



What's in the upper half of our logo?

This note attempts to answer some of the questions frequently asked about the image in the upper half of our logo—the trees framed by an arcuate row of blocks. The upper half of our logo is a representation of an exquisitely crafted sandstone lattice window in the western wall of the Sidi Saiyad Mosque of Ahmedabad, which was completed around 1572/73 CE. The use of this window in our logo is symbolic of the roots of the Institute in the western Indian medieval city of Ahmedabad—the window, or jali as it is locally known, has, over the years, come to be identified with the city, and of excellence in our craft—the delicate tracery work in sandstone is unparalleled. What was the context in which this masterpiece was created? Who was Sidi Saiyad?

When Timur sacked Delhi in 1398 and hastened the end of Tughlaq rule, the governor of Gujarat, Zafar Khan, declared his independence and took on the name Shamsuddin Muzaffar Shah. Thus began the roughly 170-year rule of the Muzaffarid dynasty. The third sultan, Nasiruddin Ahmed Shah I,¹ moved his capital from Patan to Ahmedabad in 1411. The Mughals under Akbar conquered Gujarat in 1572, thus ending the Gujarat Sultanate. The Muzaffarid period saw the development of the Gujarat Sultanate style of architecture, of which the Sidi Saiyad mosque, completed around 1572/73 CE, was the last major example. The mosque is notable for the sandstone tracery work that fills up its window spaces. There are ten windows, three each on the northern and the southern sides; and four on the western wall—two on either side of a middle window space which is blind. This middle window was closed possibly because it was above the central mihrab and the architect did not want light streaming in directly and making the central mihrab less visible, or because the Mughal invasion did not allow the installation of the window. The window of interest to us is the one immediately north of the middle window space, that is, as one looks at the western wall from the outside, the window to the left of the middle space.

This window is dominated by a “tree-of-life”-and-parasite motif. There is a single palm tree with the fronds spreading out at the top. And then there is a vine—its tendrils and leaves and flowers filling up the rest of the space. The vine seems to emerge from the mouth of a *makara*, a mythical aquatic creature (this is clearly visible in the central tree in the window to the right of the middle space)—the *makara*, the emblem of Kamadeva is also used to anchor toranas or archways in Hindu iconography.

¹ Historians agree that Muzaffar Shah had two stints as ruler, with Tatar Khan (Muhammad Shah I) ruling for about a year in 1403-04 in the middle of Muzaffar Shah's reign. Ahmed Shah I is believed to have begun his rule in 1410.

According to Professor Mehrdad Shokoohy of the University of Greenwich, the tree motif, and the creeper pattern, which here follows the *rati-kerā* pattern (one of the eleven vallibhis or creeper patterns used in Hindu and Buddhist iconography), and is symbolic of the goddess of love (Rati is the consort of Kamadeva), are pre-Islamic, but were probably adopted by the architects for their artistic value, and refined into an exquisite tapestry of fine tendrils, leaves and flowers. It is also possible that the Islamic arabesque style, with its emphasis on intertwining stalks and foliage, and which had become well established by the 15th century, played a role in the design of the windows. We cannot be sure about who the actual craftspersons were, but it is reasonable to assume that many of them would have been drawn from the community of *shilawats* that contributed to much of the sculpture of 15th and 16th century Gujarat. But we still do not know how the fine skills exhibited in the windows were brought in— the tree and vine patterns in other places, including one in the Jama Masjid, though carved only about a century earlier, are nowhere near the standards of excellence achieved by the Sidi Saiyad jalis. There are some fine specimens of sandstone lattice work at Champaner, the capital of the Gujarat sultans from 1484 to 1535, but the windows of Sidi Said outshine these.

Who was Sidi Saiyad? Sidi Saiyad was a Habshi—a person of Ethiopian origin. Habshi in Arabic refers to an Abyssinian, an Ethiopian, and Sidi, possibly derived from Sayyidi for “my lord,” is a term used to denote Habshis, especially in Gujarat. The role of sub-Saharan Africans in Indian history has perhaps not attracted the attention it deserves. Long before the “discovery” of the sea route to India, trade between the African east coast and India was significant. Many Africans came to India as traders, but many were brought in as slaves, usually for military purposes. Slave trading, which was well established by the ninth century, was possibly at its strongest in the 15th and 16th centuries. Some Habshis, like Malik Ambar of the Deccan who was Jehangir’s implacable enemy, achieved military fame; others rose to rule princely states, such as Janjira, off the coast south of Mumbai and Sachin, near Surat, in Gujarat. In the 16th century, the Gujarat Sultanate relied heavily on Africans for staffing its army. Sidi Saiyad, also known as Shaikh Saiyad al-Habshi, was in the service of Sultan Mahmud Shah who ruled from 1537 CE till his murder in 1554. After 1554, there was chaos when the Habshis and the other factions fought for power. Sidi Saiyad joined Amir Jhujhar Khan, another Habshi, and distinguished himself militarily. Muzaffar Shah III, Mahmud Shah’s son, restored order in 1560 and rebuilt the Habshi contingent in his army. Sidi Saiyad seems to have continued serving the new sultan, but some time before the Mughal invasion, he settled down to a quiet life near the mosque. He converted an old brick mosque into the structure that stands today, possibly between 1570 and 1573. He built a public kitchen known as al-nakar for feeding the poor and spent his last years as a pious man. He is known to have died on the third of Shawwal, AH 984, corresponding to December 24, 1576. He is buried in the north-eastern corner of the mosque (to the right as one enters the complex).

Visit the mosque; walk around to the back and, facing east, with the setting sun behind you, observe the window to the left of the central blind window space. You will realize why this exquisitely crafted lattice window is just what our logo was looking for.

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