

## Along the Banks of the Tapi

November 2005 was memorable as it was almost completely dedicated to Surat and its heritage. On the 15<sup>th</sup> we walked the streets of the old city in an effort to launch the heritage walk. This in the company of the Cultural Secretary from the Netherlands Embassy, the Municipal Commissioner, and many a Surti celebrity. Not only did we sample the cities architecture but we had various impromptu speakers enlightening us along the way and at the end in Narmad's House we saw a lovely film on the history of the Indian customs department. Ending with a typical Surti dish called *Lachko*. A first day cover with a VOC cancellation was launched simultaneously at the GPO in Nanpura, which was originally housed in the Dutch East India Companies Factory / Warehouse.

Later that month I was in Delhi for work and heard about the ongoing exhibition at the National Museum on the "Tapi Collection". A fabulous collection of textiles, brought together by Praful & Shilpa Shah of the Garden Silk Mills. Though nothing in line with Ahmedabad's Calico Collection, this collection is certainly worth a *dekho*. It tells the tale of Surat's past as a trading post and an important harbour connecting India to far away shores.

Amazingly the colours on all the various types of fabric and embroideries are vibrant even today. The quality of the collection is breathtaking. Patola's with their animal and bird motifs meant for the far eastern markets, tell us much about prevalent patterns and fashion of the time. Today a dying art it was a much exported product. Pyjamas and jackets with various kinds of embroidery, often the type Parsi's like to call their own. What many of us forget is that much of this textile trade was influenced by textiles with designs and styles imported from China. If it did not reach Europe via the silk route it reached there from our very own coast, often being slightly adjusted to local craftsmen and their calibre or to the taste of the buyers. This was probably the start of Surat and its tryst with textiles. Though Surat has lost all of its traditional textiles it is still frequented by many for it. No more will you find a Tanchoi or Mashru in this city which is completely dedicated to power-looms, churning out meters and meters of synthetic materials in every hue and colour. No finesse of design or shade, just oodles of gaudy cheap bundles.

If the plans of the Municipality are given a chance, this beautiful almost Mediterranean city will look pretty much like its textiles soon. The old city is up for demolition as there is a sad belief that traffic can only be catered to by the breaking away of beautiful old facades and widening of roads. Little does one realise that by doing so you will surely kill the cities heart and with it the city which throbbed for the whole country.

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