

# Entrepreneurial Governance and the Ahmedabad Gujarati Bazaar: Erasure of the Sabarmati River as Commons

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## ABSTRACT

This essay frames the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project (SRFDP) against a cultural history of the Sabarmati riverbed as a commons and against the successive aesthetic readings of the riverfront correlating with Ahmedabad's urbanization. Design practice materialized Ahmedabadi elites' desires to remake Ahmedabad as a global city by commodifying the Sabarmati landscape. This simultaneously erased the socio-spatial networks and practices grounding the working poor in the riverbed for centuries. The case of the Ahmedabad Gujarati Bazaar provides insight into these disempowering processes and into the market traders' actions to claim their right in shaping the city for their survival as well.

## AHMEDABAD'S WORKING POOR AND THE SABARMATI AS MAIDAN-COMMONS<sup>(1)</sup>

Founded on the banks of the Sabarmati River in 1411, Ahmedabad became a manufacturing center and investment

site for the accumulated textile wealth with the rise in maritime trade in the sixteenth century. The area between the Sabarmati and Mahi rivers became well known for its indigo cultivation and continued in patches into the twentieth century where in 1966, Henri Cartier-Bresson famously photographed small-scale textile workers drying indigo-dyed cottons in the dry Sabarmati riverbed. By the 1850s, Ahmedabad's fortified eastern banks would accrue manufacturing and production facilities<sup>(2)</sup> and with the British construction of Ellis Bridge in 1892, the Sabarmati's Western banks were incorporated into Ahmedabad as well. The histories of Ahmedabad and the Sabarmati are also inextricably linked with emancipatory struggle. In 1917, Mohandas Gandhi founded an ashram on a 36-acre site on the western banks of the Sabarmati with the financial and political backing of Ahmedabad's textile barons. He was later detained in 1922 in the adjacent Sabarmati Prison as retaliation for his involvement in the Quit India campaign. Gandhi led his first satyagraha<sup>(3)</sup> in the dry Sabarmati riverbed as a response to abysmal living and working conditions for the city's 50,000 textile workers.<sup>(4)</sup> Twelve years later, over 100,000 Indians walked 390 km from the Sabarmati River to the coastal village of Dandi in protest of British salt taxes.

These two histories of the city with the Sabarmati changed drastically with India's 1947 independence and the ensuing industrialization campaigns.

Historians Achyut Yagnik and Suchitra Sheth frame these changes through three separate Ahmedabads (2005). In the first Ahmedabad, the old walled city housed Dalits, Muslims and upper class Hindus within individual pols<sup>(5)</sup>. The second Ahmedabad extended eastwards in the early twentieth century through villages-turned-townships near the emerging textile mills. Residents of this second Ahmedabad were mostly Dalit and Muslim laborers who formed two-thirds of the city's working population. Following Independence in 1947, a third Ahmedabad spread westwards, separated from the previous two Ahmedabads by the Sabarmati River. Upwardly mobile and elite residents created cooperative housing societies with the clear caste-based separations of the first Ahmedabad. The communal riots of the 1960s, a familiar phenomenon in Ahmedabad since 1714, accompanied rapid urbanization during this period. Multiple riots since then, most recently in 2002, further ghettoized Hindus and Muslims with Juhapura, as Ahmedabad's (and India's) largest Muslim ghetto, housing an estimated 400,000 residents.<sup>6</sup> (Yagnik & Sheth, 2005, pp. 229-230) In addition to Yagnik and Sheth's "three Ahmedabads", the more recent shift westwards by elites into Prahlad Nagar and Satellite demonstrate a further distancing from working class populations. These exclusive and resource-intensive corridors intentionally neglect the other Ahmedabads, and instead build their identities upon ecologies of the consumption of high-end brands.

Anuradha Mathur, in her essay “Neither Wilderness nor Home: The Indian Maidan”, characterizes the maidan as an accommodating grounds that is nomadic, collective and supporting of indeterminacy (1999, p. 205). Her coupling of maidan with the commons is useful to describe an occupation of land based upon subsistence and community respect. As an ocean-like surface of sand, stone or grass, the maidan performs as a common ground by accommodating both cyclical and linear time cycles in everyday life (Mehrotra, 2008, pp. 206-207). Introduced by Fifteenth century Muslim rulers, the maidan has hosted a range of transient practices in India: military camps, parades and battles; sports and leisure; education, worship and celebration; farming and markets; as well as protest and extra-legal settlement (Mathur A. , 1999, p. 205).

