007 and *Voice India* in 2015.” Trophies he has earned for his music are lined up in the living room. He also has a range

of musical releases and performances in *Gujarati* devotional and classical music to his credit.

“After 12th, I took admission in Mithibai College in Mumbai along with an enrolment in Sound Ideas, a music academy. With all the fees paid and formalities done, I was excited, nervous, happy, all at once. For me, Mumbai has always been the place to be. So much so that I would carry brochures of various music schools with me everywhere throughout my 12th standard. I felt the exposure and opportunity there is limitless. I wanted to dream, live, grow and survive Mumbai.”

“However, it was all short lived. The twist in the tale was- like any teenage boy, my voice was changing. My *guruji* suggested that I required a homely and a comfortable atmosphere at such a crucial time. And so it was decided that I drop the idea of Mumbai and complete my graduation at home, in Ahmedabad. That was an absolute numb time in my life. Something I wanted all my life was only a step away and I had to walk backwards from it!”

“So here I was back in Ahmedabad, trying to make sense of the shattered dream: Mumbai.” There is a deep sense of acceptance and maturity in his voice.

Kushal is now pursuing a Bachelor’s degree in Performing Arts from Gujarat University. After a successful attempt at one year of doing commerce and not enjoying it, he went on to skip and take a year off. In that same year he got a golden opportunity to participate in a reality show – The Voice India, broadcast on &TV. He was eliminated after the first few rounds, but was not only loved and applauded by the celebrity judges, but also earned a playback assignment from one of them! Through the same show he was exposed to the music industry and masses of people.

“I felt Ahmedabad was not a place to pursue or experiment with music. But after my elimination and short-lived fame, I started making songs and uploaded them online. I got an amazing, unexpected response, which pushed me to make and upload more and more songs. My song even trended on Facebook for a week! Along with all this I started getting offers to do playback for *Gujarati* movies. Maybe if I was in Mumbai, I would not have reached this level. I would still be ‘learning’ (struggling).”

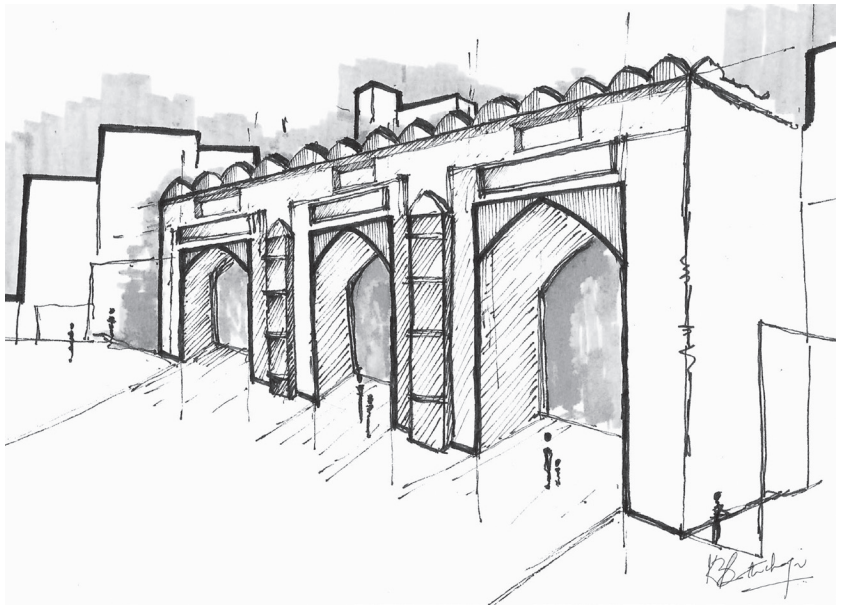
“Apart from my online presence, I also collaborate with lost artistes, like the poets, *ghazal* writers, *ghazal* singers of Gujarat – I need their talent and they need a connect with the audience. With their brilliant skill and experience, I compose and try to reach out to an audience that will listen to this new type of music. And this is how I am trying to build a following. My idea is that when I move to Mumbai, I should have the backing of the people of Gujarat.” Kushal runs his hand through his hair.

He believes listening is the most important aspect of composing music. *Riyaaz* spans about seven or eight hours daily and includes singing, listening and composing. Kushal follows various artistes the world over and being inspired by them has also started a new habit: of listening to just one particular genre for a time. “I am making stacks of genres in my bank of music for inspiration. Before I make or compose anything, I want to listen to everything! Along with all the music that I sing, listen to and compose, I have started realising that singing with emotion is important. For example, I cannot be sad while singing a happy song. There was a time when I would not understand this concept. But as I am evolving, these things are becoming very important and evident. Singing with emotion sounds very filmy, but it matters.”

Limitless and free are words Kushal uses often. To make music that is free, with no boundaries, no limitations, is his ambition. He strongly believes that his training in *Hindustani* music has given him a very strong base and makes his work possibilities infinite. He wants to be someone who can make and sing *bhajans*, compose jazz, classical, western classical and anything else with equal ease. His future plan is to make a place in the industry as an independent musician, someone who can be music composer, director – a one man army of sorts.

“Also, I strongly feel that I should go to Mumbai as a complete package. So I have started working on my body and grooming myself. I work out daily and have made myself fitter and leaner. My knowledge, emotion and representation of myself, combined with my music, contributes to the package! I have a chance to improve myself and I want to make full use of it.”

