

# B·O·H·R·A DWELLINGS

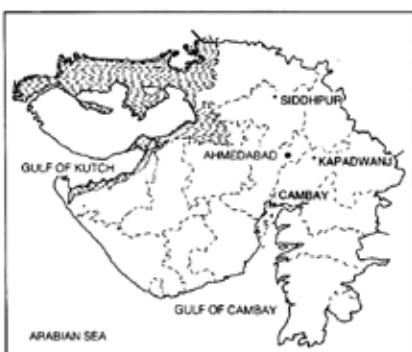
**S**ituated on the west coast of India, the State of Gujarat is blessed with excellent ports which place it on the international trade routes to the western world. Over the centuries it became a commercial centre and a melting pot of empires, civilisations and cultures, giving rise to prosperous urban centres and settlements that evolved in response to myriad influences. Fine examples of this synthesis are the traditional Bohra dwellings, which vivify a mixture of styles, forms and overall manifestation signifying a rich and subtle metamorphosis of ideas through every phase of architectural development.

Of the estimated half a million Bohras in the country, fifty per cent are in Gujarat. The roots of the Bohra sect go back to the eleventh century when the first two Shia missionaries from Egypt landed at the port town of Cambay in Gujarat during the reign of Siddharaj Jaisinh to peacefully spread the word of Islam. Since Siddharaj was a tolerant ruler and the Arab missionaries did not have political motives, they were able to gradually convert a sizable population to their faith (with its emphasis on equality), mainly from the lower and middle strata of Hindu society. This population belonged to the urban trading centres of Gujarat and, comprised mostly traders. The community acquired its name from the term 'Vahoravu' which in Gujarati means 'to trade'. Later, in the fourteenth century, another minority of traders were converted by the Sunni Muslim rulers of Gujarat. These converts are known as Sunni Bohras.

The prolonged presence of the British

## cultural manifestations in regional architecture

Madhavi Desai



in India brought about considerable changes in the socio-economic and cultural values of the people. The upper and middle classes looked up to the British rulers and their lifestyle and strove to achieve the same standards. This attitude brought about a continuous process of adoption, adaptation and retention in the evolution of the built environment. The Bohra community being in

business and trade came into frequent and close contact with the British metropolitan and urban life as well as its architectural expression. These associations, combined with the Bohra's own relative prosperity, particularly after World War I, affected the construction of their permanent residences as status symbols in their native towns in Gujarat. Their houses were constructed by carpenters or masons who employed, as the basic structural framework, the methods of construction based on the principles of ancient building sciences from Hindu scriptures. The internal spaces, however, had to respond to the socio-cultural needs of the Islamic community's day-to-day living patterns. Thus, the final form had an eclectic blend of elements from three highly developed styles of architecture.

### Culture: a blend of Hindu and Islamic customs

Today, the Bohra community is one of the most cohesive communities in the country in terms of its overall social structure and its adherence to religious customs and social norms. Within the homogenous culture, however, some regional variations can be seen. In the language, for instance, the Bohras of Gujarat speak a comparatively purer form of Gujarati, while those from Malwa speak Gujarati mixed with Hindi. Many Arabic words, particularly religious terms, have found currency. A large number of ceremonies and customs, apart from religious rituals, are Hindu in origin. In social functions such as marriages, celebration of festivals, etc., the local customs



Photo: Milkha Desai

*A typical street in Siddhpur*



MAP OF BOHRAWAD — CAMBAY



MAP OF MAIN BOHRAWAD KAPADWANJI



A mansion in Siddhpur with shops on the ground floor



MAP OF MAIN BOHRAWAD - SIDDHPUR

are followed. Marriage among the Bohras, as with other Muslims, is contractual and not sacramental. The practice of dowry does not exist. The Bohras are, by and large, monogamous, and though divorce is legal, it is strongly disapproved of, since the community is closely knit and the social norms are rigid.

