

# India Ki Khoj: Vignettes

A collection of impressions from the cultural highlights of seven days in the state of Gujarat.

This is *India Ki Khoj* – discovering India.

Laura Hu, 2018

## Odissi Dance

*Krishna awake, for the day has dawned:  
large, deep and lotus-like,  
your eyes are as in the love-shaped lake  
a pair of swans even a million Kamadevas cannot vie*  
- Sant Surdas, 16<sup>th</sup> Century

The classical dance of Odissi contains four parts.

*Nritta*: pure dance

Sing a song for Krishna, invoke a hymn for the god. The dancer is the devotee. Tap, tap, hear the patter of her henna-stained feet, the clang, clack from stack upon stack of ankle bells.

The bright colors of her saree billow, undulating with the lyrics of her movement. The silver beads around her waist glint and tinker, their chime a twinkle in the music's crescendo.

*Nritya*: expression

Her headpiece is a temple crown, like a lotus with a thousand petals. She weeps, tearless, anxious, graceful, longing for the lotus-like god. *O Krishna*, her adorned arms exalt. Painted hands sweep in fluid mudras, her palms like lotus petals, like Krishna's eyes.

Then there is joy in her face, adoration in lovely kohl-lined eyes. Ruby lips swell in a smile as her body bends, swaying, smooth and slow.

*Natya*: play

The women dance as actors upon a stage. See there, the maiden; see there, the lord, her beloved Krishna. See one firm, legs square, spine straight, arms raised with elbows bent. See one nimble, bending, limber like willow.

Push and pull, ebb and flow. They step in tune yet hardly touch. Red-tipped fingers flick and flutter, four hands grasping and slipping. See the dancers, the mythos, see their show.

*Moksha*: liberation

Finale. Free. The music quickens. Movements merge with pose; these women dance Odissi to free the soul. The singer fades; the dancers settle in one final stance. Gracefully they bow.

## The Adalaj Stepwell

Walking through the village of Adalaj, past the languid cows, past a bright pink temple, one can see the surface of some ancient structure.

Immediately the tourists come into view: peering down crevices, climbing over rails, padding upon sandstone carve five hundred years ago.

Following the crowds down the first flight of stairs, one can see adorned columns, intricate carvings, and excited families posing for pictures. Their excitement is contagious—so many niches to explore, crawl-spaces to enter and admire.

A young visitor steps onto a ledge, edging precariously towards a platform. A shrill whistle stops him with a start. A man sits on the opposing ledge, legs dangling, warning, guarding the empty platforms and their well-swept altars.

Another flight of stairs down, the air feels a little cooler. Peering towards the center of the stepwell, one sees layer upon layer of columns supporting stacks of undisturbed, picturesque platforms. The buzz of the crowd seems to die down as the octagonal spaces unfold.

Stair after stair, volume and temperature continue to drop. Chatter loses to quiet awe, as the darkened structures unfold like images in piled mirrors. The carvings are close to scrutinize: Hindu gods and goddesses, panels of

royal court, animate elephants, flowers. Intricate Islamic geometries iterate to mesmerize.

When it seems as if the steps will never stop, and one has long lost count of the corridors, it ends. Pilgrims peer at the edge of the water, a blue-green lagoon illuminated by the light above. Staring up five stories, the sky seems too bright, shedding light on layer upon layer of the well.

Looking back down and blinking in the dimness, one can imagine scenes from times past: women fetching water in their colorful sarees, worshippers in the intricate niches, gossip and hubbub at the watering-hole. Blinking again at the pale taupe stone, one turns and ascends back into the travelling masses.

## Heritage Walk

*Beep beep. Beep.*

Motorbikes honk and weave through crowds. Pedestrians fill the congested alleys, headed to work or worship. Vendors line the path, preparing to peddle wares in the morning light.

Deeper into the Old City of Ahmedabad, it quiets. Inhabitants peer from the doors of centuries-old houses. An old woman presses colorful pants with a heavy coal iron, watching as visitors whip out phones and snap pictures of the vernacular architecture.

Goats chew placidly. A dog barks at a leaping monkey. Chipmunks swarm over a wall, shared with pigeons in their man-made crevices, who occasionally fly to peck at an octagonal bird feeder. These animals are stray, yet fed. The Jains care for them, believing in the dignity of all life. These are part of the community.

Secret doors connect houses within a *pol*, a housing cluster dating back to 18<sup>th</sup> century Mughal rule. Inside the *pol* the roads are winding, narrow, sometimes only fitting a single traveler. The houses open to spacious courtyards, over reservoirs of rainwater caught by copper rooftop drains. Puzzling over the preservation, visitors file out of the residence.

Back on the broad streets, the fifth largest city in India bustles raucously, a developing metropolis.

