

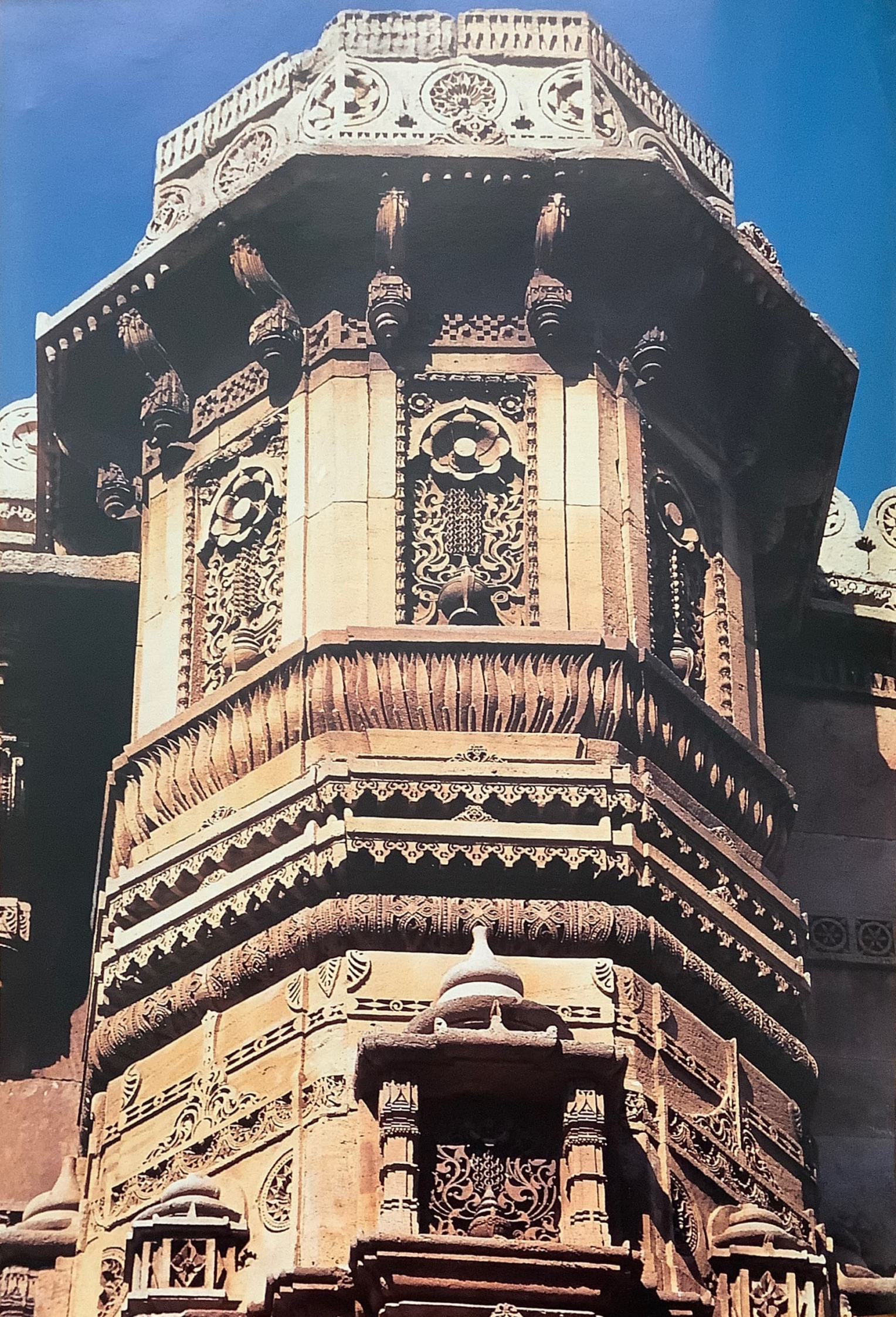
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# India