#### The Bohrawad: three settlements

For the purpose of this study, the author examined three Bohra settlements and dwellings in three towns, namely, Cambay, Kapadwanj and Siddhpur — towns which were prosperous and growing a few centuries ago but are now on the decline. The Bohrawad in Cambay, which is believed to have been established in the eighteenth century, is the most organic of all three. The settlements in Kapadwanj begin to show nuances of colonial planning, while the entire layout in Siddhpur is a fine example of British influence with extra wide streets and large, standardized house plots. In Cambay and Siddhpur, a main street is created by large Bohra mansions on both sides, often with shops on the ground floor.

The general overall layout of all three Bohrawads is, however, introverted. The

close knit community, which also faced discrimination as a sect, built its houses clustered closely together in an arrangement known as a *mohalla*. The growth of such a *mohalla* was organic. It consists of a street along which houses are arranged in a continuous row. Such a unit usually houses families which are closely related to each other. The street is a cul-de-sac and has carefully marked entrances and prominent central locations assigned to the 'mosque, community hall, priests' house, etc. These



There is a consistently clear demarcation of private and public spaces regardless of details, as illustrated by the examples from Siddhpur (above) and Kapadwanj (below).



are definite zones and a hierarchical sequence clearly differentiates the street and house. The street is connected to the house by either a platform or a porch, sometimes enclosed by a gate before one reaches the main door. Even inside, one must first enter transitional space before approaching the centre of the habitat. These barriers clearly distinguish the house - street relationship of this community from that of the Hindus where there exists a sense of participation (the street as an extension of the house) and not just a visual or formal connection.

The Bohrawad settlement also had a very specific boundary distinguishing it from the rest of the town. The closed system of streets, the lack of open spaces and absence of a preconceived square, typically found in other Muslim communities, indicates the importance of the inhabitants' relatively insular social life within the walls. The distance maintained from the wider urban fabric retained an ethnic and communal identity, and also achieved a balance between social isolation and community participation. There is often one main entrance gate to the *mohalla*, on top of which is located a small dwelling, generally occupied by the community priest, symbolizing the sectarian identity of the Bohras. Petherbridge sums this up beautifully while describing the Islamic city: "Islamic urban organization is the physical manifestation of the equilibrium between social homogeneity and heterogeneity in a social system, requiring both segregation of domestic life and participation in the economic and religious life of the community. The city characteristically comprises a tripartite system of public, semi-public and private spaces, varying in degrees of accessibility and enclosure."

While retaining a general conformity with the features of a typical Bohrawad, each of the three settlements respond to the different nature of the urbanity of the towns they belong to. The Bohrawad at Cambay, being the most organic, is most integrated with the existing, traditional urban fabric. Kapadwanj was made up of various *wadas* that maintained segregation between different communities, and remains one of the most prosperous and well planned *wadas*. The Siddhpur Bohrawad is an example of the majestic development of a new part of an old town where the main bazaar street is the primary axis.

The dwelling unit of the Bohras basically conforms to the typical layout of the medieval Indian system of a row house cluster, that is, a house confined within two long parallel walls which are shared. It is thus a deep plan with long narrow rooms, one behind the other. It often has a courtyard in the centre for light and ventilation. The front facade is then the only connection to the street. Within this conformity the dwelling incorporates subtle differences in the organization of spaces.

## Facades: cultural and architectural meanings

Considerable attention is paid to the articulation of facades as they reflect the status of the owner and his standing in the community. The elaboration of the facade and the height of the plinth of the house increases in direct proportion to the affluence of the owner. The facades, which display a high degree of intricacy and complexity, are rich in cultural and architectural meaning. The semi-open areas at the entrance are often



Above, below and facing page. The variety of facades in Siddhpur. Note the balcony enclosures and craftsmanship in ornamentation and iron grillwork.





