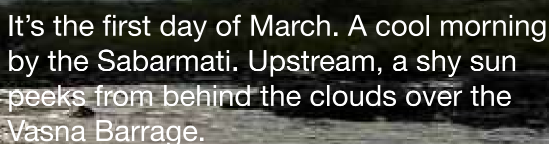
THE CLOTH OF THE RIVER

Mega infrastructure projects, river embankments, and poor wastewater management threaten the sacred textile art of mata ni pachedi

Benita Fernando

Chandrakant Chitara (left) and his nephew, Kirit, wash their mata ni pachedi in the Sabarmati as it leaves the Vasna Barrage. *Photograph by Benita Fernando.*



It’s the first day of March. A cool morning by the Sabarmati. Upstream, a shy sun peeks from behind the clouds over the Vasna Barrage.

Downstream, buffaloes amble across the grassy riverbed. Crows and waterbirds fly past, some alighting on the passing cattle.

Consider these as the only pastoral fragments of a larger scene. Across the river loom the hazy outlines of textile and dyeing units and their army of chimneys. Located downstream are some of Ahmedabad’s most important sewage treatment plants. All around us are signs of urban refuse—rubble, plastic, effluents. Here, in Vasna, the Sabarmati is but a trickle made possible by excess outflow from the barrage. And it’s in this very spot that the world-renowned sacred textiles of Ahmedabad, mata ni pachedi, are washed and prepared.

On this particular day, artists Chandrakant Chitara and Kirit Chitara, his nephew, are here to wash and dry some of their recent pieces. One of Chandrakant’s daughters, Mittal, accompanies them. We have crossed a black roiling canal and cut through a thicketed dirt track to reach this place where the Chitara family has been washing its mata ni pachedi pieces for more than four decades.

There was a time when they could walk through farms to get to this part of the riverbank, but the farmers have become wary of trespassers in recent years. The dirt track is the Chitaras’ only option. And, only in the mornings. They wouldn’t dare come here after noon. There are burial grounds closeby, some for children, and the banks are often used for last rites. Stories of ghosts haunt this place.

Chandrakant and Kirit step into the Sabarmati, its murky water pooling around their shins. They say they are often worried about rashes and infections from the river. Mittal looks on from the bank.

“When I was young, this water was so clean that we could drink it,” says Chandrakant, 53. The test of the water’s clarity was to drop a coin in it and to fish it out with ease, he adds. Today it would be considered a major feat.

A mata ni pachedi by Chandrakant Chitara shows the process of making the sacred textile in the bottom border. On the right, Chandrakant painted the artists washing the cloth in the Sabarmati. *Courtesy of ROM (Royal Ontario Museum), Toronto, Canada. © ROM.*

Chandrakant was the recipient of a National Award in 2001 and a Shilp Guru Award in 2019. He is as famous as his father, Bhulabhai, the first mata ni pachedi artist to win a National Award in 1971, giving the craft a push towards becoming a collector's item. Chandrakant doesn't speak much these days. He's had a major dental surgery and he communicates through writing and gestures, or speaks till the pain is unbearable. His daughters help in putting together his words for me.

In 2019, the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada, added a commissioned work by Chandrakant to their permanent collection. The piece invokes Meladi Mata, the goddess who rides a black male goat and whose name suggests she is made from dirt. She is flanked by two trees, wrought intricately by Chandrakant. The rest of the textile teems with motifs that are part of the mata ni pachedi tradition.

For the bottom border, however, Chandrakant chose a different path, offering a narrative on the craft itself, to show audiences the structured, logical steps behind a mata ni pachedi. Starting on the left, a family of Chitaras first washes woven cotton cloth. This is then seasoned in a tannic solution and dried. When it has fully dried, the cloth is painted or printed, and seasoned with alum.

After this, there are two crucial steps that Chandrakant shows to the right of the canvas. The painted/printed cloth is washed in the Sabarmati and then dyed in alizarin in a large copper cauldron. The Sabarmati is crucial to their work—its waters bear a direct impact on the dyes.

"The colours would bloom on the textile. What a sight it used to be for sore eyes," Chandrakant says. But only in his art is the Sabarmati as vivid as he remembers it. Reality paints a different picture.

Once their pieces are washed, Chandrakant, Kirit, and Mittal spread them on whatever garbage-free spots are available on the riverbank. Goddesses dry under the open sky and it's important that no feet—human or animal—touch them. The family stays vigilant. When a tractor rumbles past, they retrieve the textiles, wait till it's safe, and then spread them out again. Dogs are shooed away. It's reverence through and through.

The travelling temple

Mata ni pachedi simply means "the cloth of the mata". The craft could be about 400 years old, although many believe that it continues an ancient worship of the sacred feminine or the mother goddess, which has its roots as far back as the Stone Age.

