



Ahmedabad

A personal history of a city

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Introduction

For a city that is India's seventh largest, Ahmedabad exerts surprisingly light urban gravity. It is a city that gives one the impression that it is either unaware of or unconcerned about its impact on India's national life, both throughout history and in modern times. Few metros of Ahmedabad's size and historical significance are as unselfconscious and untouched by their relevance and, in some sense, notoriety.

Long used to being counted out of the list of important Indian cities, Ahmedabad has developed a detached demeanor about its many great accomplishments and contributions. By the same logic, it is equally unencumbered by its many profound flaws. Its disinterest in showcasing itself can often be mistaken for natural diffidence. It is anything but.

It is in that spirit that the completion of 600 years of the city's founding in 2011 ought to be seen. It should not surprise anyone if most inhabitants of the city consider that anniversary as nothing more than a passing number unless it creates some memorable opportunity for trade and commerce; or, in short, an

opportunity to make money. Perhaps more than in any other comparable cities, the people of Ahmedabad display a particular earnestness to get on with the business at hand. If history fits into that dynamic, that's great. If it does not, then it needs to step aside. It is a city fully grounded in the now.

During my two and half months of researching and interviewing in the city, I did not come across anyone who, of their own volition, mentioned the 600th anniversary. When I broached it, the reaction was mostly a combination of polite disinterest and transient curiosity. Some of that attitude may have to do with their barely hidden antipathy towards the city's Muslim founder Ahmed Shah. Equally though, it could also be explained by their innate preference for the more immediate and current. However, the most important reason why the Amdavadis, as the people of the city are known, do not consider that anniversary of any great significance is because Ahmedabad was not built so much by its ruler as by its business community, locally known as the Mahajan.

As Umang Hutheesing, a scion of one such family and probably the city's most passionate cultural impresario, describes, "I can think of only three

cities of any significant scale in the world which were built by the business community. I call them the three Ms: the Mahajans of Ahmedabad, the Merchants of Venice and the Medicis of Florence.”

Any city that owes its success to its business/trading class is necessarily focused on the present. It is not a city that celebrates history and does its best to not let it stand in its way. Add to that equation the fact that quite like many Indian cities, Ahmedabad’s demographic is also very young in terms of the age of its residents who are by their very definition more interested in now and not what some “sultan bhai”, as teenager named Bhavesh put it, did 600 years ago.

Ahmedabad has always enjoyed an identity that is distinct and, in many ways, distant from the rest of Gujarat which has much older cities but none that nearly has had the kind of singular impact in shaping the state’s economic personality. In many ways the identity of the Gujaratis as being shrewd business people is overwhelmingly drawn from the people of Ahmedabad.

Historically, Ahmedabad has always been a city full of possibilities, but it is only in the last decade or so

that they have come to be recognized more widely among the people. Industriousness and mercantilism have always been the two defining characteristics of the people of Ahmedabad, but the last decade has witnessed them acquire a whole new dimension.

There is a third less obvious characteristic and that is the city's quiet self-assurance. Ahmedabad has been a very well-to-do city for a very long time, but rarely, if ever, wealth is flaunted here. In fact, some of the city's wealthiest people have been known to be consciously understated. There was a time in the 1960s and 70s when some of the wealthiest men and women in Ahmedabad wore no-frills and preferred strictly cotton clothes. The only giveaway of their wealth would be barely noticeable diamond buttons in their shirts or kurtas. I remember my visits with my maternal grandfather to his boss and then prominent businessman Vimal Kilachand's bungalow in the Law Garden area. Dressed up in a blindingly white poplin kurta with diamond buttons and cotton dhoti, he would alight from his Chevrolet Impala and quickly send the car away lest its opulent presence overwhelmed a child. While some of that character has undergone change

because of the rise of the neo-rich, it is still very much part of the life here.