Kushal’s talent and passion for music is revealed in the way he talks about it. If he could, he would fit in all his knowledge in the one-hour long intense but casual chat. A need to do something big is evident in his poise and manner. It is amazing to see that a twenty-year-old has already thought of how his career should pan out. He has already foreseen the hurdles he will face and how he will jump over them! And in all ways he represents the youth in the city – informed, ambitious and limitless.





## Kala Ramji *ni mandir*

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Enter through the gates of Lal Darwaza and pass through the cramped, inter woven streets of the old city to reach Haja Patel *ni Pol*. Vibrant hues of green, yellow and pink adorn the facades of buildings as the scorching heat of Ahmedabad scarcely filters through this tightly woven fabric of homes.

The poetic carvings on a facade complement the humdrum tone of prosaic activities around it. A bunch of little girls, their eyes thickly lined with kajal, wearing blue striped uniforms, huddle around a cart selling flashy glass bangles. Through an open doorway, a group of old men can be seen sipping on their *chai*, their eyes fixed on a little boy carefully removing a kite stuck on a tree outside. An old *peepal* tree, standing firm in the glorious afternoon sun, provides a shady haven for a vegetable vendor. Amidst all this, a young man points me towards the Kala Ramji *ni mandir*, a 400-year-old temple dedicated to Lord Ram.

A series of doorways open into the serene place of worship, making the hot *Amdavadi* afternoon seem like a distant memory. A quaint courtyard greets devotees, its columns painted in a shade

of verdigris. The carvings on the brackets of the pillars hint at the time when the temple shrine was built. An old man sits under a well-preserved *chabutra* that stands tall inside the courtyard, while pigeons flutter over his head.

Sailesh Laxman Prasad Padh admirably bears the weight of family tradition and is one of the caretakers of the 400-year-old temple. His lineage can be traced back to Dwarka, where his forefathers hailed from. They came there when the temple had just been built. Lord Ram has been the beloved guest in his household, around whom everyday life revolves. Padh's face breaks into fine wrinkles as he smiles, and talks about the family's deep-rooted *Gujarati* values. "We have lived here for ages. I was born in this *mandir* and have spent my childhood playing in this courtyard," he says as nostalgia sweeps over his face, softening his eyes.

Constructed in Burma teak, this is a *haveli* type *mandir* with about 65 rooms in the upper storey. Two dark, narrow staircases on opposite sides lead up to a white balcony that runs around the inside of the courtyard. Lined around this are tiny rooms with large windows, each opening into the balcony. Padh says there are about 80 members in his family now. Over the years, they have devised a way of coping with the economics of city life, while maintaining their traditions. Everyone in the family is a CA. Everyone works. Padh talks about the time when they would sit around in the courtyard all day and immerse themselves in the hymns of God. He then proudly talks of the hundreds of visitors to the temple every day, as a part of the heritage city walk.

He takes me into the *sanctum sanctorum*, where the black stone idol resides. The temple is one of the rare shrines with the deity in a sitting posture. According to a rarely heard story, the idol

resurfaced on its own post-Independence – hundreds of years after the temple priest had hidden it in a secret cellar with carefully hidden entrances. As per ancient lore, it is preferable to have an idol in a sitting posture, since that way the presence of the God is permanently in the place of worship. Thus traditions and values continue to linger in this *haveli* temple, despite the family's struggle to catch up with the mechanics of city life.

*Aarti* is conducted at the temple five times a day, with the first one beginning at 5 AM. With every prayer, food is offered to Lord Ram, every *bhog* being different – *mangal*, *shringaar*, *raj* and others. The responsibility for the daily rituals is handed over to a new sub-family every 15 days. The entire clan comes together twice a month during *Sud Nom* and *Vad Nom*, and offers prayers together. It is not only the past that we share, but traditions and an enthusiasm for festivals, which meld at the temple, transforming the courtyard into a beautiful site for celebration, or *utsav*,” says Padh. Both the family and the temple have the air of a bygone era that is reminiscent of the old city, reflected in the now-crumbling *havelis* in the *pols*.

As an *Amdavadi*, Padh is born with a love for *chai*, and announces that it is time for a cuppa. We walk towards his favourite tea stall, through Khara Kua *ni Pol*, which is next to an old well that could have given the area its name. What grabs my attention are the houses of the *pol* built around the well, twisting and turning around the existing structure, creating self-subsistent neighborhoods. The organic nature of the *pols* spills out into the lives of those that live within them. This nature of the city to continue to be, instead of trying to be something else, keeps Ahmedabad's well moulded tradition and spirit alive.

## GLOSSARY

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**Aamras** – In Sanskrit, the word *amra* means mango and *rasa* means juice. Literally the word *aamras* means plain mango puree or pulp.

**Aari** – This is a type of embroidery practiced in various regions such as in Kashmir and Kutch, where a sharp edged needle is creatively used to make a chain-stitch kind of imprint.

**Aarti** – Also spelled as *arti*, *arati*, *arathi*, *aarathi*, it is a Hindu religious ritual of worship, a part of *pooja*, in which light from wicks soaked in *ghee* or camphor is offered to one or more deities. *Aarti* also refers to the song sung in praise of the deity when lamps are being offered. (see *pooja*.)

**Abida Parveen** – A prominent Pakistani Sufi singer, often dubbed as the Queen of Sufi music.

**Adda** – A place where people gather for conversation.

**Adivasi** – An umbrella term for a heterogeneous set of ethnic and tribal groups.

**Akhand divo** – *Akhand* means continuous and *divo*, *diya* or *deep* means oil lamp; *akhand divo* is a continuously burning lamp, usually lit during the festival of *Navratri*.