## Lothal

The Indus Valley civilization is also named the Harappan civilization, after the first-excavated urban center of Harappa. It is one of the cradles of post-Neolithic human progress, fascinatingly developed and shrouded in mystery.

Their script remains undeciphered. Seals with Harappan glyphs have been found in Mesopotamia, and there exists evidence of trade with distant Egypt.

Unlike their Middle Eastern contemporaries, the Harappans lacked monumental structures which suggest large-scale rituals and dramatic social stratification. There were no palaces, no temples, no kings, priests, or armies. Their cities were remarkably well-planned and egalitarian: houses were built after extensive drainage systems—a level of organization in which many modern-day cities fail to achieve.

Standing at the site of Lothal, a southern Harappan site, you can only see the ruins of a city foundation. If you look closely, you can see the dimensions and lattice of bricks from the fourth millennium BCE. Wondrously, their alternating two-to-one ratio is now known as the English bond, rediscovered many millennia later as one of the strongest bonds in brickwork.

The winter sun beats down relentlessly. The ground is dusty and dry. At Lothal you can step

on the first dock in the world. Walking on what is now cracked earth, try to imagine: a major river once flowed through the desert; ships sailed in with wares from along the Indus River and beyond the Arabian Sea, carrying beads, shells, copper, and gemstones.

Lothal was a prominent exporter of beads. A short walk from the dock leads to the remaining floor plan of an ancient bead factory. Imagine the artisans sitting in the demarcated rooms where you can stand, imagine watching them chisel beads of carnelian and jasper. Imagine the nearby bazaar bustling with everyday activity, the air noisy and pungent.

Then the Harappans disappeared. By 1700 BCE their cities were abandoned. Archaeologists have proposed a variety of theories as to why the Harappans de-urbanized. There is much we do not understand.

I left Lothal poignantly, feeling a mysterious thread connecting to an era long past, wearing a pair of carnelian beads made the same way as they were five thousand years ago.

## Village Girls

Walking out from the India Institute of Technology's pristine Gandhinagar campus is like leaving a brutalist bubble. The modern landscape of steel, glass, and concrete immediately transforms into dusty roads with wandering dogs and cows.

Just a five-minute walk away resides a sizeable village, a proud local producer for the nearby Amul milk-collection center.

The only source of water is a single spigot in the village center, collected in a long, muddy trough. The dalits—members of the lowest caste—are not allowed to touch it.

Near the spigot someone had built the village school, its turquoise concrete walls encompassing the space of a small classroom, with empty squares for windows. Children peer out, piqued, then swarm towards the unfamiliar visitors.

Girls in school uniforms surround me, marveling at the foreign faces. Excitedly they practice their English greetings and pose for pictures together. Their faces are bright, shining, full of life. They smile, some having just lost their baby teeth. Almost all the girls in this village quit school after eighth grade.

Their mothers take selfies with us on a smartphone, and we leave reluctantly, wondering what the future holds.

## Amrita Sher-Gil

*She was very fair and there was an expression of weariness in the lovely liquid dark eyes. Her little finely curved and red hued lips seemed like drooping rosebuds and were sealed as if it were in silence eternal.*

*She seemed as if she guessed the cruel fate which had been meted out for her by the Rani and Rajah and her other rich but distant relations in whose hands she seemed a helpless toy.*

- Twelve-year-old Amrita Sher-Gil's description of the bride at an Indian wedding.

In the home-turned-public Kasturbhai Lalbhai Museum, the industrialist Lalbhai family features a special collection of pieces by the female vanguard of modern Indian art.

Indian-Hungarian artist Amrita Sher-Gil captured the lives and sentiments of 1930s women. Her female drawings are flapper-esque, lavish, pictures of refined and isolating European society. Her watercolors are vivid and fluid, the dark-skinned women deliberately exoticized and the romances fantastical. Her self-portraits convey a profound melancholy of grappling Indian and Hungarian identities.

A haunting passion drew her from Europe to India, where she depicted rhythms of life among the rural poor. Dark faces stare hollowly beyond the canvas, the painted women too somber for their colorful garments. It was in India where Sher-Gil found her artistic mission, of which she would leave the legacy of a short yet brilliant life: "to paint those silent images of infinite submission and patience."

## Gujarati Sweets

Shiny silver diamonds. Purple squares studded with rose petals. Miniature orange apples made of sugar. Green and yellow-shelled confections that blossom like flowers.

Our Indian friends treat us to stunning local sweets.

“Don’t get those,” one says, pointing to delectable green bonbons rolled in poppy seeds and each topped with a single sugar star. “My friend got stopped in Dubai because of opium in poppy seeds.”

We share the sweets among us, the memory sweet too, and sad. It was our last day in India—who knows when we will meet again?

My new friends help me pick and purchase as I point at the glass display. I eagerly watch the shopkeeper pile my box of sweets, eager to share them back home, to share fond memories and impressions, to share the frames of those times in these very words.