Despite its dramatic growth in the last decade and half or so Ahmedabad's heart is essentially provincial. The overriding attitude of its people has been that the world will adapt itself to them rather than the city to the world. That is both strength as well as weakness. This dynamic has given the city, its people, its buildings and its culture a character that lends itself to a compelling narrative.

Although the known history of the city has been traced back to the 11th century, and in some ways, at least by implication, to the Harappan civilization because of its proximity to Lothal, it is after its founding in 1411 by Ahmed Shah that it begins to evolve into an urban conglomerate. The frequently told but most likely apocryphal story about Ahmed Shah's dog and a hare still resonates. The story goes that once while walking his dog/s Ahmed Shah was startled when a hare attacked his canine companion without a warning. He was believed to have said something to the effect that if the hares of the region were so fearless he could only imagine how its people would be. From that logic, it is believed, was born Ahmedabad. You can still find people in old

Ahmedabad who think the dog and the hare were actually metaphors for the alien ruler and his indigenous subjects. They see that story as representative of the people of the city rejecting an invader.

The name Ahmedabad is a combination of Ahmed and Abad, which in Urdu means prosperous. Together it was supposed to be the enduring legacy of Sultan Ahmed Shah who like all rulers wanted to live and prosper in its inhabitants' memory long after his death. Left to the ever-pragmatic people of the city the name's Islamic identity was chipped away over the centuries and sculpted into a more neutral Amdavad. It is possible that Ahmedabad started collapsing into Amdavad initially out of its inhabitants' reluctance to be fastidious about its pronunciation. Somewhere along the centuries, particularly in the latter half of its existence, as Hindu-Muslim relations began to come under strain the more revisionist-minded among the majority community began to remind the rest that its name commemorated a conquering Islamic ruler. There is a fairly substantial number of people who would, in fact, want the city's name changed back to what they believe to be its original—Karnavati.

It is a measure of how deeply ingrained this thinking has become that very few people, mostly those who are not indigenous to it, pronounce the name correctly. A vast majority calls it Amdavad as if they are shorthanding a history of subjugation. At the Ahmedabad railways station, its English and Hindi versions are accurately spelled, while its Gujarati version is written as Amdavad. Ramnik Patel, who was coming out of the station, had this question in reply to my question why most Gujaratis are reluctant to pronounce the city's name the way it is. "Ahmed Shah mari gaya chhasso varas pehla. Have to danti to emne. (Ahmed Shah died 600 years ago. Let's bury him now.)"

As an experiment I asked some half a dozen random children on the city's streets if they liked living in Ae hamed aa baad. They looked at me strangely with two of them, siblings outside the Gujarat Law Society's high school in the Law Garden area, even correcting me by saying, "Aa to Amdavad kehvay (It is called Amdavad)." Sensing an opportunity for some interesting perspective I probed the siblings further and asked them if they knew who Ahmed Shah was. Preeti, the sister, said, "Naam to koi Musalman bhai nu lagey chhe pan khabar nathi. Ae

shun karta ta? (It seems like a Muslim man's name. What did he do?)” Her older brother, Paresh, perhaps conscious that my questions may not be so innocent, cut short the conversation saying, “Aapne ketla taka kon Ahmed Shah hato? Hashe koi. (What do we care who Ahmed Shah was. Must be someone),” he said and led the sister away.

From that dismissiveness began my journey to and through Ahmedabad. It seemed to me that I might get a better measure of the city if I approached it from a vantage point that was older than its 600 years and still within reasonable geographical vicinity. I found it without any effort. It is called Lothal, the “mound of the dead.”

Chapter 1

Lothal to Ahemdabad

The white summer light bleaches the flat brown ground and gives it a frosted look. Hot gases that rise from the ground refract everything—people, cows, dogs, peacocks, monkeys, buildings, scooters, rickshaws. At noon, when the sun is at its zenith the city looks misaligned. It is from this misaligned city of Ahmedabad that I begin my journey to the perfectly aligned Indus Valley town of Lothal, to an ancient but finely structured past with little or no bearing on the current but chaotic present.

