

BHUJ TWINNING : VISIT TO BHUJ

The following report is submitted by Cllr Navin Shah giving information about his visit to Bhuj from 1st to 3rd February 2004. The visit was entirely of personal nature funded by Navin Shah.

INTRODUCTION

Before travelling to India the Trustees and Secretary of SKSS Kenton Temple kindly put me in touch with their Bhuj Temple and Mr. Mukesh Zaveri in Bhuj. Mr. Zaveri was an ex Mayor and an ex Member of Legislative Assembly who proved to be most resourceful and helpful throughout my short stay in Bhuj. Credit goes to him entirely for what turned out to be a very productive visit for 2 working days. It was also fortunate that Mr. Vishram Mayani, President of SKSS Kenton Temple was also in Dahisara (his home town near Bhuj). Mr. Mayani accompanied me throughout the stay and his assistance proved to be most valuable in terms of his knowledge of the area and his contacts.

This was my second trip to Bhuj the first one being in Bhuj and surrounding areas in the aftermath of the earthquake. The following notes are prepared from my 2 working day visit to some of the key places in Bhuj. The notes narrate information about my meetings in Bhuj and further information, mainly based on brief research from books obtained in Bhuj, is also incorporated.

BRIEF HISTORY

The town of Bhuj is located some 400KM from Ahmedabad the old Capital of Gujarat State in Western India. In 1549 Bhuj was established as a capital of princely state of Kutch. Bhuj is capital of Kutch District in the State of Gujarat. The profile of the map of Kutch seen upside down resembles shape of a tortoise. Thus it is claimed that the name of the district of Kutch is derived from Katchuo in Hindi and Kachbo in Gujarati languages meaning a tortoise - the very symbol of steady and solid progress.

Bhuj town (municipal boundary) itself is spread over an area of 9.48 sq. km with a beautiful backdrop of 'Bhujia' Hill in the east. The Bhujia Fort dominates the skyline of Bhuj and a temple placed on the top of the hill. As described to me by one of the Sadhu's (priest) of the Bhuj Swaminarayan Temple, Bhuj is named after this hill where a 'Bhujang' a snake resided. To date every year there is a Mela (festival) celebrated on the 'Nag Panchami' day when snakes are worshipped.

Bhuj, in the shape of an irregular polygon was originally surrounded by a stonewall, 35 feet high and some four feet thick with towers at intervals formerly armed with fifty one guns. The fort walls to the east of the town have disappeared over the years to accommodate urban sprawl of the town. Similarly four of the five gates to the town have been tempered with. (In the true British tradition I would blame the planners for this destruction!). In the heart of the town there is a gothic palace (1860-75) designed by a British Engineer, built by local builders but now in a derelict condition, part of which houses a museum. To the West, adjacent the palace is the Hamirsar Lake.

Briefly some of the historical landmarks of repute are the Palace (Aina Mahal), Bhujia Hill Fort, a Mosque & a Tomb Complex, Alfred High School, a Step Well and Kutch Museum formerly called Ferguson Museum. Old temples also form key focal points – for example the old Shri Swaminarayan Temple (destroyed during the earthquake), Ashapura Temple, Laxminarayan Temple and Smriti Temple etc.

DEMOGRAPHY & WORKFORCE

(All Statistics are quoted from the Bhuj Municipality's Town Profile)

Population of Bhuj Municipal area as per 1991 Census is 102,176 spread over an area of 9.48 sq. km. Of the total population 53.56% are male and 46.44% are female. Average household size is 4.95 persons per household, which is the lowest among all towns in Kutch district. Average literacy rate is 65.61%. The density based on these figures is about 10,778 persons per sq. km. High density, low average household size and higher literacy rate are indicative of the highest urbanization of Bhuj amongst all the towns in Kutch district.

The workforce participation rate (main and marginal workers) in Bhuj is 32.79%. The main workers are largely involved in Trade and Commerce (24%), transport and Storage (12%) and other services (44%) in Bhuj Urban area.

Official current population figures are not available but they are estimate to be just under 200,000 (based on a fairly high average annual growth rate of 3.9% between 1981 and 1991).

MUNICIPAL / POLITICAL PROFILE

Status of a 'Nagarpalika' (a Municipality) was accorded to Bhuj in 1911 and subsequently classified as Class B town when it exceeded population figure of 100,000. Bhuj, headquarters of Kutch district, is divided in to 12 geographical Wards. Each Ward is represented by 3 Councillors (described to me as 'Members'). Municipal elections are held every five years. Of the elected Members one third must be women. The administration is headed by an 'Adhyaksh' an Executive Mayor elected by Members (and NOT directly elected) whose term is for 2.5 years.

Currently the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) controls the Nagarpalika with 29 members and the Congress Party has 7 members. The current Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) for the areas is from the Congress Party.

