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a quarterly newsletter

Special issue on River Vishwamitri- An icon of Vadodara

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From the Editor's Desk

Rivers have a special connection with towns and cities across the world. Most human civilizations have come up on the banks of water-bodies, including freshwater bodies as rivers and large lakes. Many well-known names include the ancient city of Rome on the River Tiber, London on the Thames or Paris on Seine. In India, we have many historical cities as Varanasi, Haridwar, Kolkata, Patna, Kanpur and Prayag that lie on the holy Ganga Maa as it flows through its course into the Bay of Bengal. For us in the cultural capital of Vadodara, it is our very own Vishwamitri that dissects our city. Alas, today it is a poor replica of its former glory mainly because of human misuse and encroachment over the years. To highlight the socio-cultural and ecological value of our iconic river, we bring you an interview with Padma Shri, Dr. M.H. Mehta who has over the years spearheaded the “Vaho Vishwamitri Project” in a bid to revive it to its former glory. He very rightly focuses on the immense value that the river holds for the residents of our city.

While Earth consists of 70% water, freshwater is only 2.5% of all water on the planet. The rest is saline and ocean-based. Further, only one percent of our freshwater is easily accessible, as much of it trapped in glaciers and snow fields. This further emphasizes the importance of preserving our freshwater bodies' viz., rivers and inland lakes if we are to survive.

While we speak of creating green spaces in our cities, the importance of blue spaces viz., water-bodies comprising rivers, lakes, ponds, *jheels* cannot be over-emphasized. These water-bodies have a major role in maintaining the ecological balance on our planet. Besides providing sustenance to a very diverse plant and animal life, it also helps re-charge the ground- water, regulates the climate and provides for sequestration of carbon dioxide (CO₂). In case of rivers, the further benefit is that it prevents saline ingress in the estuaries, prevents excessive flooding and helps irrigate and provide rich nutrients to the land through which it flows. The scientific study of rivers is termed as Potamology.

The river Vishwamitri is home to the Marsh Crocodile (*Crocodylus palustris*) locally known as the *Mugger* and the city of Vadodara has the proud distinction of being home to one of the largest population of this species in an urban area in the world. Recently the Forest Department and an NGO (Pagdand) conducted a Crocodile count in the part of Vishwamitri that flows through the city.



Despite there being human habitation alongside, there are very few cases of human-animal conflict. This speaks volumes about the tolerance of our people as well as the peaceful nature of the species. Crocodiles belong to a very ancient group of reptiles that appeared on our planet in the Trassic age (approx. 190 million years ago).

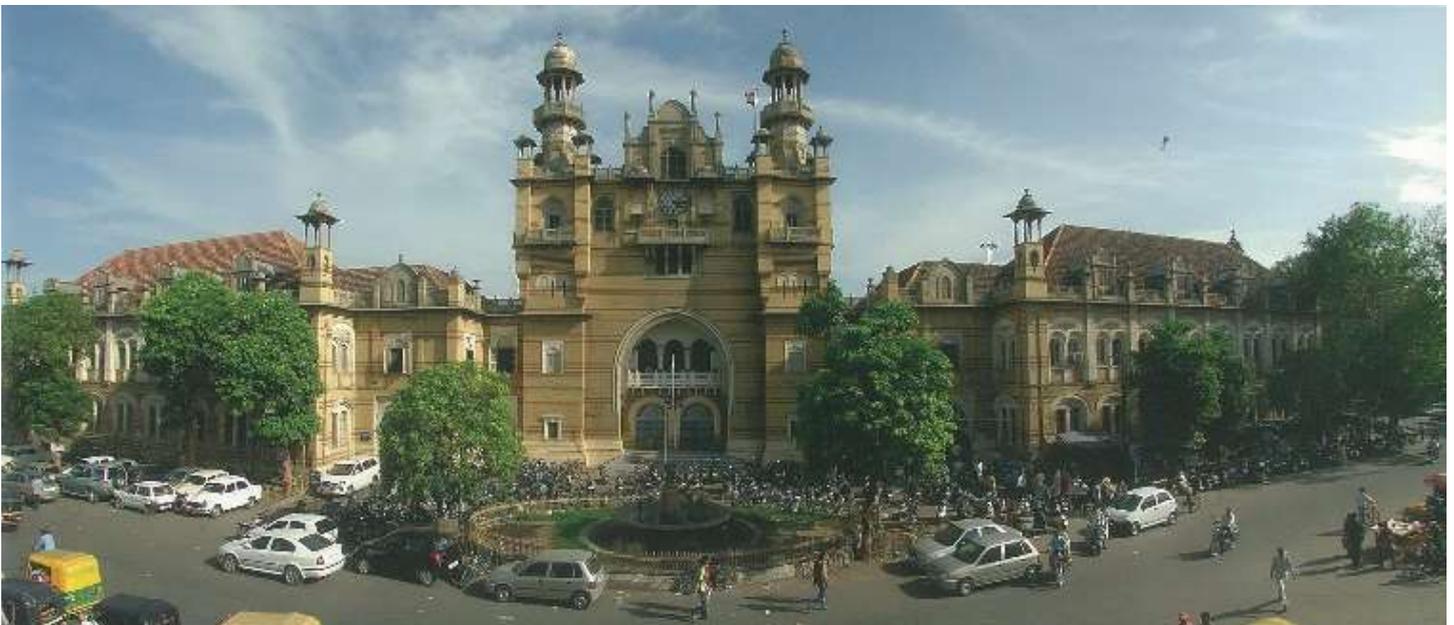
As of going to the press, our members had a chance to participate in the Bharuch Heritage Walk on March 10th, 2019. Thanks to Ms. Archana Patel and her team at Bharuch as well as the District Collector of Bharuch for opening up the interesting and exciting ancient port town that is home to some of the most interesting and beautiful structures showcasing its history. For those of you who missed it we carry an account of this exciting event. Readers who enjoy reading travelogues, an interesting book on the city's ancient structures is "*A Walk through Barygaza – the Ancient Greek Port Town of India*" by Zac O' Yeah is available as a download on Kindle.

