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# HERITAGE SPOTLIGHT

## PIRAM BET: THE ISLAND OF HISTORY, FOSSILS, AND MARITIME LEGENDS

### Early Human Activity and Archaeology

Off the Ghogha coast of Bhavnagar is Piram Bet, an island with a rich tapestry of human history, natural wonder, and familial legacy. Archaeological evidence from the Bhavnagar–Ghogha coast points to human activity in the region as early as the Harappan period. While Piram itself has yet to reveal major excavations confirming a Harappan settlement, scattered stone anchors and pottery fragments indicate that the island was perhaps a stopover or maritime point in antiquity.

Documented in the Gazetteer, Piram Bet is a microcosm of religious plurality. Over the centuries, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Islam have all left their mark. Today, the island preserves a Hanuman temple and the dargah of Balamshah Pir, alongside numerous artifacts of Jain and Buddhist heritage. These sites speak of centuries of coexistence and mutual respect among diverse religious communities, with sacred spaces interwoven into the very soil of the island.

### Piram Bet and Medieval Maritime History

Piram's story is inseparable from its maritime and military history. During the early 14th century, the island was under the control of Muslim soldiers of the Delhi Sultanate. In 1325, Mokhadaji Gohil, ancestor of the Bhavnagar State rulers, captured Piram Bet. He fortified the island, established his base, and imposed tolls on passing ships while simultaneously protecting merchant vessels from pirates in the Gulf of Khambhat. Mokhadaji is remembered as one of the earliest Rajput rulers to conduct organized naval operations.

His prominence eventually drew the attention of Sultan Muhammad bin Tughluq of the Delhi Sultanate, who was suppressing a revolt in Gujarat. In 1347, the Sultan attacked Ghogha; Mokhadaji was slain, and the fort on Piram was razed. His son, Dungarji, later recaptured both Ghogha and Piram, cementing the island's place in local folklore. The dramatic events inspired the ballad "Mokhdoji", immortalized in Jhaverchand Meghani's *Saurashtra ni Rasdhaar*. Among the fishermen of the region, Mokhadaji's story endures through songs, oral histories, and a unique ritual: before setting sail, locals offer a coconut and a coin to the sea, chanting "Le Mokhdaji taru daan", a plea for his blessings and protection.

Piram Bet continued to serve as a stronghold and settlement for fishermen and farmers even after the destruction of its fort. In the mid-18th century (c. 1729), a Surat merchant, Mulla Muhammad Ali, constructed a new fort to establish himself as an independent chief. Eventually, the island fell under the control of the Bhavnagar royal family, who erected a bastion on the southwest corner to monitor maritime activity. Later, in 1864–65, the British built a 24-meter-high circular masonry lighthouse on the remains of Mulla's bastion, one of the earliest in the region. Today, the island belongs to the Raol family, acquired by Sidhraj Singh Raol, affectionately known as Banna Bapa, whose admiration for Piram's history inspired its preservation.



*Piram Bet is resilient. It has stood for millions of years, through shifting seas and climates. What it needs is recognition and structured care, not overprotection.*

*– Harshvardhan Singh Raol, proprietor, Piram Island*

”



## Fossils and Paleontological Significance

Beyond its human history, PIRAM BET is a treasure trove of paleontological significance. Fossils of extinct giraffids of the Sivatheriine group, including Bramatherium and Sivatherium, once roamed the area, offering insight into the evolution of giraffes in South Asia. Fossils of the ancient three-toed horse, Hipparion, link the island to broader Late Miocene fauna known from other parts of India. Perhaps the island's most remarkable discovery is the prehistoric side-necked turtle *Piramys auffenbergi*, named after the island and whose modern relatives exist only in South America and Madagascar.

The earliest significant fossil finds, including giraffes and Hipparion remains, were documented in the 1860s during British colonial rule. In 1974, paleontologist K.N. Prasad formally described *Piramys auffenbergi* from a fossil skull recovered on the island, solidifying PIRAM's place in global paleontological research. The fossils are preserved on site, offering scientists a rare, direct window into the Late Miocene era, roughly 8 million years ago. Occasional finds of dinosaur bones and teeth fragments hint at even deeper geological history, though these are less studied compared to fossils from Balasinor or Kutch.

Fossil discoveries on the island have mostly occurred opportunistically rather than through systematic archaeological excavation. British geologists first collected marine mammal and Hipparion remains in the 1860s. Later finds, like Prasad's *Piramys auffenbergi*, were made by individual researchers and paleontologists. Small-scale expeditions, including a National Geographic mission in 1994 with Sidhraj Singh Raol's assistance, brought attention to PIRAM's unique paleontological wealth.

