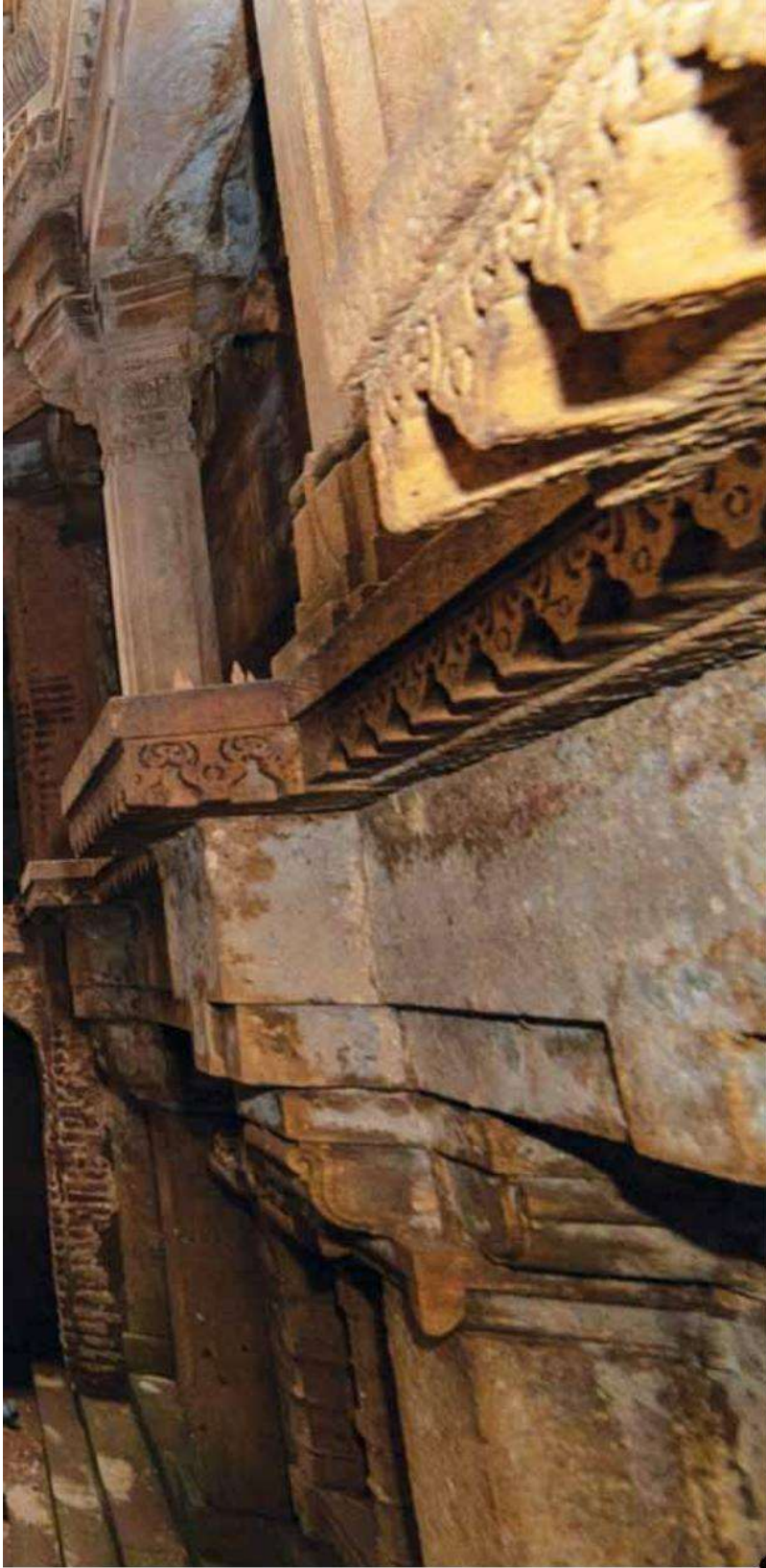




STROLL THROUGH THE POLS

*Being listed as a UNESCO World Heritage City, Ahmedabad
has preserved some unique memories from the past*

Words: **Tania Banerjee**



1. Ancient stepwell
in Ahmedabad

A swelling hum of drums drills into my ears. I am at the gates of Swaminarayan Temple, Kalupur in Ahmedabad—a temple built in the 19th century and dedicated to Nar Narayan Dev. I am here to embark on a three-hour-long walk, which would snake for two kilometres along the different pols of the UNESCO World Heritage City of Ahmedabad.