The steady drone of the Bajaj auto rickshaw engine mixed with the rancid heat touching 45 degree Celsius can lull anyone into a slow death. It is a good thing I am not driving. I am not sure it is a good thing for anyone else to drive either in this debilitating heat. But Jasubhai is different.

Jasubhai, the rickshaw driver, has not heard of an invention called sunglasses. His eyes are wide open as if locked in a who-blinks-first-contest with the sun. The jaggedly, post-apocalyptic glare, which can singe the lesser mortals' retina, is no match for him. I thought I saw the sun dim its light a bit as if

in defeat but quickly attributed it to the disorientation caused by the infernal heat. Before he agrees to drive me to Lothal he is not so much excited about traveling back 4500 years in history to the ancient Indus town as he is at the prospects of earning 450 rupees that he said he would charge me.

“Normally I would have charged 600 rupees—one rupee for every year of Ahmedabad’s history—but since you are writing about my city I am giving you a discount,” he says part in jest, part seriously. It is just as well that I am not writing a history of Lothal because if the antiquity of the city determined Jasubhai’s rickshaw fares, it would have been one expensive ride. Also, he does not realize that if we are going to a place which is 4,500 years old, he has charged me just ten paise for every year. Only in Ahmedabad would you find a rickshaw driver who could price history in actual hard cash.

During the summer, the route from Ahmedabad to Lothal on the National Highway number 8 is predominantly tawny, broken by an occasional green bush. There is no relief from the relentless heat even though we pass through what looks like a series of tiny pools of water; all of them mini mirages formed on the pitch-black tar of the road.

They appear and disappear in such rapid succession like an illusionist's trick that I cannot decide whether they are real or imaginary. The best is to imagine them to be real.

In the door-less rickshaw the smell is a mixture of an overcooked earth and wafts of Ahmedabad's pollution. Sweat evaporates almost as soon as it forms because of the dry heat and wind in one's face. But somehow it seems appropriate to ride in a rickshaw to the antiquities. It seems like a form of transport closer to that period.

Lothal and Ahmedabad are separated by 80 kilometers in geographical terms and nearly 4500 years in historical terms. What joins them is the Sabarmati River, an estuary of which coursed past Lothal in ancient times as the main river does through Ahmedabad today. In each case the river spawned two remarkable urban settlements and both emphatically defined by its people's innate industriousness.

Once one of the most important cities of the Indus Valley Civilization in 2350 BCE, Lothal now looks like a brick kiln fallen on bad days. Its millennial ruins do not do justice to its glory days when it was

a thriving town boasting of marvelous town planning and engineering skills as well as remarkable expertise in metallurgy, weights and measures as well as jewelry making. Although the opinion is divided on whether Lothal did indeed have a dry dock and hence suggesting of some form of shipbuilding industry or merely a structure that looks like it was a large water storage tank, it is clear that the Harappans who founded and lived here were quite advanced in their technological knowledge and entrepreneurial prowess.

In their book ‘Harappan civilization and Rojdi’, Gregory L. Possehl, M. H. Raval and Y. M. Chitalwala point out that given the relatively small size of Lothal (about 5.5 hectares) all of its “manufacturing and commercial activity far outstripped any reasonable estimate for the needs of the Lothal inhabitants. This fits well with the proposed outpost function of the site.” In other words, they produced goods far in excess of their own needs and demands with a clear intent to send them beyond their own settlement.

Standing near the remains of its dry dock/water tank and walking on its neatly laid out streets it is possible to feel a connection between Lothal and

Ahmedabad. And with a creative leap it is also possible to imagine the inhabitants of Ahmedabad fitting right into the ancient groove of a people who were modern despite their antiquity. Experts believe that although the Harppans were the dominant influence in Lothal, there was also a hunter/gatherer population that most likely would have worked in tandem with them. The hunter-gatherers were the indigenous population unlike the Harppans who came from Sindh. While no such study has been carried out, it is possible that some inhabitants of Ahmedabad carry a bit of Lothal's DNA in them.