- Albert de Mandelso** – A seventeenth-century German adventurer, who wrote about his travels through Persia and India.
- Aloo paratha** – A *paratha* stuffed with spicy boiled *aloo* (potato) and onions. (see *paratha*.)
- Amdavadi** – A native, resident of Ahmedabad.
- Ammi** – Mother.
- Amway** – An American company that uses a multi-level marketing model to sell a variety of products, primarily in the health, beauty, and home care markets.
- Anganwadi** – A shelter programme run by the Indian government for the benefit of toddlers and lactating mothers. The word *anganwadi* means ‘courtyard shelter’ in Indian languages. A typical *anganwadi* centre provides basic health care in Indian villages. Basic health care activities include contraceptive counselling and supply, nutrition education and supplementation, as well as pre-school activities.
- Annas** – A currency unit formerly used in India and Pakistan, equal to 1/16 rupee.
- Arzoo** – Originally from Dari-Persian, it means a desire or wish.
- Atithi devo bhava** – A Sanskrit verse, taken from an ancient Hindu scripture which means ‘The guest is equivalent to God’ or ‘Be one for whom the guest is God’.
- Aum** – Also *om*, it is a sacred sound, spiritual icon as well as a mantra in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. It appears at the beginning and end of most Sanskrit recitations, prayers, and texts.
- Badal Sircar** – An influential Indian dramatist and theatre director, most known for his anti-establishment plays during the Naxalite movement in the 1970s.
- Badshah** – This comes from the Persian word *padishah* meaning master king or great king.

***Bajirao Mastani*** – A 2015 Bollywood historical romance which narrates the love story of the Maratha Peshwa Bajirao and his second wife Mastani starring Ranveer Kapoor, Deepika Padukone and Priyanka Chopra.

***Bangla*** – The primary language of Bengal.

***Baniya*** – An occupational community of merchants, bankers, money-lenders, dealers in grains or in spices, and in modern times numerous commercial enterprises.

***Barahandi*** – It literally means food cooked in twelve (*bara*) vessels (*handi*), a meat lover's delight. It is said that the *barahandi* tradition had come to Gujarat from Iran.

***Basti*** – Settlement.

***Batata*** – Potato.

***Bazaar*** – A market consisting of rows of shops or stalls selling miscellaneous goods.

***Behenji*** – A way of addressing a woman, generally married, in India with respect. The literal translation is 'sister'.

***Ben*** – The customary way of addressing women in Gujarat. For example, *Ansuyaben*.

***Bengali*** – A native of Bengal.

***Bhai*** – Brother.

***Bhajan*** – A devotional song.

***Bhajiya*** – It consists of small pieces of vegetables, meat, or fish that are covered in batter – a mixture of flour and liquid – and fried.

***Bhelpuri*** – A delicious Indian snack of puffed rice, onions, spices, and sweet and hot *chutneys*.

***Bhog*** – In the Hindu religion, the food served to the Gods.

***Bichona*** – A mattress, mat, cloth, or anything spread for bedding.

***Bindaas*** – Carefree, independent-minded.

**Bindi** – A decorative mark worn in the middle of the forehead by Indian women. It comes from a Sanskrit word *bindu*, meaning point, drop, dot or small particle.

**Bucketwallah** – A person who sells buckets.

**Bukharia** – Bukharan Jews, also Bukharian Jews or Bukhari Jews.

**BV Doshi** – A prominent Indian architect, based in Ahmedabad.

**Chaas** – Buttermilk.

**Chaat** – A lip-smacking savoury snacks typically served on pavements in the evenings, at stalls or food carts in various public spaces.

**Chaatwallah** – A person who prepares and sells *chaat*. (see *chaat*.)

**Chabutra** – A structure mostly found in villages of Gujarat. It is a tower-like structure with octagonal or pentagonal shaped enclosures at the top. In the upper enclosure are several holes, wherein birds can make their nests.

**Chadar** – A sheet/or veil.

**Chaddar** – A large piece of cloth that is wrapped around the head and upper body leaving only the face exposed, worn especially by Muslim women.

**Chai** – Tea.

**Chanya choli** – A traditional long skirt and blouse worn by women particularly in the states of Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana and Rajasthan.

**Char rasta** – *Char* means four and *rasta* means road. The meeting of four roads or the junction is called a *char rasta*.

**Charpoy** – A bed, used especially in India, consisting of a frame strung with tapes or light rope.

**Chawaal** – Rice.

**Cheeni** – A native of China.

**Chetichand** – An important festival celebrated as New Year's Day by *Sindhi* people of India and Pakistan. The *Sindhi* community celebrates the festival of *Chetichand* in honour of the birth of *Jhulelal*, the patron saint of the *Sindhis*. This day is considered to be very auspicious and is celebrated with pomp and gaiety. (see *Jhulelal*.)

**Chharas** – Part of a nomadic group of people whose roots were around Rajasthan. Their language is *Bhantu* – similar to *Marwadi*. The Chharas are also known as Sansis, Kanjar, Kanjarbhat, and Adodiyas in different parts of the country.

**Cholafali** – A popular Gujarati snack often prepared during the festival of Diwali. These are spicy mixed flour fingers, deep fried in oil.