Our very own Fatehgunj is a bustling area with modern day buildings close to the University campus. Within this modernity lie many an interesting heritage structure that speaks a story. We bring you an interesting insight. Read more about our very own Fatehgunj in this issue.

Heritage Trust is planning more activities in the coming months. Watch the forthcoming announcements for more and do remember to mark your diary and join in for our programs.

Enjoy this issue.

Avi Sabavala



Did you see the poll we put up on our social media? We asked what you thought about the Nyay Mandir and its future, and we were pleased to receive an overwhelming response. More than 87% voted to have the building adapted to an apropos cultural center for the city, which could be a gallery, museum, information center on Baroda amongst others. Look out for more on our social media on how we plan to take this ahead! Photograph by Rahul Gajjar from our *Once Upon a Time...there was Baroda* book.

A Conversation with Dr. M.H. Mehta

Padmashri Dr. M.H. Mehta (Chairman - Community Science Centre and President of the National Bioshield Society, India) was kind enough to share his thoughts on the River Vishwamitri, its history, significance and revival. Dr. Munibhai's knowledge and expertise on the subject is diverse and wide, spanning from the mythology of the river, to the conservation of the waterways built by the Mughals and Gaikwads to the creation of a natural bioshield to enable the Vishwamitri River to thrive and remain alive.

Here are some excerpts:

A few words on the historical significance of the River Vishwamitri.

The river Vishwamitri, mentioned since the time of the Vedas, is one of the oldest rivers in India. 'Vishwamitrimahatmyam', by Prof. Thakar, is an excellent resource book on the history of the river and was published by the Oriental Institute Vadodara in 1997. It recalls how according to mythology, it was on the banks of the river Vishwamitri that sage Vishwamitra was elevated as a Bramshri after reciting the Gayatri Mantra. The river was a part of the Shankara forest and this history makes one realize that without a forest the flourishing of the river is not possible. Vadodara has always had a very sacred relation with the river as is apparent from the number of revered places and temples and Ghats along its banks. Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III envisioned Vadodara as a cultural capital and saw the river as a potential resource. Most of the city developed around the river. The river has a rich history. Evidence of water harvesting as well as the building of water channels during Mamud Begada's reign display the role the river had to play in the development of the surrounding habitation areas.

How can a fragile ecosystem be preserved considering the explosion of developmental growth? Is there scope for redefining the river and restoring it to its past glory?

Revive and reconstruct the river front with plantation. The VVA, Vaho Vishwamitri Abhiyaan is a campaign that began with the social interest at large, which offers a scientifically organized security of the revival of the river Vishwamitri. The Abhiyaan aims to develop a bioshield starting from Pavagadh to the Gulf of Khambhat throughout the length of the river. This length of 134 kms can be roughly divided into 3 sections. 1. The hilly areas of Pavagadh 2. The flat plains of Vadodara and saline areas of Bharuch 3. - The 40km stretch of the saline area before the river drains out into the sea. For the revival of the river, this drainage area is most important, as for a river to remain alive it has to flow.