PERSPECTIVES



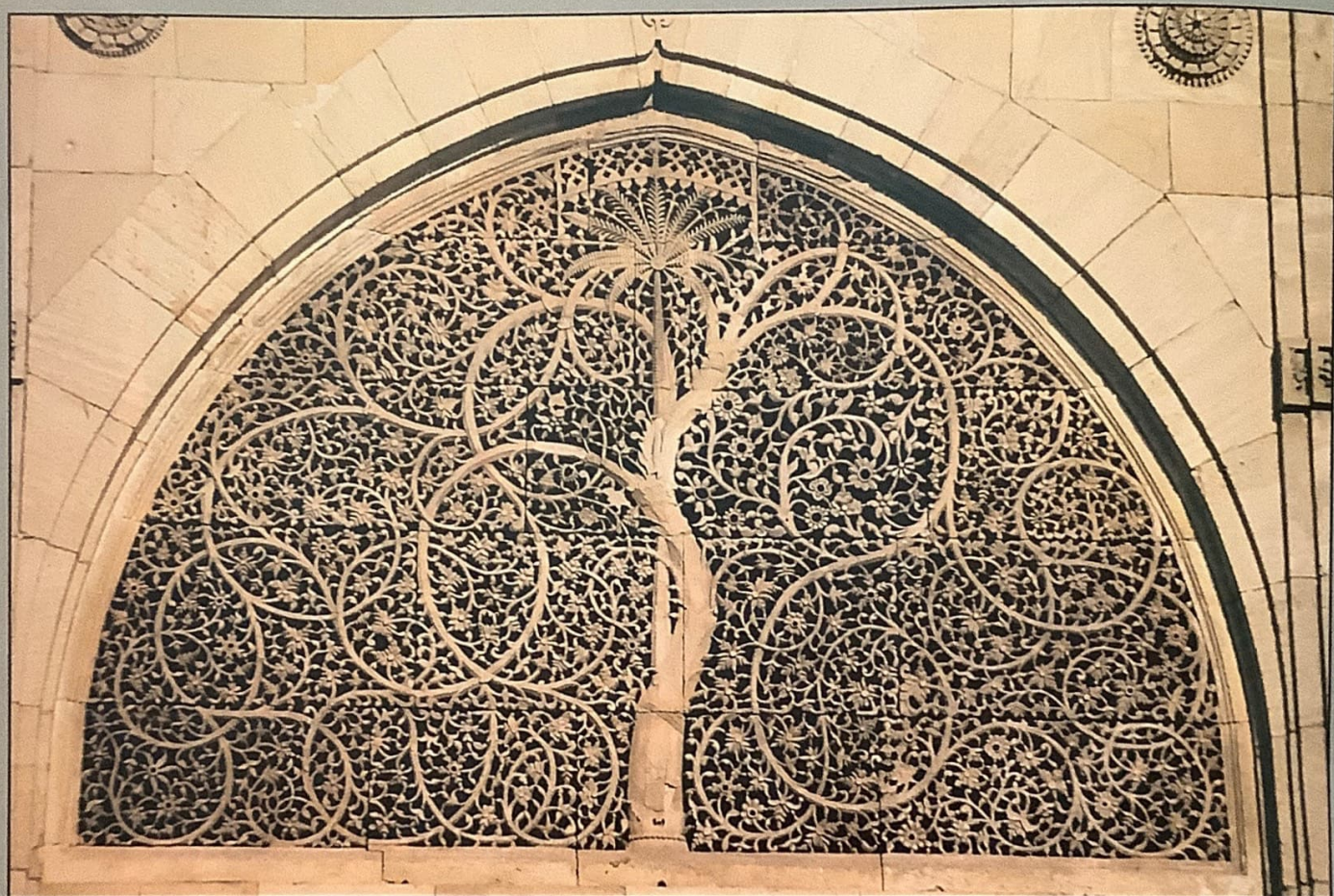






# AHMEDABAD OF MOSQUES AND MINARETS

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It has been said that people make a place and this is certainly true of Ahmedabad - the Manchester of the East. This industrious city is the outcome of shrewd and practical Ahmedabadi's single minded pursuit of business. Its political, cultural and material prosperity finds immediate and honest expression in buildings that its successive rulers planned, raised and adorned. One thing amiss here is the string of Victorian buildings attached to most of the metros in India.