Pachedi refers to coarse, cotton fabric and mata here is a mother goddess who takes on many forms, each with distinctive iconography. Amba is the sword-wielding goddess who rides a lion or a tiger, for instance. Bahuchara rides a rooster and is revered by trans people and hijras. Hadkai protects you from rabies. Naturally, she rides a dog. The lame goddess Khodiyar has a crocodile for a mount, often kills a buffalo, and carries formidable weapons. There is also Shikotar, goddess of sailors and trade, whose name is derived from the Socotra island in Yemen, alluding to the trade connections that existed across the Arabian Sea.

To see a mata ni pachedi is to imagine the gleam of swords and the vengeance of goddesses. The seminal book on the subject, *Temple Tents for Goddesses in Gujarat, India* (2014; Niyogi Books), written by Eberhard Fischer in collaboration with Jyotindra Jain and and Haku Shah, states that in the last hundred years "the goddesses in Gujarat have been deprived of their 'sanguinary' traits, thus becoming rather benign and bloodless expressions of their former grandeur." Even so, viewers can gauge the ferocity of the matas. There are hints throughout, such as the bhuvo, or shaman, one of the mandatory motifs of a traditional mata ni pachedi. He is shown with a sword, a sacrificial goat and a bowl of blood from the animal—just as he appears in the rituals surrounding the mata ni pachedi.

With some exceptions, the goddess always occupies centrestage in these textiles, just as she would in a temple. A patron or a worshipper asks the artist to make a particular mata, depending

(From left) Chandrakant Chitara, Kirit Chitara and Mittal Chitara dry the sacred textiles on the riverbank at Vasna after washing them. *Photograph by Benita Fernando.*

on their prayer or ritual. This makes mata ni pachedi a sacred art form, explaining why its artist is called a devipujak—worshipper of the goddess.

The devipujaks belong to the formerly semi-nomadic Vaghri tribe that travelled across Western India, settling in places from time to time, depending on available work. The Vaghri sold spices or twig toothbrushes, dealt in ironmongery, made ropes and toys, or took up stonemasonry.

The Vaghri's makeshift settlements were often outside the limits of a town or village, for they were not a welcome set of people. The community had been unfortunately labelled as a criminal tribe during colonial rule in 1871 and were de-notified in 1952. Yet, even today the shackles of prejudice and ostracisation follow them—something the modern Vaghri is keen on throwing off.

Temple Tents states that the Vaghri groups "were formerly excluded from entering Hindu temples and they used—and continue to use—these textiles with the images of the goddesses as temporary sacred spaces" and that the textiles "are almost exclusively used by underprivileged communities". If the doors of established temples were closed to the Vaghri, mata ni pachedi became the building block of their personal textile temples. It forms the walls and canopy (often called chandarvo) around a mud platform, transforming into a temporary site where a goddess is invoked.

Ask the devipujaks today and they will dismiss this theory, stating that these mobile temples—erected and folded up at will—were a practical solution for an itinerant community, and that it had nothing to do with the history of oppression and untouchability.

Just like the Vaghri's other trades, mata ni pachedi, too, wasn't a full-time activity. It was prepared for the times of the year when a mata's worship was conducted, with Navratri being the main one. It is in the last 50 years that the craft has found more attention, and the devipujaks now make two distinct kinds. One caters to the ritual worship of the mata. It's usually block-printed and is sought out by a rural population. The other is hand-painted, also called Gujarat kalamkari, and attracts art collectors. The latter can fetch upwards of one lakh rupees per work and can often omit the central figure of the goddess, replacing it with other motifs, such as the Tree of Life.

The devipujaks settled in different parts of Gujarat in the 20th century. The Ahmedabad clusters, many of whom were originally from Viramgam, chose the city mainly because the flowing Sabarmati helped them produce the textiles.

The story of mata ni pachedi is about several things—goddesses, a rejected people, reclaiming one's right to worship, but it is also about a river. Nisha Vikram, promoter of the crafts platform CraftCanvas, who has collaborated with the devipujaks for various projects, says that where there is a dyeing or printing cluster, a river is involved. This was the case with Ajrakh in Dhamadka in Kutch, which flourished alongside the now-dry river Saran. In Srikalahasti, Andhra Pradesh, kalamkari thrives along the Swarnamukhi. Even ancient Egypt, Vikram says, has evidence of dyeing with madder along the Nile, as seen in linen from Tutankhamen's tomb. Vikram says, "Natural dyes are used even today and that means there is a link to a river. So if a river dries or changes course, it affects the people."

Mata ni pachedi is found across Ahmedabad, in temples belonging to the Vaghri community and on the streets. *Photographs by Benita Fernando.*

Mata ni pachedi by Jagdish Chitara, 2023. Credit: ARTISANS' Centre, Mumbai.

A dead end

It's a tiny corner in a tiny room made grand by the swathes of mata ni pachedi that hang from the walls. I meet artist Jagdish Chitara, 52, at his home in Ranip, Ahmedabad, where he sits in this corner and paints, dwarfed by Momai Mata beside him. The great mother goddess rides a camel and visual elements of a temple, such as flags and torans, are printed around her.