**Chor Bazaar** – One of the largest flea markets in India. The area is one of the tourist attractions of Mumbai. The word *chor* means 'thief' in Hindi and Marathi. (see *bazaar*.)

**Chota** – Small.

**Cutlet** – A patty made of mixed vegetables or meat.

**Daaktar** – Doctor.

**Daawat** – Invitation/banquet. It also means to feast or party.

**Dada** – Grandfather.

**Dahi** – Curd.

**Dal** – Lentils.

**Dal vada** – A crispy deep fried savoury made from Bengal gram. This crunchy and mildly spicy dumplings or *vada* are very popular in southern India.

**Dandi March** – Also known as the Salt March and the Dandi Satyagraha, it was an act of non-violent civil disobedience in colonial India initiated by Mahatma Gandhi to produce salt from the seawater in the coastal village of Dandi, as was the practice of the local populace



until British officials introduced taxation on salt production, deemed their sea-salt reclamation activities illegal, and then repeatedly used force to stop it.

**Dandiya** – A stick, representing a sword, used in the *dandiya raas* dance, which is the traditional folk dance form of Gujarat and is associated with scenes of *Holi*, and *lila* of Krishna and Radha at Vrindavan. Along with *garba*, it is the featured dance of *Navratri* evenings.

**Dargah** – An Islamic shrine built over the grave of a revered religious figure, often a Muslim or Sufi saint.

**Darwaza** – Also spelled *darwaja*, it means a door or gateway.

**Deepika Padukone** – A popular Bollywood actress.

**Dhandha** – Business.

**Dhokla** – A food item made with a fermented batter derived from rice and split chickpeas, originating from Gujarat.

**Dhuleti** – The next day after *Holi* is *Dhuleti* or *Dhuli Padvo*. Literally, it means throwing of mud. (see *Holi*.)

**Diwali** – Also called *Deepawali*, it is the Hindu festival of lights, held between October and November. *Deep* means light and *awali* means a row. People clean their homes and decorate it with lights before *Diwali*. During the festival, they wear new clothes, light fireworks, worship and welcome *Lakshmi*, the goddess of prosperity. According to legend, *Diwali* commemorates the return of Lord Rama, king of Ayodhya along with Sita, his wife, and Lakshman, his brother, from a 14-year-long exile and the defeat of the demon-king Ravana.

**Dosa** – A kind of pancake made from a fermented batter. It is a popular south Indian breakfast item.

**Dresswallah** – A person who sells clothes or cloth.

**Dungali** – Onion.

**Dupatta** – A length of material worn arranged in two folds over the chest and thrown back around the shoulders, typically with a *salwar-kameez*.

**Fafda** – A delicious *Gujarati* snack prepared with *besan* (chick-pea flour), baking soda, thymol-carom seeds, turmeric powder, oil, and salt.

**Farsan** – A collective term used for snacks in Maharashtrian and *Gujarati* cuisine. Some are fried items which are then dried and can be stored, others are fresh or steamed.

**Feri** – The ferry, it is a boat or ship for conveying passengers and goods.

**Frantz Fanon** – A French psychiatrist, philosopher, revolutionary, and writer.

**Gaddi** – Cart.

**Gamthi** – A style of block print that dates back to the medieval ages in India. These prints usually have a repetitive motif that is used throughout the fabric. The word *gaam* means village and *gamthi* refers to the fact that this art originates from the villages of Gujarat and Rajasthan.

**Ganapati** – The elephant-headed Hindu god also known as Ganesha or Vinayak.

**Ganesh Chaturthi** – Also known as *Vinayaka Chaturthi* is an Indian festival that marks the birthday of Lord Ganesha. The festival is celebrated by installation and worshipping of clay image of the elephant-headed god, Ganesha. At the end of the festival, the idols are immersed in a large body of water such as the sea, river or a lake.

**Garba** – A dance form that originated in Gujarat. The word *garba* comes from the Sanskrit word for womb and so implies pregnancy – life. Traditionally, the dance is performed around a clay lantern with a light inside, called a *garbha deep*. *Garba* is performed in a circle as a symbol of the Hindu view of time. The rings of dancers revolve in

cycles, as time in Hinduism is cyclical. As the cycle of time revolves, from birth, to life, to death and again to rebirth, the only thing that is constant is the Goddess. Traditionally, it is performed during the nine-day Hindu festival *Navratri*.

**Ghagra choli** – The *ghagra* is a form of skirt which is long, embroidered and pleated. It is worn as the bottom portion of a *choli*. A *choli* is a midriff-baring blouse with short sleeves and a low neck. It is the favourite female apparel worn during festivals, weddings or special events in North India especially during the *Garba* festival in Gujarat.

**Ghat** – A series of steps leading down to a body of water, particularly a holy river. In *Bangla*-speaking regions, this set of stairs can lead down to something as small as a pond or as large as a major river.

**Ghazal** – A lyric poem with a fixed number of verses and a repeated rhyme, typically on the theme of love, and normally set to music, in *Urdu*.

**Ghoonghat** – A veil or headscarf worn by some women to cover their head, and often their face. Generally, the loose end of a *saree* is pulled over the head and face to act as a *ghoonghat*.

