INTRODUCTION

A fable about the founding of Ahmedabad reflects the recurring pattern of change in the city. When in the early fifteenth century, Sultan Ahmad Shah began building the city walls, the day's construction would be mysteriously destroyed every night and the next morning, work would have to begin anew. Legend had it that a local saint, Manek Nath, unhappy with these developments, had cast a spell. As the walls were being built during the day, Manek Nath would weave a magical blanket. Every night, he would then unravel the blanket, this magical gesture bringing down the city walls. There are different versions of the resolution of this conflict. In one, Manek Nath relented because Ahmad Shah agreed to name a part of the city after him. In another, the saint was tricked into trapping himself in a bottle. The constant dynamic of weaving and unweaving recurs through the city's history.[1] It is visible in the partial disintegration of the handloom industry and the growth of the textile mills from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. The motif reappears when the textile industry collapsed in the mid-1980s and industrial restructuring enabled the expansion of power-looms and other industries. It is visible again in the settling and unsettling of city spaces, in the knitting and unspooling of social relations. As Ahmedabad's neighbourhoods grew, its socio-spatial relations transformed. Older spatial and social forms and practices were not simply supplanted by newer ones. Instead, as this research demonstrates, they were overlaid and, in turn, were often enmeshed with the newer forms and practices. While the analogy of weaving and unravelling offers us a productive lens through which to view the city's history, it was not an unambiguous, unidirectional process. It is this tension—of the often simultaneous and interlinked processes of building and dismantling—that this book is set against.

Two broad historical processes—industrial transformation and communalisation—frame the questions that I seek to address. The expansion

and decline of the textile industry, the acceleration of informalised work regimes and an extensive ethno-religious mobilisation that appeared as a particularly violent form of Hindutva shape the contours of this book. The key theme that this book grapples with revolves around how the urban working classes attempted to make a life in the city through the course of the twentieth and the early years of the twenty-first century: how is a foothold established upon the city; what claims were asserted and how; what actors emerge as mediators in this process; what forms of material and political avenues appear through which to stake a claim on urban resources and state processes.

I follow this question from the 1920s to the 2000s with a focus on two interrelated themes of inquiry, which correspond to the two parts of the book. First, I examine the forms and practices of local politics, tracing the dynamics of political mediation and the constitution of social power and authority, as it is made and remade in a countervailing field of forces. This examination of how local constellations of power fluctuate offers some clues about the ways in which the urban working classes accessed and negotiated with state processes. It presents a view into the workings of political mediation, the nitty-gritties of local political involvement, as they straddle the realm of formal and informal politics. Second, I focus on the social geography of workers' housing as a way of understanding how material claims on space are effected. A closer look at the dynamics of changing property regimes allows, on the one hand, to reconstruct and empirically illustrate how working-class housing was produced, the conflicts and tensions it generated and, on the other hand, to analyse the politics of spatial marginalisation and differential access to the city. This research contends that the interconnections between the histories of industrial transformations and the histories of communal pogroms can be only grasped against the background of evolving, contingent and, to some extent, continuous structures of political mediation and property relations.

Certain qualifications should be laid out at the outset. While this book is about the city's industrial areas, it does not take as its object of study the textile mills or the industrial estates themselves, the work sites around it or their labour processes. While communalism and religious violence are crucial to the structure and organisation of this study, I do not focus at length on the actual unfolding of violence. Rather, it is a study of the ambiguous relationships of power and conflict that undergird the making and remaking of Ahmedabad's worker districts, offering a view into the geographies of urban change, social segregation and the links between the realms of formal (state-born) and informal (often extra-legal) regulation.

THE CITY, ITS INDUSTRIES AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOODS

Ahmedabad was founded in 1411 by Sultan Ahmad Shah. The citadel of Bhadra on the eastern bank of the Sabarmati River formed the original nucleus, with *pol*s growing around it. The pols were clusters of houses, intersected with narrow winding streets and open spaces. Often gated and usually organised around caste, religion or occupation, pols took the form of a spatially contained 'residential street', governed by a *pol panch*, or council.[2] Transactions of pol property were collectively regulated and sociality in these spaces, as other observers have remarked, was stamped with a 'warm or oppressive coziness'.[3] At the edges of the walled city centre grew a number of suburbs or *pura*s. In 1572, Ahmedabad came under the Mughals. By the early 1700s, Maratha rule was established over the city, and by the early nineteenth century the city came under British colonial control. Ahmedabad's morphology, which had been influenced by both Muslim and Hindu conceptions of space, changed considerably by the late nineteenth century.[4] This was due to several reasons: the volume of trade to and from the city intensified; the growth of railways recalibrated Ahmedabad's position in relation to other commercial centres; certain sectors of the urban economy expanded, accompanied by an increase in population (Table I.1).[5] However, the most significant change in Ahmedabad during this period was the growth of the textile mill industry, which was central in reshaping the city's spatial and social organisation.