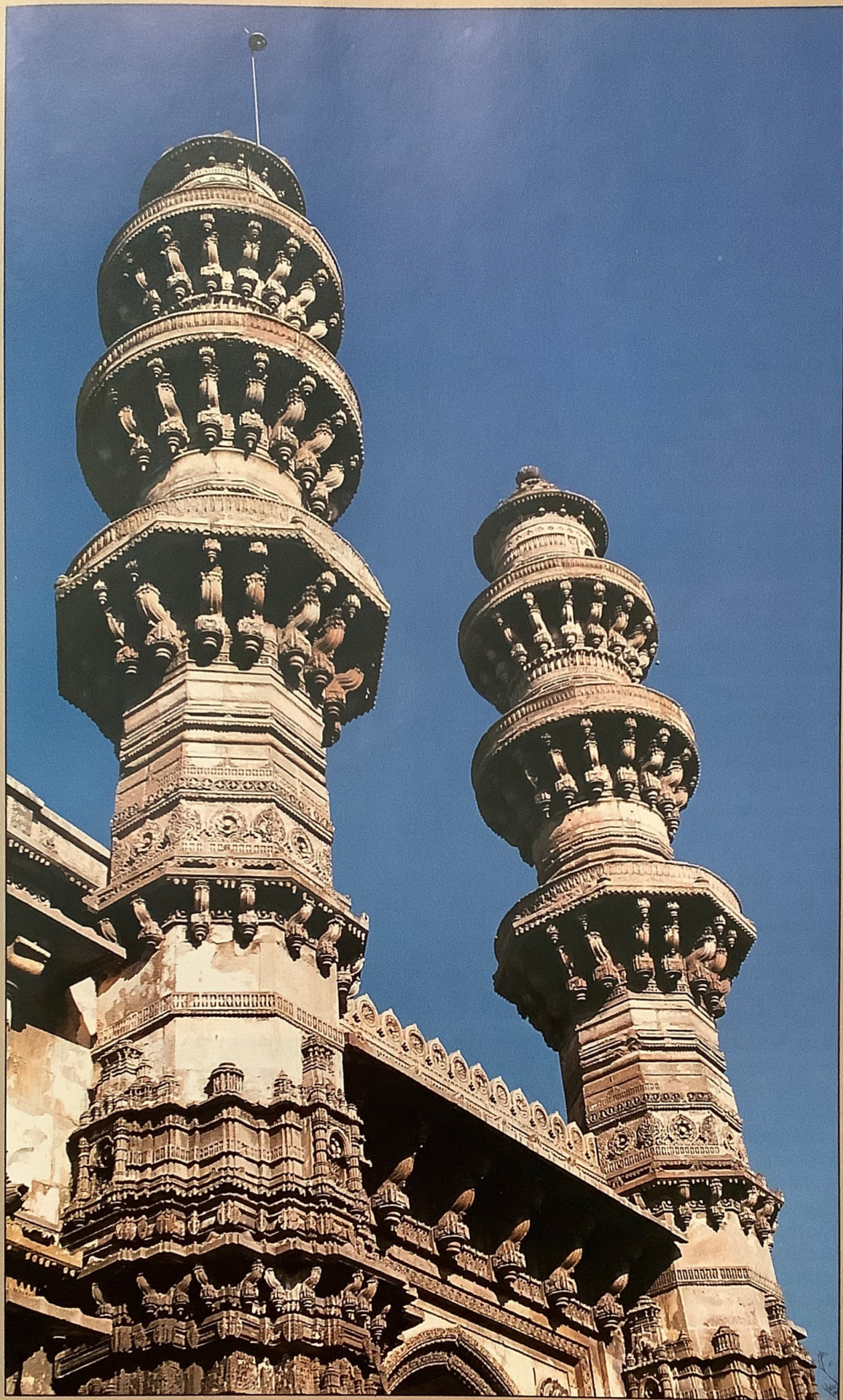
The tour guide may begin with a precise date 1411 A.D. when Sultan Ahmed Shah (1411-42) founded Ahmedabad, and the oft repeated