This creation of a bio shield means planting trees according the terrain alongside the river which will allow the river to live again by stabilizing the banks of waterbodies as well as reduce the erosion of soil along the banks of the river. The greening of the entire region from Pavagadh hills to the plains of Panchmahal, Vadodara and Bharuch with scientific biodiversity will not only beautify the region but act as the lungs of Central Gujarat. The bioshield along with water bodies will create a flow of clean water in the river throughout the year. In order to make this happen villages will need to manage their own solid and liquid wastes for which there is a proposal for all villages to have their own compost pits so that they are not forced to dump waste into the river.

If we can catch 15% of the rainfall water, we would have 1.5 to 2 times more water than what Ajwa dam has. To make this happen, we need small check dams, catchment lakes and a bioshield comprising of 90,00,000 trees. Once accomplished, the river will be able to sustain its diverse ecosystem of birds and plants as it did earlier, as well be a water resource for the area.

What do you think of the River Vishwamitri as a resource with multiple values like cultural, economic, environmental and social in the present day?

Unfortunately over the last several decades, the river has been degrading due to several factors. Unplanned urban growth, dumping of solid and liquid wastes as well as negligence changed the Vishwamitri. If revived, and restored to its old state, along with the development of the green belt, the river would provide water to the city. The beautification of the religious sites like temples and *ghats* would add to the heritage of the city and the areas around the river. The Vishwamitri is a part of Gujarat's heritage which should be restored.

What can local citizens do to contribute to the preservation of the heritage of the Vishwamitri?

The Vaho Vishwamitri Abhiyaan is a community based participatory movement. In order to take care of the water body, the VVA engages the communities in the all aspects of the project. It is necessary for the members of the community to take care of the river as their own. Tree plantation is the important aspect of the VVA. Several Seed Ball Camps have been held by hundreds of school children and the seed balls have been dispersed at difficult to reach areas like hilly areas and ravines long the river banks. Hundreds of school children and citizens participate in these camps every year. Awareness of an integrated plan of ecosystem and water management needs to spread. The holistic model is the right model for this and we should implement it for the good of everybody.

Arati Desai



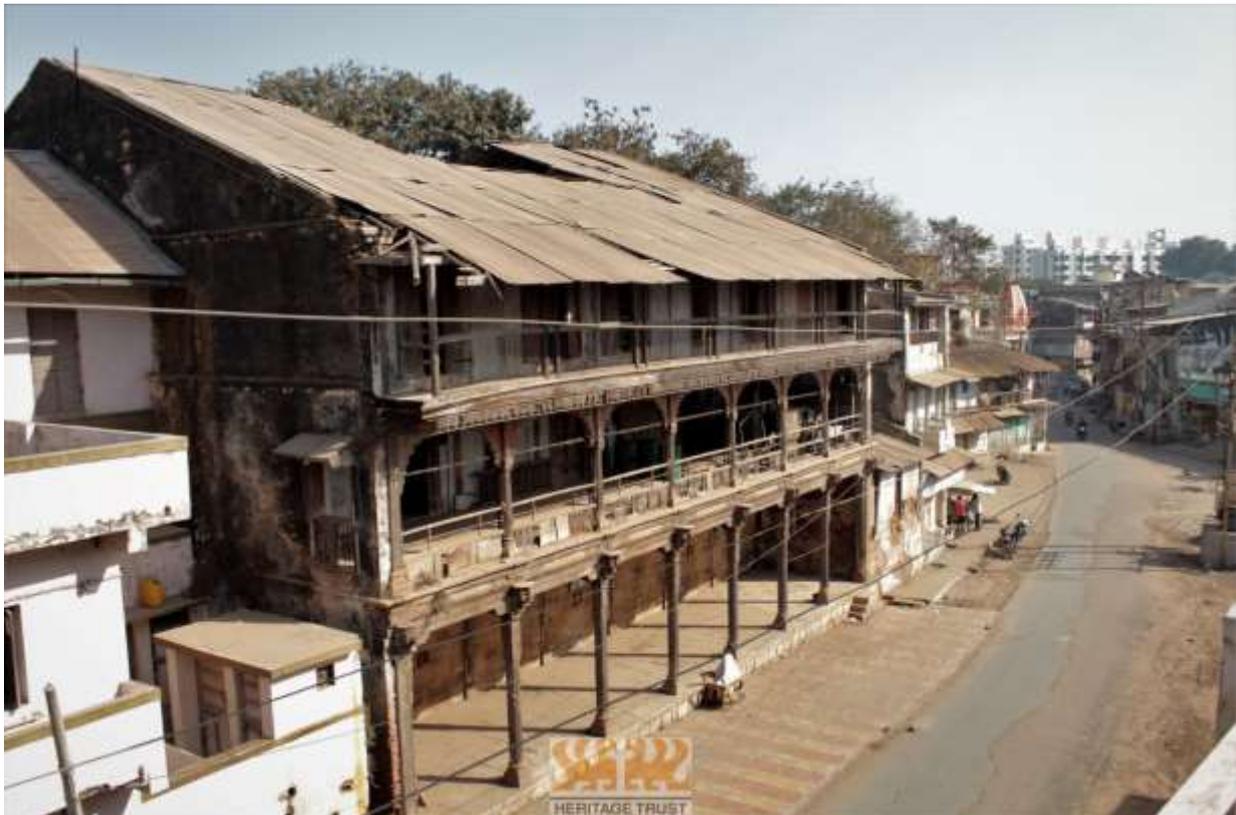
From top: At the river origin, its extent, Old Ghaat and Bridge near Kala Ghoda, Bio Shield, photo credits Dr. M. H Mehta