Together with 15 Senior Municipal Officers I met 10 Members (Councillors) including Mrs Hansaben Chheda who is the current Executive Mayor in a temporary Municipal office building. The original Municipal building was destroyed in the earthquake with loss of 4 Officers. The New Town Hall is nearly complete and ready for occupation.

I was very warmly received in their current temporary offices and the discussions both with the members and officers proved to be positive and concluded with press interviews confirming a commitment from Mrs Chheda – the Executive Mayor to support and work in the long and short term for the concept of Twinning of Bhuj and Harrow. This was echoed by Mr. Mukesh Zaveri. The meeting was also attended by Mr. Navin Joshi a reporter from Kutch-mitra (a local daily newspaper) and a reporting team from Bhuj Electronic Media. A very positive article on my visit and purpose was published in Kutch-Mitra a local daily newspaper.

EDUCATION, HEALTH AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR FACILITIES

During my visit, with the able help of Mr. Zaveri, I took an opportunity to get the flavour of some of the services and facilities in Bhuj. Both, for the educational and health facilities I requested to see examples of public sector and private/voluntary sector provisions.

SCHOOLS

Indrabai Girls High School :

A Municipal School. Met Mr. M S Acharya the Principal of the school and some of his colleagues.

Established in 1949 this was the first girls' school in Bhuj. The original building was totally destroyed by the earthquake. But the site has been redeveloped in phases with brand new School, Hostel and Auditorium Buildings. The whole project is/was funded by a private sponsorship from 'Gem & Jewellery Co.' with no strings attached. The phased redevelopment made it possible for a small part of the school to start functioning in pre-fabricated unit(s) four months after the earthquake. Some further information :

- Total pupils in the school 1900 currently (2200 prior to the earthquake)
- Standard class size 50 but can go up to 60 pupils.
- High School catering for years 8 to 12 only.
- Total staff of 66 including teachers and other staff.
- Cost of School and Hostel redevelopment 7 Crore Rupees (70 million rupees / £875,000 at the current value). Additional 2 Crore Rupees for the Auditorium project.
- Have a Parents' Committee active in organizing events/activities such as Melas (Festivals), Cooking classes and supporting school needs/activities.
- 100 capacity Girls Hostel with Kitchen, Lounge and Dining facilities. This is a new provision, some charging arrangement. Currently unoccupied.
- State-wide acknowledgement for high educational achievements and currently pursuing a link with the British Council.

Kutch Kalyan Sangh School :

Private / Voluntary Sector School.

Met Ms Savitaben Thacker, Principal of the School, some prominent Trustees and their colleagues.

The main body behind this co education school is 'Vidya Bharati' a national organisation currently running approximately 20,000 schools India-wide and approximately 350 schools in Gujarat State. These are voluntary schools resourced exclusively from private funds/donations. The School established in 1983 is run by a local Trust. The school operates on the ethos of all-round spiritual development of pupils. Some further information :

- Total pupils in the school 546.
- Standard class size 40 to 45 but aspirational size of 30 pupils.
- Caterings for years 1 to 10 currently but a new building would provide additional accommodation for years 8 to 12.
- Have a 41 strong Parents' Committee active in organizing events/activities.
- Class Teachers visit parents of their pupils twice a year.
- School Hall facilities available for other 'community' related uses.

HEALTH

New G. K. District General Hospital Bhuj.

Bhuj Hospital was completely destroyed in the earthquake and this new 300 Bed Hospital funded from the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund was opened by Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee the Prime Minister of India in late January 2004.

The Hospital is now completed and expected to be occupied shortly. Some key points of information about the Hospital:

- The stunning new hospital signifies the PM's vision for India. A promise made by the PM in Bhuj when he visited the site on 28th January 2001 (2 days after the earthquake) for a 'world class' and 'State of the Art' Hospital.
- In addition to the 300 Bed capacity the hospital will act as a tertiary care medical facility centre for the District.
- Approximately 25 specialist / super specialist services would be provided with hi-tech, modern facilities.
- Built with 'Base Isolation' technique which can withstand up to 9 Richter Scale – the first ever building in India built using this technique.
- Medical Care to be provided by the State/Government but Privately tendered Maintenance Contracts.

Matushri Meghbai Premji Jetha Hospital & Research Centre

This a privately funded voluntary sector facility established by Shri Kutchi Leva Patel Educational & Medical Trust.

The 'Sanstha' meaning an Organisation (a voluntary organisation) was established in 1988 for the Patel community with an initial vision of providing educational facilities to 'uplift and educate' the entire Leva Patel community covering some 24 Leva Patel villages.

Various Leaders of this community and organisation kindly spent a considerable time with me discussing specific facilities, leading role of the 'Sanstha' and took time to show me around the medical facilities. Apart from very impressive set up I was convinced of their support for a twinning arrangement.