The Sabarmati riverbed has functioned as a civic and ecologic maidan-commons throughout Ahmedabad’s history, supporting the livelihoods of many launderers, cloth washers, dyers and printers, petty traders, carpenters and farmers (Yagnik & Sheth, 2011, p. 300). Three generations ago, many poor families residing along the river grew melons and pumpkins there to sell in Ahmedabad’s produce markets. By 2004, eighteen highly polluting industries had made the river ecologically incapable of supporting crops (Bhatt, 2006, p. 81; United Nations Development Programme, 2004). Other laborers borrowed from low-interest banks to buy donkeys, seeking economic subsistence in the river’s sand that they would carry to nearby construction sites (Bhatt, 2006, p. 114). The later damming and flooding of the 9km stretch of the Sabarmati River

through Ahmedabad has barred access to that sand. Furthermore, the closing of the city’s 64 textile mills resulted in lay-offs for a majority of Ahmedabad’s workforce. It is estimated that 75-80% of the city’s working population, mostly women, depend upon open markets and street vending as major sources of sustenance for Ahmedabad’s poor (Mathur N., 2012, p. 65). Many have also settled along the river in response to previous State-sponsored evictions and the later denial of access to rehabilitation and relocation processes mandated by law. The saga of Ahmedabad’s Gujarati Bazaar traces a history of long-term use of the riverbed as commons, dispossession by the recent SRFDP and their struggle to participate in Ahmedabad’s urban transformations. Officially founded by Ahmed Shah three years following the city’s establishment, this lively market developed into a self-governed space for the weekly exchange of primary goods for 200,000 low-income residents in the region. Having first used the maidan in front of Bhadra Gate, the traders’ association began leasing 2600 square yards of maidan on the Sabarmati River in 1954 for a mere 151 Rupees per year (Vakil, 1995, p. 11). The market is legendary for its ability to furnish an entire lower-income family’s home in just one visit. Up to 200,000 customers and 2,400 traders<sup>(7)</sup> meet any given Sunday, buying and selling cooking utensils, clothes, furniture, books, hardware, electronics, antiques and hand carts among other things. As 40% of the traders are women, and another 40% self-identify as Dalit, the Gujarati Bazaar is representative of socially- and economically-progressive attitudes in Ahmedabad (Mathur & Joshi, 2009).<sup>(8)</sup>

Traders’ co-dependence has provided stability and survival through the city’s history of communal riots. While Ahmed Shah originally organized the market to operate with the weekly call to prayer at the Jama Masjid (main mosque), the market has been democratically governed by the Ahmedabad Gujarati Association (AGA), a secular membership-based organization that prioritizes economic rather than communal affiliation. These traders’ almost 600-year solidarity in cooperative dependence upon customers and weekly access to the Sabarmati riverbed highlights the efficacy of this structure of socio-spatial relations. As such relationships for material exchange, previously residing in the city’s commons, are reconfigured as competitive binaries between communities —be they elite/poor, with/without land tenure, upper-Caste/Dalit or Hindu/Muslim— the tipping points and consequences of social and economic exclusion become increasingly violent.

A second strength of the Gujarati Bazaar’s socio-spatial structure is its openness: traders set up in drier areas on wet days, accommodate 1,000+ ad-hoc traders each week, wrap around and bypass other activities and fluxes in the riverbed to provide seamless functionality within a perennial river landscape. Once co-opted into the SRFDP, the policed, and high-rent commanding strip of waterfront would render the Market’s flexibility impotent. The project’s designers intend for the self-organized petty traders of the Gujarati Bazaar to be replaced with a ‘world-class’ conference center and antiques traders in the sanitized Gujarati Bazaar as a caricatured market meant to feed the self-image of global city aspirants (Shah, 2010).

Ahmedabad's administrators interpret these uses of the commons as transgressive of its totalizing authority. Geographer Vinay Gidwani and sociologist Amita Baviskar claim rings true that the "destruction of common resources and the communities that depend on them is a long-standing outcome (some would argue prerequisite) of capitalist expansion" in India (2011, p. 43). While this commodification of common resources is lauded as emancipatory for beneficiaries, this erasure of the commons devastates urban populations living with thin survival margins of error (Gidwani & Baviskar, 2011, p. 43). The Sabarmati riverbed, when joined by Ahmedabad's streets, garbage dumps, open markets and other sites liminal to authority, becomes the ecological and civic commons for the working urban poor to occupy in resistance to their own dispossession.

