

"Modesty is their virtue, but they are setting examples in culture and co-operation."

Of Baroda and the big tree

"ARE you an engineer? What is the project you are concerned with?" my fellow-passenger in the plane asked with casual curiosity.

"I'm no engineer. I'm going to deliver the Annual Sri Aurobindo Lecture."

"I heard you are going at the invitation of the Municipal Corporation of Baroda. You must have said the university. Something is wrong with my ears or..."

"My tongue? No. You heard me right. Sri Aurobindo had spent thirteen years in Baroda, from 1893 to 1906. No wonder that Baroda Municipal Corporation should deem it fit to institute an annual lecture in his memory."

"And, pardon me, no wonder that it would be a fiasco — I mean the Municipal Corporation venturing into a programme of this nature. You know the state of politicians in our country. They are sincere

about nothing except quarrelling among themselves. The opposition would have done its best to wreck it. I should not be surprised if the Mayor himself would have forgotten all about it!" wryly commented the passenger.

The position of a Mayor always inspires a strange vision in my imagination—an assortment of characters from the noble Jean Valjean of Hugo's *Les Miserables* to the short-sighted Mayor raising his hat to a hippopotamus referred to by Michael Frayn in his introduction to the *Best of Beachcomber*. Both and between them all the other figures I could remember did not encourage me to challenge the gentleman's observation.

The pleasant surprise

"I hope you'll be in the audience to sympathise with me

in my plight—if there is an audience at all," I said.

I don't know if he came. The large Mahatma Gandhi Nagar Gruh, the Corporation's own hall, was teeming with a highly disciplined and receptive audience on the 8th October evening and I could not have easily located him. The organisation of the function including the display of messages and pictures of Sri Aurobindo and the imaginative floral decoration of the dais must have proved too surprising for him to face me, if he was there at all.

The affair was no less surprising for me, though pleasantly. If it was for the mild-mannered Mayor Mr. Jayant Bhai Patel to welcome the speaker and the audience, it was for the graceful leader of the opposition (and the ex-Mayor) Dr Jatin Modi to thank all at the end. Before my de-

parture I had an hour-long talk with the young Dy. Mayor, Mr Ashwin Mehta, and I forgot that he was anything but a research-scholar on the literature and culture of Gujarat.

The way to the banyan tree

The term Baroda is a derivation from Vadodara—meaning a hamlet under the banyan trees. The name has grown into a sprawling city, but a few of the ancient banyan trees that sheltered the early habitation can still be seen. They might gradually disappear, but, I am sure, their qualities—compassion and vastness—have gone deep into the soul of this homely city. The Corporation of Baroda projects a ray of that spirit. Its activities and unity on certain fronts are exemplary, though the peo-

ple concerned are so modest about it.

Tale of the other city

Baroda, like several other towns of Gujarat, is of course fast expanding though its age old spirit has resisted the onslaught of superficial modernisation. But how amazingly powerful such resistance could be was evident to me once I was at Dabhoi, the birthplace of Dayaram, one of the makers of Gujarati Literature.

