

| GOING SPECIAL |

CREATING TRANSGRESSIONS

SAAD KHAN

PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO



When I walked next to Anita on the streets of Kathmandu, I went through a series of emotions. Anxiety, dread, nervousness, and then eventually confidence. Anita is a wheelchair user, and the streets of Kathmandu, very much like that of Dhaka, are not accessible or wheelchair friendly. Part of my emotional rollercoaster was because Anita was on the main road, and not on the footpath, maneuvering amidst other fast approaching cars and bikes. Part of it was because she was also attracting stares. Her wheelchair was electronic, so she didn't require anyone to push it.

After a long day of planning meeting on a course on disability, gender and sexuality, my other colleagues, Anita and I had gotten out for a stroll. I observed how Anita's body, and her electronic wheelchair, transgressed into the very able-bodied street, where a body like Anita's was not to appear, or be expected. Moreover, her wheelchair evoked, among her spectators, surprise. How can a disabled body (that too of a brown, elderly woman) can have the agency to go on her own, like other 'normal' bodies? Also, of course, people were fascinated by the wheelchair that ran on battery- who wouldn't be?

The three-day long planning of the course culminated to this very precise moment of experiencing how we dwell in spaces, and how spaces are created because of that dwelling. Being an able-bodied man, I don't have to think twice about stepping down from the footpath, or jumping across potholes. Due to countless other able-bodies, the street also gets rendered as, or becomes able-bodied. It's not only an abstract concept. Our architectures, infrastructures and economies are able-bodied that exclude bodies that jut-out or don't 'fit'. Able-bodiedness can hence be also read as an oppressive structure that denies exploring potentials and agency of other bodies and

lived realities. Thus, is being crippled a limitation? What should be more shameful—having an impairment, or society disabling individuals from getting an education, exercising rights and

enjoying life? In a country like Bangladesh, where talking about disabilities—physical, intellectual, psycho-social, invisible—is still shrouded in taboo, creating healing

spaces to address shame, stigma and silence associated with disabilities, is not only necessary, but urgent.

"People want to come to support groups, but not share," says Shamsin Ahmed, founder of Identity Inclusion, an initiative that aims to break mental health stigma and promote social inclusion of people with mental health conditions, learning and developmental disabilities and even conditions such as Epilepsy. "The stigma is still very strong. They become more comfortable as they hear each other's narratives," she adds.

Shamsin shares a story of a girl with Epilepsy who lost consciousness when she was in the second grade. Her class teachers insisted that she was put in a special school. Her parents stopped her from going to that school, fearing that teachers and classmates will neglect her condition, and bully her more. However, the girl wants to go back to school, and have friends other than her parents.

"One of our volunteers started visiting her, and became her friend. We are also planning to link her with family members who have successfully managed schools into accepting their children with epilepsy. People need to see mental illness as any other lifestyle changing illness like diabetes, which requires changes in lifestyle. That doesn't mean one cannot live a productive, social life," adds Shamsin.

Dialogic spaces like these can be healing and transformatory. Understanding different kinds of narratives can motivate us to look at our own narratives with the hope to learn and grown. By the time I came back to the hotel with Anita, I had started to feel more confident than when I started. She said that we should all try to be brave. What kind of questions are you raising, and how are you transgressing? Perhaps, trying to be brave can be our new year's resolution! ■

| EXPERIENCE |

We arrived at Ahmedabad in a rush. But the rush was that of excitement and anxiety. We were in Gujrat, the land of colours, traditions and Garba! The fifth day of the 100 Member Delegation trip from Bangladesh to India had already begun, and we were ready for whatever was to come.

After flying in from Delhi, without a break we began rehearsing for the cultural show. We were to perform at the LJ Institute of Information and Technology after a Gujrat performance by the locals. At 2 in the morning, after checking into the hotel and settling down, with fatigued eyes but incomparable spirits, we all went downstairs to begin rehearsals. Srimonti Sengupta Pooja was there not just to choreograph but keep us going, and keep us inspired. My roommate Sarzina was the cultural coordinator and she rightly set up the dance troupe, singing ensemble, poetry reciters and mime artists for the show.

song after the other- ranging from patriotic songs, to pop, to western. Next, Arij Anam Khan, Mahidul Islam Ratul and Kazi Nazrul Islam recited three beautiful poems. Sadia Jannat Joya and her partner performed a hilarious mime piece depicting the lives of obsessive selfie takers.

