Iran's past within the city's heart

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The next time you zip down the J Mehta flyover at Kemps corner in south Mumbai, slow down just a little bit and you might catch a glimpse of a largely unknown part of Mumbai's history, preserved as lovingly as the gated colony that surrounds it.

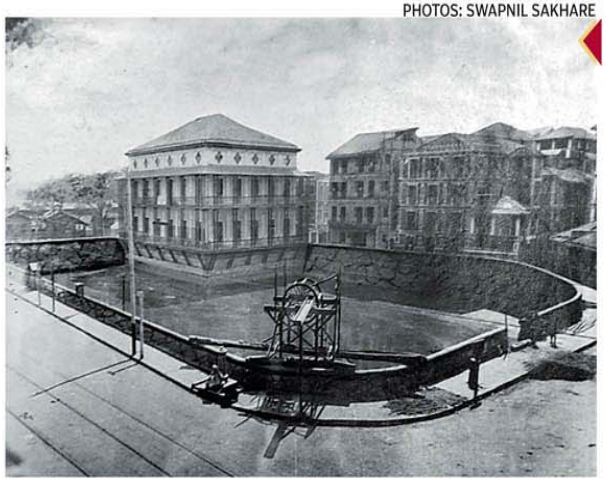
Located inside the Khareghat colony, which is one of the many Parsi baugs in the city, is the first and perhaps the only community museum in the country.

The FD Alpaiwalla museum, founded in 1952 and run by the Bombay Parsi punchayet, houses some of the finest and most diverse collections of items connected to Parsi history. The museum is housed inside the Khareghat colony memorial hall. It started with Framji Dadabhoy Alpaiwalla's own personal collection of porcelain, stamps, coins and sculptures, which he intended as keepsakes for future generations. Sadly, he passed away before the work was completed in 1954.

Maintained in excellent condition by the 62-year old curator Nivedita Mehta for the past thirty years, the museum is open for public viewing from Monday to Friday, from 10.30am-1.15pm and 2.30-5pm, no entry charges.

They can also be contacted on 2361 6586. Here's a peek at some of the exhibits:

PHOTOS: SWAPNIL SAKHARE



THE ORIGINAL DHOBI TALAO

The picture that you see is the only surviving picture of the dhobi talao in south Mumbai. Yes, unlike the misleading Churchgate or Null bazaar, forever the butt of all jokes in the mass emails that challenge you to find the origins of their names, dhobi talao was an actual pond once upon a time. Mehta explained that at the beginning of the 20th century, all the talaos, tanks and wells in the city were closed due to endemic malaria, and there are hardly any pictures of those water bodies. Apart from this one, there are other photos of a playground-like Colaba or a horsecart populated CST. Fittingly, there are a lot of artefacts connected to the history and geography of Mumbai, the city with the highest number of Parsis in India.

FIRST LOOK

The Bombay Parsi punchayet still runs and keeps the museum open for display it as part of a proviso laid down by Alpaiwalla. His friend, Dr Jamshed Unwalla, who was an Avestan scholar and an archealogist, also contributed items from his excavations, or those that he had been gifted. As the years passed, many other prominent Parsis have added to the museum's quirky collection.

RARE ARTIFACTS

Some of the items from Susa, dating back to 4,000 BC. Susa was an old settlement on the lower reaches of the Euphrates and the Tigris, the birthplace of many famous kingdoms, and at one point, the provincial capital of Emperor Darius. It was completely destroyed by Alexander's attack.

SIX FEET OVER, NOT UNDER

What you see in the picture is called an *astodan* or ossuary. Though perhaps an oversimplification, but you could call it a type of coffin. Mehta explains that in earlier days, most Parsis would leave their dead in the woods or higher ground, to be picked clean by animals or birds. In those days, to prevent the bones from getting scattered all over the place, they were placed in astodans like this one. Sometimes, the bodies were weighed down so that the animals wouldn't be able to drag them away. As cities expanded, Towers of Silence were used instead.

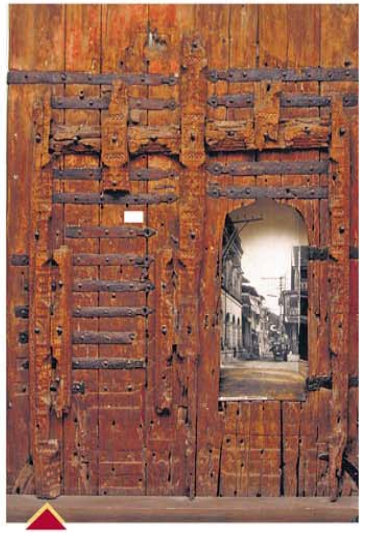
THE LIVING ROOM

One part of the museum contains a recreation of a typical Parsi home from another era and place: from Imperial China, where many families had moved. It contains pieces from those homes.

CEREMONIAL CLOTHING

These intricately decorated diaphanous garments are ceremonial tops that represent the 'sudreh' or the advantageous path, a part of Parsi religious philosophy. The garment is appropriately designed to these specifications.

The back of the top represents the future, the front represents the past, and the wearer represents the present. On the left is the female garment and the male one on the right.



OLD SENTRY

This beautifully crafted piece is actually a door - Dastur wad - the gate from a Parsi settlement in Navsari, dating back to the 16th century. The deep ridges and wounds on the wood explain the protection it offered its inmates.

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