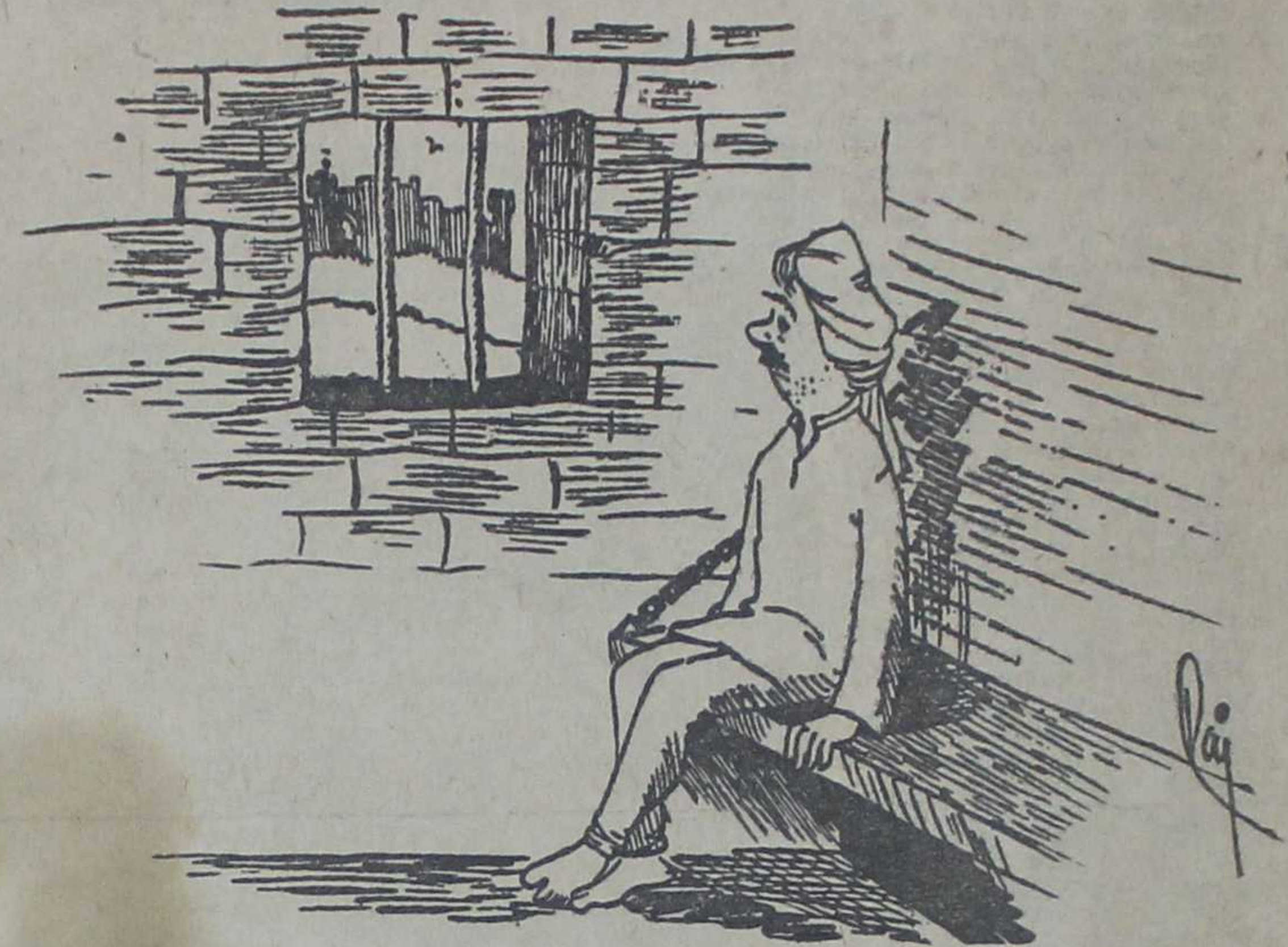
Dabhoi is only about thirty km from Baroda, but Time seems to have taken a diversion leaving this cosy little fort-city in peace. Its narrow lines, houses leaning towards one another in an unending whisper, nurture a chunk of the forgotten atmosphere of a fairytale era.

Its residents perhaps are no

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The banyan tree

By Manoj Das



different. The moment we asked a local primary teacher in front of the 12th century gateway if he would be kind enough to guide us into the city, he jumped into the car and led us to the Kalika Mata's Shrine in the only surviving part of the once magnificent fort and asked, pointing at some locked doors, "Do you know why they had to be kept shut?" The answer of course had to be provided by himself, "Because the goddess, the Mata, was in the habit of getting out through them too often!"

This part of the fort is remembered as Hira Bhagol after its unfortunate architect, Hira. No sooner had the gifted architect completed the intricate construction of the fort than the king imprisoned him in a stone cabin lest he should build another fort of the same kind for some other king. The cabin had only one small open-

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ing through which Hira's wife slipped his daily ration to him.

Years later the king ordered for his release. The gigantic stone that blocked the cabin door was removed, but the moment Hira emerged into the

daylight he collapsed and died.

We left after a look at the stone cabin that had been shut for good. But the fear that Dabhoi might one day suddenly step into the modern times is still haunting me.