Table I.1 Population of Ahmedabad

Year	Population
1881	127,621
1891	148,412
1901	185,889
1911	216,777
1921	274,007
1951	837,163
1971	1,585,544
1981	2,059,725
1991	2,876,710
2001	3,520,085
2011	5,577,904

Source: AMC Statistical Outline 2003–04; Census of India (Ahmedabad city), 2011.

We begin our story about five decades after the establishment of the first textile mill in 1861. In this time, Ahmedabad had gained prominence as the 'Manchester of the East'—an industrial centre that could compete with Bombay (present-day Mumbai). Through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, textile mills were established in a semicircle around the walled city and beyond. The nascent textile industry met with little opposition from the city's economic elite and was backed by prominent financiers as well as by the merchants' guilds, the *mahajan*s. The mill owners, as Gillion writes, 'cooperated rather than competed', many of them sharing caste, kinship and marriage ties.[6] By 1921, there were fifty-three textile mills in the city, employing on an average nearly 49,000 workers daily.[7] Ahmedabad's textile workers at this point accounted for almost 18 per cent of the total population and, according to colonial sources, formed a remarkably urban workforce.[8] Compared to other industrial centres, such as Bombay or Kanpur, a large proportion of textile workers in Ahmedabad were drawn from the city and Ahmedabad district.[9] While those workers who came from the city were said to have 'no contact with the villages at all', others, especially those from the Deccan and Konkan regions, were recorded as 'permanently settled' in Ahmedabad.[10]

Following strikes against wage cuts in 1917–18, the Textile Labour Association (henceforth the TLA) was established in 1920. Instrumental in its formation were Mahatma Gandhi, Anasuyaben Sarabhai[11] and Shankarlal Banker.[12] The Gujarati name for the union—Majoor Mahajan Sangh—retained a link with the caste-based merchants' guilds (the mahajans) of pre-industrial Ahmedabad. Through this name, in a sense, the same status and dignity were symbolically assigned to the worker and the merchant alike and a partnership envisaged between the employer and employee.[13] Prodigiously powerful in the first half of the twentieth century, the union remained committed to a Gandhian ideology of labour relations. At the heart of Gandhian philosophy lay the notions of dignity and justice, which shaped his conceptualisations of labour relations. Thus, the interdependence of labour and capital was based on a set of mutual rights and obligations. The rights of workers, such as a basic standard of living for the satisfaction of their economic, social and cultural needs, were seen as obligations of the employers; while conversely, the obligations of the workers towards the employers were seen in terms of a moderation of their demands in relation to the health of the industry.[14]

In the initial years of the textile industry, caste and community distinctions permeated onto the workfloor, with various departments drawing labour from particular groups.[15] In historical sources and other academic writings,

we can trace the concentration of certain communities in specific occupations within the textile mills. Of these, Dheds and Vankars (Dalit sub-castes) were employed primarily in the spinning departments, Vaghris in the frame departments, and upper castes such as Brahmins and Banias in bundling and reeling.[16] The weaving sheds were staffed mainly by Muslim workers, with a gradual increase in the middle-caste Patel and Patidar component, as well as by workers from the United Provinces and Padmashalis from Andhra.[17] Among others, Bavchas, Marathas and Kolis (a numerically dominant but lower-caste group) also formed a fair proportion of the workforce.[18] While there were changes in the caste-based occupational groupings in the textile mills, much of the earlier segmentation remained and was, in fact, even strengthened by the TLA's structure as a federation of various departmental unions and by its mode of organising.[19] From contemporary newspaper sources, we can surmise that the union's support base, especially in the early years, was segmented likewise—nearly 65 per cent of spinners aligned with the TLA, while only 25 per cent of the weavers were union members.[20]