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*PIRAM BET has historically served as a nesting ground for Olive Ridley turtles and, to a lesser extent, Green turtles. These globally threatened species lay eggs from November to February. Harshvardhan Singh Raol recalls watching hundreds of turtles crawl up the shore at night to nest, and how his father, Banna Bapa, quietly safeguarded their fragile habitats. Unfortunately, plastic pollution, industrial activity from Alang shipbreaking yard, and human disturbance have sharply reduced their numbers.*

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## Ecosystem and Wildlife

The island's ecosystem is equally remarkable. Its isolation and saline environment nurture coastal scrub vegetation, sandy stretches, and tidal wetlands, providing a haven for birdlife. Peacocks, gulls, terns, cormorants, herons, and egrets are common, while migratory species such as flamingos, oystercatchers, and Eurasian curlews visit seasonally along the Arabian Sea flyway. PIRAM BET has historically served as a nesting ground for Olive Ridley turtles and, to a lesser extent, Green turtles. These globally threatened species lay eggs from November to February. Harshvardhan Singh Raol recalls watching hundreds of turtles crawl up the shore at night to nest, and how his father, Banna Bapa, quietly safeguarded their fragile habitats. Unfortunately, plastic pollution, industrial activity from Alang shipbreaking yard, and human disturbance have sharply reduced their numbers.

Government initiatives now attempt to mitigate ecological damage from Alang. Designated “green plots” at the shipyard aim to reduce hazardous waste discharge and pollutants entering the Gulf of Khambhat. While progress has been made, effective enforcement and community participation remain crucial for the island's biodiversity.

PIRAM's flora is adapted to saline soils and isolation, with hardy species such as *Prosopis*, *Salvadora*, and mangroves (*Avicennia*). Though no plant is endemic solely to PIRAM BET, its coastal shrubs are regionally significant, and reports note the presence of medicinal and salt-tolerant plants rare on the Saurashtra mainland.

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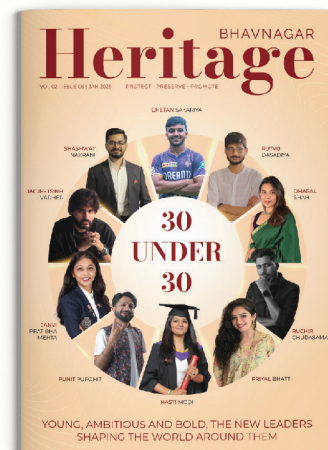
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## COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

# THE MOOD SPACE: PIONEERING MENTAL WELLNESS ACROSS INDIA



In an era where mental health is often overlooked, The Mood Space is reshaping the conversation, making counselling and emotional wellbeing accessible to individuals and organisations alike. Founded by Vidhi Merchant, the organisation has become a one-stop solution for those seeking support, guidance, and structured programs that address stress, anxiety, grief, burnout, and other mental health challenges. But while Vidhi's journey is inspiring, the true story is of a growing organisation that bridges the gap between professional mental health care and communities that often lack access.

The seeds of The Mood Space were sown in Bhavnagar, Vidhi's hometown. She recalls her early education there before moving to a boarding school in Singapore for three years. From Singapore, she went on to study in the United States, completing both her bachelor's and master's degrees at the University of Virginia and Columbia University, respectively. These formative years exposed her to cultures and systems where emotional wellness was embedded into daily life. "Growing up in Bhavnagar, conversations about stress or anxiety were rare. You just had to move on! But studying abroad showed me that counselling doesn't need to be a response to crisis; it can be part of everyday life," she reflects.

Returning to Bhavnagar, Vidhi was confronted with a stark reality: despite her qualifications, opportunities were limited. Mental health remained heavily stigmatised, and starting a private practice was not viable since people were reluctant to seek support locally. She began her professional journey as a school counsellor at Podar International School, working with students and honing her clinical skills. Yet, she recognised that the need for mental health support went far beyond the classroom.

