

VADDI BHAJAAR IN ZANZIBAR



By Abdulrazak Fazal *Updated: October 2020*



A Khoja grocer

The Zanzibar stone town street names like ‘Vaddi Bhajaar’, ‘Changa Bhajaar’, ‘Khor Bhajaar’ or ‘Ajam Gully’ are clear indications of Zanzibar’s Indianness at one time in the past. The nostalgic picture here probably clicked in Vaddi Bhajaar around the 1920s - 1950s takes us back through the memory lane to the lovely time we had spent there. It is fitting that we should remember those who had touched our lives in one way or the other.

The Portuguese Street converged on ‘Vaddi Bhajaar’ where the public bustled in purchasing their requirements. Most of the shopkeepers in Vaddi Bhajaar like in Malindi and other streets had their dwellings above the shops creating a homely atmosphere as in Kutch, India. The shops catered for the daily needs of inhabitants such as grains, spices and herbal medicines that were mostly imported from India. As many as 10 grocery shops were located in ‘Vaddi Bhajaar’ and within a short distance of each other. They were the shops of Khamis Damji, Hassanali Khamis Damji (Bukai), Saleh Alarakhia (Madawa), Abdulhusain Kermali (Kallu), Bhandhali Hasham (Bhandha) and a few Hindu shops. Most of the residents in 'Vaddi Bhajaar' were Ithnashries. 'Vaddi Bhajaar' stretched from Jaffer Hirji's (Jafu Msumari) shop along Forodhani to Saleh Alarakhia's (Saleh Madawa) shop towards Ismailia Jamaatkhana/Kiponda.

The Khamis Damjis were my maternals. Their place formed the point of our frequent visits. Theirs was earlier a joint family household as most of the brothers and their families stayed together. The old man Khamis Damji, my maternal grandfather, hailed from Kutch Mandvi and had established his business in Zanzibar's 'Vaddi Bhajaar' (Hurumzi) in the early 1900s. He himself kept shifting from Zanzibar to Mandvi and vice versa entrusting his son Ramazanali with the business. Eventually his younger son Jaffer took over the business and it started to flourish.

Jafumama as known to us would sit in his office that was inside the shop where he had placed his table & chair along with his telephone and typewriter. In those days of the 40s & 50s it was rare to have a telephone in a shop or house. He was found mostly busy typing his business letters or on phone talking to the banks and his business contacts in Zanzibar as well as overseas. The eldest brother Ramazanali would be seated cross legged on the bench. He was more of a retiree devoting himself to communal affairs and humanitarian work. The spacious shop had two Washihiri (Yemeni) shop assistants, Abdulla and Salmin, to deal with the customers and wrap up the grocery. Ramazanali's son Mohamedraza occupied the middle table recording the debtors in his ledger and then cycling all the way to collect the debts. In the evening he would take us children for a drive in his pickup van to the Sateni Club or Mtoni beach or the open field behind the airport where we played tennis ball cricket. A peculiar character among the Damji household was my cousin Murtaza who was nicknamed 'Babura'. As a child with his silly antics everybody found him very amusing. Later in life poor fellow found himself all alone and eventually died in isolation. His was a sad end.

Around the Damjis was Rashid Manek's (Baapa Rashid) shop. The shop was run by his two sons. Baapa Rashid was an old man. He was short in physique with a long beard projecting a Father Christmas like figure. They had an Agency for 'chocoprince' and wafer biscuits. I was a regular to their house as my sister Zainab was married to the younger son Fida, popularly known as 'Fi'. The elder son Mohamed aka 'Kisaka' was fun and would come up with real crackers. He had a wide circle who gathered in the shop to entertain themselves with Kisaka's brand of humour over cups of 'kahawa' that the Washihiri vendors poured out to them. The uncle Bha Bachchu (Abdulhusein Rhemtulla) resided with his family in the adjacent house. His wife commonly known as 'Mami Thakro' was famous for her 'ladus' that would be distributed in the Vaddi Bhajaar 'khushali bankro' held in its gully in the earlier days. She owed her cooking talent to her father in law Rhemtulla (Remu Thakro) who was an excellent cook and had served as Gulla Dawood's assistant in the Junni mosque kitchen.