#### MODERNIZATION AND MODERNISM IN INDIA

Prime Minister Nehru structured post-independence India on the premise of technological modernization as a means for social progress. These efforts invested in energy production, heavy industrialization and state-sponsored institution building. Modernism, as the cultural expression of a post-World War II social order (Swyngedouw & Kaika, 2003, p. 6), thrived in Ahmedabad under the patronage of textile barons who sought to compete in the world market by pairing traditional practices with modern technological means (Mehrotra, 2011, p. 31). Ray and Charles Eames, George Nakashima, Buckminster Fuller, Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Kahn all visited, proposed and

or built projects in Ahmedabad through the eyes of the city's elites. Le Corbusier, in designing the Ahmedabad Textile Mill Owner's Association Building in 1951, remarked that "the quaint scene of local dry cleaners [in the river] washing their cotton fabrics and drying them on the sand in the company of herons, cows, buffaloes and donkeys, partially immersed to stay cool, was an invitation to use architecture to produce (...) views that would serve as a background for both everyday business and night-time festivities." (quoted in Touchaleaume, Moreau, & Vigo, 2010, p. 459). While celebrated for its formal ingenuity, this first modernist project on the Sabarmati River encoded the modernist aesthetic in Ahmedabad with Le Corbusier's noted "gaze of domination over the exterior world" (Colomina, 1992, p. 112), exoticizing the poor and their history of dependence upon the Sabarmati.

#### LIBERALIZATION, GLOBAL ASPIRATIONS AND THE ERASURE OF MEMORY

With India's liberalization of economic policies beginning in 1992, Indian architects became central in homogenizing urban form to project efficiency and competence to appeal to the investment of what Rahul Mehrotra describes as "impatient capital" (Mehrotra, 2011, p. 49). Economic liberalization also catalyzed Ahmedabad's shift towards entrepreneurial urban governance, with city imagineering practices including city branding, the staging of mega-events, and the construction of flagship urban projects to move discourse away from the blatant anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence of Hindutva politics and

towards reassuring images of the state for economic and development progress (Desai, 2012a, pp.31-43; Harvey, 1989, p. 4).<sup>(9)</sup> Implementation of these projects through the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JnNURM) encouraged Ahmedabad's administrators to evict slum dwellers in order to gentrify high exchange-value land (Desai, 2012b, p. 52). Through the seemingly irrefutable rhetoric of the sanitary, predictable and efficient modernization of Ahmedabad, a nexus of landowners, builders, designers and city administrators profited tremendously while a noncompliant urban poor was criminalized for their survival practices in coping with state-imposed restrictions (Baviskar, 2011, p. 53).<sup>(10)</sup> The spatial products of this gentrification are "mirrors": on one side are the infrastructure-intensive gated enclaves with public spaces programmed for leisure and consumption and on the other, peripheral relocation sites with minimal infrastructural service and severed access to livelihood and community networks (Mathur, 2012, p. 69). This trend of entrepreneurial governance and spatial products extends throughout Gujarat.<sup>(11)</sup>

In opposition to the extended history of the Sabarmati as a commons and consistent with Gujarat's pattern of entrepreneurial governance following 1990s economic reforms, Bimal Patel, head of the non-profit Environmental Planning Collective, proposed in 1998 to claim and reconfigure the Sabarmati riverbed through the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project (SRFDP). In a self-congratulatory article published in the Wall Street Journal with his 2011 "public" project exhibition<sup>(12)</sup>, Bimal Patel wrote that the SRFDP was successful in

*“stopping the flow of untreated sewage into the river, relocating and rehabilitating all slums in the project area and reclaiming 200 hectares of land in order to convert a mostly private river edge –where private plots front directly onto the river –into a public realm with promenades, parks, markets and public amenities.” (Patel, 2011)*

The exhibition, entitled “Envisioning the Sabarmati Riverfront,” consisted of wall-scaled artistic renderings familiar to design schools worldwide: the seduction of perfect sunsets and clean-lined concrete promenades, clear water for watercrafts and floating restaurants and populated with devout Hindus with just-enough grit to pass as a bourgeois-environmentalist pastiche of Ahmedabad. To top off the fantasy, a predictable list of coastal development projects from fully-industrialized neoliberal cities –Paris, London, Sydney, New York, Singapore, Shanghai, Chengdu— were presented through which the global city might manifest for Brand Ahmedabad (HCP Design & Project Management Pvt. Ltd., 2011). This rhetoric of landscape is indicative of what W. J. Mitchell might describe as a site of “amnesia and erasure, a strategic site for burying the past and veiling history with ‘natural beauty’” (2002, p. 263), effectively erasing the economic and cultural contributions of commoners upon whose labor the city is reproduced every day (Gidwani & Baviskar, 2011, p. 43). The SRFDP performed a set of hydrologic gymnastics to create an illusion of a modern waterfront sited on an ecologically healthy river. As an immutable constriction to the river’s ability to accommodate monsoon rains,

