

MAPPING MUMBAI

BY MEHER MARFATIA



IN A 10-PART SERIES, THE WRITER UNCOVERS LITTLE-KNOWN STORIES BEHIND WELL-KNOWN PEOPLE AND PLACES

You can write to Meher at mirrorfeedback@timesgroup.com

ALL IS WELL



DEEPAK TURBHEKAR

The holy-to-the-Parsis Bhika Behram kuva stands strong at Churchgate

Trust a grandmother to leave you with lifetime of faith in the waters of a well. Mine did so with ease.

It started with her telling the children in the family to say a silent, quick prayer in three situations. Each time we saw a pregnant woman (because having a normal baby is not to be taken for granted). Each time we dropped a book (because the printed word gifts you knowledge, which makes it sacred). Each time we passed a place of worship (because you have much to be grateful for).

The last gesture extended not just to temples, mosques, churches and agiaries but also to a small corner-hugging monument opposite the south-east curve of the Oval Maidan at Churchgate. An oasis of calm, the holy-to-the-Parsis Bhika Behram kuva stands strong and gracious. No desecration can violate its essence. Its beauty was restored even after vandals attacked its gorgeous stained glass canopy panels in 2004. The other side facing Cross Maidan welcomes every community. When a 19th-century plague ravaged a city then without the Powai and Tansa tanks, the fresh water of this well alone was declared fit to drink.

"Take more thanks there than favours," mamma urged us as she explained the wonders of this wishing well. Yet, as a schoolgirl, I ignored her advice, of course. Staring down into its waters where turtles serenely swam, I simply lit oil lamps chanting fervent pleas for exam success. God, help me crack those tricky trigonometry riddles, get hateful chemistry valencies to balance. In college it was pretty selfish again, all about angling for please-make-it-work romances and career choices. Thanks to the good sense age brings, the view slowly turned outward. With more meaningful requests like bouncing health for children, painless ageing for parents, much needed jobs for friends.

Not unlike most bonds between person and place, this too exudes an aura verging on magical. It takes hold the second you step into the lovely inner pavilion, sinking deeper at the lightest touch of a bowed forehead along the kuva's cool stone rim.

Thrown open in 1725, the legend behind the origin of this well is as fascinating as its boast of remaining a perennial sweet water source in an area of brackish supplies — remember, back then the Arabian Sea waves lapped way up to the well's walls. How this beloved structure was built three centuries ago, in an act of gratitude, makes an intriguing tale.

The story, dating to 1715, revolves around the adventures of poor man turned philanthropist, Bhika Behramji. On his way to Bombay from Bharuch to better his fortune, he found himself suddenly intercepted by Marathas who mistook him for a Muslim. At the time, the Marathas were at war with the Sultans of Gujarat. A petrified Behramji was freed from Pandegarh Fort only on conclusively proving that he was indeed Zoroastrian. This happened after a deliberate, dramatic show of his sudreh vest and kusti thread girdling the waist. Finally convinced he was really a Parsi, his jailors let go their suspect. It was to celebrate such a providential release, as well as his subsequent success as a prosperous merchant, that Behramji vowed to erect a well which would serve and soothe many. True to his word, he did.

So the flame flickers on. My constant relationship with an edifice now anointed A-grade heritage status continues. I still burn softly glowing diyas here every month, marvelling at the peace the stone girth of this well offers in the noisy heart of a Bombay buckling under the beat of business as usual.