Continuously inhabited since the 11th century, a tide of dynasties had flourished in Ahmedabad through history— Bhils, Chalukyas, Solankis, Vaghelas, Muzaffarids, Mughals and Marathas. Residue from the centuries of civilisation has today burgeoned to give Ahmedabad its characteristic feature, among which the pols play a vital role. Dating back 300 years, the pols are gated community living systems, which were introduced to counter the communal anarchy of the city.

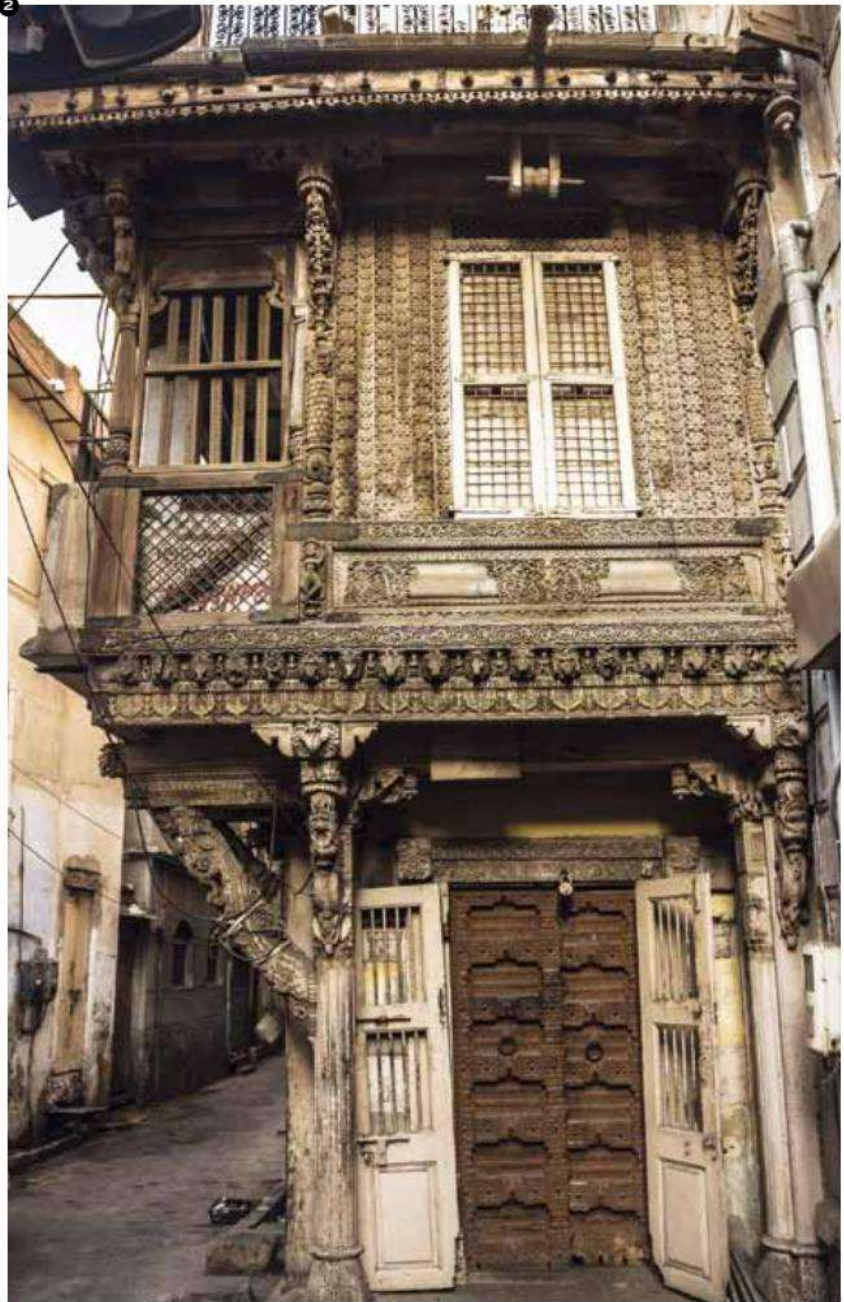
I leave behind the Burma teakwood pillars of the Swaminarayan temple, carved with Hindu Gods and Goddesses alongside contemporary Indian warriors of the Sepoy Mutiny, to trail my guide. The sun pokes yellow fingers on the bronze statue of Poet Dalpatram installed in Lambeshwar ni Pol. Born in 1870, the poet had penned several poems in Gujarati language. A little ahead, a green pillar hemmed with effigies of human figures race stands tall. It is crowned by a balcony and entwined by an iron staircase. The guide goes on, "These are bird feeders, locally known