Mahtarima Sharmin Prokriti, Prishuti Chakma, Ummay Salma Soma and I performed to the song *Aji Bangladesh er Hridoy* by Sadi Mohammad. The night ended in an absolute high when all the students and performers went out onto the field and did a Garba piece together- more than a 100 people, in a circle, dancing to the hearts' fullest contentment. It was something none of us would ever be able to forget. And I can speak on behalf of all the 100 members when I say this. After such a night, we went back to the hotel in a daze, some of us still moving to the Garba music that kept ringing in our ears.



Performing at the LJ Institute.

PHOTO: BYDG16

THE TRIP OF A LIFETIME: 100 MEMBER YOUTH DELEGATION

(PART IV)

NAZIBA BASHER

On our sixth day, we began our morning with a riveting tour of the Adalaj Stepwell- built in 1499 by Mahmud Begada for his queen Rudabai, wife of Veersinh, the Vaghela Chieftain. It is one



With the children of the Gandhi Ashram.

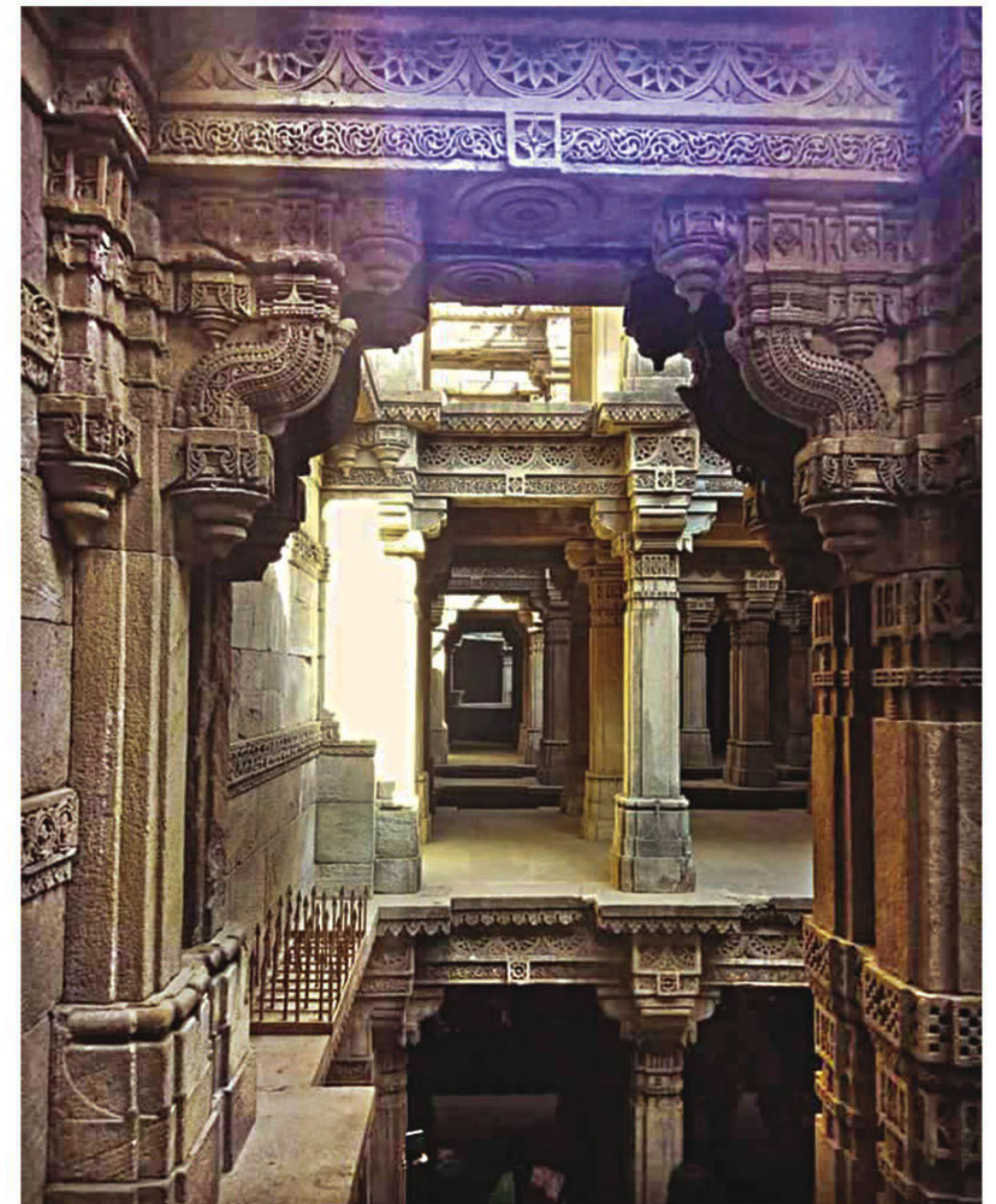
PHOTO: BYDG16

The next day began with a trip to Tata Motors which was followed by a visit to the Gandhi Ashram, where we learned the basic and down-to-Earth lifestyle of Mahatma Gandhi. We were then headed to the LJ Institute, and all the while, the back of the bus was busy with dancers rehearsing mudras and steps, and the front was occupied with the singers singing their hearts out. After arrival and getting ready, the stage was set. The Gujrati students went first- beginning with raags, Garba music, painting, mimicry and ended with an exciting Garba dance piece.

Then up went the Bangladeshis. The singers, such as Debolina Sur, A. I. Razu, Suraiya Shakila Shukla and many others, no doubt, began and took the show in the palm of their hands. The audience were on their feet as the medley began- one

of the most gorgeous examples of Indo-Islamic fusion architecture. This was also the day the 'back of the bus' gang was formed- a gang that became like a family consisting of Arij, Sarzina, Sadman Anik, Saad Uddin, Tamanna Taher Tonni from Jahangirnagar University, Theatre activist Somaiya Samm Moni, and bookstore owner Sabrina Islam. Beginning from random songs, to random jokes, to a shoulder to sleep on- we were there for each other throughout.