Jagdish is the son of Vaghi, one of the artists that Fischer, Jain, and Shah documented in *Temple Tents* from the 1960s to the 1980s.

As a child, Jagdish used to accompany Vaghi to the Sabarmati to wash their textiles. The process of washing is called jhanjhari (to turn over in the water)—every step has a name, as Fischer, Jain, and Shah learned. It is as follows: two poles are rammed into the riverbed and a cord hung between them to form a clothesline in the water. The textiles are then secured to this cord. They float, allowing the water to run over them. Because they have several dyes and colours on them, the textiles aren't squeezed dry but laid flat on the riverbed.

The Sabarmati used to be just a few minutes away from Jagdish's childhood home in Mirzapur, where he lived until various family circumstances made him relocate to his current place in Ranip. Back then, the whole family would go to the Sabarmati to wash their textiles. "It used to be like a picnic," he says. They'd pack rotis and, sometimes, they'd buy fish from the stalls on the riverside. Some days, they would wash more than 25 large mata ni pachedi.

How long did one piece take to be washed? "We didn't have a phone or a watch to keep time like that," Jagdish says. His father would secure the textiles to the rope, light a beedi, and by the time he was finished with his smoke, so were the mata ni pachedi.

Top: Jagdish Chitara at his home in Ranip, Ahmedabad. *Photograph by Benita Fernando.*

Left: Jagdish Chitara at the historic Raikhad Darwaja, where he used to come as a child with his family to wash their mata ni pachedi. *Photograph by Benita Fernando.*

The Sabarmati as it flowed through Ahmedabad in the 1980s. *HCP Archives.*

Jagdish used to go to the part of the Sabarmati that you could access from Raikhad Darwaja, a historical gate from the Muzaffarid dynasty's rule in the Old City. Jagdish takes me there and as the autorickshaw rumbles down a narrow, winding lane, he says, "Everything is just as it used to be." Until, that is, we reach the gate.

From here, the Sabarmati is far away, beyond a four-lane road, beyond an embankment, beyond a promenade, beyond a barricade. This is not the river of his youth.

Jagdish stands by the gate. His eyes well up. He doesn't know why. "What I told you is of a time long ago," he says.

A river for all

Imagine the Sabarmati before 2002.

The river begins its journey in the Aravalli range of Rajasthan, passing through the city of Ahmedabad as it seeks out the Gulf of Khambhat. It was never a perennial river. Fed by the rains, it would appear in the form of gentle streams and puddles. Time and again, it would unleash itself as a devastating flood.

For most of the year, the Sabarmati riverbed was predictably a maidan, people recall, on which you could play cricket all day if you wished.

The water seemed scant but it was ample enough for communities to

thrive. A photo essay conceptualised and curated by archivist and NID alumnus Raj Maurya for Living Waters Museum shows farmers growing melons and pumpkins on the Sabarmati riverbed when it was at its driest. Cattle graze here and donkeys carry sand. You shop for knick-knacks at the weekly Sunday Market, visit the circus, take a tazia procession for Muharram—all on this riverbed.

Or, you could wash and dry hundreds of textiles. Photographs of the Sabarmati from the latter half of the 20th century—some of them famously by Henri Cartier-Bresson—show the

riverbed as a place of activity for various textile communities, including dhobis.

Photographs from 1975 by Pushpa Chavda for her diploma project, titled "Countenance of a Woman: River Sabarmati" show the river and the riverbed being used for textile production and textile washing. Textiles, including mata ni pachedi, would be dried on the riverbed, turning it into a patchwork of colour.
Credit: Archives, National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad

Viloo Mirza, a former chief designer of the Gujarat State Handloom and Handicrafts Development Corporation (also called Garvi Gurjari), remembers the Sabarmati being "a patchwork of deep olive green and red"—these being the main colours that tribal communities wore and produced. The hot weather and the warm sand would work together to hasten the drying of cloth on the riverbed. Mirza says, "The sun would bring out the colour of these textiles. The Sabarmati would look beautiful even though it was barren."

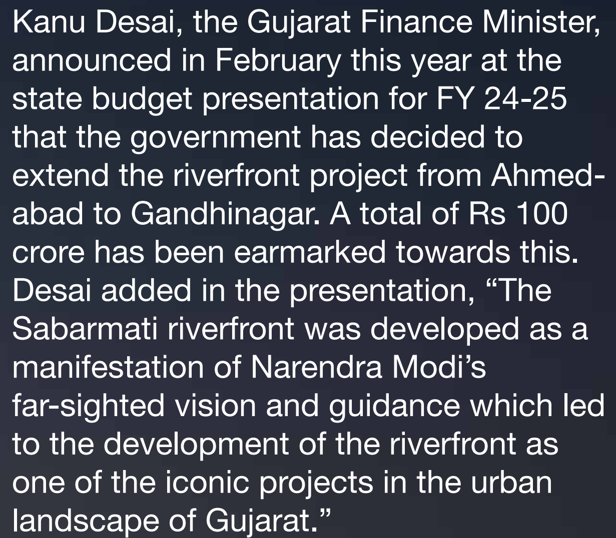
In the late 1970s, two significant changes took place. In Ahmedabad, the Vasna Barrage was built in 1976 to improve irrigation. The Fatehwadi Canal—the same one that the Chitara family crosses to reach the Sabarmati—was drawn from the barrage. Upstream, about 130 kms from the city, the Dharoi Dam was built in 1978. The Sabarmati was controlled between these two systems and was released only when it exceeded the barrage's capacity.