The Bharuch Heritage Walk

To the average Indian, Bharuch is famous for its salted peanuts and Sujni, a hand-woven quilt. But it has more to offer. With a 2000+ year's history, Barygaza, now Bharuch, is perhaps the oldest living settlement in India after Kashi (Varanasi). It was through this city that Northern India traded with the Arabs and the rest of the western world. The "Periplus of the Erythrean Sea", a delightful book written about 150 CE, mentions that the Narmada at Bharuch was so treacherous that it required the services of specialized pilots for bringing ships in for docking at Bharuch.

It would, therefore, be no surprise to find Bharuch reflecting its rich legacy in architectural form. Keenly aware of this, the District Administration has been encouraging weekend trips and heritage walks to enable tourists to better appreciate the rich culture of the town. For Heritage Trust, it all started with our member Ms. Archana Patel suggesting that the HT members join for a walk through the lanes of the old city of Bharuch.

For the enthusiastic participants, Bharuch did not disappoint. The local guide, Mr. Patil, led us through the lanes pointing out landmarks which define Bharuch for what it is today. If the Nathu Thoban Dharamshala exhibited its beautiful wooden carvings, the Jumma Masjid left us fascinated. The Raichand Deepchand library has an ambience reflective of the days gone by, a perfect setting for a period movie drama – the library was set up by Premchand Raichand, the cotton king of Mumbai and founder member of Bombay Stock Exchange, in his father's memory. Sadiqbhai of Sardar Manzil took great pains to show us his rare antique collection and the private wooden mosque held in place by poles. And the Dutch cemetery is a not-to-miss place. Sadly, the Narmada is a poor shadow of its former self. The dams upstream have reduced the once majestic river to a small one occupying a side so remote from the town as if ashamed to admit its reduced circumstances. The wide open dry river bed is now used by children to play cricket with several concrete pitches running along the wall of the fort where once sea-faring ships used to dock.



Nathu Thoban Dharamshala, a rest house with intricate wood work, photograph by Sameer Gaikwad



Being March, it turned out to be a hot Sunday as the sun rose overhead thus impeding the completion of the walk.

No trip to Bharuch is deemed to be complete without a visit to a Salted Peanuts stall, and we did our bit to augment the economy of the town.

The best time for viewing the wonders of this town is November to February when the weather is pleasant during the day. Narrow lanes do not allow any but the smallest of vehicles to navigate through. While there is great scope for enhancing the experience of walkers to attract more participants, it is definitely a step in the right direction.

A Heritage walk as this provides participants both local and tourists with a first-hand experience that showcases the interesting history and culture of the town. It creates a greater appreciation and pride in the local residents for their heritage and encourages efforts towards conservation. Neglecting our heritage and history will only be at the cost of our identity.

