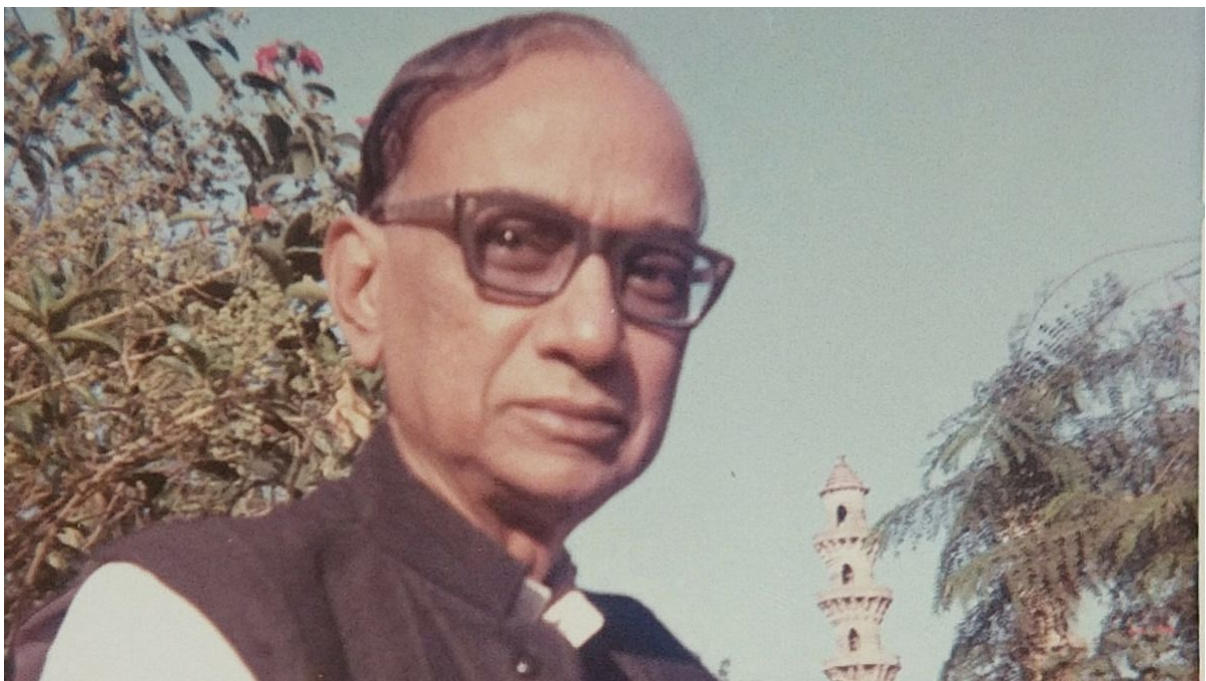


Soviet-inspired animal universe that charmed Gujaratis—Hariprasad Vyas’ Bakor Patel stories

Vyas' Bakor Patel stories had catchy Gujarati titles with special typography and drawings; the original black and white sketches bore the signature of Tansukh, an artist from Surat.

[URVISH KOTHARI](#)

08 August, 2023 08:00 am IST



File photo of Hariprasad Vyas in 1972 | Photo courtesy: Dilip Vyas, the son of Hariprasad Vyas

Hariprasad Vyas created a universe of characters for children in Gujarati literature that enchanted generations of readers and formed an important part of their childhood memories. Similar to classic fables, Vyas’ ‘Bakor Patel’ universe was populated with a myriad of animal characters with human traits, which effectively compensated for the absence of humans in his stories.

When American historian Howard Spodek ventured to learn Gujarati from noted poet-writer Sarup Dhruva, Bakor Patel came in handy. Salil Tripathi, a noted writer and Gujarati from Bombay, remembered a play organised by the Indian National

Theatre in the early 1970s on Bakor Patel stories, in which actors put on masks of different animals. As a kid, Tripathi acted in the play too.