There is hardly any physical record of what happened between the time Lothal faded away over 4000 years ago and the emergence of a medieval state. The territory, which now forms Gujarat, was very much an integral part of the Mauryan Empire (321-185 BCE) that stretched from the modern-day Bangladesh all the way to Afghanistan, and then the Gupta Empire (320 to 550 CE) that straddled the Golden Age of India. From 900 CE to 1243 CE Gujarat was ruled by the Solanki dynasty with Anhilwad, now Patan, as its capital. In the 11th century under the sixth Solanki ruler Karna Dev (1063/4-1093/4) a city was founded where

Ahmedabad exists today and named Karnavati after the king. However, it is only with the advent of the Muslim rule over India in the early 13th century that the territory that is now Ahmedabad begins to emerge in a sharper relief out of its hazy ancient past.

Turkic and Afghani dynasties started ruling over Delhi from 1206 with the Mamluk dynasty (1206-90) being the earliest followed by the Khilji dynasty (1290-1320) and then the Tughlak dynasty (1320-1413). Both the Khilji and Tughlaq dynasties played a decisive role in shaping the future of Gujarat. Sometime in 1297 the army of the Khilji ruler Allauddin overwhelmed the Solanki dynasty of Gujarat and set the stage for over four centuries of Muslim/Mughal rule over the state with Ahmedabad as its pivot. After the ascension of the Tughlaq dynasty in Delhi its Sultan Firuz Shah Tughlak appointed Malik Mufarrah as the governor of Gujarat in 1377. Following some internecine and fraternal battles for the control of Gujarat, Sultan Nasir-ud-Din Muhammad bin Tughluq appointed Zafar Khan its governor in 1391 and gave him the title of Muzaffar Khan. A year later he defeated

Mufarrah near Anhilwad Patan and took over the city as his capital.

In 1403, Muzaffar Khan defied the counsels of his son Tatar Khan to march over Delhi only to be imprisoned by his offspring. Tatar Khan assumed the title of Muhammad Shah and decided to march over Delhi. He was poisoned by his own uncle Shams Khan. Shah's death laid the field open for Muzaffar Khan to be released from prison. In 1407, he declared himself the Sultan of Gujarat and sanctified his rule with his own insignia and coins. After his death in 1411, his grandson and Tatar Khan's son Ahmed Shah took over.

As it frequently happens with Indian history, the birth of Ahmedabad is also shrouded in fables and legends. It is not clear how and under what circumstances Ahmed Shah decided to shift from Anhilwad Patan to a new city about 125 kilometers to its south. One such story was told by a certain Charles Dickens (not to be confused with the redoubtable litterateur Dickens) and the way he tells it in the weekly journal 'All the Year Around', in the volume XI dated January 6, 1894 to June 30, 1894, it sounds most compelling.

“A romantic story, like a faded rosebud found within the pages of a dusty chronicle, throws a poetic glamour round the chapter of Indian history which commemorates the founding of Sultan Ahmed’s capital. The Mohammedan conquest of Gujarat was accomplished at the end of the fourteenth century by the Viceroys of the Emperors of Delhi, and the increasing power of the Royal delegates at length enabled them to form an independent dynasty.

Ahmed, the second sultan of the new regime, when riding on his elephant through the jungle which clothed the lower spurs of the Rajputana mountains (the Aravallis) became enamoured of Sipra, the beautiful daughter of a black Bheel chieftain, as she came to draw water at sunset from a shallow river which crossed the monarch’s path. The burnished brass of the lotah (pitcher) posed upon the graceful head emphasized the dark loveliness of the girl as she stood among the green fronds of the tall bamboos which fringed the stream, and the susceptible monarch succumbed to the untutored charms of the startled wood-nymph, who became a star in the galaxy of beauty which adorned the Royal Zenana. When the Sultan espoused his dusky

bride, he determined in the true Oriental fashion, to honor his lady-love and to immortalize his own name by building a new capital on the banks of the brook where the mysterious hand of fate met the barbaric maiden and led her to a throne.”

