

# Sahaj ✿ The Vernacular Furniture of Gujarat book

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The First Book Published By Cept University Press Tells How Local Needs Had Shaped Vernacular Furniture In Gujarat

# WHEN FURNITURE SPEAKS IN GUJARATI!

## AUTHENTIC IDIOM



### HICHKO: SWING

Still seen in a number of Gujarati households, the suspended seat is also known as 'Hindlo' in Saurashtra, the word having its roots in Sanskrit 'Hindlo/ Dola'. A large number of old houses with courtyards or porches have the 'hichko' which has many variants - ranging from the humble paati, a plank of wood, to early 20th century versions more resembling benches and ornamental dhoni/khaat.

### DHOLIYO: CHARPOY

Typically found in Saurashtra, its masculine name signifies its primary use by men. It is characterised by a surface of interlaced cotton tapes and heavy turned wooden legs coated with red lacquer. The feminine variant is known as 'ohini'.

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When someone says 'furniture,' the first things that come to mind are table, chair or wardrobe. But well before the European model was adopted from late 19th century, Gujarat's regions had a unique voice when it came to what adorned their houses.

A book, 'Sahaj: Vernacular Furniture of Gujarat' by Mitraja Bais, research associate, Jay Thakkar, associate professor; and Samrudha Dixit, research assistant at Design Innovation and Craft Resource Centre (DICRC) of CEPT University and Ben Cartwright, collection curator of the South Asian Decorative Arts and Crafts Collection (SADACC), has put forth the unique furniture legacy of the state ranging from Bechar/ floor seat to Majus/ chest.

The book, the first publication of CEPT University Press, was launched by Gujarat CM Vijay Rupani, on October 10.

Thakkar says the book is the result of Phase I of The Vernacular Furniture of North-West India Project which is also covering states like Rajasthan, Punjab and Haryana. "The first thing that strikes you about vernacular furniture of Gujarat is how a majority of them are closer to ground, more suitable for cross-legged sitting - right from floor seat to patlo or paati/bench."



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"Over a period of three years, we managed to map about 2,000 of the furniture pieces - primarily from rural areas and dating from year 1900 and onwards," he said.

The book divides furniture into five categories - Aasan: Seat, Manch: Bed, Majus: Storage, Sopar: Surface and Nasti: Object. The team car-

ried out extensive surveys and also mapped the artisans and furniture styles in different regions.

The book observes that social and economic changes have affected traditional furniture. Today even villagers have to travel to purchase items such as damachyo/ mattress bench as majush/ dowry chest is no longer commissioned. "Now only pockets such as Ludiya and Bhujodi in Kutch or Dholka near Ahmedabad produce specific kind of furniture. The language of ornamentation has changed however as they are catering to urban and export market," says the book. "The primary purpose of the project is to highlight the indigenous designs and its connection with the land. But it is also to provide a starting point for budding designers to get inspiration and create something for rural India," said Thakkar. "We do see a few interesting projects where the old furniture is re-imagined. The furniture is also closely associated with artisans. Through an online platform, we also want to keep the tradition alive," he added.



### DABLU: BRASS CONTAINER

loosely associated with communities like Kathi, the cylindrical brass/copper container with three legs was once displayed proudly in households. It was used to store a bride-to-be's possessions, but they were also used to store jewellery and valuables.



### DHICHANIYO: KNEE PROP

Unique to parts of Saurashtra, the dumbbell-shaped prop was used to keep beneath a folded knee while sitting. It was made both of wood and brass.

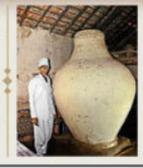
### DHALIYO: MERCHANT'S DESK

A signature furniture in any Gujarati pedhi of yore, it's considered to be a great example of how utility shaped early furniture designs. It derived its name from dhal or slope which was used to write books of account. The upper flat part was used to keep the inkpot, whereas the multi-compartment inner design allowed storage of documents, money and other valuables.



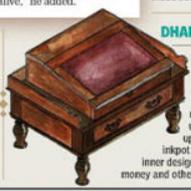
### SANJERYU: LARDER

One can call it a rudimentary refrigerator as it is a mud, hay and dung cabinet having wooden doors. Unique to Kutch region, it was used to store perishable food items including milk and curd. Mud kept it cool whereas dung worked as antiseptic.



