

ANAVIL HISTORY

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As a general rule, Indian History has not been well recorded. In instances where it has been recorded, general availability is poor. A lot of it probably lays hidden in private hands. Foreign visitors did leave records in their own countries and this has been one source. Hence, we have to rely on these few written records and the oral tradition where such history passed on from one generation to another. Such versions are likely to be embellished or inaccurate due to exaggerated or faultily recollection of the history.

My account has been reconstructed from written records of my father, other articles written in the last three to four hundred years, the oral tradition and some logical conjectures. I did not attempt to delve any further back than 1500 AD, as sources are far from reliable.

For many Anavil youngsters growing up in North America, this particular history may not seem very relevant but I do believe that knowledge of our origins, accomplishments and failures provides stability and continuity to our existence. A Sanskrit proverb says that a person who forsakes his roots loses direction and the new roots he wants to claim may not happen in his or her lifetime. Thus, compilation done in the early era of Anavil Diaspora in North America could provide a steady focus. I do however feel that this should not become a total preoccupation and must be viewed as a link in the continuum of our existence.

Homeland:

By all accounts, all Anavils consider Surat and Valsad districts in South Gujarat as their homeland, no matter where they live today. The area between the two South Gujarat cities, Surat and Vapi, are the natural boundaries (though the borders have broadened to the North and South by a few miles over the years). The area covers approximately 5 000 sq. miles and is generally a very fertile flat plain into which many rivers drain (e.g. Tapi, Purna, Mindhola, Ambika, Kaveri, Auranga and Daman-Ganga). Most of them originate in the Satpura ranges and empty into the Arabian Sea.

Religion:

The Anavils are Brahmins by cast but they are “grahasthi” Brahmins and unlike most other Brahmin communities they do not perform priestly duties. Hence, they get no alms or gifts from clients. This is why they are called “Ayachki Brahmins”- meaning Brahmins who don’t take alms. Anavils usually follow Lord Shiva, however, these days this distinction is not acute – they are broader in their interpretation of religious affiliation.

The word Anavil itself is interesting. It is a combination of two Sanskrit words, UN and Avil. UN is a common Sanskrit prefix which means “not” and Avil means “dirty” or “impure”. Thus, the two words together mean “not impure”. The double negative usage signifies very pure. One might conclude

from a historical perspective that Anavils must have had a reputation for being very upright and having integrity. This should make today's Anavils ponder a little and look upon their forefathers with pride.

Professions:

As stated above, Anavils did not earn their living by being priests. So they must have been farmers, teachers, politicians, pirates, soldiers of fortune, etc. My conjecture is that they did all of this to varying degrees. Circa about 1500 AD, Anavils were popularly known as Bhatellas. It is certain that the word Desai did not apply to these Anavils at that time. This word has five interpreted meanings:

- (1) Bhatella is a combination of two Sanskrit words-Bhat and Eela. Bhat means a soldier and Eela means land or earth. Hence one interpretation is that they were soldier-farmers.
- (2) It could be a combination of Bhat and Hathilla. Hathilla means tenacious. Hence the word could mean tenacious soldiers.
- (3) Bhatella could be a degenerated word from Bhrishtilla - meaning those that have degenerated from their Brahmin Heritage. It denotes a lower status amongst priests.
- (4) Bhat colloquially means rice hence the word could mean Rice farmers.
- (5) Bhat has another dictionary meaning of river delta, hence it also could mean Anavils were people who lived and farmed the Tapi river delta.

I personally prefer the interpretation of Soldier Farmer. This is because one needed to be strong to farm, as there was no central authority at the time and might was right – no community would be prominent without some fighting capabilities. Even today, Anavils are viewed as being more combative when compared to other Gujaratis. Even our last names like Naik (Nayak), Vashi, Mehta, etc. denote soldiering affiliations.

Naik (Nayak) means a platoon leader in Sanskrit (also Gananayak), Vashi means to control or to lead and Mehta was presumably an accountant needed in the army. Later, Mehta got interchanged with the meaning of a trader or a teacher. When the first Mogul King, Akbar, came as far south as Surat in 1569 or 1570, he needed administrators and tax collectors for the newly conquered territories. He must have been struck by the soldiering and other abilities of some Bhatellas and chose some of them to be his administrators. Thus some of our forefathers helped Akbar to consolidate his conquests of areas in and around Surat. My family accounts show that we were given this privilege by Akbar's son Jehangir (or Salim before he became the King). Once a year these collectors traveled to Delhi to remit the money. This was a distance of 700 miles or so. With good horses they did this distance in less than a month. My forefathers made this trip once a year according to family records.