Some other historical accounts say that Sipra, in fact, was the queen of Mahmud Begada (1458-1511), the grandson of Ahmed Shah and attribute to him the romantic circumstances by which he came to meet her as described in Dickens’ account.

En route from Lothal to Ahmedabad, there is hardly any hint of the importance of what one has left behind and what lies ahead. It is a drive as dull as dull can be. Approaching Ahmedabad from the southwest has no particular drama attached to it. Sarkhej, once a major center of indigo dyeing with strong links to the Silk Route as well as a royal retreat for Ahmed Shah and his descendants is now a reluctant suburb of Ahmedabad. It no longer has much to offer other than the Sarkhej Roza, a 15th century mosque-mausoleum complex in a state of disrepair.

The Ahmedabad Community Foundation and the Sarkhej Roza Committee have been engaged in

efforts to turn the complex into a cultural getaway where the residents of the city can come and unwind in the midst of indiscriminate urbanization which devours much of the open space. The transition from the ancient to the medieval and eventually to the modern as it unfolds along the Lothal-Ahmedabad drive does so quite uneventfully. To think that a mere 80 kilometers can run through over four and a half millennia of civilization can be hard to grasp at first, but one begins to understand the mindset of the people of the region here that history is nothing but a story past its expiry. As Jasubhai puts it, “Bhootkal to samjya havey pan vartman nu shun? (The past is fine but what about the present?)”

Indeed, what about it? To find out I tell him to drop me at Manek Chowk which can be justifiably called the heart of the historical Ahmedabad. The barely one-kilometer long walk from the Bhadra Fort, the principal entrance to the royal complex of the sultan, to Manek Chowk, so named after Maneknath Baba, an ascetic who became the most effective countervailing presence against the ruler, is redolent of an astonishing variety of scents, sounds and sights. A heady mixture of jasmine attar, turmeric

powder, roasted cumin seeds, rose oil, Darjeeling tea, sandalwood incense, cow dung and pungent human body odors awaits one.

Add to the odors, both pleasant and putrescent, the unfiltered cacophony of honking rickshaws, ringing bicycle bells, howling hawkers, mooing cows, squawking parrots and occasional hooting monkeys and you have a surreal mixture of the olfactory and auditory. What completes the scene are thousands of people randomly bouncing around in Brownian motion that seems impossible to decipher from outside but is tackled effortlessly once you are inside the throng. It is as if the laws of motion here are unique to this place and work only inside the one-kilometer radius around Manek Chowk.

Ahmed Shah and Maneknath were said to be adversaries, one the padshah of all that was physical in Ahmedabad and the other the master of the metaphysical. The cause behind the animus between the sultan and saint is not clear but that has not prevented mythologies from rising out of the mists of history. One holds that Maneknath, who disapproved of all the fortifications being created by Ahmed Shah around the city, decided to invoke his miraculous powers to stop the king. He would stitch

a quilt all day and unravel it at night. Every time he unraveled the quilt fiber by fiber the walls of the fortification would crumble brick by brick. Eventually the two reached a truce under which the sultan agreed to name the square in the middle of the fort as Manek Chowk. In return, the ascetic lifted the curse. Or so goes one of the fables. The purpose of this fable is quite like the purpose of any fable—it is to mythologize banal realities to make them worthier for posterity.

