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INDIAN INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT Vastrapur, Ahmedabad 380 015

Mr Armoogum Parsuramen  
Director UNESCO  
New Delhi

28<sup>th</sup> April 2010

Dear Mr Parasuramen,

It was very nice to meet you and your colleague Ms Paromeeta De Sarkar at your office in Delhi last Friday. I am formally sending this letter representing 3 communities who have sought their inclusion into Ahmedabad's proposed bid to gain the status of a UNESCO Heritage City. According to the newspaper reports about the recent conference conducted by Ahmedabad jointly with UNESCO, a discussion about these sites has been missing in the broader heritage of Ahmedabad. While we will take up this initiative locally with the municipal government as well, the communities are keen to have their voices heard through channels that are independent. Please find a very brief description of these living cultural sites in Ahmedabad.

1. **Gulbai Tekra:** A settlement dating back to at least 1846, as a result of a group migration from Barmer in Rajasthan. Members of this community called Bawri, are skilled artisans and craftspeople that have developed a community livelihood space over a span of 165 years at Gulbai Tekra. This community can be seen as a significant part of Ahmedabad's living cultural heritage, with the community's well preserved traditional craft forms, passed through apprenticeship and oral traditions, festive customs, musical forms, indigenous knowledge about natural materials used for making clothes, votive sculpture and idols and conservation of natural and community resources. On the morning of 28<sup>th</sup> April 2010, non-local members of this community from all over Gujarat and Rajasthan participated in a cultural ritual known as 'Barmah', the 12th day of mourning of a Clan Chieftain's demise at Gulbai Tekra. This site is considered sacred by the community as they were provided a living and livelihood space by a landowning Parsi woman devotee when it was a hilly forest in the 1840s (and it takes its name, Gulbai, from her). This community is under immediate threat of the demolition of their workshops and living spaces, and part of their self-built homesteads have been demolished a few months ago, pushing this community towards great vulnerability and lowering their ability to survive in an urban setting as a traditional craftspeople's community representing myriad aspects of intangible cultural heritage.
2. **Gujari Bazaar:** Gujari Bazaar or the Sunday Market, is a 596 year old open informal market that continues to this day, run by the community organization of traders that comprises both hindus and muslims, with 40% of its 1200 members being non-dependent women. In addition, the market has provided ad-hoc stalls for another one thousand traders each Sunday. The market is crucial in providing livelihoods to hundreds of thousands of Ahmedabad's residents and non-residents

through complex chains of craftspeople, home-workers, mechanics, small traders, technicians, book-sellers providing a range of items such as all kinds of newly made or refurbished household goods, auto and mechanic supplies, rare coins and antiquarian books, new and used electronic items, cameras, clothes, bicycles, pushcarts, crockery and cutlery (some from the colonial period), paintings, furniture (new as well as period furniture), office supplies, school supplies etc at prices that are affordable, and this makes the market a huge draw from within the city and state, as well as from the region . It is the backbone of Ahmedabad's informal sector which comprises 75% of all of Ahmedabad's working population. The rich cultural, economic and social networks facilitated throughout history by the market have been documented in a 600 page unpublished handwritten manuscript, written by the association's office bearers over generations, and well preserved as a live-historical document that can continue to be augmented with time. It is situated at the Old City wall, at the Sabarmati Riverbank. However, the space for this market had been circumscribed already by construction activities of the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project of the municipal government, and will be entirely evacuated soon, with no clear plans of rehabilitation or conservation.

3. The **Chharanagar Settlement**: The Chhara community were indigenous and nomadic people of the Punjab region who were "notified" and settled by order of the British colonial government and confined in a colony called Chharanagar in the 1930s. After independence they were released from the settlement, but many chose to remain in close proximity, having essentially no resources or other means of livelihood and no retraining in skills considered productive for society. Due to their history of nomadism and forced sedentization, social stigmas have developed about the Chharas that place them at considerable disadvantage in competing for jobs and education. They have become scapegoats and usual suspects for police, who are able to use Chharas for illegal purposes, such as brewing country liquor under threat of compulsion. This places Chharas in constant uneasy relation to authority and has resulted in an extremely high rate of incarceration. Youth find it very difficult to acquire and retain employment. Yet Chharas are highly motivated to excel at education, and Chharanagar boasts an impressive number of professionals.

However, given the spatial cohesion of the community, the cultural traditions, customs, art forms, theatrical practices, indigeneous skills have been well preserved over generations. The **Budhan Theatre** is a key vehicle that documents and enacts the heritage and experiences of the Chhara community and emerges as a significant contemporary form of social and cultural expression in the urban social space in Ahmedabad. Originally scripted on the experiences of De-notified Tribes, Budhan Theatre's performances have included experimental forms of participatory theatre, street-theatre as well as proscenium theatre based on the works of national and international playwrights. Through this form, their goal is to demonstrate that Chharas and other communities are not "born criminals," they are humans with real emotions, capacities, and aspirations. Through the dramatization of the events surrounding custodial deaths, abductions, beatings and torture of such tribes throughout the country, the Budhan Theatre has sought to

transform the way in which mainstream society perceives these communities, and challenge those stigmas. The Settlement is a key symbol in Chhara history and the City's heritage, which is being used as a government facility. The Chhara community seeks promotion of their cultural way of life particularly the transition from the stigma it faces, through a celebration and acknowledgment of their identity in Ahmedabad's contemporary urban aspiration. We seek to reclaim the Settlement as a community space, as a Living Museum to conserve and preserve their traditions, history, experiences, customs and place in Ahmedabad.

Our communities are bearers of the knowledge about these 3 sites, and the undersigned representatives from the communities are committed to providing UNESCO, IIM Ahmedabad, or any other agency, support towards a systematic documentation of their intangible heritage towards their survival and efforts at conservation. We shall be happy to provide tours to your team, organize visits, meet with community members, host workshops, and create and maintain documentation as you suggest. At IIM Ahmedabad, along with associates in prominent institutions such as CEPT University and the National Institute of Design, we are committed to providing support to these communities and in turn have been mentored by them for the past few years in our gaining knowledge about their place in the social and cultural fabric of Ahmedabad, and fully support this process. We shall be happy to provide any assistance, and also share the documentation we have already carried out in support of their aspiration.

These sites of community heritage are currently endangered either through neglect or by eviction and displacement from private and public infrastructure projects. These processes are threatening the survival of these communities and their cultural heritage. Our collective effort may prevent them from being purged from Ahmedabad's collective memory and its future imagination.

Yours truly,

Dakxin Chhara, Budhan Theatre, Chharanagar

Nafis Ahmed, President, Gujarati Market Traders Association

Magabhai Bhati, Gulbai Tekra Community Leader

Beena Jadav, Community Researcher

Darshini Mahadevia (Professor, CEPT University)

Tanishka Kachru, Faculty, National Institute of Design

Sahil Kureshi, LD Arts College, Gujarat University

Navdeep Mathur, Assistant Professor, IIM Ahmedabad