### KOTHI: GRANARY

While not exactly a wooden item, kothi or kotlio are made of clay by individual families for storing grains. The granary made of bamboo is known as kabho. It was designed as an airtight container as the grain used to be filled according to requirement and then the mouth of the container sealed with the same material. A small opening, known as aano was kept near the base from where the grain was extracted.



We're very pleased that one of our most prolific authors Mitraja Bais has co-authored a remarkable survey of the vernacular furniture of Gujarat.

*Sahaj: Vernacular Furniture of Gujarat*, co-authored by Mitraja Bais, Jay Thakkar, Samrudha Dixit and Ben Cartwright, is the result of the first ever survey and accompanying research of vernacular furniture in Gujarat. It is the result of Phase I: Gujarat of the Vernacular Furniture of North-West India project, a collaboration between Design Innovation and Craft Resource Centre (DICRC), CEPT University and the South Asian Decorative Arts and Crafts Collection Trust (SADACC), UK. This book focuses on vernacular furniture in Gujarat from c.1900 to the present. Nearly 2000 furniture pieces and associated objects were recorded during the course of this research. Sahaj is published by the CEPT University Press and supported by Gujarat Tourism, Government of Gujarat.



Sahaj  
Vernacular Furniture of Gujarat

Mitraja Bais | Jay Thakkar | Samrudha Dixit | Ben Cartwright

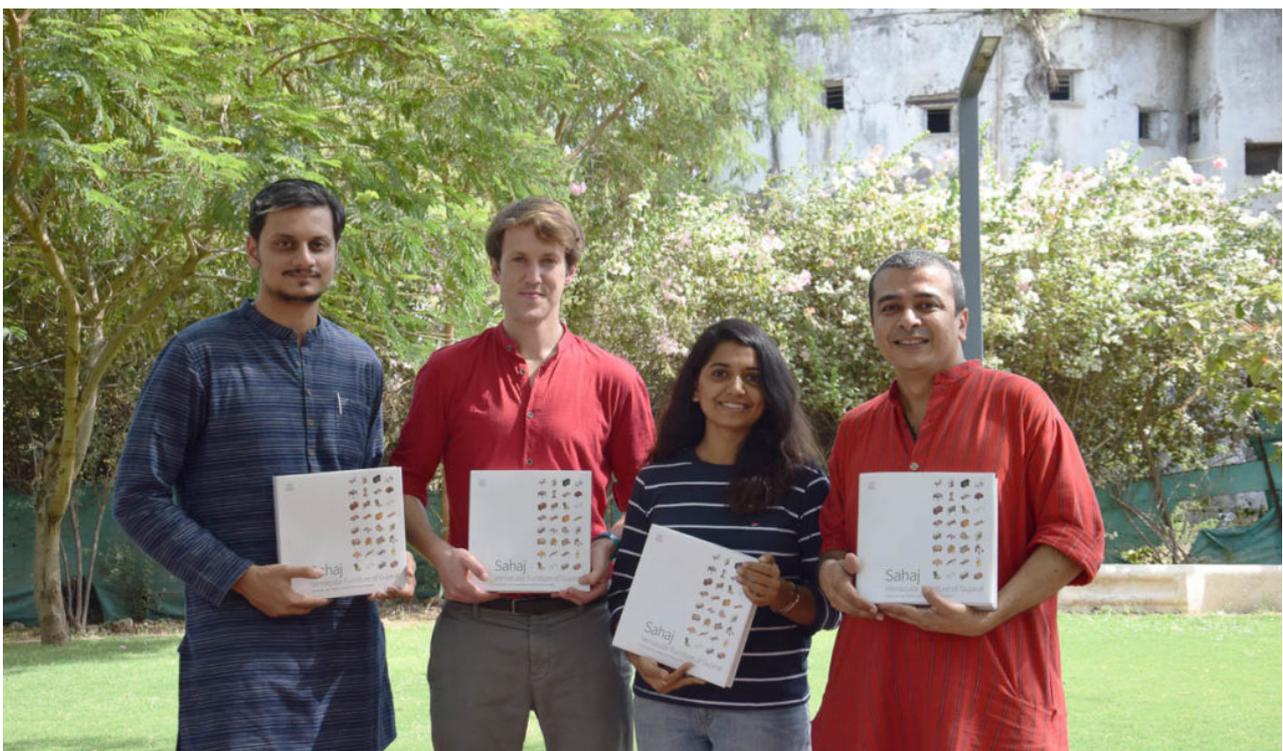
Vernacular furniture is the traditional everyday furniture made and used by many different communities throughout the state. The Gujarati term *Sahaj* can mean either “inherent” or “intrinsic”, and this book introduces the everyday furniture that is inherent to, and still is made and used throughout Gujarat: whether that be a local household constructing a *kothi* (grain store) from mud; a *kharadi* (woodturner) crafting the lacquered frame of a *parnu* (cradle); or a *suthar* or *mistri* (carpenter) creating the series of joints and complicated interlocking compartments in a *majju* (a large and ornate hope chest on wheels, decorated with carved wooden grills or inset glazed ceramic tiles).

