Homes of Capital:
Merchants and Mobility across Indian Ocean Gujarat

by

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Philip J. Stern

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Ajantha Subramanian

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

HOMES OF CAPITAL: MERCHANTS AND MOBILITY ACROSS INDIAN OCEAN GUJARAT

Chair: Engseng Ho

My dissertation project is an ethnographic history of “homes of capital,” merchant homes located in port-cities of Gujarat in various states of splendor and decrepitude, which continue to mark a long history of Indian Ocean cross-cultural trade and exchange. Located in western South Asia, Gujarat is a terraqueous borderland, connecting the western and eastern arenas of the Indian Ocean at the same time as it connects territorial South Asia to maritime markets. Gujarat’s dynamic port-cities, including Rander, Surat and Bombay, were and continue to be home to itinerant merchants, many with origins and investments around the littoral from Arabia to Southeast Asia. I argue that rather than a point of origin or return, Gujarat's merchants—many of whom are themselves itinerants from Arabia, Persia and Northwest India—produce and produced Gujarat as a place of arrival and departure: as a crucible of mobility. Gujarat's merchant homes offer a model of transregional engagement produced through the itineraries of merchants who continue to see the regions bordering the Indian Ocean as an extension of their homes.

While historians have generally studied these merchants through the bureaucratic archival records of imperial trade-companies, my project examines the yet-unexplored archives that collect around historic merchant homes. Curated by a current generation of merchant families who continue to ply old routes at the same time as they forge new ones, merchant homes offer a way to study oceanic connections from the inside-out and capital in cultural terms. Drawing on a rich array of collective and personal ethnographic and historical materials within homes, including architectural form; material objects; private journals,
datebooks and travelogues; visual media; and merchant memory, my project brings into view a mercantile space-time on ocean's edge. Though emerging from concrete ethnographic and historical materials that cast powerful light on Gujarati merchant mobility in the British Empire over the course of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, my account of “homes of capital” pursues mercantile imaginings across long tranches of time routed through the political economic transformations of the period stretching between the tenth and twelfth centuries. I argue that these non-linear imaginings structured by oceanic mobility exist in the interstices of imperial, colonial and post-colonial state space.

Placing merchant imaginings at the center of my analysis, my dissertation argues that the Indian Ocean was and continues to be a key spatial and temporal motivator of mercantile life. My project makes explicit the terms of this intimacy through a “chronotopic” study of merchant homes across Gujarat. Homes of capital in its broadest sense also include mercantile buildings like bridges, libraries, funerary sites, mosques and community centers, which, when linked together, created shaded pathways across the region in the face of an emergent colonial state centered on Bombay. In doing so I also reveal a more capacious mercantile subject, showing how new kinds of nineteenth-century circulations of Gujarati-language texts across merchant libraries, reading rooms and homes were embedded in and shaped a longue durée oceanic topography. My project documents the range of visual, material, textual and affective modes from within this topography through which merchants gave and give form to such a terraqueous region.
For my parents, Rajesh and Anupama Pant.
Our lives are not our own…we are bound to each other. Past and present.

~ David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*
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NOTE ON MAPS

Maps of the Indian Ocean and Gujarat were created by Akshay Dhavle using R statistical software and libraries (http://www.r-project.org/), which are available under the GNU General Public License.

Vector and raster map data was obtained from Natural Earth (http://www.naturalearthdata.com/). Natural Earth is a public domain map dataset, a collaboration involving many volunteer cartographers around the globe and originally created by Nathaniel Vaughn Kelso, Chief Cartographer at The Washington Post, and Tom Patterson, Chief Cartographer at the U.S. National Park Service. Data at 1:50m scale (1cm = 500km) was used for Indian Ocean centric maps, and data at 1:10m (1cm = 100km) was used for maps roughly centered around Gujarat.

Natural Earth data was visualized in map form using the ggplot2 package for R developed by Hadley Wickham, with liberal help from online documentation and tutorials. Edwin Chen's tutorial was immeasurably helpful in accelerating the learning process.