**Goliyon Ki Raasleela Ram-Leela** – A 2013 Bollywood movie, this is a romantic-tragedy which is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

**Gujarati** – A native of Gujarat or the primary language of Gujarat.

**Gujarati thali** – The typical *Gujarati thali* consists of *roti*, *dal* or *kadhi*, rice, and *sabzi*. The *thali* also includes preparations made from pulses or whole beans such as black eyed beans, etc., a snack item like *dhokla*, *khaman* and a sweet-like *jalebi*. Many *Gujarati* dishes are distinctively sweet, salty, and spicy simultaneously.

**Gulab jamun** – An Indian sweet consisting of curdled milk and flour dumpling deep fried in clarified butter and soaked in sugar syrup.

**Guruji** – A guru or spiritual teacher, in Sanskrit.

**Halwa** – A dessert which is popular in Indian, Asian and Middle Eastern cuisines. Flour, semolina, grains or nuts form the base of a *halwa* and is garnished with nuts.

**Haveli** – A generic term used for a traditional townhouse and mansions in India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh, usually one with historical and architectural significance.

**Himesh Reshammiya** – An Indian music director, singer, producer, lyricist, distributor and actor. Some of his hits are *Aashiq Banaya Aapne*, *Tera Suroor* and *Hookah Bar*.

**Hindustani music** – North Indian style of Indian classical music.

**Hindutva** – Literally Hindu-ness, an ideology that seeks to define Indian culture in terms of Hindu values. It is the prominent movement advocating Hindu nationalism in India.

**Holi** – The Indian festival of colours. The legend of this celebration revolves around more than one story – the soulful bond of Lord Krishna and Radha, Prahlad, the child-devotee of Lord Vishnu, Kamdeva, the Indian Cupid-God and Dhundhi, the immortal ogress.

**Honey Singh** – Popularly known as Yo Yo Honey Singh, he is an Indian rapper, music producer, singer and film actor who is a heartthrob of the youth in India. *Blue Eyes*, *Lungi Dance* and *Chaar Bottle Vodka* are some of his biggest hits which will definitely get you grooving.

**Hututu** – Another name for the sport, *kabbadi*.

**Idli** and **chutney** – A traditional breakfast in South Indian households. *Idli* is a savoury cake made by steaming a batter consisting of fermented black lentils and rice. *Chutney* is a coconut stew mixed with other spices and served with *idli*, *dosa*, *vada*, etc.

**Imammah** – The Shia Islam doctrine (belief) of religious, spiritual and political leadership of the Islamic community. The Shia believe that

the Imams are the rightful successors of Muhammad and possess divine knowledge and authority.

**Imam** – The person who leads prayers in a mosque.

**Jaali** – A perforated stone or latticed screen, usually with an ornamental pattern. This form of architectural decoration is found in Indian, Indo-Islamic and Islamic architecture.

**Jaat** – A traditionally agricultural community in Northern India and Pakistan.

**Jalso** – Also termed the *jalsa*, it means enjoyment, *masti*.

**Jamanvaar** – Luncheon.

**Janmashtami** – Also known as *Krishnashtami*, *Gokulashtami* or *Srikrishna Jayanti*, it is the annual celebration of the birth of the Hindu deity *Krishna*, the eighth avatar of *Vishnu*. Hindus celebrate Janmashtami by fasting, worshipping Krishna and staying up until midnight, and offer prayers at the special time when *Krishna* is believed to have been born.

**Jelebi** – Also known as *zulbia*, this is a sweet made by deep-frying a wheat flour batter in circular shapes, which are then soaked in sugar syrup.

**Jhulelal** – The patron saint of the *Sindhis*, also known as Ishtadeva Uderolal.

**Ji** – The customary Indian way of addressing a person with respect. For example Ansarji.

**Jism** – Body.

**Jugaad** – A colloquial *Hindi* and *Punjabi* word, literally meaning a hack or innovative fix or a simple work-around.

**Jumma** – Friday prayer of Muslims.

**Kaarigaar** – A craftsman or artisan.

**Kaccha** – Dwellings made up of mud or hay stacks or tin roof that normally can't withstand harsh weather.

**Kadi** – Also spelled *karhi*, it is an Indian dish, consisting of a thick gravy based on chickpea flour, and contains vegetable fritters called *pakodas*, to which sour yogurt is added to give it little sour taste. It is often eaten with boiled rice or roti. (see *pakoda*, *roti*.)

**Kadia** – Labourer.

**Kajal** – A black powder used as a cosmetic, either around the eyes or as a mark on the forehead.

**Kaka** – Uncle, father's brother.

**Kali Mata** – The Hindu goddess of time, creation, destruction and power.

**Kashrut** – The body of Jewish law dealing with what foods can and cannot be eaten and how foods must be prepared. The word *Kashrut* comes from the Hebrew, meaning fit, proper or correct.

**Kathi roll** – A street-food originating from Kolkata. Its original form was a *kathi kabab* enclosed in a *paratha*. Today, any filling rolled up in any kind of Indian flatbread is called a *kathi* roll.

**Kevi Rite Jaish** – A 2012 *Gujarati* drama film. The plot is about the fascination and obsession of the Patels – a *Gujarati* farmer community – of migrating to the United States.

**Khadi** – Also called *khaddar*, this is hand-spun and hand-woven cloth mainly made out of cotton.

**Khajur** – Dates.

**Khakhra** – Thin crackers made from mat bean, wheat flour and oil. It originates from Gujarat, and is part of Jain *Gujarati* cuisine.

**Khaman** – A food common in Gujarat made from soaked and freshly ground *channa dal* or *channa* flour. Generally eaten as a snack, it is

mostly served with *sev* – a crispy snack made from gram flour – and fried chillies and chutney.