story is that of a hare chasing a hound. The Sultan, while camping on the banks of river Sabarmati translated this unusual sight into an auspicious omen which was further sanctioned by his patron saint. Soon the city of Ahmedabad sprang up. It incorporated the 11th century ruins of Karnavati built by the Solanki King Karna who had subdued the still earlier tribal settlement of the Bhils called Ashaval which finds mention in Arab travelogues and Alberuni's account of India.

The powerful Sultans of Gujarat extended patronage to raise buildings in rivalry with other kingdoms. In the process a number of buildings were

*Above: The lattice work on Sidi Sayyids mosque. Facing page: The famous shaking minarets.*







erected in Gujarat, particularly in Ahmedabad, thereby establishing a rich architectural tradition which led the British envoy, Sir Thomas Roe, to acknowledge "Ahmedabad as the handsomest town in Hindustan, perhaps the world".

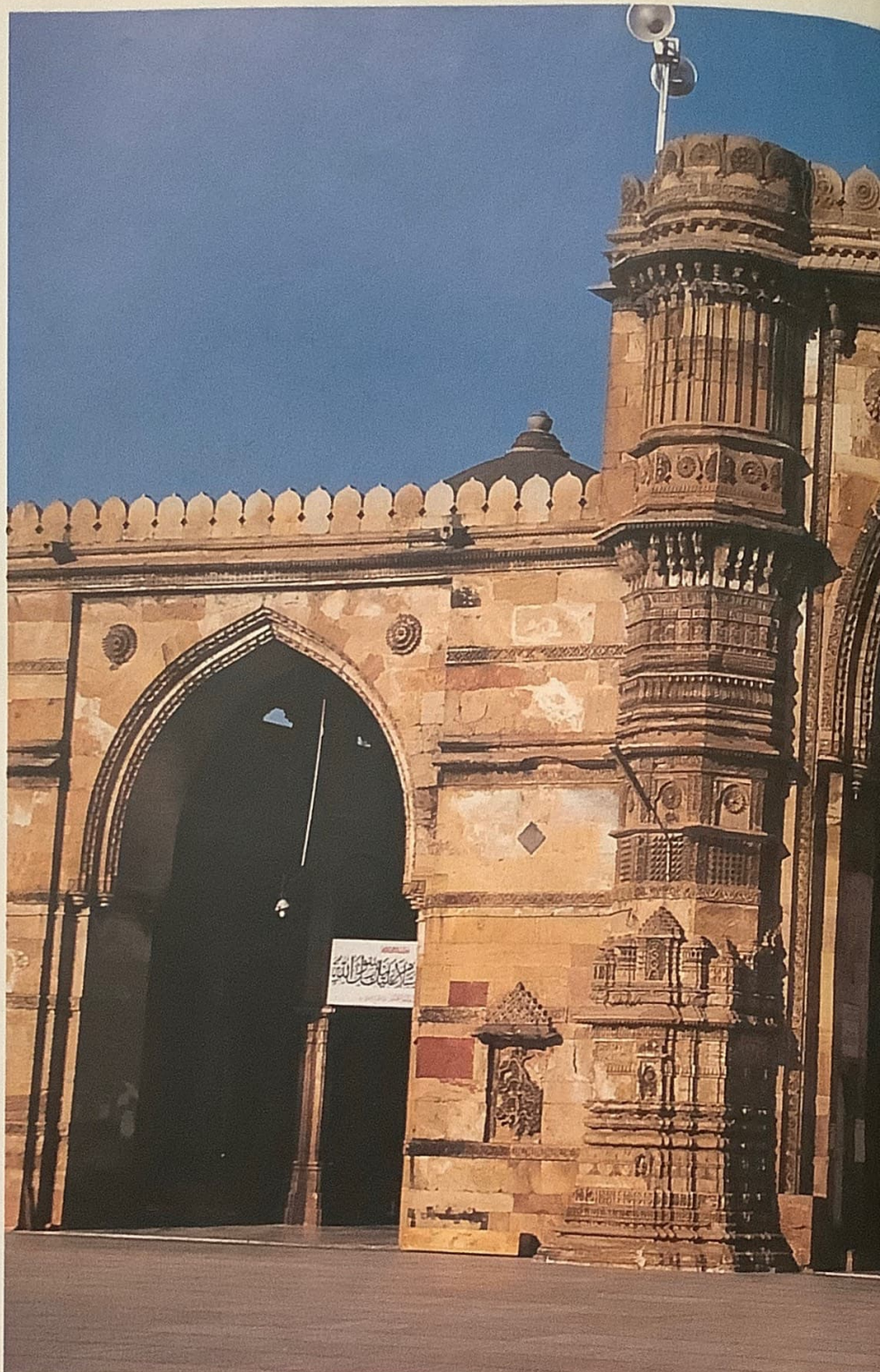
Ahmedabad is afloat with mosques, minarets, mausoleums, museums, step-wells, temples, libraries, etc. It is a matter of choice for the tourist to scamper around few of the monuments or to leisurely scout the monuments, one by one.