The mill owners came from the city's social and mercantile elite and banded together to form the Ahmedabad Millowners Association (AMA), which went on to play an influential role in city politics in the first half of the twentieth century.[21] As the textile mills flourished, workers settled around the mills, partly accommodated by the mill owners and partly by private landlords. New property arrangements emerged in the pols, with increasing numbers of renters, modifications in customary regulations and changes in their caste compositions.[22] Tenements and the new architectural form of the *chawl*—one- or two-room dwellings, with shared facilities—sprouted across the landscape of eastern Ahmedabad. The mill neighbourhoods acquired a distinct spatial form over the years and amassed considerable political clout, to a large extent propelled by the TLA.

In 1960, a new state of Gujarat was carved out of the Bombay Presidency;[23] until the new capital was established in Gandhinagar, Ahmedabad remained the administrative centre of the state. From the late 1960s onwards, investments were directed towards small-scale, power-loom and chemical industries—processes which were concentrated in the industrial estates established in the eastern peripheries of the city: Naroda, Odhav and Vatva. When the mill industry entered a crisis in the late 1970s and eventually collapsed by the mid-1980s, over 100,000 workers lost their jobs.[24] Women's participation in the textile industry had already been whittled down by the time the mills finally closed—accounting for less than 2 per cent of the total

workforce, with a coeval increase in informal sector work participation.[25] This loss of what a former mill worker called 'gentleman *naukriyan*'[26] entailed a dramatic transformation of the social, spatial and economic fabric of the industrial east. The strong urban base of the city's workers was highlighted again, as retrenched millworkers remained in Ahmedabad even in the face of grave socio-economic dispossession.[27]

The liberalisation policies of 1991 opened up the country's economy more directly to forces of global capital.[28] The decline of the textile industry was not indicative of an overall slump in Gujarat's economy. Instead, the 1990s witnessed a growth in investments, but not in employment.[29] The chemical industry, in particular, was the site of the most impressive growth—the number of registered units increased from 10,919 in 1980 to 29,661 in 1991, and then made a phenomenal jump to 58,332 in 2000.[30] Furthermore, large parts of former textile mill areas such as Bapunagar and Amraiwadi grew as important sites of the diamond polishing industry, as small workshops were established by Patidar entrepreneurs from Saurashtra. The intensity of investments in the industrial estates, and the willingness of the government to ignore non-compliance with legal regulations, allowed these spaces to grow unregulated.[31] Retrenched mill workers thus found poorly paid jobs in such precarious and scantily regulated work environments, entering employment relationships that were considerably more insecure.[32] The mill closures and the repeated episodes of communal violence (most significantly, in 1941, 1946, 1969, 1981, 1985–86, 1991–92, 2002), accompanied by changes in political ideology and forms of political practice, contributed to a substantial remaking of Ahmedabad's labour spaces.

It is in these neighbourhoods of the city's industrial east that I locate my explorations (Figure I.1 and Table I.2). While the archival material used relate to Ahmedabad's worker neighbourhoods in general, the ethnographic evidence has been collected from two such localities—Gomtipur and Vatva. Both of these grew around sites of production. In the case of Gomtipur, the neighbourhood grew with the establishment of the textile mills in the early twentieth century and the neighbourhood of Vatva grew around the industrial estate established in the late 1960s (Table I.3). Gomtipur, located in the heart of the mill districts,[33] continues to have a mixed population, mainly of lower-caste Hindus and Muslims. The neighbourhood of Vatva is situated in the south-eastern periphery of the city and lies adjacent to a Gujarat Industrial Development Corporation (GIDC) estate that specialises in chemicals. An important Sufi shrine—the fifteenth-century mausoleum of Qutub-e-Alam— imbues the area with some cultural significance. Incorporated into

