

Heritage Curator and Soul Keeper of Indian Maritime - Asha Sheth

Vasant J. Sheth Foundation was formed by The Great Eastern Shipping who were the settlor of the foundation. My interest had always been history and culture and therefore I started working on the coastal culture. It took a long time to finish this project. It hasn't been the best documentation, but I feel that some idea has emerged out of this documentation. While doing the document Surat turned out to be very interesting trade and culture port and we located a store house factory of the Dutch period exactly in the middle of the town where the Tapti river is. From this emerged the idea of a Maritime Museum from Mrs. Sheth that in Surat or anywhere else in India we should have a Maritime Museum.

Can you tell us about your Maritime Museum project and your connection with IIM Ahmedabad's Shipping Management Course?

The foundation was founded by The Great Eastern Shipping Company in which the objects of foundation were sea and shipping related. My interest was always in history and culture. Therefore, I added Maritime Heritage as a part of Maritime Museum.



**Asha Sheth
Chairperson at Vasant J Sheth
Memorial Foundation**

As museum being more of my interest and after having had seen the National Maritime Museum in United Kingdom, I clicked on the idea of having a Maritime Museum in India. I am talking of about ten years before Surat culturally and historically has been a very important city port of India. I learnt about the museum concept working on Surat's history. We continued the scholarship safety workshop and lecture.

Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad was highly rated IIM institution. After throwing the idea to the Vice Chancellor of India of IIM. He also felt that a short course in shipping could be introduced some what like the Harvard Senior Management Business courses. He readily agreed on a course in shipping management and he recommended Professor Raghu Ram, who was already working in transport industry. Therefore, this

was a pioneering of the Vasant Sheth foundation. We readily provided research materials, papers, files etc., to Professor Raghu Ram and he then started working on preparing the Shipping Management course for Senior Managers. The shipping course was a very good success and lot of Senior Executives then lead the program, it



**Vasant Sheth, Capt. Ahuja, founder of Sea Cadet Corps,
K.M. Sheth, Asha Sheth.**



**Mrs. Asha V. Sheth, Chairperson and Arundhati De of the Vasant J. Sheth Memorial Foundation,
the team from the Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney along with the
candidates of the workshop in Kochi, Kerala.**

gave me great enthusiasm and encouragement.

The idea of Maritime Museum project came to me at this time and then I started lobbying for it as much as I could and continued my efforts about having a museum in Surat right on the river Tapti. There was a Dutch factory right on the coast which had been left with small government offices like post office etc., but to me it seemed an ideal period building for a restored museum. From that time idea of Maritime Museum has been present with me. I am very happy that the Ministry of Shipping has undertaken as a part of Sagarmala to set up a National Maritime Heritage complex. I and all other experts feel very proud to work on this National monument. The idea of the project was also encouraged by Modiji and Lothal was the site that was selected to set up this National Maritime Heritage complex.

The idea of museum was very new and not many people thought of Maritime Museum then and I am very happy a new awareness has been restored to our coastal culture. I started doing maritime documentation. I wrote to people whom I knew in Gujarat to get me two students to go around the coast of Gujarat and see if there is anything of historical interest that they could find. So, we can showcase that these are all the things of historical importance regarding our maritime heritage hugging our shoreline like mosques, temples, lighthouses and so on. There is a lot of interesting material that I have collected. It has taken nearly 6 to 7 years to do that. Not all of it is the very best, but at least I have done some work which is solid. So, I am very happy about it. Now, people are demanding, and scholars are coming forward.

They have asked me to be on this committee for National Maritime Heritage Complex, which is going to come in Lothal, an ancient trading port of India. It is on the Gujarat coast. Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi is very keen to develop Lothal into an international standard airline site. The whole maritime area with university, library, museum and all kinds of things from all over the world will be put here.

How long will this project take for completion?

It's a very large and national project and it should take at least 2-3 years more. We have come to a stage where serious work has started.

Was this part taken up by Shri Narendra Modi or the ministry of shipping?

I am sure the Prime Minister would certainly favour this national project, but the ministry of shipping has been instrumental in picking up the idea. It's a very

monumental project involving many ministers and of high International standards. An idea for a Maritime Museum in Mumbai is being supported by people of Mumbai. The Navy and citizens feel that Mumbai is the ideal place for showing the ocean trade and growth for economic structure.

You came into the Sheth family from a different family background. Tell us something about childhood times, association with freedom struggle and life after marriage?

I personally was very far from the shipping scene because I come from Uttar Pradesh, from well-known Malaviya family. I came from a very different culture and we were mainly connected with books and teaching and freedom struggle. We lived in Allahabad. Many members of my family were freedom fighters and my father were a special target of the British government as he was conducting the underground moment of the freedom struggle. The young freedom fighters had to work underground, therefore all the work had to be done secretly

For my family our inter caste marriage was very unusual. My grandfather did not like it at all. Particularly because we were from very high caste Brahmins. But my father Late K.D. Malaviya who set up ONGC etc., was very forward looking insisted to my grandfather that this inter caste marriage must take place and requested my grandfather and other senior members to attend. My father was progressive and a National leader. His principals were to integrate India. He practiced in personal life what he was socially fighting for.

Vasant Sheth was just starting to build the Great Eastern Shipping Company and often I met the Bhiwandiwala family who were a part of Great Easter Shipping. In the early stages there were Dr. Nagendra Singh the former Director General of Shipping, maintained a very high standard of working. Sumati Ben Morarji chairman was very respected shipping lady as she was the Chairperson of Scindia Steamship and the first president of INSA.

Vasant became part of INSA many times during his career of shipping and often I had met many seniors like Rama Swamy Mudaliyar, S. Jagannathan and many other eminent names which I can't recall, and we had a Company's Secretary Dr. Sankelcha a very knowledgeable person of the shipping industry who has written an excellent book on Great Eastern Shipping.

This was a great period of giving birth to National. Therefore, shipping like Shipping, Airlines etc., had to be a part of new nation and Nationalism which India was experiencing in that period.