A modern riverfront

In 2005, the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Corporation Limited (SRFDCL), a Special Purpose Vehicle launched by the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation, began its construction of the Sabarmati Riverfront. The first phase was inaugurated in 2012, on Independence Day, by Gujarat's then-chief minister, Narendra Modi. It cost about Rs 1000 crore.

The riverfront is, in essence, a heavily concretised promenade that runs for 11.5 kms in the city from Subhash Bridge to Vasna Barrage, on both banks, planned with parks, gardens, and other recreational facilities. The high concrete walls, according to the SRFDCL, "ensure that the flood-carrying capacity of the river improves." Building these walls and the rest of the embankment resulted in the displacement of at least 11,000 families who lived along the river.

A section of the Sabarmati in Ahmedabad before and after the construction of the riverfront. *(top) HCP Archives, 1980s/ (bottom) Umang Shah for HCPDPM, 2023.*



Kanu Desai, the Gujarat Finance Minister, announced in February this year at the state budget presentation for FY 24-25 that the government has decided to extend the riverfront project from Ahmedabad to Gandhinagar. A total of Rs 100 crore has been earmarked towards this. Desai added in the presentation, “The Sabarmati riverfront was developed as a manifestation of Narendra Modi’s far-sighted vision and guidance which led to the development of the riverfront as one of the iconic projects in the urban landscape of Gujarat.”

When subsequent phases are completed, this riverfront is set to become the world’s longest at 38.2 km. It is designed by HCP Design, Planning and Management Pvt. Ltd., led by Bimal Patel, who has earned the reputation of being Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s favourite architect.

When I meet Niki Shah, director of urban design, at HCP’s busy office overlooking a stretch of the Sabarmati, he shows me some of their other waterfront projects across India. Shah sees cities being built around water not only because the primary requirement of civilisation is water but also because “water does something to our psychology”.

Shah joined HCP in 2002 and began overseeing the Sabarmati riverfront project in 2008. In his view, the Sabarmati riverfront is a coming together of the affluent and the economically weaker sections of society. He says HCP’s objectives were “to make the entire [river] edge a democratic space, a public space…and to make the project accessible to people…Nobody stops you from going on the riverfront.”

The Sabarmati Riverfront stretches for 11.5 kms in Ahmedabad and will the world’s longest riverfront when future phases are completed. *Photograph by Benita Fernando.*

The riverfront has been a polarising subject in Ahmedabad. Many of the people I interviewed agree with Shah that it is the city's first dedicated public open space. On this promenade, you can ride a cycle, skate, or rent an electric scooter; sign up for a cruise; perform Ganesh visarjan; stroll and jog. There was even an option to take a helicopter joyride to enjoy an aerial view of the riverfront.

But, you cannot wash, dry and produce textiles here anymore. People can access the river, but they cannot conduct business anymore, unless of course you are one of the kiosks, eateries or approved additions (such as an upcoming amusement park) along the riverfront.

The Fatehwadi Canal, which diverts water from the Sabarmati for irrigation. *Photograph by Benita Fernando.*

This is a far cry from when the riverbed was a maidan—an "unarticulated space" as Ahmedabad-based architect Riyaz Tayyibji puts it. "It's precisely because it didn't have any particularity that it remained flexible and open," he says. "And since little had been spent on its development, it was affordable to a large cross-section of activities—what we would today call inclusive."

Tayyibji believes that while big infrastructure is needed, it need not replicate models that don't belong here. He says, "The aspiration is Paris and the architectural concrete is a 19th century vision. This is a borrowed imagination. And the minute you put up a concrete wall between communities and an ecological system, you can't have craft."

For the devipujaks, like many other textile-based communities, the Sabarmati riverfront isn't useful anymore for another major reason. There are cautionary "Deep Water" signs placed along the riverfront. At its current depth of approximately 10 metres (source: SRFDCL feasibility report, 1998), a devipujak dare not step into the river, let alone stand and wash his textiles.

Before the riverfront came the river. In 2002, water from the Narmada river canal was diverted into the Sabarmati to create the illusion of a perennial river, fitting the vision of the proposed riverfront. Only, this water was regulated by the barrage and it never flowed. Today, the stagnant Sabarmati lies like a beached whale across the city.

