

Charting a trade route from Kutch to Commercial Street, via Mumbai

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Traders and businessmen mostly, the Kutchi Memon community charted a long journey from Kutch in Gujarat to Bangalore in Karnataka centuries ago

“Most of the old shops in Commercial Street are owned by members of the Kutchi Memon community,” says Anjum Razack, interior designer with the Prestige Group. Razack’s family, including brothers Irfan Razack and Rezwan Razack, has contributed immensely to changing the skyline of the city. From the city’s first multiplex in Forum Mall, Koramangala, to a number of high-profile office buildings in new Bangalore, their real estate conglomerate, The Prestige Group, is one of the biggest in Bangalore.

“Bangalore has changed immensely over the decades,” says Anjum Razack. “Even though our community’s traditions seem to be getting lost in this dynamism, I feel the city has the right mix of liberalism and culture. But, today, traditions are becoming simpler — people just follow them, they don’t understand their values.” Sabiha Mohamed, who runs frozen foods business Abba Foods in Bangalore and is part of the Kutchi Memon community, says,

“Even though there has been a drastic change in our language and the way we dress, most of the rituals regarding weddings and other ceremonies remain the same.”

The Kutchi Memons used to speak a mixture of Sindhi and Gujarati, but now they speak broken Urdu. Most Kutchi Memons migrated from Gujarat during the famine centuries ago. While some sailed to Kenya and Mombasa in Africa, others set up base in Mumbai. “Most of the Bangalore Kutchi Memons migrated from Mumbai,” says Mohamed, whose family has lived here for four generations.

Clannish in nature — Anjum Razack says most Kutchi Memons in the city are related to each other — the community organises a jamatkhana wherever they go. “It’s an association of the prominent members of the community. Even today, the jamatkhana is a strong institution; however, the meetings have become less frequent,” explains Mohamed.

Having spent more than four decades in the city, former Congress minister and social activist Nafees Fazal has seen the city undergo many changes. “There was a time when children used to skate around the Mosque Road Bridge. Today, it’s impossible,” says Fazal.

Fazal feels her community has also gone through a social liberalisation of sorts. “Kutchi Memons used to get married to people from the same community. Today, things are more relaxed. In fact, because of inter-community marriages, there are very few pure Kutch Memons left in the country — there must be a maximum of 1 lakh.”

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