the SRFDP exacerbates the risk of flooding for the high-value housing it speculates for its banks (D’Monte, 2011). Even more alarming is that the sharp 12.3 km concretized line of the SRFDP project area is not a river: dammed at both ends, the SRFDP holds stagnant water conveyed from the drought-stricken Narmada River over 220 km away. Monsoon hydrologic patterns, which create biophysical activity in the Sabarmati from upstream rains and occupational activity in their absence, are ignored in favor of the commodification of a geometrically perfect water edge (Mathur & da Cunha, 2013). Additionally, the very modernization of the poor sanitary conditions used to rationalize the project have been reproduced in this new fantasy-scape: since 2011, multiple reports document the city’s dumping of plastic and waste, the rise of malaria-infected mosquito colonies, algae blooms and invasive Hydrilla infestation (Bina Patel, 2011; John, 2013). The SRFDP’s second claim of slum relocation is perversely accurate. The proposal claimed that it would self-finance its USD 300 million expense by “developing” and selling 21% of the SRFDP’s claimed site area to residential and commercial real estate developers and builders (Environmental Planning Collaborative, 1998). The project’s extents were determined accordingly without addressing the 40,000 families living within the 70 settlements along the project area (Mathur, 2012, p. 65). Many of these settlements were generational, having formed from residents’ livelihood networks being embedded in the riverbed-as-commons, or as a result of previous forced evictions from the city’s development projects. Civil society groups

estimate that the SRFDP evicted 14,000 families, often by bulldozer and without warning. By structuring complex and exclusionary relocation and rehabilitation policies to label these residents as “criminals” and “encroachers,” (Mathur, 2012, p. 72) the city minimized resident eligibility for rehousing in one of 13 sites at the city’s periphery. These sites, some without access to water, sanitation or even shelter, have produced even worse living conditions than the original dwellings the SRFDP slated for rehabilitation. By rendering the riverbed as a terra nulla and labeling existing residents as non-entities disinterested in the stewardship of the commons upon which they depend, city administrators and the design team constructed narratives of progress, development and inclusion to reconfigure the Sabarmati to serve the agendas of the city’s elites.


#### EMANCIPATORY ACTION AND THE DESIGN PRACTICE

But is this emergent Ahmedabad that designers have imagined and imaged humane? Have designers’ visions for the Sabarmati River increased or decreased the potential for emancipation for those who depend upon it for sustenance? Apologists for the SRFDP<sup>13</sup> claim that design consequences adversely affecting the poor are beyond the designer’s responsibility. In the unrolling and aftermath of the SRFDP, most of the dispossessed have not been able to build the kinds of stability they knew before, let alone the stability enjoyed by those with state-backed land or building tenure. However, the resistance responses by affected communities offer opportunities to examine the potentials for emancipation and disempowerment at the core of

such urban reconfiguration projects (Swyngedouw & Kaika, 2003, p. 5). Since the SRFDP's inception, those threatened by demolition and construction activities have organized to make claims for municipal and state-level action. Becoming aware of their impending eviction and the demolition of their homes, in 2004 slum dwellers residing within the Sabarmati riverbed formed the Sabarmati Nagrik Adhikar Manch (Sabarmati Citizens' Rights Forum) to assert their right to participate in shaping Ahmedabad's form and its urban development machinery. By rallying over two years around their shared need for housing rights, the Manch was used Public Interest Litigation to demand the production of a rehabilitation plan from city administrators prior to demolitions and the SRFDP's construction (Desai, 2011, p. 119; Mathur & Joshi, 2009). In 2010, 3,000-4,000 additional families were violently evicted and relocated to a snake-infested marshland site in Piplaj consisting of little more than chalk squares below high-tension power cables.<sup>(14)</sup> Members of displaced communities, academics, artists and citizens joined under the banner of Our Inclusive Ahmedabad and called a public hearing to hold city administrators and the SRFDP design team accountable for their promised spatial tenure (Our Inclusive Ahmedabad, 2010). In 2011, as an alternative to the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation's narratives for Ahmedabad's year-long 600th birthday celebrations, a collective of relocated communities organized the Residents University at the same Piplaj relocation site to acknowledge their shared histories of violent marginalization, exchange their experiences coping and to learn from the diverse means of reconstructing their lives