as *chabutara*—a common feature in all Hindu, Muslim and Jain pols. Grains and water collected from the residences in the neighbourhood are regularly put in these feeders, so that birds are never hungry or thirsty.”

I cross Relief Road and penetrate into the womb of the pols where houses are piled thick against one another. I walk through the gates of a double storied, tin roofed, semi tarnished building with faded walls. A chain of complex buildings runs to its left and right. “Pols are similar to *mohallas* of North India. They are gated colonies,” says our guide. All pols are synchronised according to culture and professions and have some similar features: a large gate, a security booth, a common sitting area, a place of worship and a bird feeder.

As I navigate the labyrinthine paths, I arrive at the marble courtyard of a pol. Within it, a temple is decked with ornate pillars hosting exquisite carvings of figures from the Hindu pantheon. In the main sanctum is an unusual black idol of Lord Rama. I am in Haja Patel ni Pol. The 300 year old temple, Kala Ramji Mandir, is the only temple with an idol of Lord Rama in sitting posture. Deviating from the common, in this temple Lord Rama is not accompanied by Hanuman. “This temple is based on an era when Rama and Hanuman haven’t yet met,” explains the guide.

While some walls have peeling paints, others are freshly splashed with colours, shaping up pictorial tales. Elements on the walls, like windows, are cleverly integrated to serve a purpose within the stories. The chalk marks on the blackboard standing along a pavement prove it functions as the bulletin board.



All pols of Ahmedabad are connected to neighbouring pols built as an emergency escape route

— HIGHLIGHTS —



HOW TO REACH

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel International Airport is 9 kms from central Ahmedabad.



USP

Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad was one of the residences of Mahatma Gandhi.



TRAVEL TIP

Since you are going to take long walks in the crowded lanes, wear something comfortable.



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2. A traditional trade house in old Ahmedabad
3. Adajaj Stepwell
4. Juma Masjid

While exploring a Jain pol, I notice buildings with walls from whom nature and time has stripped off the plaster in chunks, exposing the bricks, scarlet in shame. The locked doors and squeaky windows are their only grace. My guide unlatches a dusty door and penetrates into the darkness behind. I follow him through a hidden passage. As I emerge out in broad daylight, a collective

murmur of Hindu chants from the neighbourhood certifies I am no more in a Jain pol. All pols of Ahmedabad are veined by maze-like secret corridors, connected to neighbouring pols built as an emergency escape route.

Intermittently, the pols are dotted with elaborate mansions known as havelis, their architecture, an amalgamation

of European, Gujarati, Maratha and Persian styles. Some are crumbling and abandoned, others stand with grandeur looked after by caretakers. The owners have mostly settled in foreign countries but their lavish homes are still used as landmarks. Dodhia Haveli is one such villa with stained glass windows and complicated wood artistry on its pilasters.

Meandering along the wafer thin *gullies* brimming with Gujarati vibe I arrive at Harkunvar Sethani ni Haveli, a mansion with eight feet long brackets— the longest in the city. The co-existence of the dragon and elephant reflects the Indo-Chinese influence. The peculiarity of the house is that it appears three-storey from one side and four-storey from another. I saunter past the imposing presence of the old Ahmedabad stock exchange, opposite which is Muhurat Pol, the first ever pol of Ahmedabad.

As I complete my exploration in the old knotted lanes of the pols, I realise who are the forefathers of the modern-day urban housing societies. ❸