***Khana*** – To eat (verb); food (noun).

***Khandvi*** – Also called *patuli* or *dahi vada*, it is a savoury snack in *Gujarati* cuisine. It consists of yellowish, tightly rolled bite-sized pieces, and is primarily made of gram flour and yogurt.

***Khan*** – A surname and title of Mongolian origin.

***Khatti meethi*** – *Khatti* means sour and *meethi* means sweet.

***Khichdi*** – A preparation made from rice and lentils.

***Khokho*** – A tag sport from the Indian sub-continent. It is played by teams of twelve players, of which nine enter the field, who try to avoid being touched by members of the opposing team.

***Kippah*** – A brimless cap, usually made of cloth, worn by Jews to fulfil the customary requirement.

***Kitli*** – Teapot or tea stall in *Gujarati*.

***Kosher*** – Foods that conform to the regulations of *Kashrut*. (see *Kashrut*.)

***Kothimbir wadi*** – Coriander fritters, a popular Maharashtrian snack.

***Kotwal*** – A title used in medieval India for the leader of a *kot* or fort. *Kotwals* often controlled the fort of a major town or an area of smaller towns on behalf of another ruler.

***Kundan*** – A traditional form of Indian gemstone jewellery involving a gem set with gold foil between the stones and its mount. The method is believed to have originated in the royal courts of Rajasthan and Gujarat.

***Kurta*** – A loose collarless shirt, worn usually with a *salwar*, *churidar*, or *pajama*.

***Kutchi*** – An Indo-Aryan language spoken in the Kutch region of Gujarat as well as in Sindh.

**Laapsi** – A *Rajasthani* sweet dish made of broken wheat pieces and *ghee* along with nuts, raisins and dried fruits.

**Laari** – A cart.

**Laddoo** – An Indian sweet made from a mixture of flour, sugar, and shortening shaped into a ball.

**Lama** – A title for a teacher of the *Dharma* in Tibetan Buddhism.

**Langdi** – A traditional Indian field sport, similar to hopscotch.

**Le Corbusier** – A prominent Swiss-French architect, designer, painter, urban planner and one of the pioneers of what is now called modern architecture, he is credited with the layout of the new city of Chandigarh built in post-Independence India.

**Lockwallah** – A person who sells locks.

**Louis Kahn** – A prominent American architect, based in Philadelphia.

**Louise Fresco** – A Dutch scientist, director and writer.

**Mahakali mandir** – Temple dedicated to *Kali Mata* (see *Kali Mata*).

**Mabaul** – Ambience or environment.

**Makai phooli** – Puffed corn.

**Makkhan** – Butter.

**Malayali** – A native of Kerala.

**Mama** – Maternal uncle.

**Mami** – Maternal aunt.

**Mandap** – A temporary platform set up for Hindu weddings and religious ceremonies.

**Mandir** – A Hindu temple.

**Manjha** – The abrasive string used for kites used during the festival of *Uttarayan*. (see *Uttarayan*.)

**Marathi** – The language spoken in Maharashtra.

**Marwadi** – An ethnic group that originated from Rajasthan. Their language, also called *Marwadi* is closely related to *Rajasthani*.



**Masala dosa** – A *dosa* with potato stuffing. (see *dosa*.)

**Masala** – *Massala* or *masalo* means a mixture of many spices.

**Masjid** – Mosque.

**Matka** – Pot.

**Meethi puri** – Literally, sweet *puri*. *Puri* is made of wheat flour and is deep fried.

**Mehendi** – The word *mehendi* means henna, a paste that is bought in a cone-shaped tube and is made into designs for men and women or applied on hair as natural dye. When it is used as a term to describe a celebratory event during an Indian wedding it translates to an event where *mehendi* is applied on the bride's hands, arms and feet and legs.

**Mela** – A fair or Hindu festival, in Indian languages.

**Menorah** – A nine-branched candelabrum, also known as a *hanukkiyah* or *chanukkiyah* for use on the Jewish festival of Hanukkah.

**Methi gota** – Also called the *dakor na gota* or *methi pakoda* this is a *Gujarati* snack made by deep frying a spicy ball consisting of fenugreek leaves and chickpeas flour.

**Mirchi** – Chilli.

**Modak** – A sweet dumpling, usually made during the festival of *Ganesh Chaturthi*. The sweet filling inside a *modak* is made up of grated coconut and jaggery, while the soft shell is made from rice flour, or wheat flour mixed with *maida* flour.

**Moballa** – An area of a town or village; a community.

**Momo** – A steamed dumpling filled with meat or vegetables. It is a traditional delicacy in Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan.

**Mukhwas** – A colourful Indian after-meal snack or digestive aid. It also freshens breath. It can be made of various seeds and nuts, but often found with fennel seeds, anise seeds, coconut, and sesame seeds.

**Naasta** – Also spelled *nashta*, it means snacks.

**Nahaari** – Also spelled *nihari*, this is a slow-cooked meat stew usually consisting of beef or lamb along with bone marrow.

**Namaaz** – Ritual prayers prescribed by Islam, ideally to be observed five times a day.

**Navratri** – A festival dedicated to the worship of the Hindu deity Durga. The word *Navratri* means ‘nine nights’ in Sanskrit, *nava* meaning nine and *ratri* meaning nights. During these nine nights and ten days, nine forms of Durga is worshipped.

