

History of Gujarati Samaj of Tampa Bay, Tampa, Florida



A handful of pioneering Gujaratis congregated to celebrate Gujarati festivals in small informal gatherings in the late 1970's and early 1980's. The *Gujarati Samaj of Tampa Bay* was born in June 1981 at the residence of Mr. Ghanshyam Patel at a meeting of a few individuals including Ghanshyam Patel, P.S. Patel and Pradip Patel. The Samaj celebrated the Navratri Garbas at the Seminole Garden Center on Central Ave. and the Diwali program at the Roy Haynes Park in 1981 under the first president Mr. Ghanshyam Patel.

P.C. Patel presided over the Samaj in 1982. Navratri garbas in those days were very simple considering the costumes and the music. The music was pre recorded on audio tapes and played on a portable audio cassette player.

Mr. Pradip Patel was the president of the Samaj for the years of 1983, 1984, and 1985. In 1983 came the first custom made costumes clad choreographed Raas Garbas by teenagers. During this year the Gujarati Samaj also sponsored and screened a Gujarati play "Ghar Ghar Mati na Chula". In the spring of 1984 a "Khichadi Picnic" was organized to encourage both young and adults collectively. This tradition is alive even today! Every year the Samaj organizes a picnic with Khichadi, roasted Corn and Watermelon to celebrate Mother's Day at the Fort De Soto Beach. The Mother's Day Picnic of spring 1998 was a great success.

The Navratri Garbas of 1985 graduated to a new high of dancing to the music of now famous Lalit Sodha & Party from Mumbai, India. The Diwali Dinner Party included a variety of Entertainment programs from local talents.

Thus began a new era in the history of the Samaj. Committee meetings became formal as minutes got written, approved and recorded. Praful Patel was elected as the President in 1986 with the first female, Neki Shah as the vice president. This year the Samaj successfully organized the Sports Day and Holi celebrations. The summer of 1986 brought the first Anand Bazaar that was organized at the 2nd floor of the USF Administrative building. The Samaj grew in size with the increasing membership. Larger halls were rented for festivals and for the first time "Lahni" was distributed to members at the Navratri Raas Garba. The Diwali Dinner was a big hit too as it included a "Natak" by the adult members of the Samaj. A souvenir magazine with Mahatma Gandhi on its front page included the list for members. By now the spirit and enthusiasm of Gujaratis were such that volunteers and funds started pouring in.

Sharad Patel took over the reins as the president in 1987 and this year the Samaj politically supported Helen Chavez as a mayoral candidate at the Anand Bazaar. 1988 and 1989 saw the presidency of Dr. Kiran Patel and Anand Bazaar evolved in to the now popular India festival at USF Sundome.

Mahendra Doshi presided in 1990. Membership grew at a considerable rate. The popular Diwali Dinner was now prepared by professional caterers. During the 1991 presidency of Mr. Khandubhai Patel distributed trophies for the India Festival which were custom designed and imported from India.

1992 presidency of Ramesh Parmar was marred by his tragic accident and a serious injury to his eyes. Ever willing to help, Mr. P.D. Patel who was then the Vice president, took over and acted as the president and performed the duties of the president as well as that of the vice president.

In 1993 Nikunj Patel became the President of the Samaj. He was strived to uphold and improve the quality of the functions while continued to host successful cultural and religious events.

Dr. Akshay Desai took reins of the Samaj in 1994. His noteworthy accomplishment was to have Navaratri Garba event in downtown Tampa under heavy police security.

Tampa Bay community's dream came true in August 1996, with the completion of the India Cultural Center. Under the presidency and leadership of Dr. Kiran C. Patel a Center aimed to inspire purer, fuller and better life that speaks of Love and Unity was born. The community's desire to have its own facility was finally fulfilled. The center is aimed at providing us to practice the laws of Dharma, Karma, and Giving. The trustees of The India Cultural Center (ICC) urge both young and grown ups to actively participate in the cultural events and also to support ICC and the community as a whole in every way you can.

"It is my hope that ICC and its Trustees will be playing the vital role of bridging the gap between the generations and providing a platform and a vehicle with which the rich culture and heritage of our community will be maintained for generations to come."-Dr. Kiran Patel.

The president for Gujarati Samaj for 1996 was Dr. Nandkishor Shah. With the passing of each year the annual events of India Festival expanded to the level of acceptance where people came all the way from Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and all over Florida to share this great family affair. Year after year the event of India Festival promised family fun for all with exotic Indian Foods, Folk Dance, Raas and Garba Competitions.

1997-The "Suvarna Jayanti" (Golden Anniversary) of India's Independence from the British Rule, India festival marks the completion of a Decade. This year Dr. Vijay Patel presided over the Gujarati Samaj. Under the Chairmanship of Dr. Kiran Patel and P.D. Patel as the Co-chair, the Samaj hosted 10th India Festival and FOGANA (Federation of Gujarati Associations of North America) competitions of Folk Dances in the first ever two day event at the SunDome. This very successful two day event provided food and accommodations to the participants of FOGANA who came from all over the North America. On the third day was a live Musical show by Kumar Sanu and Kavita Krishnamurthy which was a huge success. Also this year Samaj distributed lahni of a real silver coin to all members.