Official site for R: http://www.r-project.org/
Natural Earth: http://www.naturalearthdata.com/
Complete list of Natural Earth contributors: http://www.naturalearthdata.com/about/contributors/
ggplot2 documentation: http://docs.ggplot2.org/current/
Edwin Chen's ggplot2 tutorial: http://blog.echen.me/2012/01/17/quick-introduction-to-ggplot2/
NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

My transliteration of Gujarati words follows the Library of Congress standard scheme of Romanized transliteration (2011). I have used this as a guide and made slight changes for readability, including dropping the underdot marking retroflex letters. I also have used the most anglicized versions of names of individuals and places, which commonly appear in English-language texts.
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my mother’s sharp wit and ability to find social comedy everywhere. I always joke and say that she is the true anthropologist in the family, with her knack for picking up languages and her ability to get people to open up. If she had written this dissertation, it would have been written in half the time and with far more charm. Thanks to my darling sister for keeping it real.
CHAPTER ONE

Homes of Capital

The sea itself, the one we see and love, is the greatest document of its past existence.

~ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of King Phillip II*¹

One may watch a tree for months and yet know nothing at all about it if one happens to miss that one week when it bursts into bloom.

~ Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*²

Makata Lane

I can remember the precise moment the seed of this project took root. It was July 2007 and western India was awash in monsoon rain. The roads were choked with brown earth and the countryside was bright green, watered and thriving. The previous day I had boarded a dusty train in Ahmedabad, the state-capital of Gujarat, and spent the night in a stuffy compartment with fading velvet curtains enroute to Diu, an old port-city of the Indian Ocean. I was traveling to Diu because it loomed large in Arabic and Persian texts from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.³ At the time, I was fascinated by a mercenary, Malik Ayaz, a Central Asian, who had been brought to the Muzaffarid state of Gujarat (1391-1583) as a slave. Ayaz had risen in the ranks of the court and was granted Diu as a prize.⁴ Ayaz’s

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rise to power suggested to me the opportunities Gujarat held out to the itinerants of the Indian Ocean. I was curious about how a place, which in recent years was notorious for its parochial ethno-nationalist politics against Muslims had once been a place of possibility where anything could happen. This was once a place where a slave could become a king.

Ayaz courted merchants and encouraged them to settle in his city by offering them port and market services. He improved the city’s sanitation and encouraged the building of houses and neighborhoods. By 1500 Diu was the major nexus on Gujarat’s coast between the western and eastern arenas of the Indian Ocean, its markets full of precious goods like pepper, cashews and textiles. Ayaz’s ingenuity brought Diu to the notice of the new imperialists at the time: the Portuguese. Though their tenure in the Indian Ocean waned as the Dutch and English asserted their presence in the centuries to come, the Portuguese held on firmly to Diu, ruling it between 1545 and 1960. For five centuries this tiny point on the map, once the pet project of a manumitted Islamic slave-soldier, became a node in the Lusophone world, connected to Portuguese territories across the world, from Lisbon to Maputo.

In Diu I walked through the hushed merchant quarter called Makata Lane, plump monsoon clouds hanging above the bay. Little of this tumultuous history I had read about was immediately apparent. The neighborhood was quiet: a single narrow street shaded by leafy trees. On either side high compound walls rose up; thick, teak darwazas (carved doors) sheltered the mansions from view. The gates were padlocked. Fading orange, yellow and green paint on the heavily ornamented facades suggested that though locked these homes had not been forgotten.

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Taking the silence as a sign that no one was home I almost missed my chance. An old man suddenly appeared wearing improbably thick glasses. I asked him about the houses and when their owners would return. He told me that though the neighborhood was usually empty, one of Diu’s most important merchants, Narendra bhai Nagarseth, was in town from Bombay. He pointed out the house to me and told me to try the rear entrance. I turned a corner and found a smaller wooden door leading into the courtyard of an enormous hundred-room haveli (merchant house).