**Nepali** – A native of Nepal or the language of Nepal.

**Nimbupaani** – Lemon juice.

**Onam** – The harvest festival of Kerala, it is celebrated with great joy and enthusiasm. It marks the homecoming of the legendary King Mahabali.

**Paanipuri** – Also known as *golgappa* or *puchka*, these are fried puff-pastry balls filled with spiced mashed potato, spiced water, and tamarind juice.

**Paise** – A monetary unit of India, Pakistan, and Nepal, equal to one hundredth of a rupee.

**Paithani** and **Shaal** – Traditional Maharashtrian *sarees* and fabric.

**Pajama** – A pair of loose trousers tied by a drawstring around the waist generally paired with a *kurta* (see *kurta*).

**Pakoda** – Also called *pakora*, *pakodi*, or *ponako*, it is a fried snack.

**Paneer** – An unaged, acid-set, curd cheese made by curdling heated milk with lemon juice, vinegar, or any other food acids.

**Papad** – Also *papadum*, *papar*, or *papad*, this is a thin, crisp, disc-shaped food; typically based on a seasoned dough usually made from peeled black gram flour and fried or roasted.

**Paratha** – One of the most popular unleavened flatbreads in India, they are made by baking whole wheat dough and finishing off with

- shallow frying. *Parathas* are thicker and more substantial than *roti*. (see *roti*.)
- Pastiwallah** – Scrap-dealers.
- Pavbhaji** – A fast food dish from Maharashtra, consisting of *bhaji*, a thick vegetable curry usually prepared in butter and served with *pav*, a soft bread roll.
- Peepal** – The *Ficus religiosa* or sacred fig is a species of fig native to Indian subcontinent, south-west China and Indochina. It is also known as the *bodhi* tree, *pippala* tree, or *ashwattha* tree.
- Pichkari** – Water gun, generally used by children to spray water and colours during the festival of *Holi*. (see *Holi*.)
- Plasticwallah** – A person who sells plastic wares.
- Pol** – A housing cluster which comprises many families of a particular group, linked by caste, profession, or religion. *Pols* are typical of urban centres in Gujarat especially of old Ahmedabad.
- Pooja** – A prayer ritual performed by Hindus to host, honour and worship one or more deities, or to spiritually celebrate an event.
- Poori-aamras** – Fresh mango puree or *aamras* served with *poori* or *puri* which is made of wheat flour and deep fried.
- Pradakshina** – Circumambulation of sacred places in a Hindu, Jain or Buddhist context.
- Pucca** or **pukka housing** – Dwellings that are designed to be solid and permanent.
- Pudina** – The herb mint.
- Pulao** – A Middle Eastern or Indian dish of rice cooked in stock with spices, typically having added meat or vegetables.
- Qawwali** – An energetic musical performance of Sufi Muslim poetry that aims to lead listeners to a state of religious ecstasy, to a spiritual union with Allah. It is devotional and expresses love for an oneness

with God, traditionally sung by a group of men to the accompaniment of musical instruments.

**Rajasthani** – Native of Rajasthan or language of Rajasthan.

**Ranveer Singh** – A popular Bollywood actor.

**Rasam** – A South Indian soup, traditionally prepared using tamarind juice as a base and spices as seasoning. It is eaten with rice or separately as a spicy soup.

**Ravivari** – This means ‘that which happens on a Sunday’.

**Rickshaw-wallah** – The driver of the yellow and green coloured auto-rickshaws, that are popular in cities across India and other parts of Asia as an alternative to taxis because of their affordability. They have replaced the manually pulled rickshaws of the 19th century, which continue to ply the streets of cities in North and East India.

**Riyaaz** – The term used for music practice, for honing of Hindustani classical music vocal as well as instrument skills.

**Roti-sabzi** – *Roti* is a thin, flat Indian bread made from whole wheat flour traditionally known as *atta*. *Sabzi* or *sabji* refers to a vegetable or a mix of two or more vegetables cooked in oil with spices, generally eaten with rice or *rotis*. It is a staple food in most parts of North India.

**Ruh** – Soul.

**Sadhya** – A variety of dishes traditionally served on a banana leaf in Kerala. It means banquet in *Malayalam*. It is a feast prepared for weddings and the festival of *Onam*. (see *Onam*.)

**Sadra** – *Kurta*.

**Safai kamagar** – Sweeper.

**Salvador Dali** – A prominent Spanish surrealist painter.

**Salwar-kameez** – The *salwar* are loose *pajama*-like trousers. The legs are wide at the top, and narrow at the ankle. The *kameez* is a long shirt

- or tunic, often seen with a Western-style collar; however, for female apparel, the term is now loosely applied to collarless or mandarin-collared *kurtas*.
- Sambar*** – A lentil-based vegetable stew or chowder based on a broth made with tamarind. It is a popular dish in South Indian cuisine.
- Sangeet*** – The word *sangeet* means music, but when it is used as a term to describe a celebratory event during an Indian wedding it translates to a musical night or musical party.
- Sanjeev Kapoor*** – A popular Indian chef and entrepreneur.
- Sappadu*** – Meal.
- Sarkar*** – A man who is in a position of authority.
- Seva*** – Volunteer work; selfless service; work offered to God.
- Shahbaaz Qalandar*** – Lal Shahbaaz Qalandar, also known as Syed Muhammad Usman Marwandi (1177–19 February 1275), was a Sufi philosopher-poet of present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- Shakshuka*** – An Arabic dish of eggs poached in a sauce of tomatoes, chili peppers, and onions, often spiced with cumin.
- Shukravari*** – This means ‘that which happens on a Friday’.
- Sindhi*** – A native of Sindh.
- Stri-Savdhan*** – *Stri* means woman and *savdhan* means attention.
- Sukhdi*** – A Gujarati sweet made from wheat flour and jaggery in *ghee*.
- Taqleef*** – Also spelled *takleef*, this is the state of being afflicted; a state of pain, distress, or grief.
- Taraqqi*** – To make progress; towards ideal completeness or perfection in respect of quality or condition.
- Telugu*** – A native of Andhra Pradesh or Telangana or the primary language in Andhra Pradesh or Telangana.
- Thali*** – A meal made up of a selection of various dishes. It simply means a round platter used to serve food. (see *Gujarati thali*.)