Next to the Damjis and right opposite their residence was the Khaku Rajpar house/shop. Every Wednesday night 'majlis' would be held in the shop. It was also a meeting spot for regular members who gathered daily at night and the elderly Bha Takki (Takki Ali Khaku) presided over the discussion sitting on his grand chair that was placed on the 'baraza' day and night. It is said that the chair had remained on the 'baraza' untouched for a long period of time even after the family's post Revolution

departure from Zanzibar. The Ali Khakus were Agents for Cadbury chocolates and their shop carried its signboard. The sister Fatubai Ali Khaku was quite popular in the neighbourhood. She was sharp and a good seamstress. As children we dreaded her gaze and words. If children became naughty the ladies cautioned them mentioning her name. The younger brother Jaffer's daughter Zehra was a brilliant teacher who later penned quite a few articles on Zanzibar including the highly acclaimed one on 'Vaddi Bhajaar' posted on my Website Guestbook and incorporated in the 'Epilogue' of my book ['MY ZANZIBAR RECOLLECTIONS'](#).

Years later I met Bha Takki wandering around a 'souk' in Deira, Dubai. Sadly, he was a subdued Bha Taki unlike his imposing personality in the past. It reminded of the tennis ball cricket that we played in the Vaddi Bhajaar gully. Interestingly our ball at times crossed over the road to Ali Khaku shop. That would make Bha Takki fly into a rage and snatch our ball. None dared to collect the ball from him except Zafar who would make repeated pleas for the ball to be returned. The brothers Zafar and Munna Manji formed part of our gully team as they stayed around there. Their father Ibrahim Kassam Manji was a polished personality and had been even President of the Ithnashri Gymkhana. Their mother Bai Nuru hailed from the Damji family, my mother's niece. My mother often visited them taking me along with her to play with the brothers who had lovely toys. When Ibrahim had bought a new yellowish Simca car he took all of us for a long drive. On Sunday morning we at times accompanied them to Sultana Cinema (now Cine Afrique) for a morning film show and being let in free due to their association with the owner Mohamed Masi. Years later post Revolution sadly Ibrahim, Zafar, and the family along with Ibrahim's sister Bai Sakku (my Malindi neighbour) and her family were drowned in the sea in a [tragic motorboat accident](#). In all, over 10 people died in that tragedy. Munna being away to London pursuing his further studies remained the sole survivor of the family. A keen golfer he is now in London, also a Chartered Accountant owning an Auditing firm.

Our gully team also included the Yusufali Salehmohamed boys who resided at the far end of the gully near the Hindu temple. Theirs was a big family. The son Akber (Akku) was my good pal and we attended the same Secondary School going by their car driven by the jolly good old Mithu. A couple of the siblings stayed with their 'Maasa' (Hassanali Dossa) and 'Maasi' (Rukia Maasi) who lived in a Malindi alley not much of a distance from my house. Maasa liked playing carom and I often dropped in at his house to join them and play the game. Maasi was a very good friend of my mother and the two would be often seen together. I put up with the Salehmohameds in the late 60s when I visited Karachi where they had migrated after the Revolution.

Next to the Manjis was my cousin Nargisbai Dungersi's house. She was known to everybody by her maiden name [Nargis Nasserali \(Fazal\)](#). The husband [Yusuf Dungersi](#) was a civil servant and very gentle. Their son [Mohamed](#) was always in the best of humours irrespective of the situation. He was my brother's classmate and occasionally visited our house. His presence enlivened the mood in our house. Nargisbai, a kindly and dignified lady, was held in high esteem. She was a good

reciter of 'majlis. Incidentally, Nargisbai was selected to a Committee of Jury Members at the Zanzibar High Court, the only lady of Indian descent to receive the honour of such an appointment. The high priest of Nai Misid, Sayed Aqa, when on a visit to Zanzibar in the past, put up at my grandfather [Fazal Sheriff](#)'s house. Later this cultural inheritance seemed to have passed on to the granddaughter Nargisbai as Sayed Aqa's grandson Sayed Raza would put up at her place where community members flocked to pay their respect to the grand priest.