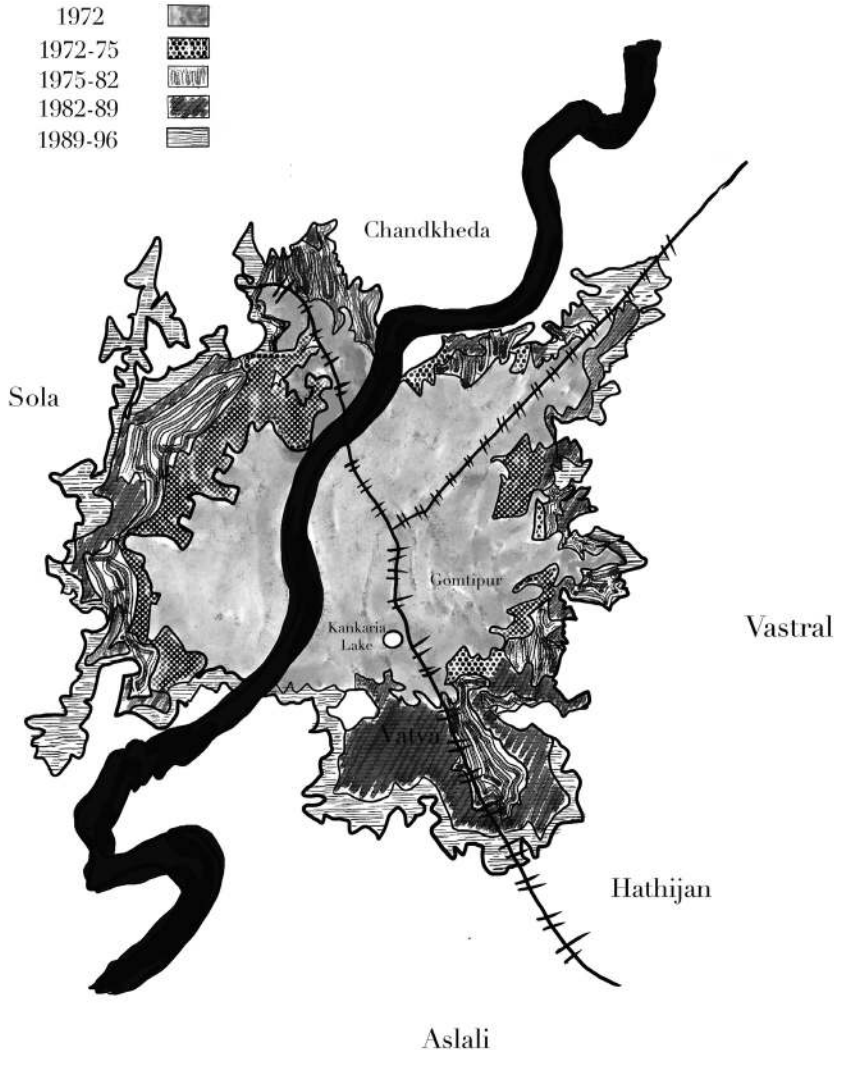

Figure 1.1 Map highlighting the growth of the municipal limits and indicating the location of the two neighbourhoods under study

Source: Prepared from Ahmedabad City Development Plan, 2006–12.

the municipal limits only in the late 1980s, Vatva has grown as a residential area with every successive episode of communal violence, especially since the early 1990s. The locality at present includes the vast industrial estate, scattered workshops and factories, shanties and worker settlements, and a few

Table 1.2 Growth of municipal limits

Year	Area	Growth rate
1901	14.93	30.68
1911	23.08	54.59
1921	23.96	3.82
1932	25.29	5.54
1941	52.47	102.46
1951	52.47	–
1961	92.98	77.22
1971	92.98	–
1981	98.15	5.56
1991	190.84	94.44
2001	190.84	–

Source: AMC Statistical Outline 2006–07.

Table 1.3 Population growth in the wards of Vatva, Gomtipur and Rajpur

Year	Vatva (32.82 sq. km)	Gomtipur (1.88 sq. km)	Rajpur (3 sq. km)
1991	52,816	41,090	85,706
2001	121,725	68,476	73,096
2011	164,730	70,015	79,409

Source: AMC Statistical Outline; Census 2011.

high-rise buildings. Systematically targeted during the months of communal conflict in 2002, Vatva became particularly important since three major relief camps were set up across the locality and the area attracted a large number of displaced Muslims from the rest of the city.[34] Gomtipur and Vatva represent, in a sense, two points in the city's industrial history—one, the site of a 'formal' industry and the other, that of an 'informal' labour regime. A deeper look at the two neighbourhoods allows us to explore processes beyond the more visible informalisation of work relations. We can trace how broader historical tendencies of electoral arithmetic, communalisation and religious violence, and more localised and specific implementation of urban policies and legal measures have contributed to the production of the city's labour spaces.