Rakesh Manocha



From left top: The 1000 year old Masjid in Sardar Manzil; the Dutch Cemetery; the Parsi Agyari constructed in 1760; above the mosque and finally some of our wonderful members joining the Bharuch Heritage Walk in March 2019) photographs by Sameer Gaikwad.



The Urbane Column

As a heritage conservation architect, the idea of historic areas then and now always fascinates the mind. Comparisons are further made when you travel and start looking at places in your hometown with a different lens. To begin this series, is one of the most sought after place by the youth in the city- Fatehgunj.

Once a lush green settlement with individual bungalows and extended yards, church bells chiming and the neighbor driving off their motorbike into the sunset, the Fatehgunj area of today is but a mere memory of the past. With changing land patrons, the area which once housed Romanesque bungalows of faculties from the Maharaja Sayajirao University and other eminent city individuals, is now mere a complex urban area devoid of a particular identity or is it really?

The half kilometer stretch in conversation here, extends from the Saffron Complex to the Indian Oil Petrol pump under the Bridge and has a bourgeois feel to it with an eclectic yet cosmopolitan mix of food, people and buildings. The perfect ingredients to get you into the holiday spirit and bring you out of your homes on other nights. I'd almost akin it to the Lokhanwala complex of Mumbai (although not that pricey), or the Hazratgunj of Lucknow albeit the regularized facades. Ours I'd dare say is one of a kind.

Being close to the largest park in the city (Kamatibuag) and the University campus and residence, the Fatehgunj area today attracts a lot of youth and families, there for a chai cuppa or a piece of cake, a visit to the church or the hidden clinics behind. With offices, printers and stationers as the major crowd pullers during the day, dawn is when the lights come on food to clothes, and an evening service at the Red Church becomes the place to be.

Fatehgunj as an entirety comprises of a part the Vishwamitri River, many religious structures and a majority of it being a military campus. However the urban culture lies in the intangibles of this one stretch, the Abbas Tyabji road and its hidden by-lanes. The residential areas juxtaposed in the background are reminiscent of yesteryear building styles and is a harbinger of community togetherness with the festivals it celebrates- be it the Ganpati exodus in September, Christmas in December, or Eid two times of the year. On a subtle footnote, those who travel by in the morning would have noticed a society giving back by feeding the needy, completing a full circle of this secular coherence.

Even though it does not boast of the British Residences or the lush green trees anymore, the urbane by-lanes offer to tingle your sense by inviting you to enjoy the local icons including Gupta's samosa, rolls at Frig Temp or bread at the 130 year old Menzes Bakery. There are food walks too that happen in the area that cover more of these lost places.

So just when you think you were done, go visit- Fatehgunj has something for everyone!

Swapna Kothari



Left: The 1902 Gothic style Red Church at its finest is supposedly still standing without a single iron rod used in its construction; Right: The calm and broad shaded streets in the afternoon with food always available! Photographs by Swapna Kothari



Become a member

As a non-profit, we rely on your support as our member and encourage you to send more heritage enthusiasts our way.

Patron Member

Rs. 100,000

Donor Member

Rs. 25,000

Life Member

Rs. 10,000

Ordinary Member

Rs. 1000 / year

Student Member

Rs 200 / year

Corporate Patron Member

Rs. 2,00,000

Corporate Donor Member

Rs. 50,000

Corporate Member Rs. 25,000 / year

Have an idea you would like to explore?

Want to collaborate or organize a tour?

Get in touch with us!



Snippets from *Once Upon a Time...there was Baroda*, story by Rani Dharker and photographs by Rahul Gajjar. The top image shows the Residency Bungalow, home to the British Resident to the court of Gaekwads, and also once known as the White Bungalow.

Bottom: The Mandvi Gate in its full glory back from a bygone time, published in the book. Till this date the gate acts as a landmark for anyone new to the city or even old, as it now connects roads from beyond the Champaner to Gendi Gate and Pani Gate to Lehripura Gate.



Publications

Looking for books? The Trust has published more than half a dozen books, four of which have been on Pavagadh. Three other books on Baroda, one of which is for children, and is still available in print. These would make great corporate gifts in the coming festive season.

Available:

Once Upon a Time...there was Baroda- Rs. 3000/- copy

Children's book on Baroda (Gujarati) - Rs. 20/copy

Comments:

"Thank you for your note with another copy of Dharohar and wish to convey my sincere thanks for arranging Dr. Devi's thought provoking lecture.

Best wishes for 2019."

- Jayvant Mehta