

THE GUJARATI HINDUS



By **Abdulrazak Fazal** Updated: December 2020



The Hindus in Zanzibar hailed from the Kutch and Kathiawar sides of Gujarat, India. They were an enterprising community, and foremost among them were the Bhatias who along with the Khojas (Ismailis/Ithnaasheries) were the initial settlers in Zanzibar, as far back as the late eighteenth century the East African Railway Settlement was a long way off). It is said that the Bhatia brothers Jeraj and Eebji Shivji were the first to settle in Zanzibar. Later their surname Shivji changed to Swaly which is derivative of the term 'Swahili'. Narandas Swaly, a reputed contractor, whose expertise our forefathers sought in having their walls and ceilings bricked up, and Vinod Swaly, a very popular teacher at the Agakhan Secondary School, were the descendants of Eebji Swaly. Some of the prominent Bhatia families in Zanzibar included Manubha of Kapadia Motor Mart and the Bablas. The Bhatias were held in very high esteem by the Sultan and a few even acted as advisers to him. The Jetha Leela private bank located in Portuguese street may be recorded as one of the oldest financial institutions in East Africa.

Here we need to point out a significant and historic incident. It was the visit of Mahatma Gandhi to Bhatia Mahajanvadi at Ziwani en route from South Africa to

India. There is an interesting anecdote relating to this episode. Gandhiji refused to enter the Bhatia Mahajanvadi building as there was a notice saying 'Bhatia sivay koine andar aavavani raja nathi' (only Bhatias are allowed to enter) . That really embarrassed the committee. The notice was immediately removed and after persuasion Gandhiji consented to enter the building. Years later in 1948 Gandhiji was assassinated and sadly this time his ashes were brought to Zanzibar when a large number of Asians gathered at the dock as a mark of respect for this great Mahatma. The ashes were then taken to Jinja (Uganda) to be scattered in the Nile.

Golaranas among the Hindus were strikingly different. They were industrious and skilful. They were dark in complexion and came originally from Daman & Diu (now Indian state, earlier under the Portuguese). Their gulfo (apartment complex) was located in a corner of Mkunazini/Sokomohogo along Ithnashries' Nai Misit. Their ladies could be seen sitting in the doorway and grinding grain into flour. They also dried off spices and vegetables in the open and at times that blocked the road. Their celebrations of Hindu festive occasions had certain grandeur. On the occasion of 'Navratri/Dasera they erected the chariot of Lord Rama and also the effigy of Ravan which they burnt later. During Holi they set fire at night and performed the ritual, also splashing colour liquid and throwing coloured powder on each other.

There were other Gujarati Hindu communities too like Vania, Lohana and others. Some of the notables among them were Anupchand Laxmichand, Manilal Mulji Suchak, Dwarkadas Morarji, Bhaichand Shah and V.S.Patel. The Hindus had formidable cricket, volleyball and hockey teams. Harji Mawji was probably Zanzibar's finest batsman. He also played football for the Kikvajuni team. Gajendra Doshi, the elegant wicketkeeper batsman, represented Zanzibar in cricket as well as hockey. Vasant and Vadilal Shah were Zanzibar's star volleyball players. The Hindu/Jain temples were located at Hurumzi (in Zanzibar we always treated the Hindus and Jains as one).The Hindu crematorium (ngazi mia or hundred steps) was located at Ziwani (of recent extensive renovation done to it by the Mulji Suchak family).

Zanzibar's biggest primary school 'Sir Euan Smith Madressa' (ESM) till the 4th standard functioned as Gujarati medium with the red turbaned Master Premchand Mehta (Master Kilemba) symbolizing the school's Indianness. The Gujarati Hindus formed the bulk of the teachers. They included Desai, Malkan (Sr), Malkan (Jr), Kapurchand, Govind, Chandu, Rajguru (Sr), Rajguru (Jr), KB Bhatt, BB Joshi, MP Joshi, Daya, Goraria, Ranchod, Magan, LT Mehta, Dave and several others. The highly reputable teachers Masters Naik and Desai taught in Government Boys Secondary School. Master Parekh and Master Swaly taught at the Aga Khan Secondary School. The Hindus also had their own 'Hindu Kanyashara' (Primary School for girls). Later around 1960 they established their own Secondary School 'Hindu Union'.

The once 'cinema culture' in Zanzibar could be ascribed to the influence of Gujarati Hindus. The first cinema house was a tin shack on the open Darajani ground and its screen being white bed sheet (introduced by a Khoja Abdulla Thaver nick named

‘Masi’ and its entrance 20 cents then). Later emerged 4 theatres – Empire, Majestic (gutted in one of Zanzibar’s worst fires in the early fifties and later rebuilt), Sultana (later Cine Afrique) and the ‘Sauti Ya Unguja’ building at Raha Leo (discontinued long back). It was the era of ‘black & white’ films with vivid memories of Beju Bawra, Deedar, Awara, Albela etc. The public hero-worshipped Ashok Kumar, Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor and Devanand. Nargis, Madhubala and Meena Kumari were some of the favourite heroines. Their picture cards came with chewing gum and exchanged enthusiastically among the youths. The ‘Cinema Poster Corner’ at the market was the centre of attraction for passersby. There were various cinema shows including morning, matinee (afternoon), zanana (ladies) and the ‘one shilling allround’ ones. A partisan section among the audience in the theatre dropped soda bottles on the entry of the main hero shouting “asanjo”

‘Sauti ya Unguja’ broadcast the ‘Aapki Farmaish’ program presented by Zarina Patel & Farouk Malik on Saturday afternoons. The composers Naushad and Shankar & Jaikishan reigned supreme then. The Zanzibar gullies lilted with Rafi’s ‘suhani raat dhal chuki’, Talat’s ‘meri yaad mein na’, Mukesh’s ‘bhuli hui yaade’ or Lata/Manna Dey duet ‘ye raat bhigi bhigi’. ‘Sauti ya Unguja’ daily at 5 sharp in the evening played the instrumental version of Lata/Hemant Kumar duet ‘muskurati hui chandni’ (or was it ‘Sound of Music?’).

The Hindus’ marriage procession or varghodo held special attention. First the children came seated in rickshaws and then Salim’s band played Indian film music. The decorative wedding car with the groom in traditional turban (the car only on motorways) was the centre of attraction. Then followed the men folk and towards the end the ladies in colourful garments singing wedding songs. Even the Sultan stopped his car to let the varghodo pass by.

The Hindus observed diwali with great pomp and ceremony. The diwali illumination brightened up Shangani/Portuguese/Hurumzi (Vaddi Bhajaar) streets and they burst with crackers. On the eve of Diwali ‘chopra puja’ was held in every shop. Even Muslim shopkeepers participated in this ‘puja’. Every Indian shopkeeper had his ‘namu’ (accounts) done in ‘Gujarati’ and he closed his books to transfer the balances into the new ones on the Hindu New Year. Also the rupee was Zanzibar’s legal tender. The Hindu doctors like Dr. Goradia, Dr. Mehta and Dr. Patel had their clinics in Portuguese street and were immensely popular with the settlers

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