WHY THE NEIGHBOURHOOD?

What does it mean when we talk of the neighbourhood? Simply taken as a territorial unit, it serves a limited purpose for analysis. The neighbourhood

appears in many forms—as an administrative category, as a unit of urban planning, as a delineated element in urban cartographies, and as a web of social relations. These various maps of the neighbourhood do not always neatly correspond; indeed, they may coincide at various points, while conflict at others.

In recent scholarship, the working-class neighbourhood in India has been viewed as a site where subsistence strategies of the worker's household are forged, as a site of social reproduction and as the locus of political action and popular movements.[35] A dominant view has tended to hold these neighbourhoods as spaces where rural ties and primordial connections are easily reproduced in an urban context—in a sense, 'villages transplanted to the city'.[36] Implicit in this conceptualisation is an idea of a seamless continuity with the rural—a sense that social relations in the urban working-class spaces were constituted by inherited village ties. A 'shared urban experience', as Chandavarkar points out, was assumed to foster a moral consensus and social harmony within the neighbourhood. Instead, he argues for an understanding of the social relations of the neighbourhood as constituted by conflict and competition, rather than by an inherent social harmony brought on by proximity.[37]

The working-class neighbourhood, in this book, appears as a 'scale' of social practice that is constituted and transformed by sociopolitical dynamics. I use scale not merely to delineate the geographical and empirical level of investigations, but more as an operational one, which refers to the levels at which social processes and practices work.[38] Crucial in this regard is the attention devoted to forms of state practices, the shifting trajectories of urban governance and the range of political actors. In locating the interactions and the intersections between these various dimensions, we see the neighbourhood as an ever-forming, ever-dynamic category embedded within wider hierarchies and relations. Brenner identifies two significant ways in which the notion of scale has been employed in recent literature. The first uses it in the sense of a 'boundary', differentiating the object in question from other geographical units. The second deploys it more in reference to processes by which different spatial units are hierarchised and recalibrated. In this research, the scale of the neighbourhood is not seen as a nested spatial container within ever-widening geographical units (such as the regional, national or global), but is constituted equally by shifting vertical hierarchies and horizontally dispersed relations and processes and is itself a product of multi-scalar networks.[39] The two lines of inquiry that this book

follows—the transformation of urban political practice and the shifts in property regimes—aims to demonstrate how socio-spatial relations within the neighbourhood are enmeshed in broader spaces and processes. Implicit in structures and processes of political mediation are questions of connections, of networks and circuits that linked the workers' neighbourhoods to various nodes in the wider city. At one level, this speaks to how the state manages and regulates urban resources and what forms of socio-spatial distinctions arise in the process. At another, it relates to the struggles and engagements 'from below' with state processes.

Spatial qualifiers with regard to politics appear throughout this book—in terms of the 'local', the 'turf', the 'neighbourhood', the 'municipal', and so on. Cox's distinction between spaces of dependence and spaces of engagement is useful in laying out in more precise terms the spatiality of politics. Spaces of dependence, as he conceptualises it, refers to 'those more or less localized social relationships upon which we depend for the realization of essential interests and for which there are no substitutes elsewhere; they define place specific conditions for our material well-being and our sense of significance'.[40] In order to secure a space of dependence, engagement with other centres of social power is necessary and through this is constructed what he calls spaces of engagement. This formulation, in a sense, captures the embeddedness of local political practice within different sites and processes, pointing towards the ways in which social power and authority circulate through and are altered at various linked levels. Scale, in this conceptualisation, is not seen as an exclusively areal or territorial unit but rather in terms of networks.[41] This reading of scale runs implicitly through this book in its focus on the enmeshed and interconnected registers of socio-spatial practice.

The mechanisms of urban planning work at a fundamental level with categories of scale, as heterogeneous spatial arrangements are refracted through cartographic isolation and abstraction, land zoning, and so on. These mapping practices in Ahmedabad were deeply tied to administrative policies of urban governance and the legal regimes of the land and property market. The cartographies of planning, the allocation of urban resources via the intended patterns of land use is one way in which the state produces the scale of local urban development. Sectarian violence produced other connected scales of urban settlements and networks of mobility. The structures of property in the city, the regulation of social space and the enforcement or circumvention of planning policies reveal the interlinkages between formal