Avni Sethi, founder of the Conflictorium museum in Ahmedabad, says, "It's no longer the same people who have a relationship with the river. It's almost like they have become audiences to the river because the kind of embankment is such. You can only witness the river but you can't engage with it. It's a thing of contrived beauty and of capital. Therefore the communities that actually have a relationship with the river are rendered powerless and can't influence this process."

Mansi Shah, an urban landscape designer and faculty at CEPT University in Ahmedabad, co-conducted a City Water Walk along the Sabarmati in 2016. Based on her observations, she believes that a river has different meanings for different sections of society. For some, it's religious; for others, it's economic. She says: "When big projects come up and their designs are not able to accommodate certain groups, then these people have to move to the fringe and fend for themselves. Although the riverfront project has its merits, the emphasis on recreational aspects in the design often outweighs other needs, as seen in the case of the Sabarmati. Now, you can see its water but you cannot touch it."

More than a decade since the riverfront opened, the devipujaks haven't got a solution. For the dhobi community alone, the SRFDCL and HCP created a formal space with seven blocks for them as part of the riverfront to wash their clothes. Deputy Municipal Commissioner IK Patel says, "If they [the mata ni pachedi artists] want to use this facility, they can use this infrastructure, no issue. Because the river—these days no washing activity is allowed. So, they have to find some solution beyond the barrage or they can use the washing ghat."

The colour red

"The river was like a rann, a desert," says artist Sanjay Chitara, 45, who has won a National Award and several state awards.

Sanjay has been to the riverfront a few times. A couple of Ganesh visarjans were enjoyable but he doesn't know what else to do with the promenade. He says, "It used to be nice for work. Now there is nothing, so work isn't happening there."

Sanjay used to live in Vasna with the extended Chitara family and shifted to his current home in Jivraj Park some years ago. While smaller pieces can be washed at home in a plastic bucket, the larger ones need to be transported to Vasna, to the same spot used by the rest of his community.

Sanjay is acutely aware of how the landscape has changed for mata ni pachedi artists in Ahmedabad. Vasna, he knows, isn't the solution that it is made out to be. In a YouTube video produced by Sarmaya Arts Foundation in December 2022, he highlights the need for an open space with flowing water and the difficulties that artists such as him are facing. "Everything has deteriorated to the point of being dreadful," he says of Vasna in the video.

Sanjay Chitara at his home in Jivraj Park, Ahmedabad. *Photograph by Benita Fernando.*

Recent mata ni pachedi pieces by the Chitara families in Vasna show blotchy black borders and lighter red, indicating poor colour absorption after washing in the Sabarmati. *Photographs by Benita Fernando.*

Trash and effluents accumulate in Vasna, making the river unpleasant, but, more importantly, affecting the colours of textiles.

A typical mata ni pachedi has three colours—pale yellow from myrobalan nuts (harda) acting as a mordant and fixing agent; a black made from iron scraps fermented in jaggery (called kala paani or black water); and, the iconic alizarin red which dominates these works. Contemporary mata ni pachedi use more colours, such as indigo, but a traditional one is a trifecta of pale yellow, black, and alizarin red.

Alizarin, the first natural dye to be produced synthetically, has been used by the devipujaks for about a century, it is believed. Alizarin isn't painted directly on cloth. The deivpujaks first paint the black parts of the textile. Then they apply a liquid colourless mordant made

of alum and tamarind flour. The mordant ensures that alizarin fixes to the cloth. When they wash the textiles in the river, the excess black paint, excess mordant, and dust flow away, without the risk of sedimentation or staining. After this, when the textile is boiled in alizarin and dried dhavada (axelwood tree) flowers, the parts that had the mordant turn red.

The red of older mata ni pachedi works is a deep maroon, almost purplish. "It used to be red like a beed," Sanjay says, referring to a seed. "Now, it comes out like a tomato."

Sakthivel V, faculty at NID and an expert on dyeing, who has worked with the Chitaras since 1999, says that alizarin needs a pH value of about 8.5 or 9, considered alkaline, to get to that maroon. "So if the colour is reducing, it means it's a lower pH," he says. While no formal research has been conducted to measure the water composition at Vasna and its impact on the mata ni pachedi that use natural dyes, Sakthivel believes that craft isn't always dependent on these studies. "Craft ways of working also means you know with your hands and your senses rather than scientific evidence."

Sanjay Chitara (centre) washes a 20-feet-long and 6-feet-tall mata ni pachedi, which now hangs in a government office in Gujarat, in Vasna in 2012. *Nisha Vikram/CraftCanvas.*

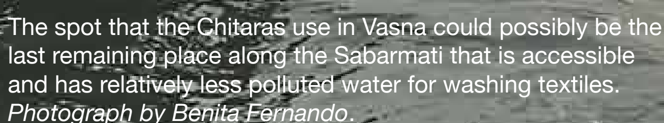
Mata ni pachedi is a trick of the elements, an alchemy of sun, sand, and water. When one of the elements goes awry, so does the entire process. Sanjay and the other artists have seen in recent years that the textiles don't turn out the way they expect them to after washing in Vasna. The blacks are patchy, the colours run into each other, and the red is not the same, possibly indicating that the alum mordant is reacting to the water. The culprits, the Chitaras feel, are sewage and effluents that have mixed in the water at Vasna.

