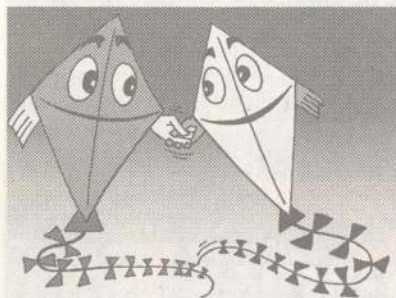


To soar, with love

By Meher Marfatia

Mumbai: Nothing thrills them more than the tug of the reel as thread unspools through nimble fingers. Then there is the sight of the kite soaring, high and far enough to be missed by most eyes—save those of seasoned kite fliers banding together to indulge in this sport from the age of innocence.

It's a thrill the members of the Golden Kite Club savour every weekend. Space-crunched Mumbai seems an unlikely hub for these low-tech aviators and the arc of the city's building boom can be charted by the club's often-shifting meeting grounds. In its early days, the club launched off from Cuffe Parade and Haji Ali. Now, its members have flown to clearer northern pas-



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tures—Versova's Seven Bungalows, Chetah Camp near Mankhurd

and Bandra-Kurla. Yet this motley bunch of enthusiastic children, housewives, businesspersons, bankers and retired professionals doesn't let the lack of real estate curb their passion.

"What I find most engrossing is the spirit of battle that kite-cutting demands," exulted Dilip Kapadia, who founded the club in 1973. In the thick of competition, he said, kite fliers often forget about meal times and work routines. "When we meet on the weekend," he noted, "there's fervent wishing that no family wedding or funeral will distract us from flying our beauties."

His son Deepak is quick to educate those inclined to dismiss 'patangbazi' as a trivial pursuit. "A serious kite flier may have a knowledge of basic aerodynamic principles, sound spatial reasoning, an intelligent blend of accuracy with creativity, a good grasp of physics, cool judgment and endless patience waiting to cut an opponent's kite," he said.

Rais Mian Qureshi lists another requirement—well developed vision. "Look," the 62-year-old baker urged. "No sign of glasses and I've squinted at patangs, my shauk, since I was a child."

His passion occasionally translates into money. He proudly recounted that he'd been Kite Consultant during a Rajasthan shoot for a soft drink ad featuring actor Amitabh Bachchan and cricket star Sachin Tendulkar. Mr Rais' shauk has rubbed off on his 12-year-old niece, Chaman Ara. She's taken to making miniature kites that fit on a fingernail.

On January 14 dawns Makar Sakrant, the feast of kites to fly and sweet til laddoos to enjoy. As the winds pick up over the city, so will the spirits of its kite fans. They will flock to maidans to send strands of colourful tails into the light wintry sky. Traditionally, the sun starts its northern journey on this day, coming into Makar Rashi when its rays are most beneficial. Engaging in outdoor activity in this bracing weather, including flying kites, was recommended in the Ramayana and Mahabharata.

Perhaps the sport's ancient history in the subcontinent has helped Indian enthusiasts hold their own at international kite cutting contests. Indian fighter kites with ingenious bamboo frames controlled by razor-sharp manjha soar on both days on which there's no wind and on days on which the wind is at its most blustery, travelling up to 3,000 metres, much further than keen kite cutting Asian and South American competitors. Mumbai's representatives in global tournaments have come away with such honours as Best Knight of the Manjhas and Honourable Mention, Fighter Kite.

Mumbai's kite aficionados often display their social consciences through their paper diamonds. Mr Kapadia and other masters of the game organise kite flying shows for charities—street children, old age homes and causes like Let's Fly for Freedom, an event hosted on Chowpatty beach at the behest of the American Kite Flyers Association to express solidarity for 9/11 victims. On January 18, the tourist department will host a kite flying display on the beach behind a Juhu hotel.

The city's kite enthusiasts hope to take their gospel to young people. They want to share with them the chills and spills of learning to fly gliders, of dual stunt lines, kite trains, dizzying stunts and combat styles in the air.

But proselytes are thin on the ground. As Mr Qureshi said, "In our childhood, undistracted by television or computers, we'd rush to the roof with kites after exams. The season started in the Diwali holidays and went up to Makar Sakrant. Hamaara to nasha tha. But today, there's no time to spare for this addiction."

(This column explores the numerous subcultures that add sparkle to the Mumbai mosaic.)