

CERD Green Chronicles



TRADITIONAL COMMUNITY PRACTICES THAT SAVE THE WILDERNESS VALUE OF A CITY

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In the context of cities, the term wilderness is rarely used. The birds, snakes, or small civets that roam in our vicinity are seldom addressed as wildlife. Sharing our space as well as leftover food, they have created a life with us. Often staying out of sight, they maintain their own routine in urban areas. With rapid urbanization, these urban wildlife species have shrunk to smaller corners. Yet, these little fighters have stood their ground and adapted to the changing situations. How? we cannot say with surety. Studies on city biodiversity is limited and conservation practices that go around them remain unexplored. Thus, in the urban setting, it falls upon the shoulders of local communities (urbanites) to understand and help conserve this form of wildlife.

Communities residing in any space (Rural, semi-urban, or urban) have always had a unique link with nature. In a country like India, composed of a diverse group of communities from varied religions, while using the resources, certain communities have also supported conservation in their day to day life. In my study of urban wildlife conservation practices in the city of Ahmedabad, I searched for such stories. Stories of how cultures impact the conservation of wildlife in the city. And I hit a pot of gold!

Heritage city of Ahmedabad

Ahmedabad, a city that lies in the north-western part of Gujarat (India), has a rich history beginning from its foundation in 1411. The city harbours the Sabarmati river that divides it into two parts – the old fortified city (the eastern part) and the new Ahmedabad city (the western part). With the passing of the old city's reigns in four periods, a diverse group of communities settled inside the city. According to the 2011 census of India, Ahmedabad houses communities of Hindus, Muslims, Jains, Christians, and Sikhs (in order of population). A small number of Parsis and Bene Israel Jews are also settled in the city. Owing to this, several religious and cultural practices revolving around different forms of urban wildlife can be seen or heard of in the city.

Ritualised feeding – Gracefully feeding the kites

A narrow lane near the Teen Darwaja, Bhatiyar gali has been in operation, serving food to weary travellers, since the Sultanates period of Ahmedabad and informally dates back to 600 years. The street has shops lining both sides with butchery shops as well as small restaurants.

Here, three elements - food, people, and kites - make up the essence of this place, which can be viewed together in a century-old cultural activity called ritualized feeding.

The 'Bhatiyar Gali' shows this unspoken arrangement between the kites and the butchers. The butchers toss small portions of scrap meat in the air to the kites all day long, while the kites do not disturb the meat that is kept for selling. Both the buyers and the sellers have become so used to these large numbers of kites that glide around them in the narrow lane as they move nonchalantly from shop to shop.



Chabutras – A sigh of relief for the birds and squirrels

The local lore goes that a saint traveling from Dakor to Dwarka sat at the Bhadra Khali temple (now known as Bhadra fort complex) to quench his thirst. The saint was sad to see that there was no provision to feed birds and other life forms. Moved by the saint's compassion, Babul Modi, a grocer, built the city's first bird feeder, locally known as *chabutra*.

Soon, the son of the grocer built many *chabutras* and *havadas* (water trough) throughout the walled city. People soon contributed to build at least one of these in every *pol* (type of housing society), either in the entrance or the middle.

In her publication "the pol project", Amanda mentions how these "*Chabutras*" placed around the city are an amalgamation of the cultures present in the city itself. They incorporate the influence of Hindu, Muslim, and Jain architectural design, but the practice of putting them up is linked to the Jain faith in which the departing soul assumes the form of birds and animals.

Most of these *chabutras* follow a very similar construct with a dome covering a stone or wooden platform, sometimes like a cage, fixed on top of a pole. This pole sits on top of an octagonal lower base. Most of these *chabutras* have a *havada* for animals as well as a storage unit at the bottom.

Among the earliest constructions, the importance of *Jeevdaya* (respect and compassion towards all living beings) in the eyes of the local community can be seen through this construction.

Jivatkhaana for the little ones

'The Muhammadan Architecture of Ahmedabad, Volume 8, Part 2, James Burgess, 1905' mentions that the Jivatkhaana is "a room used to feed maggots and vermin with financial support given through the imposition of taxes on marriage and merchant transactions." Along with this, the 'Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency, Volume IV, Ahmedabad, 1879' mentions the process in the Jivatkhaana as "A servant collects maggots and other vermin during the rainy season. After this, a small amount of grain is thrown in for their substance and the room is closed for 10 to 12 years. Contents collected from the closed room are collected and used as manure."

Even though in a deteriorating state now, the building still shows the lengths at which the community went for the welfare of even the smallest of creatures.

The innocent sparrow

Placed in Dhal Ni pol in Ahmedabad, there is a corner board stating that during the Navinirman movement in 1974 at 5:25 pm in Gujarat, an innocent sparrow was killed during reckless police firing.

According to the folklore, after the sparrow's death, the locals in the pol even took police permission to lead a funeral procession for the sparrow. Till date, local people light oil lamps and keep bird feeds in the pol as a remembrance of the bird. This unique memorial shows a beautiful sense of compassion by the local community of Ahmedabad.



Uttarayan: A nightmare entangled in strings

Not all cultural practices have a positive impact on wildlife. *Uttarayan* celebrated as Makar Sankranti in various parts of the country is known to be the onset of the harvest season. The days become longer, the skies clearer and the breeze cooler. All these factors make this time apt for kite flying, which is how *Uttarayan* is celebrated in Ahmedabad.

Culturally significant to Gujarat, this kite flying is celebrated joyfully irrespective of class, community, or age group. However, this festival coincides with the migratory period of the birds shifting through the city skies. Gujarat, falling under the Central Asian Flyway, attracts a considerable number of migratory species crossing over the city. Thus, this week-long festival is nothing but a nightmare for them. What makes it more brutal is the glass pieces rubbed on the string to make it stronger. Thousands of birds can be seen injured or dead by the *manjha* (string) of the kites all around the city.

Epilogue

These are a few examples from just one city in a massive country that fits in an even larger world. With more groups, more cultural diversity, many unconventional practices would surface.

This also shows that wildlife conservation does not necessarily mean protected areas with tigers and lions. Look at it by asking yourself a simple question - The birds that chirp on your window or the snakes that slither through your garden, is it not wildlife? Have you tried to put up a nest box, fill up a tray of water, or save a tree that they nest on or roost at night? Caring for the wildlife and greens in your neighbourhood, as little as possible, could simply lead to a substantial contribution to wildlife conservation in cities.

Citizens all around the world have taken small initiatives to help the wilderness thrive in neighbourhoods. Proving the fact that local communities have driven wildlife conservation over centuries.

Every time I think about these conservation practices, the wise words of a temple priest echo in my mind as I visualize his roof lined with pots for nesting birds,

"*Itna liya hai toh kuch dena bhi chahiye na*"

(We have taken so much (from nature), we should give back somethings too)

These words said with such simplicity forms the base of the ideology of community-based conservation practices in the city of Ahmedabad to help conservation ethos to survive.