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RIP Ranjitsinh, the people's king

Express news service

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Vadodara Shubhangini Raje stood with her hands folded, watching her husband's mortal remains leave their home in a palanquin as the other women of the Gaekwad family wept, looking out of the ornate armorial embossed windows of the palace that their ancestor Sayajirao Gaekwad -III had built.

An inconsolable Anjana Raje Gaekwad, the younger daughter of Ranjitsinh, led her mother away, to be with the other women in the Darbar Hall, where they collected themselves and struggled to come to terms with the loss.

As the palanquin was loaded on a carriage and led away to Kirit Mandir, the royal resting place, shouts of Maharaja Ranjitsinh ki jai rent the air and men clad with peshwa-like-headgear played Raghupati Raghav ... on the shehnai, taking Vadodara back to an era long gone.

Ranjitsinh, in fact, was the last living royal in this city who had witnessed the transition of Baroda from a kingdom to a part of the Indian union.

This year, Vadodara is celebrating 150th birth anniversary of Sir Sayajirao-III, the visionary king who gave the city its railway, schools, Raja Ravi Varma gallery, Felici sculptures and public buildings, inspired from Islamic, European and traditional Indian architectural styles.

Ranjitsinh led these celebrations that were launched on March 11, which was also his last public appearance. Barodians who broke down in the funeral procession recalled seeing Ranjitsinh on a wheel chair that day. Sixty-five-year old Dinkar Pawar, who was Ranjitsinh's personal assistant, stood in the corridor, under Laxmi Vilas Palace's famous church-like tower, in a daze. "I have been here for 40 years, have seen Pratapsinhrao, his father. His (Pratapsinhrao's) grandfather was Sayajirao whose father was Khanderao, you know the Khanderao market?" he asks and adds, "Now, everything is gone".

"Sadi beet gayi(an era has ended)," mourners were heard saying as the palanquin set out on its final journey through the antiquated streets of old Vadodara. "This palanquin was newly made, after the old one broke. Maharajsaheb is the first to use it," says Pawar.

Kirit Mandir, where Ranjitsinh was cremated, is about 2 kms from the Laxmi Vilas Palace and on the banks of the Vishwamitri river. It is the first such memorial for royals built in India, says Ranjitsinh's political secretary Anand Rao. "Sayajirao was inspired by Egypt's pyramids and brought the idea to Baroda and built Kirti Mandir, The others only followed suit," he says. Here, under one roof, a statue of the royals is built after they die.

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"Me Maharajancha Bhagva zanda cha sipahi (I am a soldier of the saffron flag of the maharaja)," says Balubabu Umratkar, introducing himself in Marathi. This caretaker at Kirti Mandir proudly details his job of cleaning up and arranging the place for the pyre, as he has been doing for all the Gaekwads' last journey.

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Dhruvnath Vyas, the royal priest says, this was the last time he was conducting last rites for a Gaekwad. "I have carried out the last rites for Rani Padmavati (wife of Fatehsinhrao), Maharaj Fatehsinhrao, Ma Saheb Shantadevi (their mother), and now Maharajsaheb (Ranjitsinh). Now, my sons will take over," he says.

Late Fatehsinhrao, the more flamboyant of king Pratapsinhrao's sons, never lived in Vadodara. He was based in Mumbai, and so was his wife. Sangramsinh, the youngest sibling, who is fighting a legal battle over property with Ranjitsinh, too lives in Mumbai. He arrived Friday morning for the rites.

Ranjitsinh, who lived at Laxmi Vilas with wife Shubhangini Raje, sister Mrunalini Devi Puar, who is MSU's vice-chancellor, son Samarjit, daughters Alaukika Raje and Anjana Raje, thus became the people's maharaja. Ranjitsinh would attend and perform at music concerts. Shubhangini Raje, who has researched on Chanderi Sarees, held an exhibition and sale of these sarees over a year back, and Samarjitsinh is the man behind the golf course, making the Gaekwads minglers of sorts.

Even as the city's scape changed with criss-cross flyovers built under the Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission project on land claimed from Laxmivilas Palace, there was still a great deal of Gaekwad in Vadodara, like Khanderao market, the organised marketplace and office of the municipal corporation.

Head from the railway station in Pratapgunj, towards Sayajigunj, where the Maharaja Sayajirao University is located, further down to Fatehgunj, a hotspot where MSU hostels are located, besides the biggest public garden, the Sayajibaug garden and Zoo...everything has a Gaekwad signature.

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