One should begin with a tribute to Gandhiji. His Ashram across the Sabarmati river marks the place where he started the famous Dandi march. Gandhiji stayed here for a long time and the Ashram today tends to recreate his life and times through a visual display of photographs which spells simplicity and tries to portray the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence. Late in the evening one can learn more about the noble soul through the *Son et Lumiere* show in Gujarati/Hindi/English. Check in advance for days and timings.

The next landmark I visited was the picturesque Rauza of Sarkhej, 10 kms from the main city. This area boasts of still greater antiquity, as one of the most revered sufi saints, Hazrat Sheikh Ahmed Khattu, settled here 10 years before the foundation of Ahmedabad.

The saint, who died at the age of 108, was highly venerated by the Sultans of Ahmedabad. His mausoleum is the largest of its kind in Gujarat with a pillared hall, panelled walls and trellised windows of perforated screen works. Sarkhej later turned out to be a huge necropolis with numerous tombs of the Sultans, their relatives and nobles who aspired for a place in the vicinity of the great spirit. The adjoining 16 pillared pavilion, the simple but elegant Jami Masjid, the tank and remains of the palace, underground chambers, reference library and a small museum are enough to detain you for the day. One should not miss the five century old translucent candle that measures six feet high and is lighted briefly only during the anniversaries of the Sheikh.

The second day I drove to the



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*Jama Masjid, Ahmedabad (above) and Hathisinh Jain temple (left).*

Bhadra Fort. If you want to avoid the crowd prefer to reach early in the morning when the pavements are not overtaken by the vendors and it is easier to explore the old city. Possibly you may spot some of the hidden, carved wooden facades of the traditional houses that usually has narrow frontage opening onto the lane. The fort once encompassed 12 gates, 189 bastions and 6000 battlements. Adjacent to it is the Azam Khan serai that reflects the Mughal architecture. Close to this edifice is Ahmed Shah's mosque - the first among the long list of mosques in Ahmedabad. Erected in 1414, it was the Sultan's exclusive mosque for the nobles and the royal household.

Facing the Bhadra Fort is the Teen Darwaza - the massive triple gate with fretted stone work. From atop the gate the Sultans used to watch the colourful processions going from the Palace to the nearby Jami Masjid which was erected in 1423 A.D. The mosque spells grandeur and its architectural finesse finds expression through its coloured marble, the mihrabs with elegant floral medallions and corbelled ceilings. The lofty minarets reportedly fell off in an earthquake of 1819. Most of the mosques in Ahmedabad followed the same pattern, though on a smaller scale.