Earlier opposite the Manji House stayed Hassanali Khamis Damji, another maternal uncle of mine, and whom we referred to as Haji Mama. He was also a retiree and devoted himself to communal affairs. He had several children and his grocery shop at the far end of Vaddi Bhajaar near the Saleh Allarakhia shop was run by the older sons Akku, Annu and Jusi. Haji, nicknamed Bukai, was very humorous and would be found whimpering all the time. Peculiar of him was his denture that he would remove to scare off the children to be quiet. Interestingly the Vaddi Bhajjar Hindu ladies whose children were being naughty would give mention to the 'Dental Uncle' to discipline them. Later the house where Haji resided was demolished and they had to move to another house around there. At the back of this house was a Hindu temple. From its rooftop you could see the activity inside the temple. Once during the Hindu 'navratri' festival the girls from the Damji family gathered there and climbed up the roof to view the 'gharba' being performed at the temple. All of a sudden, the roof collapsed. While most of the girls fell into the house two of them were found trapped holding themselves tightly to the roof that was hanging in the direction of the temple. Had they lost their grip they would have remained no more. Eventually they were rescued by the worshipers at the temple. Indeed, a lucky escape and a hair-raising experience.

The Hashulo couple (Hassanali Ladak and his wife Bai Rukia) lived in the corner house of Vaddi Bhajaar. Hashulo was a simple man and had obtained some knowledge in spiritual healing. In particular he was held in deep affection by ladies in the neighbourhood. They sought remedies from him for all sorts of their problems and he would visit their houses obliging them by reciting holy verses and providing holy water (kombe) and 'taweez' as offerings. His wife Bai Rukia was a funster and would raise her eyebrows in mock amazement. She, being a good friend of my mother, interestingly entered our house without a knock at the door. Her house key fitted into the keyhole of our main door. Bai Rukia was a talkative lady and with her funny gestures would relate all the Vaddi Bhajaar happenings.

At the far end corner stayed the Jaffer Hirji family. Popularly known as 'Jafu Msumari' the old man Jaffer Hirji dealt in hardware items like nails and cement. His son Akber sadly had become blind but had a sharp reproach when targeted by anybody. He would be all the time in his half khaki trousers. Daily in the evening the father and son duo holding each other's hand would walk down to the nearby 'Forodhani'. Bai Marzia Jafu, a popular girls' teacher at the Dato Hemani School, was one of Jafu's several children. The 'Vaddi Bhajaar' ladies often gathered for an outing to Forodhani, halting at the Jafu Msumari shop to greet the sisters and indulge in social chit chat. The Vaddi Bhajaar ladies enjoyed a lot of camaraderie among

themselves moving together to go to the 'mehfils', 'Ngambu' for shopping, theatres for the 'zanana' shows or Forodhani.

'Vaddi Bhajaar' extended up to Saleh Alarakhia's (Saleh Madawa) shop. Salehmama as we called him was an expert in herbal medicine. He was typical, despite shortsightedness he just had to stretch out his hand to pick the actual box from the shelf at the side or back without even turning his head. He knew the exact position of every box and its content. He would then wrap the right quantity in a paper without measuring it. Such was his popularity that to date shops dealing in herbal medicine in Zanzibar are referred to as 'Saleh Madawa'. Saleh was a kind soul. The Saleh household was lively, their womenfolk affectionate and hospitable towards visitors. The shops in 'Vaddi Bhajaar' remained open till late at night. On our way back home from the Damjis my mother would stop at Saleh's shop to greet them. Saleh would often wrap up 'chana bor' (dried cherries) in a paper cone and give it to my sister and me. During Diwali time my mother would buy us 'phooljari', 'lavingia' and some other crackers from Salehmama. Saleh's Mshihiri shop assistant Abed had been there with him for years. He was fully conversant with herbal medicine and also well versed in Kutchi. Interestingly the workers in the Indian grocers' shops were mostly 'Washihiris' and some even resided right there, eating and sleeping inside the shop.

Today when I occasionally visit Zanzibar its Vaddi Bhajaar is only a few minutes stroll away from the hotel where I put up. Gloomily it bears no semblance of its past terminology but now transformed into a lackluster Hurumzi. The past whirls around and a ghostly feeling creeps up. Its Indian grocer is a thing of the past. Wandering around there as dusk falls reawakens the memory of the melodious lilt of Indian songs once resounding in the serenity of a Vaddi Bhajaar evening. Sadly, it is only holding onto the past that remains no more, just like accidentally deleting an old file from a computer and everything is gone.

By Abdulrazak Fazal

Updated: October 2020

Click below for:

- **[Abdulrazak Fazal's Updated Zanzibar Articles](#)**
- **[More Zanzibar articles](#)**
- **[Tributes and more interesting articles](#)**
- **[Abdulrazak Fazal's original website](#)**