The Hospital and Research Centre, open to all, was completed in October 2000 provides highly subsidised services. The centre provides specialist diagnostic and medical facilities not provided elsewhere in Kutch. Some key facilities include:

- ICU providing treatment for heart attack and paralysis.
- Endoscopy and Dialysis Units.
- Pathology, Physiology and Radiology Departments.
- Health Check Up Scheme (widely used by visiting non resident Indians)
- Ambulance service but no Accident Emergency Department.
- This is a diagnostic centre only – without any Wards / Inpatient facilities.

On the same site there is a large School Complex. The initial educational facilities commenced with provision of Girls School. In 1998 R D Varsani Boys School of total capacity 850 students was established. In addition to a Girls School there is also a Hostel for Girls accommodating some 1350 girls. Like the medical facilities education facilities are highly subsidised with provision for free services in deserving cases.

BUSINESS

The Lions Club of Bhuj

I was met and warmly welcomed in the Lions office by the President and the District Governor of the Lions Club with other members of the organisation who spent considerable time in discussing their extensive activities for the benefit of the Bhuj community and the District. In the aftermath of the earthquake the Lions Club took a leading role in rehabilitation work actively networking with local, national and international (UK) organisations. As a result it was involved in assisting in setting up new Medical and Housing projects including a housing estate of its own named 'Lions Nagar'.

I was showed around their basement areas, which located a workshop producing artificial limbs supplied all over the district and a physiotherapy area etc.

There is keen interest in linking up with other (Harrow) Lions sectors and participate in the twinning arrangements.

RELIGIOUS / COMMUNITY

Shri Swaminarayan Mandir (Temple) Bhuj

This is main temple, which is the 'parent body' for both the SKSS Temple in Kenton and the Swaminarayan Temple in Edgware. The offices of this temple, with the kind help of the Head Priest Shri Jadavji Bhagat and Mr Mayani the President of SKSS Kenton Temple served as my base throughout the trip. They gave me inspiration, ideas and kept my engine well oiled by providing a variety of meals throughout the visit for which I am most grateful.

The original Temple Complex built in 1878 was destroyed in the earthquake. Makeshift temple in a metal shed like structure has been constructed for the time being. Redevelopment of the Main Temple commenced in May 2003 and full completion is expected in about 3 to 4 years. Some key features of the new complex:

- 'Neej Mandir' The main temple to serve men. Designed in white marble.
- A Ladies Temple.
- Sabha Mandap
- A Guest House

The Bhuj Temple has well established links with the Temples and communities in Harrow.

Residential Areas / Villages etc.

Due to the time constraints I did not have much opportunity to visit residential areas but managed to have a 'feel' of some areas.

During my first visit to Bhuj about 18 months ago I witnessed massive destruction of buildings and the infrastructure but the calamity had not destroyed or defeated the hopes and spirits of people. I stayed in a builder friend's house in a village called Baladiya. This

was a village with a large number of properties owned by 'Non Resident Indians' (NRIs) my friend from Harlesden being one of them. Strong links between families between Harrow and Bhuj were very much obvious to see in this village as well as other areas of Bhuj.

During my recent visit I stayed in 'Madhapur' a village 4KM from Bhuj, in a house owned by my another builder friend from Alperton. Like Baladiya, Madhapur is also inhabited by NRIs and their close families and friends. I met several people from various areas like Harrow, Brent, Peterborough and Northampton. This visit demonstrated how strong the will of the people were. I witnessed most amazing progress in the last 2 years. There is obviously a lot to be done but the whole of the Bhuj area has been already transformed with major redevelopment works including large rehabilitation housing projects.

THE BHUJ RESPONSE & WAY FORWARD

My meetings with the Bhuj Politicians, Schools, Hospitals and the Voluntary Sector it was clear that there is overwhelming support for the concept of establishing a link through twinning arrangements between Bhuj and Harrow. I gave background of how the concept of twinning has come about and explained the process and the procedures to achieve the twinning. I further explained that if Harrow Council were to agree to the request for twinning by 'Sahyog' the potential for the Council was to work towards initial informal twinning arrangements in early May 2004 as a part of Harrow's 50th Anniversary celebrations.

As indicated in the early part of my report the Executive Mayor of Bhuj has already publicly supported the concept of twinning and the Municipality's desire to work with harrow towards achieving the objectives of Twinning.

India's Protocol for Twinning: Based on the Leicester & Rajkot Twinning arrangements, as advised by Mr. Mukesh Zaveri, the protocol at Indian end is

- First the Bhuj Nagarpalika (Municipality) passes a resolution to accept the twinning principle.
- The resolution is forwarded to the Minister for Urban Development (Mr. I K Jadeja) of the Gujarat State Government for approval.
- The Sate Government seeks approval from the Indian High Commission in London.

Both the Executive Mayor and Mr. Zaveri have given public commitment to complete the whole of the protocol and procedures in approximately 2 months time. Mr. Zaveri has also given an undertaking to lead a Group in Bhuj similar to and in parallel with 'Sahyog' in Harrow for the Twinning purposes.

Navin Shah
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