**Tharki** – Lascivious, pervert or lewd.

**Thenthuk** – Hand pulled noodle soup, very common in Tibetan cuisine, served as dinner and sometimes lunch.

**Thepla** – Whole wheat and fenugreek leaf flatbread. It is usually roasted on a flat iron pan.

**Thukpa** – A Tibetan noodle soup. It originated in the eastern part of Tibet.

**Tika** – Also *tilak*, this is a mark worn by a Hindu on the forehead to indicate caste, status, or sect, or as an ornament.

**Tukkal** – Sky lanterns.

**Undhiyu** – A Gujarati mixed vegetable dish that is a regional speciality of Surat in Gujarat. *Undhiyu* comes from Gujarati words *matlu* meaning earthen pot and *undhu* meaning upside down since they are traditionally cooked upside down underground in earthen pots fired from above.

**Utsav** – Derived from the Sanskrit word, *utsav* is a festival, celebration or any joyous occasion.

**Uttarayan** – A major festival of Gujarat celebrated on January 14, *Makar Sankranti* – the day when the sun starts to travel northwards marking the decline of winter. It is known for the display of kite flying skills and now an International Kite Festival. Although the Kite Festival is celebrated all over Gujarat, it is the most exciting in the capital city of Ahmedabad.

**Vaav** – These are stepwells – wells and ponds in which the water may be reached by descending a set of steps.

**Vada** – Generally known as *medu vada*, it is made with *urad dal* (black gram) flour. This *vada*, shaped like a doughnut with a hole in the middle is a popular south Indian breakfast or snack.

**Vadapav** – Also called *wada pav* or *pao*, it is not to be confused with the south Indian *vada*. It is a popular fast food dish native to the state of Maharashtra – deep fried, batter coated potato fritter sandwiched into a *pav*, a soft bread roll.

**Vaishnav** – A devotee of Lord Vishnu.

**Vatki Vyavahar** – *Vatki* means a bowl. *Vyavahar* means behaviour. Often when something delicious is made at home, a bowl of the delicacy is given to the neighbour. The bowl comes back to after a few days with a delicacy that the neighbour has prepared.

**Veeshi** – Dining hall.

**Yantra** – Mystical geometrical diagram, or any object, used as an aid to meditation in tantric worship. In classical Sanskrit, the generic meaning of *yantra* is instrument, contrivance, apparatus.

**Yatri** – Passenger.

**Yoga** – A school of Hindu philosophy advocating and prescribing a course of physical and mental disciplines for attaining liberation from the material world.

**Zardozi** – A form of embroidery that came to India from Persia. Its literal translation, *zar* meaning gold and *dozi* meaning embroidery, refers to the process of using metallic-bound threads to sew embellishment on to various fabrics.





# ABBREVIATIONS

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- AMC** Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation  
**ATMA** Ahmedabad Textile Mill Owners' Association  
**AWAG** Ahmedabad Women's Action Group  
**BA** Bachelor of Arts  
**B.Com** Bachelors in Commerce  
**B.Ed** Bachelors in Education  
**BPA** Blind People's Association  
**BRTS** Bus Rapid Transport System  
**CA** Chartered Accountant  
**CBI** Central Bureau of Investigation  
**CEE** Centre for Environment Education  
**CEPT** Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology  
**DNT** De-Notified Tribe  
**FiA** Foodaholics in Ahmedabad  
**GRE** Graduate Record Exam  
**HDC** Housing Development Corporation  
**IAS** Indian Administrative Service  
**IELTS** International English Language Testing System

## ABBREVIATIONS

- IIM** Indian institute of Management  
**IPS** Indian Police Service  
**JTMF** Jaswant Thaker Memorial Foundation  
**LGBTQ** Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer  
**LLB** The Bachelor of Laws  
**MA** Master of Arts  
**MBA** Master of Business Administration  
**MFG** Malayali Friend's Group  
**MICA** Mudra Institute of Communication, Ahmedabad  
**MSU** Maharaja Sayaji University  
**MTS** Municipal Transport Service  
**NGO** Non-Governmental Organisation  
**NID** National Institution of Design  
**PDPU** Pandit Deendayal Petroleum University  
**PhD** Doctor of Philosophy or Doctor Philosophiae  
**PRL** Physical Research Laboratory  
**SPIPA** Sardar Patel Institute of Public Administration  
**UNESCO** United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization  
**USA** United States of America  
**VECHAAR** Vishalla Environmental Centre for Heritage of Art, Architecture and Research, Charitable Trust

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*Allah ke bande*  
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*Khaman* – a tradition  
The *limbodi* coloured *basti*  
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