The last remaining spot?

A Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) report, tabled by the Union Ministry of Jal Shakti in November 2022, listed the Sabarmati as the second-most polluted river in the country. The Biochemical Oxygen Demand (BOD), which indicates how much oxygen is needed to break down organic matter in water, was an alarming 292 mg/L in the Raysan-Vautha stretch of the Sabarmati, which includes the riverfront, the barrage and the area used by the devipujaks. According to the CPCB, a river with BOD exceeding 6 mg/L is considered polluted and fit for remedial action.

In recent years, there has been growing concern among citizens, environmentalists, and urbanists about the escalating pollution of the Sabarmati and damage to its riparian ecosystem. Concerns include domestic waste water being insufficiently treated before being discharged into the Sabarmati. Ahmedabad city generates 1,693 MLD (Million Litres per Day) of sewage, which far exceeds the combined capacity of all 14 Sewage Treatment Plants (STPs), as per reports. Moreover, there have been several allegations of illegal discharge of industrial effluents into the Sabarmati, despite curbs and penalties enforced by the municipal corporation.

Environmental activist Rohit Prajapati, one of the members of the Joint Task Force constituted by the Gujarat High Court in March 2019 to look into the Sabarmati pollution issue, had apprised



The spot that the Chitaras use in Vasna could possibly be the last remaining place along the Sabarmati that is accessible and has relatively less polluted water for washing textiles. *Photograph by Benita Fernando.*

View of Vasna barrage from the eastern bank of Sabarmati in January 2021. On the one side is deep water, meant for both irrigation and the Sabarmati Riverfront. On the other, excess water trickles out of the barrage. © *Raj Maurya.*

the High Court: "A stretch of the Sabarmati river in the Ahmedabad city within the Riverfront Project is brimming with stagnant water. The stretch of 120 kms. of the river, before meeting the Arabian Sea, is 'dead' and comprises of [sic] partially treated industrial effluent and sewage. In other words, the Sabarmati river is highly polluted/contaminated."

Stand near Vasna Barrage and look on both sides and the difference created by the various infrastructural developments is stark—upstream is a still, full river and downstream, dry land overtakes signs of water. Alka Palrecha, an expert in water resources and waste water management who was among those who filed a PIL on pollution in the Sabarmati in 2021, says, "What people are accessing after the Vasna Barrage is only water that has seeped out or leaked from the barrage. Otherwise what you see of the Sabarmati downstream is all sewage from Ahmedabad city which is released from the STPs."

The devipujaks believe that their spot in Vasna may well be the last remaining place in the Sabarmati where they encounter less pollution, relatively speaking. About three kilometres downstream are the Vasna STP and the Pirana STP, which could possibly mean that inadequately treated wastewater mixes with the river thereon. A 2021 study showed that wastewater disposed in this area has higher concentrations of heavy metals than their respective prescribed safe limits of heavy metals used for irrigation provided by Indian Standard, World Health Organization (WHO) and European Union Standards.

It is not uncommon to see mata ni pachedi artists being accused of polluting the Sabarmati, some of which is a hangover of the prejudice the community faced historically. Sakthivel believes that it is not possible for the production of these textiles to spoil a river as there are no real effluents released from this work. The devipujaks use natural dyes

and alum, which is, in fact, used for water purification. He says, “They don’t pollute but their visibility is more. If there are ten people washing, then you see it. There are industries that release waste-water from 4 pm to midnight, but no one sees it happening.”

“What has happened,” he adds, “is that policy makers have no regard for craft and particularly for these artists, because it’s a small community. And because they belong to a denotified community, no one wants to listen to them. It makes them more vulnerable.”

Lessons from Ajrakhpur

Could Ajrakh, which shares similarities to mata ni pachedi in its techniques, offer solutions to the devipujaks?

Ajrakh, which can be traced back to the Indus Valley, is known for its predominant use of indigo and is practised by the Muslim community of Khatris. The technique flourished in Dhamadka, Kutch, on the banks of the river Saran, which dried up in the late 1980s due to excessive borewell use.

With no option left, the printers turned to borewells, but the high iron content in this water resulted in poor colour qualities in their textiles—similar to what mata ni pachedi is facing today. Industries were cropping up around them and the water table was rapidly going down. The 2001 Bhuj earthquake proved to be the last straw for Dhamadka, forcing an exodus of the Khatris, who set up a new village called Ajrakhpur, meant exclusively for blockprinting.

