

Review of *Architectural Heritage of Gujarat* by Miki Desai and Madhavi Desai.  
Gandhinagar: Commissionerate of Information 2012

This is a jewel of a book. Its photographs simply take one's breath away as the realization sinks in of the history that lies about us in the monuments recorded here so accurately and lovingly. Temples and mosques emerging from the brown earth, the rounded huts of the Banni in Kutch, the interlacing carved woodwork in the havelis, the charm of elaborate *chabutars* or bird feeders—the richness is dazzling. The photographs taken by the authors invite general readers to pause and stare at all this while they gently and unobtrusively tell us about what we see, drawing our attention to the way in which these structures reflect the geography and culture of the groups that produced them. Fine drawings of building plans accompany, in many cases, the utterly beautiful photographs.

They start with an era which clearly had town planning, Lothal and Dholavira, part of the Indus Valley Civilization, and move on to early forms of dwellings that survive among rural communities in villages, where houses are built without artisans and adorned by the people who live in them. Then come the towns, and history as we know it enters through more complex buildings as one age gives way to another. Buddhist caves of the 4th century offer a surprise in the form of columns that look familiar, till one realizes they are Graeco-Roman in style and probably derive from Gandhara art after Alexander's invasion.

We pass then to the medieval period of kings and patronage and elaborate places of worship: the 10<sup>th</sup> century temples of Polo, a city now abandoned, and the 11<sup>th</sup> century sun temple at Modhera. Exquisite photographs capture that marvellous temple, its columns alive with dancing maidens and minstrels and depictions of tales from our epics, all guarded on every side by Surya in his chariot. The gold

brown of the temple matches exactly the sun-dried earth on which it stands, a magical blend of art and nature. The richly carved Kalika Mata temple and Hira gate in Dabhoi, the innumerable temples on the Palitana hills, and the astonishing effect of Vishnu reclining on Seshanag surrounded by friezes that crowd every inch in the Rani ki Vav stepwell of Patan, all bespeak devotion overflowing into stone.

There is more. Indo-Islamic architecture reaches a height that matches, or surpasses, the splendour of monuments in Delhi. Ahmedabad alone is a treasure trove. The noble simplicity of the square in the Sarkhej Roza, the delicate tracery of the Sidi Sayid jali windows, the richness and grandeur of the Jama Masjid, all lovingly caught by the author's camera, are indescribably beautiful

There is yet more. Changes in style were brought in by European colonizers as they strove to make themselves comfortable, combining thoughts of 'home' (the inevitable clock tower) with local materials and climate. Broad, cool verandahs mark the buildings of Anglo-India, while palaces built by rulers of princely states brought up in the West replicate European features. One of the few solariums left in the world—the Jamnagar solarium—finds a place in this book; there is a photograph of what is essentially a 'building' revolving on top of another building.

We come finally to the modern architects who have graced the state, more particularly Ahmedabad, with extraordinary structures. Corbusier, Louis Kahn, B.V. Doshi—famous names, already part of the heritage of Gujarat. And then the contemporary masters: Kamal Mangaldas, Bimal Patel, and a little earlier, Kanvinde and Raje. Airy buildings full of natural light, elegantly simple buildings framed by channels of water, grey buildings with huge circles for windows, red brick buildings like sleeping elephants on the grass—this is an amazing city in an amazing state and the virtue of this book is that it awakens our pride in its variety, its richness, its ancient traditions and its modern buildings.

If there is a fault it is that the text tends to fall between too little (technical terms unexplained) and too much (vague appreciation). But this is to carp, and as I close, I return to the image of a jewel. Gujarat is the jewel that glows in the light cast by

this volume. To bring so much together, to enable us to see and feel the glory that is Gujarat is no mean achievement. The authors are to be thanked and the government congratulated for bringing out this volume in this very special year.

Dr. Suguna Ramanathan

Former Head of Dept., St. Xavier's College, Ahmedabad

May 2012



































