**"I wanted to make mental health and therapy accessible to people across India. Particularly in tier 2 and tier 3 cities, support is scarce. The Mood Space was born out of that need."**

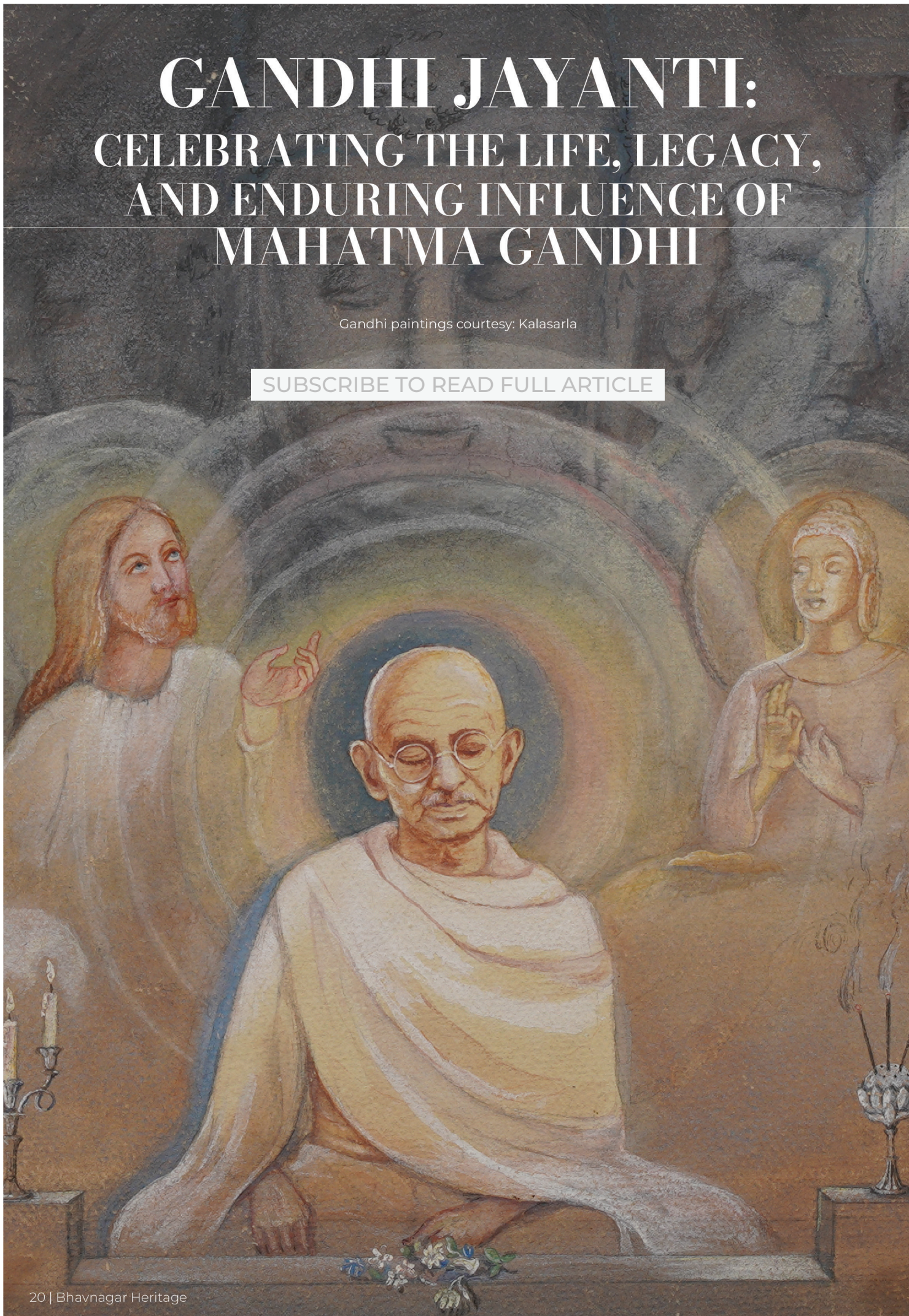
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# GANDHI JAYANTI: CELEBRATING THE LIFE, LEGACY, AND ENDURING INFLUENCE OF MAHATMA GANDHI

Gandhi paintings courtesy: Kalasarla

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# NINE NIGHTS OF FAITH AND CELEBRATION AT RAJAPARA

In the small town of Rajapara, Bhavnagar, Khodiyar Mandir has long been a place of faith, comfort, and community. Every year, during Navratri, the temple transforms into a lively, joyous space filled exclusively with women, all coming together to celebrate Khodiyar Ma with devotion, dance, and song.

From the very first night, there is a palpable energy in the air. Women dressed in vibrant chaniya cholis gather in the temple courtyard, their laughter and excitement blending with the steady rhythm of the dhol and the clinking of dandiya sticks. The garba that follows is an expression of love and gratitude, a way to connect with the divine through movement and music. For those who attend, it is as if time slows down, and the temple becomes a world of its own, alive with faith and tradition.