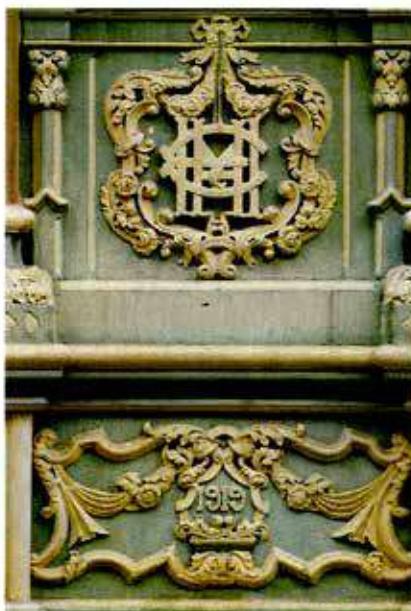
enclosed brass railings, and are in general, mere transitional areas for maintaining informal contact with the public realm while safeguarding privacy. A platform in the front with a low plinth becomes an extension of the house, while the higher plinths of the Bohra dwellings help reduce visual and social participation. The use of various kinds of screening devices and balcony elements again signify the desire to protect the privacy of women. Social restraints seem to increase with the level of sophistication in living.

Architecturally, the facades represent a combination of eastern and western influences. The Cambay and Kapadwanj dwellings have a greater degree of decorative Hindu motifs while the Siddhpur houses built during the early twentieth century are highly influenced by British colonial ornamentation and elements, such as balustrades, terraces and venetian screens. They have symmetrical and modulating details in carved wood, moulded plaster and wrought iron railings, expressing strong references to certain western architectural styles such as



eighteen century roccoco, baroque and art deco. The vertical movement elements are well organized and are generally highly decorated on the outside as well as inside.

If one studies the three facades and compares them, one can see very clear similarities and differences. The Cambay house is relatively simple and modest, clearly displaying the influence of Hindu architecture of that period on the style of ornamentation, making of doors and windows and even in the entrance space. The Kapadwanj facade is the most ornamental of all three, with a blend of Hindu and colo-