Under Ahmed Shah the city quickly began to acquire its impressive physical features. He imported alabaster, marble and expensive woods from different parts of India to build royal mansions and mosques. A network of narrow streets scratching their way through principal streets began to take shape. The principal streets were “broad enough for ten bullock carts to drive abreast”, according to some of the chroniclers of the time. Think the 15th century version of a four-lane highway. The infrastructure building boom inevitably brought in craftsmen. The construction economy also led to the influx of weavers and merchants who began shaping the city’s identity.

The streets that now seem stifflingly narrow were more than adequate in Ahmed Shah's time as traders set up an impromptu bazaar, spreading out their goods on the two sides. There were fine silks, ornaments, attars, brassware, along with spices and dry fruits on sale. The sustained generation of wealth reflected in mansions that were constructed by merchants in the immediate vicinity of the business district. Intricately carved doors, finely chiseled cornices, windows that looked like ornate oversized picture frames and balconies that seemed like protruding thrones were all common features in buildings in and around Manek Chowk. Many of them still exist in the forlorn hope of a rescue by connoisseurs. There is one but his story later in the book.

By the time Ahmed Shah died in 1442 Ahmedabad was one of India's most thriving cities. His legacy was carried on by his grandson Mahmud Begada who built a wall around the city, many parts of which still stand today. Some of the massive spiked doors made from teak tell the story about how Begada kept the enemy's elephants from battering them. But the death of Begada in 1511 triggered a decline of the city.

“The power of the Gujarati Kings waned, their revenues were reduced, trade was crippled by Portuguese competition, and the harassed State impoverished by the quarrels of turbulent nobles. The reigning monarch failed to quell the tumult, and in A.D. 1572 the malcontents called in the aid of the Emperor Akbar. He entered Ahmedabad almost without opposition, made Gujarat a province of the Mughal Empire and appointed a Viceroy,” Dickens wrote.

The advent of the Mughal control once again saw the city’s fortunes start to turn around. Political stability started drawing merchants from neighboring states, particularly Rajasthan. Some of them came from Osian, a village near Jodhpur in what was then Marwar, towards the end of the 16th century to settle down in Ahmedabad. One of their descendants was Sheth Shantidas (1590-1659), described by family annals as “a famous jeweler, financier and businessman of the 17th century.” Shantidas traded in precious stones and gold and built up a vast fortune, big enough to earn him direct access to the Mughal court. In fact, what bridged the cultural and religious gap between Shantidas, a pious Jain, and the staunchly Islamic

Mughal rulers was wealth. He was known to have lent money to the royal court on many occasions. In return the court “treated him with deference and civility.” By the late 1630s Shantidas had established himself as the most influential citizen of Ahmedabad and was said to have been conferred the title of Nagarsheth by Emperor Jahangir. Shantidas’s progenies would go on to play a defining role in shaping Ahmedabad’s destiny that remains strong nearly five centuries later.

By the late 17th century Ahmedabad was back in the midst of renewed prosperity so strong as to compel a Portuguese traveler in 1695 to call it “the greatest city of Hindoostan, nothing inferior to Venice for rich silks and gold stuffs curiously wrought with birds and flowers.”

A lot of what prompted the anonymous Portuguese traveler to gush about Ahmedabad was in and around Manek Chowk. What in 1695 seemed “nothing inferior to Venice” also included the ‘Badshah no Haziro’ and ‘Rani no Haziro’, the mausoleums of Ahmed Shah and his queen and the rest of the family, including their parrot, in the heart of Manek Chowk. Even though the Muzaffarid dynasty of Ahmed Shah had long passed in the late

17th century its monumental legacy was intact. However, over three centuries later the old Ahmedabad is nothing like Venice. And nowhere is that more evident than the Rani no Haziro. The mausoleum predominantly smells of human urine and excrement. Squatters have overrun the outer perimeter of the mausoleum. One has to navigate through drying laundry hanging on haphazardly tied clotheslines, torn cardboard boxes, broken furniture and worn out shoes to enter the complex.