For the services they performed, the Moguls compensated by giving them ten percent of what they collected and had to pay no taxes on their lands. This compensation was termed "dahshai"- a Persian word meaning a tenth - which was then corrupted into Desai. This gift later on took other names such as Jagir, Inamdari (another Persian word – Inam meaning a gift). Anavils were not the only people selected for this job. There were Parsis and Muslims too. Hence you will find Desai surnames in these communities as well. When Moguls went further south into Sikandrabad, the same practice prevailed. So you will find Desais, Sirdesais and Hiredesais amongst Maharashtrians and Karnatakis.

Incidentally, the privileges (paying no tax) on the Anavil lands were maintained by the British when they governed and lasted into independence until Morarji Desai abolished it all after assuming power.

We Anavils have a great divide – only in names – between so called Bhatellas and Desais. As you can guess from the previous narrative, Desais obviously got more prosperous after 1600. This glory lasted till about 1780 when the Mogul connection vanished. 1857 was the last Mogul's day. For a few years after that, some remnant power remained but it was all over by 1780. Then Gayakwad moved in. Anavils helped him to consolidate his acquisitions. For these services these Desais got similar rewards but on a lower scale and they came to be known as Pedhiwallas. Three towns have these families - Palsana, Mahuva and Gandevi. When Gayakwad acceded to Indian rule in 1947, their glorious days started to ebb.

The British under Lord Cornwallis abolished this system of land tax collection and farmers remitted taxes directly to the treasury after the enactment of statutes. Anavil words for this tax were Kis or Ganot. British allowed Anavils their freehold land privileges granted by the Moguls. This change led to new titles in Gujarat such as Patel, Sar Panch, and Talukdaar etc. These are not the exact words but signify generally the rule.

The establishment of British rule brought railways, roads and universities into the life of Anavils. They, being Brahmins with the natural aptitude for learning, took up the new roles quickly. Initially, a part of the family still farmed whereas the brightest or the youngest went to study in colleges and universities. Hence they became prominent professionals such as Doctors, Lawyers, Professors, Teachers etc. The higher education also led them inexorably towards the freedom struggle and hence many Anavils played significant roles in the freedom struggle - most notable among them being Morarji Desai, the Prime Minister in the free India Government; Mahadevbhai Desai, Gandhiji's lifelong Secretary; Bhulabhai Desai, the lawyer who defended Indian National Army officers; Khandubhai Desai, the labour Leader and Dayalji Desai, founder of the Anavil Ashram in Surat.

In recent times, this trend has subsided and Anavils are not in any national prominence. As a matter of fact, as I sit here and watch, Anavil prominence at the political level federally as well as provincially is at its lowest. I can only speculate that years of an indolent lazy lifestyle and the migration of the brightest and the most entrepreneurial abroad may be the reasons.

This is the start of the Anavil Diaspora, starting with other Indian cities, then other countries (Mauritius, South Africa, East Africa, Fiji, Burma, Java, Sumatra etc.).

Modern Times and Anavil Population:

With the advent of railways and roads and institutes of higher education, Anavils quickly caught on. This slowly led to urban migration. First a part of the family migrated and then a flood started. This has weakened the links to farming since early 1900. Migration to other countries started first to British territories because of easier consular permissions and then to North America. Now they are in almost all countries. I was surprised to learn that some of us are also in Cameroon and Panama. The

Anavil Diaspora must number more than half a million for sure and probably it is as great as what remains in India. Judging from the old census numbers those in Surat district do not number more than half a million. Anavils numbered 41,158 in 1887 census. Applying a growth rate of 2 percent per annum, the number today would be 3,85,721. Assuming incorrect count in census, I believe the number does not exceed half a million. One must also allow for migration outside Surat District. Anavils do not have a world directory to estimate the correct number.

Conclusion:

There are three books written in the last thirty years which the curious can read:

- (1) Dakshin Gujaratna Anavils by Shree Ambelal Gopalji Desai
- (2) Anavil Darshan also by Shree Ambelal Gopalji Desai and
- (3) I Give Thee My Daughter by Van Deer of Holland.

The first two are in Gujarati and the third one is in English. The books have been out of print for a long time now, however, the first two may be available from the authors' families or from Jai Shukleshwar press. The English book is more about marriage practices and customs. As a community, we must thank these authors for their efforts. Shree Ambelal Desai deserves a special gratitude as he has compiled this history with his personal resources and selflessness, qualities not easy to find today. I am personally amazed that Anavils had a continuous history of magazine publication for over seventy five years – first ANAVIL POKAR then ANAVIL JAGAT and now JAI SHUKLESHWAR. These are not high literary magazines but have kept the community linked and informed. By subscribing, the reader will help retain this continuity.

I hope my modest effort will stir youngsters to delve and research more on the subject. If you have additional facts, please communicate them to me by phone (905-828-2628), fax (905-828-2517) or by email (joedesai@rogers.com).