without meaningful support from city administrators. In 2010, the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation began the illegal demolition of the Gujarati Bazaar without providing notice or rehabilitation plans for the 1400-strong traders association, 1000 ad-hoc traders, or extended livelihood networks of craftsmen, daily-wage supply chain laborers and their collective family dependents. The traders association initiated the design of a rehabilitation plan for the market along with faculty members, students and researchers from the Indian Institute of Management and National Institute of Design.<sup>(15)</sup> The traders' association leveraged this community-based design process as evidence in the Gujarat High Court to demonstrate the feasibility of their inclusion in the design process and form for a modernized Gujarati Bazaar. They were able to halt demolitions until the SRFDP design team could provide an in-situ rehabilitation plan, but their present and future remain uncertain: whether the Court's decision will be honored, whether an appropriate rehabilitation plan will materialize, and whether traders will be able to organize and operate effectively within it.

These histories do not outline clean problems with permanent, neatly packaged solutions – or for determined types of projects and design practices.<sup>(16)</sup> Instead, they present the socio-spatial practices that have produced Ahmedabad's Sabarmati riverbed landscape as a commons for more than 600 years, traced their erasure by recent urban development projects, and highlighted efforts by the poor to claim their right to participate in shaping Ahmedabad's urban transformations. As

demonstrated through recent projects on the Sabarmati, designers have the potential to mediate disempowerment in their materialization of desire, activity and political will in the urban arena (Swyngedouw & Kaika, 2003, p. 5). However, as demonstrated through the process of the Gujarati Bazaar's community-based rehabilitation plan, design practice also holds the potential to reclaim more humane possibilities from the margins of these increasingly normative scenarios. 

#### NOTES

(1) Events identified within this section rely upon Yagnik and Sheth 2005 and 2011 and upon conversation with numerous Ahmedabad residents.

(2) Textile productions were co-opted into larger textile houses under the Sarabhai, Shodhan and Arvind textiles baron families with at 47,109 loom capacity in 1944. See Mathur 2012, p. 65 and Ahmedabad Textile Mill Owners' Association, 2013.

(3) Organized protest of nonviolent resistance, from the Sanskrit translating as "holding firmly to Truth".

(4) Mill owners, wanting to continue their enormous World War I profits, wanted to cut the workers' plague bonus that they had offered as an incentive to panic-stricken workers to stay in the city. See Yagnik and Sheth, 2005, p. 176.

(5) Dense, enclosed Ahmedabadi housing clusters in which inhabitants are of the same community. These played a significant role in the possibility of trapping and escape during the city's numerous communal riots.

(6) Narendra Modi, Gujarat's current Chief Minister and supporter of the SRFDP, has been connected to or indicted as an instigator in the riots since 1986. See Concerned Citizens Tribunal 2002.

(7) The Ahmedabad Gujarati Association has 1,400 member-traders and between 1,000-1,200 ad-hoc traders each Sunday.

(8) Selling stainless steel cooking utensils and second-hand clothes, a number of women members of SEWA rely on the market as a vehicle to economic independence. See Vakil, 1995.

(9) Following the 2002 Riots, this strategy continues with Chief Minister Narendra Modi's indication on the Vibrant Gujarat website, that the state is safe for investment "with its all inclusive, sustainable and rapid growth, is emerging as

a globally preferred place to live in and to do business." See Modi, 2013.

(10) Bimal Patel, director of the SRFDP, confirmed this nexus during recorded public discussion. See Patel, Mathur and First Saturdays Meeting Group, 2012.

(11) See Bharwada and Mahajan 2006, p. 313. Gujarat's drive to modernize its wastelands has resulted in the transfer of wasteland commons—used for sustenance by the state's large nomadic population—to larger corporate houses who will lease the land at prices beyond the nomads' reach.

(12) It was accessible only by invitation to an exhibition space used by city elites. Project-affected communities were not notified nor were there any reasonable means for them to become aware of the exhibition claiming to be oriented towards the public.

(13) Including those explicitly described earlier in the politician-builder-designer nexus and implied by their planned benefit from heightened land exchange values.

(14) Per author's visit. For more information, see Mathur and Joshi, 2009.

(15) IIM and NID are two of India's premier educational institutions and are located within Ahmedabad.

(16) As framed in the discourse on "wicked problems," (see Rittel & Webber, 1973).

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