Given Ajrakh’s dependence on water, Ajrakhpur has done its best for water management. Common washing areas, tanks, water filter plants to remove iron, and solutions to recycle water for

Kirit Chitara at his home in Vasna, Ahmedabad.
Photograph by Benita Fernando.

agriculture were built here. Yet, there is no saying when Ajrakhpur will run out of water, as here again, there have been concerns of receding water tables.

In Vasna, some members of the Chitara family live together as neighbours, about 20 minutes away from the river-bank where they wash their textiles. Could the Ajrakhpur model be followed here?

Kirit Chitara, 32, believes it could work, provided they have the funds to build tanks. “Ajrakhpur has solved its problem. But we don’t have that kind of space. Or that kind of water supply,” he says. “If our world-famous mata ni pachedi has a problem with production, we have to make a ghat or be allowed to make a ghat. We can solve this only with the government.”

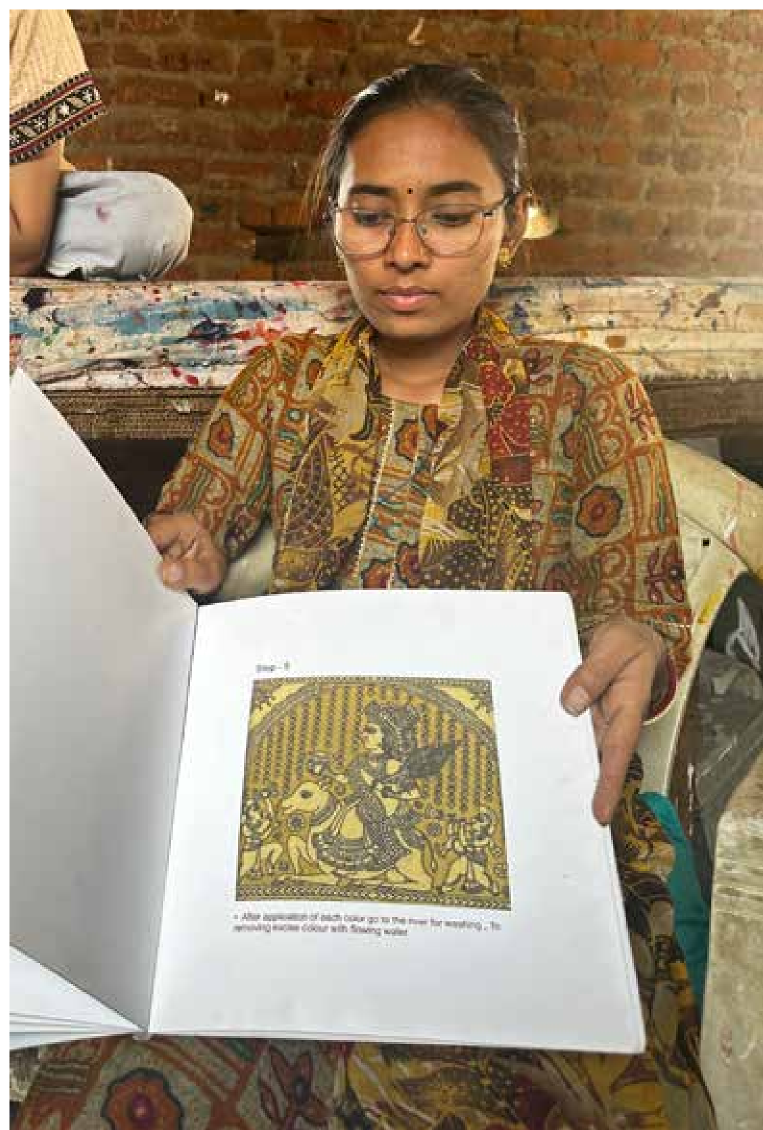
Sakthivel believes building tanks may not be the answer for all kinds of mata ni pachedi. Tanks work if the textile is printed but not if it’s painted. He explains, “In a tank, the flow of water is from the top. This means cloth gets sucked into the water rather than getting washed, risking the colours in a painted piece. For mata ni pachedi, the current needs to be below the textile—like in a river.”

A united appeal

I meet Niral, 25, Chandrakant’s oldest daughter in the family’s workshop on the first floor of their house in Vasna. A long table, splattered with colour and scribbled over by children, occupies the length of the room. There is a distinct smell that pervades the space, one that is synonymous with a devipujak’s home. It comes from fermentation—iron scraps in jaggery. For an outsider, it takes some getting used to. For Niral, who grew up with it, this is the smell of her childhood.

Like the other women in the community, Niral never designs a mata ni pachedi. Young girls often assist fathers, picking up skills along the way, but mata ni pachedi remains solely a man’s domain. In adulthood, women can fill in colour or dry the textiles, but the actual painting and washing is out of bounds for them. As one artist told me, “The art has to remain in the family. And because women marry and leave, it cannot be taught to them.”

Chandrakant, a more liberal father, taught Niral extensively, and although she doesn’t practise it anymore, she sees the problems that her community is facing.