The vernacular furniture presented in *Sahaj* plays an important role in the tasks and rituals of everyday life in Gujarat, and in some cases, has done for centuries. Furniture items are presented in five use-based chapters: Aasan: seat; Manch: bed; Manjush: storage; Sapaat: surface; and Vastu: objects. Each furniture type is accompanied with detailed physical information (materials, construction methods, scaled drawings and exploded drawings made using 3D modelling software) and a more human story (location, contextual photographs, oral histories). Gujarat is a large and environmentally diverse state with a number of different communities and language groups; the vernacular furniture in *Sahaj* reflects this diversity.

Despite vernacular furniture’s important position in the material culture of Gujarat, there is a lack of accurate information on these items, which is linked to a wider absence of research. This book addresses some of the factors that have influenced changes in vernacular furniture use and manufacture from c.1900 to the present, reviews previous scholarship and ideas about this furniture across the twentieth century, and provides an in-depth overview of Gujarat, its landscapes and the communities that live there.

## Authors

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Mitraja Bais is a Research Associate at DICRC, CEPT University, Ahmedabad, India. Her research interests lie in sustainable design and disciplines that harness indigenous crafts at their core. For this project, Mitraja was the Team Leader and Principal Researcher. Some key areas of her research into vernacular furniture have been: its history, usage and related human stories and understanding the association between furniture and the Gujarati language.

Jay Thakkar is an Associate Professor and UG Program Coordinator at Faculty of Design and Director at DICRC, CEPT University, Ahmedabad, India. He has worked on various design, crafts and research projects in India, Europe and Australia. His expertise on wood carvings of Gujarat was of significant value to this research. Sahaj is his fourth publication in the field of craft, tradition and heritage of India.

Samrudha Dixit is an Industrial Designer by education and a research assistant at DICRC, CEPT University. He has been one of the key researchers on this project, travelling and interacting with numerous scholars and craftspeople throughout Gujarat.

Dr. Ben Cartwright is Collection Curator for The South Asia Collection and the SADACC Trust, Norwich, UK. In this project, he has studied vernacular furniture as a form of material culture (specifically, the links between craft, community, landscape and belonging); and how vernacular furniture crafting and use has changed over time in Gujarat, including the social, political and environmental factors that have influenced this process.

*The Vernacular Furniture of North-West India project is a collaborative initiative of Design Innovation and Craft Resource Centre (DICRC), CEPT University and the South Asian Decorative Arts and Crafts Collection Trust (SADACC), UK. It is a pioneering research project that undertakes survey and extensive research on traditional everyday furniture belonging to a particular region or community across North-West India. The research focuses on the four states that form the region of North-West India: Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Punjab and Haryana; and is envisioned in three phases out of which, Phase I: Gujarat was recently accomplished.*

*The first phase of this project focused on Gujarat, where nearly 2000 items of vernacular furniture and associated objects were recorded. The result of Phase I: Gujarat is a twofold output: Sahaj: Vernacular Furniture of Gujarat, and Vernacular Furniture of Gujarat: Catalogue. The subsequent phases for Vernacular Furniture of North-West India project, each involving fieldwork, documentation and research, are Phase II: Rajasthan and Phase III: Punjab and Haryana.*

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