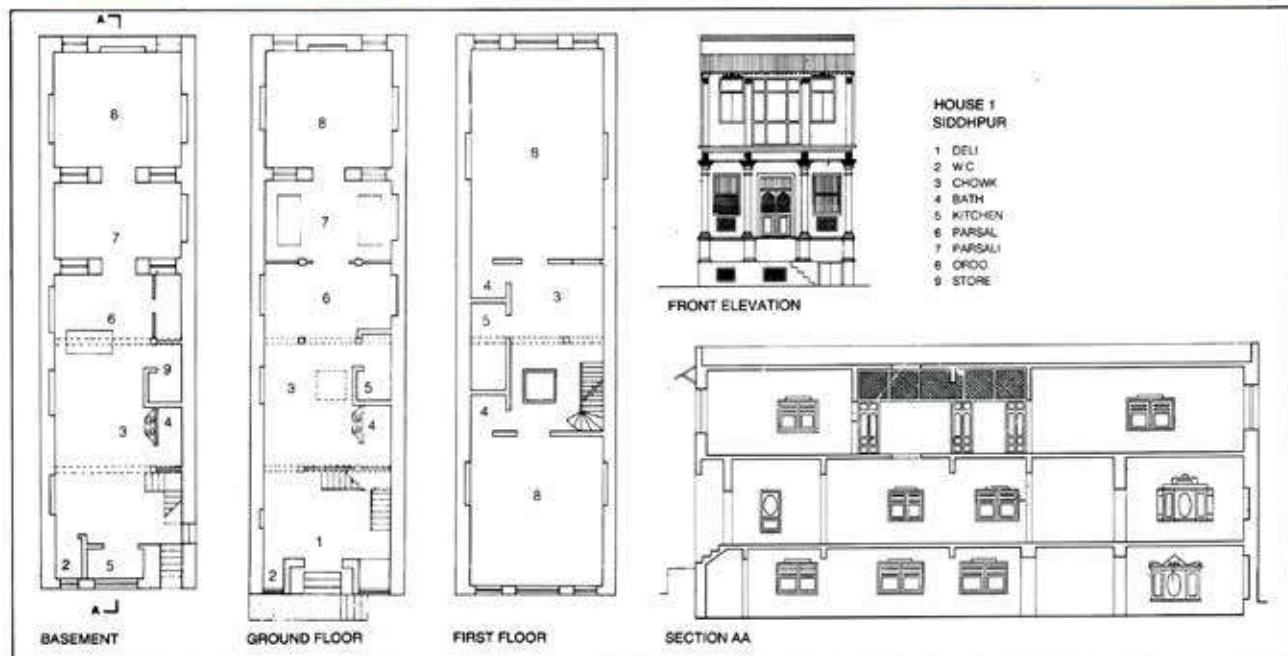


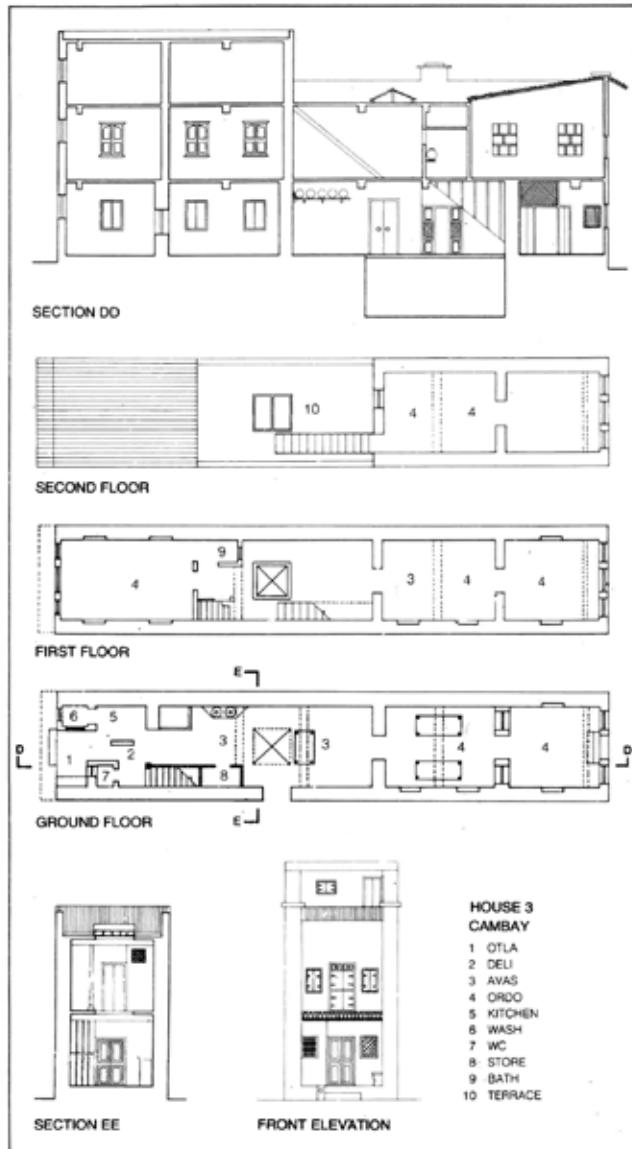
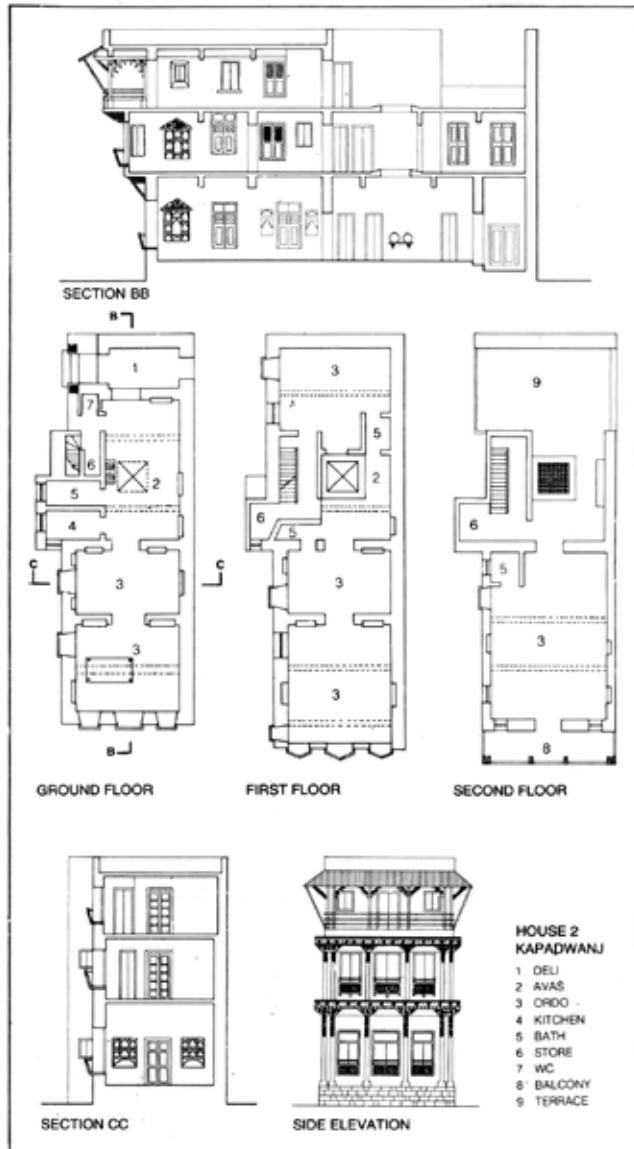
Details of ornamentation in Siddhpur highlighting the heavy European influence.

