

Surti sketchers trace Navsari's rich Parsi heritage

Pics: Karan Soni & Jay Acharya



Art and architecture enthusiasts from Surat made a half-day journey to Navsari for the sketch sesh

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As more people seek to slow down and be present, experiencing a place through urban sketching is gaining momentum. Armed with pens, watercolours and curiosity, urban sketchers pause, observe and document everyday life, heritage and architecture as it unfolds before them. Recently (January 4), this practice brought together a group of art and architecture enthusiasts from Surat, who set out on a half-day journey to Navsari to explore and sketch the town's rich, overlooked Parsi heritage.

The initiative was jointly hosted by INTACH Navsari and the Navsari Municipal Corporation

(NMC), and supported by trustees of several Parsi organisations within the precinct, including Khurshed Desai.

TRACING PARSİ FOOTSTEPS

After breakfast, the sketchers embarked on a heritage walk through Navsari's Parsiwada Precinct 1, guided by INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage) representative Ruzbeh Umrigar. The group wandered through streets that had witnessed centuries of Zoroastrian history.

Parsiwada Precinct 1 forms the cultural core of Navsari, home to landmark institutions like Jamshedji Nusserwanji Tata Birth-



place museum, the modest yet evocative ancestral home of the founder of the Tata legacy. Nearby stands the colonial-era DK Tata Boys' School, its architecture reflecting the educational reforms of the late 19th century. Equally significant is the Bai Navajbai Tata Zoroastrian Girls' School, an institution that empowered Parsi women through education long before it became a national priority. Principal Hitesh Parekh shared the fascinating story and evolution of the school with the artists.

Among the most striking stops for the artists was the First Dastoor Meherjirana Library. The pastel-hued façade, vintage wooden furniture and stained-glass windows exuded old-world charm. Established in 1872, the library has been a vital hub for Zoroastrian studies, with a collection of manuscripts in Avestan, Pahlavi and Persian. Librarian Chaitali Desai and priest Farzan Antia proved inspiring and enlightening.

The sketchers also witnessed the concluding rituals of an induction ceremony of two young boys entering the Parsi priesthood at the Vadi Daremeher (Vadi Dar-i-Mihr). "Established in the 12th century, it is the oldest continuously functioning Zoroastrian seminary in India and is often described as the 'Oxford of the Parsi world,' having shaped generations of priests and scholars," explains Umrigar.

The final stop was the Desai Atash Behram, founded around 1765. With its Atash Behram—the highest grade of sacred fire—it embodies the resilience of Zoroastrianism in India and highlights Navsari's importance as a hub of Parsi culture and pilgrimage. IAS officer Dev Chaudhry, Municipal Commissioner of the NMC, also dropped in to encourage the artists.

Interpreting heritage through sketches

After the heritage walk, the artists scattered, each drawn to the spot that inspired them most. Some settled in the quiet corners of narrow alleyways, others chose views of schools, libraries, or

temple. With pen, ink, watercolour, and mixed media, they captured Navsari at their own pace, observing its details, textures, and atmosphere with attention. Sketching became a way of appreciating the city, letting its beauty unfold gradually. The session ended with an artwork throwdown, followed by a communal group lunch. In the end, the Navsari heritage and sketch walk reminded everyone that we often chase distant stories while overlooking

the treasures closer to home. For the Surti sketchers, Navsari's Parsiwada emerged as a neighbourhood gem.