A Bakor Patel play at Indian National Theatre | Photo courtesy: Salil Tripathi

The Bakor Patel universe

The first Bakor Patel story published in 1932 set the character up and it remained unchanged throughout: a middle-aged, bespectacled, higher middle-class owner of a firm with business dealings in Japan lives in a bungalow in Bombay with his wife Shakari Patlani. Bakor signified a goat (*bakaraa* in Gujarati). Hence, Patel had a goat-like beard. *Patlani* was a Gujarati colloquial word for 'Mrs Patel'. Hathishankar (the elephant), Dr Untadia (the camel), and Vaghajibhai Vakil (the tiger) were some of Bakor's affluent friends.

Interestingly, there was no absolute villain in the Bakor Patel universe. The characters with negative shades were small-time cheats or bullies. As the stories were meant for kids, there was no mention of heinous crime, liquor, or references to sexuality. There was a story in which Patel tries to be trendy by cultivating a habit of smoking. But a fire caused by the cigarette pushes him to abandon it.

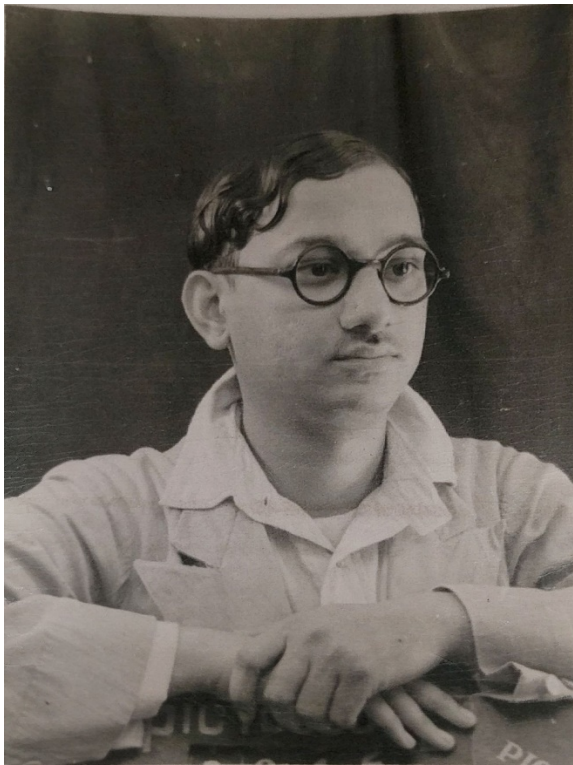
The stories largely revolved around the goofy, kind, unassuming, enthusiastic, impressionable, and absent-minded Bakor Patel, who would invite trouble due to his nature and repent his missteps in the end with a smile on his face. Legendary Gujarati humorist Taarak Mehta, whose characters are used for the popular TV series *Taarak Mehta Ka Ooltah Chashmah*, expressed his profound gratitude for the Bakor Patel stories. Mehta ran a popular series titled *Duniya Ne Undha Chasma* in Gujarati weekly *Chitralekha* based on life in a fictitious middle-class chawl of Bombay.



Bakor Patel, the title character created by Hariprasad Vyas

“It has been years since I read Bakor Patel. But the characters of the Bakor Patel stories are internalised in my consciousness in such a way that I feel my characters are human incarnations of those stories. I do believe it even if anyone else does not. Goofy Jethalal reminds me of Bakor Patel himself. Jethalal’s wife has traits of Shakari Patalani. Dr Hathi resembles Hathishankar in many ways... and to be honest, I did not think of Bakor Patel while creating these characters... it shows how

competent writers are indebted to the writers of previous generations,” Mehta quotes from Vyas’ *Bakor Patelni Hasti Duniya*, edited by Hundraj Balvani.