This year, the spiritual atmosphere was enriched by Bhaktiba Jethwa, a renowned folk singer, whose voice echoed through the temple on all nine nights. Her songs are simple yet powerful, carrying stories of devotion and folk wisdom that

touch the heart. As her melodies floated above the crowd, women swayed and danced, fully immersed in the celebration.

The Shri Khodiyar Mandir Trust works purposefully to keep these traditions alive. By organising the festival exclusively for women and preserving the authentic rituals of Navratri, the Trust offers a space where culture and devotion coexist naturally. In a world that often rushes forward, the temple becomes a sanctuary where generations can pause, celebrate, and connect with their roots.

Navratri at Shri Khodiyar Mandir is a living tradition, a celebration of community, and a heartfelt expression of devotion. Each night leaves an imprint on the heart, a reminder of the power of faith, the beauty of culture, and the joy of being part of something larger than oneself.

For more information about the temple and its programmes, visit [khodiyarmandirtrust.com](http://khodiyarmandirtrust.com).





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# CHANGING TRADITIONS: THE EVOLUTION OF WOMEN'S ATTIRE IN INDIA

- Jalpa Padaya

Women's clothing in India has always reflected a blend of cultural tradition, regional identity, and social status. Among upper-caste women in both urban and rural areas, traditional garments like ghagra (or chania), polka, and saree have remained central to their attire. A common cultural practice has been to drape a saree in such a way that the head is covered, symbolizing modesty and respect.

Interestingly, the attire of working-class women, especially in urban areas, is quite similar to that of their upper-caste counterparts, although the quality of fabric is typically coarser. In rural regions, shepherd women are known for wearing woolen garments such as jimmies, kapadras, and odhanis suited to their environment and lifestyle.

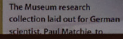
Young girls traditionally wore chania, choli, and odhani, but as the 20th century progressed, Western influences introduced frocks into everyday wear for girls. The period following India's independence marked a significant shift in women's fashion, particularly among the educated. Western clothing, salwar-kameez combinations, and fusion styles began to take precedence, especially in urban settings.

Despite these shifts, the saree has retained its importance and continues to be a mainstay in Indian women's wardrobes. However, practices like covering the head with the saree have seen a notable decline. Today, many women, like their male counterparts, go about their day with uncovered heads, moving more freely in public spaces.

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The arrival of systematic taxidermy in India coincided with British colonial expansion, a period of fascination with and dominion over nature. Hunting, especially of apex predators such as tigers, leopards, and cheetahs, was considered a demonstration of courage, skill, and social status. For British officers and Indian princes, every hunt was a ritualized encounter with power, each kill transformed into a symbol of human mastery over the wild. Taxidermy provided a means of





# HOME TO HERITAGE: THE CHANGING FACE OF INDIAN WEDDINGS

By Maulik Thakkar, Wedding Planner – Dreamfest Events



## The Courtyard of Memories

I still remember the first time I saw my parents' wedding photographs. They were grainy, slightly faded, yet full of life. My mother in a simple red saree, shyly smiling; my father in a cream sherwani, looking both proud and nervous. Behind them, the familiar walls of our family home were decorated with marigold strings, mango leaves, and bedsheets borrowed from neighbours to create makeshift backdrops. It was not extravagant, but it was beautiful.

Everything, from the food to the seating arrangements, was managed by the family. Aunts cooked for days in the courtyard, uncles took turns at the gate to welcome guests, and cousins ran around with plates of snacks. The house was alive with laughter, music, and the aroma of freshly fried pakoras. Back then, almost every wedding in our town was like this - intimate, homegrown, and overflowing with warmth.

Looking back, one wonders, in the age of grand palaces and curated experiences, do we sometimes lose this sense of intimate participation and shared joy? Or is it possible to carry this warmth into the new era of celebrations?

## The Shift: When Life Changed, Weddings Changed Too

Over the years, our way of living has transformed and with it, the way we celebrate. Families that once lived together under one roof are now often spread across cities or even countries. Homes have become smaller, families more nuclear, and everyone, from parents to cousins, is busier than ever with work and personal commitments.

This shift meant that the "all-hands-on-deck" style of home weddings became harder to manage. Tasks that were once shared among relatives, such as cooking, welcoming guests, and arranging décor, began to shift towards professionals. Catering moved from the family kitchen to commercial kitchens. Décor evolved from locally available flowers to designer setups. Photography transformed from posed portraits to candid storytelling.



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