nial styles in motifs and decorative elements. The introduction of brass railings and a gate before the entrance door adds a unique touch to the typical facade. The Siddhpur house sits on a higher plinth and has a marked influence of the colonial style in decoration. The semi-enclosed entrance space has been eliminated in the typical Siddhpur dwelling where one enters directly into the house from the front steps.

#### Plan: hierarchical sequences

The house is built from inside out and has an underlying order of hierarchical





sequences of access and enclosures, beginning with the public zone and gradually leading to the most private areas. The entrance space is carefully designed as a transitional space, as a threshold between the public and the private realms. It is called *deli* in all three regions. The stairway is generally located in the *deli* so that male guests do not violate the household privacy of women. The central space, called *avas* or *chowk* has the kitchen and *paniara* (water place) located around it or in it and is the most significant space in the house. It is the hub of family activities where elders relax, children play and women chat or do household work. It is also used for dining where the family traditionally eats together from a large *thal*. The bedrooms are generally on

the upper floors and always have a small, bathroom attached to them. In many dwellings, the top floor contains a large, well decorated hall which is specifically meant for entertaining male guests. The terraces also have a high ornamental value.

Though the basic organization remains the same in Cambay, Kapadwanj and Siddhpur, the typical house in Siddhpur is wider, having additional spaces next to the central space. The semi-enclosed space is called *parsal* and the enclosed space next to it is called *parsali*, where family activities spill over from the *chowk*. Any other room is called *ordo*. The vernacular names of different spaces are derived from similar usage in Gujarati.

There are varying degrees of Hindu

influence on the plan organization. The element of the front *otla* (platform) is still seen in the Cambay dwelling; while an enclosure is added to the *otla* in the Kapadwanj house, it totally disappears in the Siddhpur example. The plan organization clearly expresses the segregation of women, physically manifested in various forms of barriers through which the women can see but not be seen.

#### Climatic Response: creation of domestic micro-climate

The buildings are well adapted to the climate in many ways, most of them being provided with a basement or semi-basement. The houses are all equipped with thick walls essential to reduce heat gain in a hot and dry

(continued on p 92)

climate, Brick is used as an efficient insulator. The openings are controlled and protected by screens and other protective devices from the glare. Courtyards are often used to create a micro-climatic zone. The top floor functions as dead storage with a loft under the roof, thus further reducing the heat. Soak pits are provided for the WC and the houses are rarely placed back to back, ensuring good ventilation. The walls are plastered with lime plaster which keeps them cool in the summer. At street level, climatic control is maintained by shadows thrown by the building on to the streets, or by the projections of the floor above. As a large portion of the family interaction occurs within the dwelling, sufficient care is taken to ensure an adequate level of light and ventilation which is better than that in traditional Hindu dwellings built during the same period.