A sullen caretaker greets me with palpable indifference until I establish my genuine interest in learning about the monument. He warms up to the fact that at last there is a visitor who is interested in something other than relieving himself. He does not know much about the history of the place but compensates that with his enthusiasm to protect it. For some reason he gets particularly animated while pointing me to the small tomb of the royal parrot. “Saheb, Ahmed Shah cared even about his parrot,” the caretaker says in an unintentionally humorous endorsement of the munificence of the royalty. His point being that if the king’s feathered companion was so pampered one can only imagine how well he treated his human subjects. Not much of that

literature is easily available. If the overall prosperity of Ahmedabad was any measure, then the ordinary people were as happy as the caretaker insists the parrot was.

I ask the caretaker why the Haziro suffers from such neglect. He looks at me as if the answer should be obvious to anyone reasonably discerning. It is not, and he does not offer one. As I give him 100 rupees for conducting me around, he hesitates at first, then contracts his upper body in awkwardness and eventually accepts it saying, “This is Ahmedabad. No one pays me.” Come to think of it, this throwaway observation paints a picture of the inhabitants who have the reputation, which is not accurate, of paying their due only when all other options have been exhausted.

From the Rani no Haziro I head to the Badshah no Haziro across the street. That domed complex, unlike the queen’s mausoleum which is an open courtyard, is decidedly better looked after. For once the smells here are so much more uplifting. Brown incense shaped like tiny cones and cylinders are burning. They send up a soothing aroma into the surrounding. Three elderly Muslim women are sitting in front of huge aluminum platters full of

boiled potatoes. They are all skinning the potatoes. Since it is the month of Ramadan, they say they are preparing for the evening feast. The oldest one smiles with such warmth that I feel compelled to sit down and chat with her. She says her family has been the tomb's caretaker ever since it was built. "It has nearly been six centuries that my family has been looking after this place," she says.

I cannot help but ask why the king's tomb is so much better looked after than the queen's. She says, "I don't know anything about that. We have nothing to do with that complex. We look after only the badshah's tomb."

With pleasantries out of the way I enter the mausoleum. The marble threshold has been worn out and smoothed by a countless number of people walking on it for centuries. The sultan's tomb is right in the middle of the rather dimly lit mausoleum. The filament in the bulb emanates pale yellow light and flickers as if it is about to burn out. A low decibel static hum of a heated filament can be upsetting if you suffer from migraines. For reasons which I have not been able to understand I felt a tremendous sense of disquiet as I circumambulated the complex. One could be

imagining such things, but it felt as if Ahmed Shah died a very unhappy man. I quickly banished the thought and returned to where I had started. Before leaving I ask the old caretaker what she thinks of Ahmedabad. She smiles and says, “Arey Amdavad to sona ni lagdi chhe. (Ahmedabad is like a gold ingot).”

A Muslim man, in his 40s walks in and folds his hands saying ‘Namaste’ to me. He just caught the last bit of the woman’s comment about Ahmedabad being a gold ingot. He completes the thread saying, “Roj na sau man sona ni levad devad thay chhe ahian. (Every day one ton of gold is bought and sold in this area).”

The next day, in a somewhat unnecessary attempt to relive Ahmed Shah’s state of mind before he decided to found the city, I retraced some of the route along which he was supposed to have found Sipra’s face aglow in the mauve of a setting sun. There were, of course, some Bheel women with their burnished brass pitchers drawing water from a rivulet but their faces were astir with none of the romance that the sultan is supposed to have discovered on Sipra’s visage. From his elephant perch life ten feet below may have appeared fraught

with romance to Ahmed Shah but at the ground level these women circa 2010 looked withered and exhausted by the oppressive banality of their existence. They paid no attention to my solicitous importunes about Sipra. One reason could be that they figured I was no sultan. For a brief moment I did wonder what gave away my commoner status but then quickly realized that I was on foot and not on an ornately draped pachyderm. Only one of them answered with a curt, “Modu thay chhe gharey jawa (It’s getting let to go home).” As they walked off a frog leapt from nowhere and landed on my right shoe and then launched again on to a muddy puddle. In the ripples it caused for a moment I thought I saw the reflection of Ahmed Shah on his elephant.