Dr. Mukesh Kapadia presided over the Samaj in 1998, keeping the traditions of the Gujarati Samaj alive. This year the Samaj very successfully organized Diwali, Navratri, and the 11th annual India Festival along with lots of other celebrations of Indian festivals and cultural events. This year The Samaj reached new heights by launching its own website on the World Wide Web.

Mr. Nainan Desai presided over the Samaj in 1999. He established a Vision and Mission statement for the Samaj and Goals and Objectives for the new and existing committees, and published them in the newsletter. To name a few, the new Bylaws committee (Dr. Sharad Patel) rewrote the bylaws of GSTB, Youth committee (Ms. Pooja Pandya) took leadership roles and community service projects, Scholarship committee (Dr. Ashok Modh) awarded merit awards for the high achievers in high school and middle school, Audit committee (Kirit Shah) conducted audit of financial accounts and established financial guidelines and controls, and Social Services committee (P.D. Patel) confidentially provided assistance to the community members in need. This year the Samaj also saw a regularly published monthly newsletter showcasing progress and community achievements.

The new Arts of India Festival committee (Swapna Shah) showcased various arts ICC to the mainstream. The 1st Arts of India Festival included displays of states of India, their arts and traditions, a mock Indian wedding, a fashion show, competitions in cooking & recipes, rangoli (paintings on floor with colorful sands), hair weaving, painting, etc. The funds raised in this event were donated for breast cancer.

Breaking new grounds, Mr. Nainan Desai selected Mrs. Malti Pandya as the first lady Chair Person for the 12th India Festival. Presidents of all community associations of India were invited and requested to bring dance teams from their associations. The Festival menu was expanded to include competitions in all classical and folk dances of India. For the first time India Festival saw competitions in 20 different dance types under one roof. Three professional dancers were brought from out-of-state to judge the competitions. Over 5000 tickets were distributed to schools in the Pasco, Pinellas, and Hillsborough Counties as an educational outreach to showcase the culture of India to the mainstream. The SunDome had to implement capacity control measures this year as all Indian communities and mainstream took part in large numbers. Also this year GSTB made a huge contribution to the ICC from the surplus funds.

Mr. Parimal Butala presided over the samaj in 2000. He arranged three weekends of Navratri at ICC. He also arranged Musical Programs and Gujarati drama for the Community. Lalit Sodha, Babra Group performed Garba.

Mr. Kirit Shah took over the presidency in 2001. He kept the tradition of the Samaj. He arranged a First time Father's Day event at ICC.

Dr. Ghanshyam Patel presided over the Samaj in 2002. He arranged Navratri, Diwali, Mothers day, Holi, Uttarayan, Comedy Show and Gujarati drama for the Samaj.

Mr. Pradip Patel again presided over the Samaj in 2003. He keeps the tradition and arranged all the scheduled programs for the Samaj.

Mrs. Swapna Shah, the first Female president took over the Samaj in 2004. She was very enthusiastic and started lots of new activity for the Samaj. She started First and only TV Show for the Gujarati Samaj for one year. She started the new committee i.e. Senior Citizen, Youth and Womens Forum. She also organized Second event "Arts of India" at ICC.

Mr. Kanti Bakarania took over the rein for Samaj in 2005. Due to increasing the membership and attendance of the members, he looked for a bigger facility for Garba. The ICC was now small and crowded. First time he organized the Garba and Diwali dinner at bigger Facility, The Florida State Fair Ground. People liked the place and enjoyed the events. Lalit Sodha & Babra Group performed music for the Garba. About three thousand people attended for Garba at Florida State Fair Ground. Famous Devang Patel show was organized on Diwali Dinner at the Florida State Fair. He updated the www.gujaratisamj.org web site and adds the list of the GSTB president. Other noteworthy accomplishment was creation of comprehensive email list of members.

Mr. Parimal Butala second time presided over the Samaj in 2006. He organized the Garaba & Diwali dinner at the Florida State Fair Ground. He organized Musical Programs and Natak as well. Babra & Group & Khelaiya group performed the Music on Garba.

Mr. Dinesh Gandhi presided over the Samaj in 2007. He first started the election process. Members stood in line and voted. He organized Garba and Diwali Dinner at Florida State Fair Ground. Organized Famous Singer Amit Kumar orchestra night on Diwali Dinner.

Dr. Harish Patel took over the rein for Samaj in 2008. He organized Navratri Garba & Diwali at the ICC. He organized Uttarayan at the Beach also organized Holi, Mothers Day & Gujarati Drama.

Dr. C. J. Patel presided over the Samaj in 2009. He arranged one weekend Garba at ICC and one Weekend at Florida State Fair Ground. He organized Musical Program, Natak, Uttarayan, Holi, Mothers Day, Garba & Diwali.

Mr. Himatlal Parekh is the new elected President of the Samaj for the year 2010.