From there we went to learn about the famous salt march by Gandhi, after which we went to one of the famous Ahmedabad cinemas. The 100 members were truly engrossed in watching *Kahaani 2*, a heavy film after which some shopping was done to calm us all down. While the nightlife of Ahmedabad may not be that of Delhi's, the colours and traditional relics everywhere



The Adalaj Stepwell.

PHOTO: NAZIBA BASHER

were enough to fill your heart with a new love for culture.

Before it even began in full-throttle, our stay in Ahmedabad was over too soon.

After a 2-day long stay we were back in our hotel rooms packing our belongings for our last and final destination- Kolkata.

Just one more day and it would all be over- much too soon, much too short.

We came to India as a 100 strangers, and now we couldn't believe the end of the trip was nearer than we could hope for.

In the final piece of this series, due next week, I will talk about the unforgettable experience I had in what to me was like Dhaka's sister city, and what I learned and gained from this trip of a lifetime. ■



PHOTO: STAR FILE

54 | NUMBERS |

Police and fear stalk the streets of Dhaka as garment workers fight for more than £54 a month in Dhaka. Last month, tens of thousands of workers clocked in and then immediately returned to the streets, joining the largest protests since those that followed the collapse in 2013 of the Rana Plaza clothing factory, causing more than 1,100 deaths.

The unrest over rates of pay forced around 50 factories to shut for more than a week and led to dozens of arrests and the "temporary dismissal" of at least 1,500 workers. Last week, those workers still willing to huddle in Ashulia's streets during their lunch breaks were swapping stories about the people dismissed. The pay rise they wanted was a tripling of the minimum salary of 5,300 taka (£54) a month, currently the lowest minimum wage in the world, to 16,000 takas.

Source: The Guardian