I also visited Rani Sipra’s Mosque to get the measure of the man who felt so galvanized by his “lady-love” as to found a whole new city even if it bears his name. *“Among the most beautiful monuments of Muslim genius must be counted the Rani Sepre Mosque at Ahmedabad. The whole city is full of beautiful specimens of Mohammadan as well as Hindu architecture, and it would seem that the inhabitants of this distant city, being somewhat less frequently massacred and robbed and burned*

out than their more eastern brethren, had found more leisure and wealth to devote to lasting proofs of their power,” wrote F. Marion Crawford in the June-November, 1885, issue of the Harper’s New Monthly Magazine published out of New York. Although I had visited the monument on a few occasions in the 1970s, I decided to go there again in the 21st century, this time armed with a late 19th century perspective as reflected in Crawford’s special article. Crawford then described Ahmedabad as a “mussulman city”, a description that can now potentially cause a riot.

Looking at the mosque today one could only guess what the allure was for a visitor like Crawford. What seemed like one of the most beautiful monuments in India to him in 1885 was in 2010 but a structure in need of a thorough scrub. There is a picture of the mosque, also known as the Masjid-e-Nagira or Jewel of a Mosque, circa 1872 by an English photographer called Colin Murray as well its pencil drawing in the Harper’s New Monthly Magazine, both of which show the presence of Rabari* men in the compound. Murray’s photograph is so sharp, one can almost read the expression on the face of one of the three Rabari

men. While it may just be a happenstance that both the illustrations from the late 19th century show only Rabari men, it is possible that even in those days, quite like today, these monuments were not frequented by the city's more urban residents. Not that this observation has any larger sociocultural significance, but one feels compelled to make it in and of itself.

The only monument from the sultanate days preserved with any degree of passion is the Sidi Saeed ni Jali. The panel of ten jalis, sandstone screens with intricate carvings, is part of a mosque built by Sidi Saeed, an Abyssinian in 1572. The word Sidi is derived from the Persian Shidi which refers to Africans. Iranian seafarers, who used to visit Gujarat coast as part of their trade route, could have brought Shidis as slaves, some of whom stayed on in the state. Sidis are found in Saurashtra as well and although they have over the centuries become Gujarati they do retain many of their African customs.

What works in favor of the Jali is that it is largely viewed as a secular monument even though it resides within a mosque unlike other monuments from the era that remind the more conservative

among Ahmedabad's people of Islamic conquests. The Jali in contrast is seen not as a creation of a conqueror. In fact, the brilliant latticework on stone is a popular emblem of the city.

From Manek Chowk I spontaneously start walking towards Sankdi Sheri (Narrow Street) as if prompted by some genetic memory of my childhood spent in the area. Those who come here know it is practically mandatory to drink a glass of lassi at Girish Cold Drinks. During my childhood the owners of Girish Cold Drinks had a standing challenge to anyone to prove that the thick layer of whipped cream that floated on top of every glass of lassi was anything but 100 percent genuine cream. Rumors had it that the Girish owners used sweetened paper pulp. I remember men arguing whether it was possible to whip up such luxuriant cream from milk that had less than six percent fat. This was even while they downed a couple of glasses of lassi. I will cite my 300 plus cholesterol as evidence to vouch for the 100 percent purity of that cream. It was amazing to discover that nearly 40 years later the lassi tasted the same cloyingly sweet and richly textured. I had the option of lassi with green khuskhus syrup or the red rose syrup. I

chose both much to my chagrin later that night. As I retched through the night, I kept thinking about my childhood in old Ahmedabad. Traveling back to the 1960s was easier than I suspected it would be for someone kept awake at 3 in the morning by a beast swirling inside the stomach.