#### Construction Techniques: influence of Hindu craftsmen

In Gujarat, carpenters working during this period generally followed principles of building enunciated in a book titled *Rajvalabh*. The book is primarily based on the *Vastu-Shastra* (the ancient rulebook of building sciences) and is a regional version of classical knowledge. It is a wealth of source material and provides total knowledge regarding the practice of architecture, the role of craftsmen, religious beliefs of the ancient and medieval periods, etc. The use of human dimensions as a measurement system, their application for proportioning, indicators of site evaluations, and many other aspects are emphasized in the book along with a combination of rituals of worship at important stages of construction.

Since those who actually constructed the Bohra houses were Hindu craftsmen, they used these familiar rules of construction while adapting the plan layout and facades to the owner's requirements. In Cambay, the houses have a framed structure in timber with infill brick walls. At the other two settlements, the walls are made either of brick or limestone. Carving is often used to disguise the bulkiness of the wooden members. The plinths are high and generally built in stone for two reasons: to prevent the damp from rising, and to provide a base for the facade. The roof is made of galvanized iron sheets supported on iron girders, trusses and rafters. The flooring is of wood, stone, tiles or marble. The top floors are supported by wooden beams which are close to one another and smaller in section. The walls of the interior are often finished with *ziki* plaster to give a cool and glossy finish and are painted white for effective light reflection.

#### The Interior: an element of lavishness

Amongst the Bohras the house is regarded as the abode of god, a house of prayer, a

holy place which has to be kept meticulously clean and as such receives top priority. This is well reflected in all Bohra dwellings, from the modest to the very rich. The introverted lifestyle as well as the desire for social status is expressed by the relatively lavish interiors. "Through a dark and untidy entrance and up steep and narrow wooden stairs in the first part of the first floor is a sitting room about 12' square. The ceiling is closely hung with European metal lamps and glass chandeliers, and the windows have, inside

their regular frames, English made plates of stained glass decorated with verses from the Koran. The floor is richly carpeted, cushions are placed around the walls, and the tables, set in the middle, are covered with ornaments. On the second floor at the rear portion, a large room of about 30' x 16' has coloured walls; the floor is richly carpeted, and sofas and chairs closely line the walls. Above is a third public room full of furniture with a large German organ in the place of honour. Set into the wall are niches and



An enclosed window in Siddhpur as seen from the outside.



*A typically elaborate interior of a Siddhpur house.*

cabinets stocked with Chinese and Japanese cups, English vases and Constantinople mugs..." (Forbes, 1988). In short, the influence of a British colonial lifestyle is manifest, especially in the houses built in the beginning of the twentieth century.

An enclosed balcony is a very important element in a Bohra house and is usually articulated with much elaboration. While non-existent in the early houses of Cambay, it takes the form of a decorative window seat in a typical Kapadwanj house. In Siddhpur, the balconies are enclosed in many different ways, always being a significant and decorative element of the facades. The large swing (*khat* or *zoola*) is a widely used item of traditional furniture meant for sitting or sleeping. The water place (*paniara*) is another significant element in the house. Located in the central space near the entrance it appears to be a remnant of the Hindu culture. Kapadwanj has the most decorative *paniars*. Even in an ordinary dwelling, one can find highly ornamented marble *paniars*.

The vernacular building tradition of the Bohra community thus offers a wide range of impressive and interesting examples in the urban context to the scholar attempting the study of built form not in isolation but in relation to all aspects of the users' lifestyle.



*The paniara, an essential element in every home.*

The Bohra house represents the inherent dichotomy of architectural responses to diverse social and artistic cultural influences. The house plan primarily expresses the traditional Bohra lifestyle, while the facades personify the process of eclectic adoption of and adaptation to various architectural styles. Nevertheless, a distinct sense of Indianness and regionalism emanates from this significant building form which has enriched the architectural heritage of the country. \*

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Madhavi Desai, currently practising architecture in Ahmedabad, completed her master's degree from the University of Texas at Austin in 1978. This article is based on a paper she presented at an international symposium on "Traditional Dwellings and Settlements in Comparative Perspective" at Berkeley, USA, in April, 1988.