In the chronological order the first three Sultans of Gujarat, namely Ahmed Shah I (1411-51) and grandson Qutbuddin Ahmed Shah II (1451-58) are buried near the eastern gateway of the Jami Mosque.

The unofficial emblem of Ahmedabad is certainly the famous lattice work (Jali) in stone depicting the patterns of a natural tree and foliage in Sidi Sayyid's mosque not far from the Bhadra citadel. British Queen Elizabeth on her visit to Ahmedabad in the early sixties spent almost half an hour admiring the beauty of the trellis windows on the western wall.

Ahmedabad occupies a place of pride in the evolution of minars. More so, the concept of gateway minars was pioneered and perfected in Gujarat. An added attraction in most of them was the element of 'shake' and hence the name *Jhulta Minar* or





Swami Narayanan temple.

shaking minarets. Unfortunately most of the minars have fallen off owing to weak construction, earthquake and due to British quest to unravel the mystery. When one minaret was shaken, the vibration was transmitted to the other through the stone bridge joining the two. Few of the surviving such minars can be seen at Siddi Bashir mosque, a mile from the railway station and the other is Raja Bibi mosque at Gomtipur. Of all the minars of Ahmedabad, the ones with the mosque of Muhafiz Khan are believed to be the strongest and thoroughly carved.

Rani Sipri mosque is another gem of Gujarati architecture. Its decoration and symmetry is highly appealing which ranks it as the most beautiful monument in Ahmedabad. It was the creation of Rani Sipri, wife of Mehmud Begra, the greatest among the Gujarati Sultans, who is famous for his sense of justice, piety and prosperity. His sobriquet of 'Begra' is

an allusion to his sweeping moustaches which he could tie behind his head. He had a prodigious appetite and is said to have been immunised against poison by consuming it in gradually increasing doses. Such was the effect that if a fly settled on his head or hand it fell dead. His reputation finds quote in Samuel Butler's line:

"The Prince of Cambay's daily food  
Is asp and basilist and toad."

Without the mention of *vavs* or step-wells the story of Gujarati architecture remains incomplete. Four kms from the city is Bai Harir Sultani's *vav* in association with her tomb and a mosque. As suggested by the inscriptions in Persian and Sanskrit, it dates back to 1501 when she was the powerful superintendent of the royal harem in the court of Sultan Begra. Unfortunately the garden complex with shady fruit trees surrounding the monuments is no longer to be seen. Nineteen kms from





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the city is Queen Rudrabai's *vav* built few years prior to Harir's. The flight of steps and some of the balconies are profusely ornate and carved in pre-medieval style. These wells were akin to medieval serais erected as a matter of devotion for the benefit of travellers. A still more extensive and elaborate *vav* can be seen at Patan, 133 kms away. A nearby museum is replete with sculptures and adjoining it are the remains of a grand waterway. This place is equally famous for its 'Patola' silk saris that involve an intricate method of weaving where the yarn is dyed in various colours before it is woven into beautiful designs. En route to Patan lies the famous Sun temple at Modhera which is an impressive piece of architecture dating back to the Solanki king Bhimdev who erected it in the year 1027 A.D.

Back to Ahmedabad city, there are several other temples. However one should not overlook the Hathisinh

temple. Built in 1848, it is a beautiful Jain temple rich in carving. Exquisite wood carvings can be seen at Swami Narayan temple while Gita Mandir depicts numerous murals from *Bhagwad Gita*.

Fifteenth century Kankaria Lake is an ideal place to fret your time in boating, visiting the zoo or simply exploring the place which according to Mirat-i-Ahmadi tells us about select wells around Kankaria where cotton clothes, embroidery and satin if washed increases their lusture and colour. The author of the Mirat considers his feat to be one of the wonders of Gujarat.

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*The Kankaria lake.*