File photo of a young Hariprasad Vyas | Photo courtesy: Dilip Vyas, the son of Hariprasad Vyas



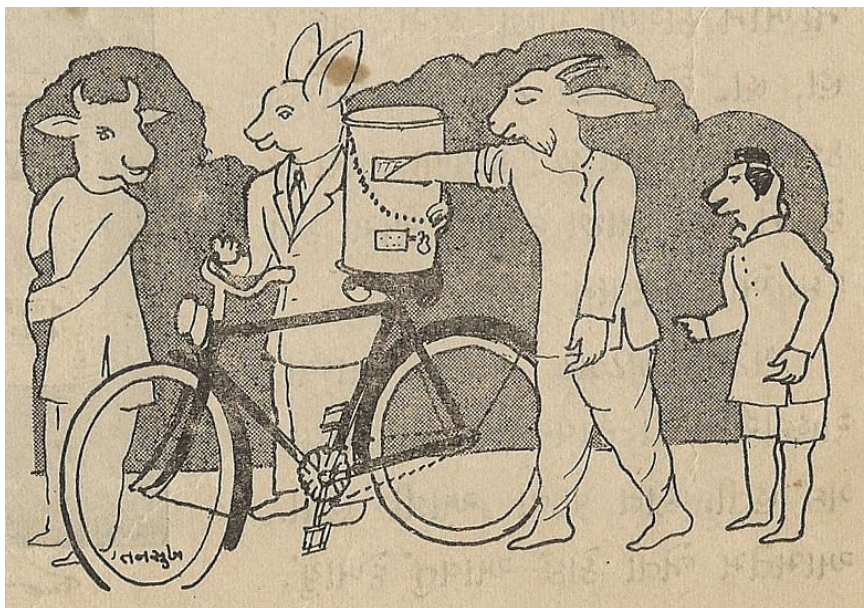
Hariprasad Vyas, wife Ansuya, sons Dilip (standing left) and Kirit (standing right) with their family | Photo courtesy: Dilip Vyas, the son of Hariprasad Vyas

Ladder to popularity

Vyas was an employee of Zenith General Insurance Limited in Ahmedabad before Independence. His association with Natwarlal Malavi aka Vimawala, a nationalist publisher running Gandiv Prakashan from Surat, resulted in Bakor Patel stories.

Malavi referred to children's literature of Soviet Russia, in which animal characters were used to portray various situations in the human world. Vyas recollected this conversation in a 1975 interview with a Gujarati humorist, Mahendra Thakkar 'Chhotam', and said that a real person named Bakorbhai Mukhi was an inspiration for the name of the lead character. As Bakor Patel was a goat, Vyas chose his wife's name Shakari to rhyme with *bakari* or female goat in Gujarati.

The first Bakor Patel story appeared in *Gandiv*, the monthly for children published by Gandiv Prakashan. Vyas churned stories month after month. They were compiled in a book form later and became hugely successful. The stories had catchy Gujarati titles with special typography and drawings; the original black and white drawings bore the signature of Tansukh, an artist from Surat. Fans of Bakor Patel, now spread across continents remember the original drawings and miss them in the new editions.



Characters from a Bakor Patel story

One lasting regret

Vyas did create other characters, many of them human. He wrote a humour column for a Surat daily, *Gujarat Mitra*, for 38 years. But his Bakor Patel series remained the most popular and metonymic with him. It was ironic that Vyas could not reap proportionate financial benefits from the success of Bakor Patel stories due to the contractual conditions with the publisher. He stayed in a rented house in old

Ahmedabad until 1976. Vyas was even forced to sell 50 per cent rights of the stories to the publisher in lieu of financial help. Vyas's son Dilip, staying in San Jose in California, expressed regret during a conversation with me and said that due to the contractual bindings, the stories could never appear in any mainstream newspapers or magazines.

Dilip also recollected an incident when Dr Manchersha Dhanjibhai Gilder from Bombay, famous as MK Gandhi's personal physician and health minister of Bombay Presidency in the Congress government, prescribed Bakor Patel books to a patient of melancholia. Being a person with inherent positivity, Vyas' financial struggles despite being the creator of one of the most famous characters in Gujarati literature didn't push him into depression. He led a happy life with his wife Ansuyaben and children, the last phase of which was spent in California with his son. Vyas died unsung, without the kind of media coverage, awards, and official recognition he deserved—but his creation has outlived the creator.