What from the street had appeared as a slumbering house was being torn down from the inside out. Kachchi women and men were bringing it down chunk by chunk. Though two sides of the house were broken and sat in piles of rubble one staircase led up from the courtyard to a wing that remained intact. I was received into an apartment of rooms by
Narendra bhai, a slight but robust man in his seventies. The appellate Nagarseth designated him as an important member of Diu’s merchants. The word nagar means city in Gujarati and seth is one of the many terms for merchant. As a composite the term joins person and place to designate the representative of a city’s merchants. The title was bestowed in all of Gujarat’s ports. According to Narendra bhai his family had held this title for almost five hundred years.

The room I entered was turquoise and peeling. An ornate swing was suspended from the ceiling and behind it a grandfather clock with frozen hands sat collecting dust. The floors were composed of black and white tiles, joined together to make diamonds and flowers. Above a wooden desk a picchwai—a painted textile of Shrinathji, a child version of Krishna and an avatar of the Hindu God Vishnu—marked the family as patrons of Nathdwara, a pilgrimage center in Rajasthan. On the walls hung portraits of the famous Nagarseths of Diu. A marble bust of Narendra bhai’s father was positioned in one corner of the room with a medal around its neck.

Narendra bhai and his wife were gregarious and eagerly quizzed me on what I knew about Diu’s history. Narendra bhai told me that his ancestors had fled Diu during the violence between Malik Ayaz and the Portuguese. They had only returned when a Portuguese contingent arrived in their ancestral village called Simbar and coaxed them to return, promising them peace and patronage under their rule. Since then, Narendra bhai told me that one of his family members held the post of Nagarseth. He also told me that for many hundred years one branch of the Nagarseth family tree was based in Maputo, in contemporary Mozambique. His family made most of its money in the textile and cashew trades, capitalizing on the opportunity to trade in the Lusophone world. Though he was not

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forthcoming about the specific coordinates of their trade route, he hinted at travels to Lisbon and Rio de Janeiro. Since Diu was ceded to India in 1960, Narendra bhai and his family now traded exclusively from Bombay. But he kept his European Union passport and spoke fondly of speaking Portuguese and traveling to Portugal and Mozambique. The haveli in Diu continued to be a place of return for family occasions. Narendra bhai looked around at the crumbling mass of the haveli with misted eyes and recalled watching black and white films in the courtyard projected onto a wall by a projector his father acquired on his many travels.

Later I looked back on this chance encounter and was struck by both its temporal scope and density. Though the haveli I had sat in was renovated in the 1930s, the ground it stood on had been in the family for generations. Besides, merchants had lived on this patch of land by the ocean since Malik Ayaz commissioned Makata Lane in the sixteenth century. Narendra bhai gestured to the objects and material surfaces of the haveli to anchor a narrative that summoned a long history of oceanic involvement. This was not a fraying piece of parchment or a footnote in a colonial document but a dense site of imagination, materiality and symbolic practice. What, I wondered, would Gujarat’s historical encounter with the Indian Ocean look like from such a site, a merchant home that had existed in one shape or another for the past five hundred years? What would a history of merchants look like from the intimate space of home, a history of capital from the inside out? And how, I wondered, faced with Narendra bhai’s own (re)collection of objects and anecdotes, did merchants themselves make sense of the Indian Ocean as a key temporal and spatial dimension of their lives?”

**Terraqueous Gujarat**
My inaugural encounter in Makata Lane changed my ocular orientation of Gujarat.

While I had earlier been in search of historical manuscripts I now looked up and encountered scores of merchant homes in various states of decrepitude and splendor dotting the horizon of Gujarat’s port-cities. That summer and the next one I traveled down the coastline in search of historical mercantile neighborhoods, surveying Gujarat’s port-cities from Bhavnagar and Veraval in Saurashtra to Porbander, Khambhat (Cambay) Bharuch (Broach), Surat, Rander and Bombay in south Gujarat. As I distilled the conceptual boundaries of my project, I chose to focus on South Gujarat, the five-hundred kilometer stretch of coastline from Khambat to Bombay (figure 2). One reason for this analytic choice is that while ports in Kachchh and Kathiawar nominally fall within Gujarat state today and were certainly active in their own right, the ports of south Gujarat were the major emporia of the region. Khambhat (Cambay), for example, to Bharuch’s north was the primary port