Niral Chitara, Chandrakant Chitara’s daughter, shows a handbook she made to explain the many steps involved in the making of a mata ni pachedi. *Photograph by Benita Fernando.*

In order to build business, Chandrakant attempted saris in the style of mata ni pachedi. Except, there wasn't enough river to wash the length of a sari. Niral says, "It was expensive to make. We worked on it for about two months. But when the colours don't rinse off properly, it doesn't sell. With paintings, the loss is lesser."

About two decades ago, Viloo Mirza, who was the then-director of the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), proposed a "cluster project" to aid the Chitaras in Vasna. The proposal suggested setting up a farm-like area, with pits for dyeing, access to flowing water, and common facility centres. The plan didn't materialise because of "a lack of willingness on the government's part", Mirza says, but also because of the "in-fighting" in devipujak families. The latter meant that they had failed to form an association or a co-operative, which was necessary for the cluster project.

Niral agrees. The competitiveness and differences of opinion within her community—possibly because there are only about 50 practitioners left—has hindered any collective action. She doesn't see the Sabarmati issue getting fixed anytime soon.

"Accessing a river is not just about washing a mata ni pachedi. It is also to sanctify the textile. Just as the Ganga is considered holy, we believe washing in the Sabarmati is holy, too. It is only after this step can a mata ni pachedi be put in a temple," Niral says. "Today you see mata ni pachedi as art. But first, it is something sacred."

Adapting and thriving

In 2016, India had its first dedicated exhibition of mata ni pachedi at ARTISANS' gallery in Kala Ghoda, Mumbai. The owner, Radhi Parekh, recalls that when the artists and their families entered the gallery, the first thing they did was to remove their footwear at the entrance and bow to each of the pieces. A bhuvo was invited to sing as well. Parekh says, "It was clear that this, too, was a ritual, not a performance, and a response to religious art."

With upcoming phases of the Sabarmati riverfront, could there be a way to remedy the crisis that the artists are facing? Parekh notes that currently there is no permanent public place to share the legacy of mata ni pachedi and "its profound relationship to the Sabarmati". She says, "It would be meaningful to showcase this tradition on the riverfront through a permanent exhibition or museum or an artists' market for painters, dyers, block printers and the mata ni pachedi artists, who originally subsisted on the river beaches."

Yet, this may not be the first crisis that the devipujaks have faced. It is in the very nature of craft to negotiate with its changing environments and market forces. And when the going gets tough, the ultimate solution would be to find a new site. But should a community be uprooted and displaced, leaving their ties to the city they now call home?

In 2023, Ahmedabad's mata ni pachedi got a GI (Geographical Indication) Tag. The GI Tag application observes that "washing in the running water of Sabarmati river is must to run off the excess

dye" and that "the local river Sabarmati has special properties in its water for setting the dyes on pachedis". In more ways than one, mata ni pachedi has married these former nomads to the city and the river.

Artist Sumit Chitara, 19, Sanjay's son, was commissioned by Sarmaya Arts Foundation in Mumbai to make a mata ni pachedi work in 2019. Sarmaya's founder, Paul Abraham says, "It is about how Ahmedabad has changed, how the river is central to the city, and how their professions have continued."

Sumit Chitara, Sanjay Chitara's son, at his home in Jivraj Park, Ahmedabad. *Photograph by Benita Fernando.*

The painting is a contemporary take on the age-old craft and shows a family of devipujaks making a mata ni pachedi. Cutting across diagonally is the city of Ahmedabad, with its river, riverfront and skyline. The family is seen producing their textiles in the river and beyond the city.

Sumit calls it Patang, after one of the distinct buildings of Ahmedabad that is seen in the work. Patang Hotel is a water tank-like structure, known for its revolving restaurant, built in the early 1980s by the late Hasmukh Patel, who founded HCP Design Planning and Management Limited. It was a symbol of modern Ahmedabad.

Sumit says, "I wanted to show the riverfront. It's a modern city and, even in this, our work is happening."

Despite the many issues plaguing their craft, the artists say that the market has been favourable for mata ni pachedi. The Gujarat State Handloom & Handicrafts

Development Corporation purchased products over Rs 38 lakhs from them in the financial year 2023-24. Local and international recognition has come their way, with invitations to participate in exhibitions and workshops abroad.

For the G20 Summit in Bali, Indonesia, in November 2022, Prime Minister Narendra Modi gifted world leaders mementoes that showcased India's arts and crafts. Rishi Sunak, the UK Prime Minister, in particular, received a mata ni pachedi painting.

Sanjay says that some of his paintings were sought to adorn the Gujarat Chief Minister's office about a decade ago, so the government is aware of the significance of mata ni pachedi. He says, "Modi Sir knows. But I feel he doesn't know our infrastructure problems yet."

Patang, 2019, Sumit Chitara, cotton cloth, hand and block painted with natural dyes. © *Sarmaya Arts Foundation.*