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7 Other sociological factors also informed my choice, including the quite different Gujarati spoken in these two regions. The Kachchhi language, for example, is a combination of Sindhi and Gujarati indexing a shared regional identity across the Thar desert in the northwest. For an analysis of the regional integrity of Kachchh see, Farhana Ibrahim, Settlers, Saints and Sovereigns: An Ethnography of State Formation in Western India (London: Taylor and France, 2009). As Edward Simpson shows in his wonderful ethnography of seafarers, Kachchh (and particularly the port-city of Mandvi) sustained distinct, patterned connections with East Africa and Arabia, particularly with Zanzibar and Muscat, suggesting a distinct regional identity. Edward Simpson, Muslim Society in the Western Indian Ocean: The Seafarers of Kachchh (New York: Routledge, 2006). Of course there were also intersections and overlaps in mercantile activity between western India and Indian Ocean textile markets. For a fascinating analysis of the role of nineteenth-century East African consumer desires in the shaping of Bombay’s textile markets (which I learned during my research in the Mangaldas Textile Market, Kalbadevi, Bombay, was dominated by Kachchhi merchants from Mandvi), see Jeremy Presthold, “The Global Repercussions of Consumerism: East African Consumers and Industrialization,” Domesticating the World: African Consumerism and the Genealogies of Globalization (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 59-88. Kathiawar is geographically distinct and comprises the peninsula formed by the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Cambay. A distinct form of Gujarati is spoken here, most strikingly differentiated by phonemic differences, like the pronunciation of the Gujarati letter “th” as “s.”
of the region from the tenth to the sixteenth centuries after which Surat rose to prominence only to lose out to Bombay in the eighteenth century.\(^8\)

One reason for the concentration of major ports in south Gujarat is the dense alluvial delta that connected them via a network of rivers to territorial South Asia. The Sabarmati, Narmada, Mahi and Tapti converge here as they empty out into the Indian Ocean. As these rivers wound their way to the coast they irrigated the hinterland making it fertile and rich for cultivation. Gujarat’s ports assumed the position of emporia because merchants leveraged the proximity to cotton (textile) production—even financing major parts of it—\(^9\) which was a precious commodity in demand all across the Indian Ocean.\(^10\) Cotton is a kharif (winter) crop in the South Asian farm calendar.\(^11\) In the winter months flowering cotton plants cover the region in a carpet of billowy white. Nowhere is the region’s shared identity more resplendent than in this perennial image of the cotton harvest. At the same time this common ecological dynamic, rooted in an alluvial delta and productive of a landscape of cultivation of cotton, linked Gujarat to an oceanic and even global world through trade (figure 3).

Prior to traveling to Gujarat I immersed myself in the rich historiography of the Indian Ocean pouring over texts in the frescoed reading room at Harvard’s Widener Library.

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\(^8\) Though the port-city of Bombay would become famous as a “British” port--the capital of the Bombay Presidency--my project frames places it within “terraqueous Gujarat.” It was only in 1960 that the region was partitioned into two states--Maharashtra and Gujarat--along linguistic lines.


I read fascinating accounts of Gujarat’s historical importance to maritime networks, written by historians like K.N Chaudhuri and M.N Pearson, describing its enigmatic merchants and bustling port-cities. Inspired by the developments in world-systems theory and world history—especially the work of Janet Abu-Lughod who provocatively locates the developments of the sixteenth-century “world system” in an “Afro-Eurasian ecumene” of the thirteenth century—these historians brought to life for me a pre-1500 world stretching across Afro-Eurasia as the birth place of capitalism. This important scholarship placed Gujarat’s emporia at the center of the Indian Ocean world as an intermediate maritime zone connecting its western and eastern arenas. A rich passage from K.N Chaudhuri’s work illustrates the entanglement of trade routes that intersected in Gujarat:

Cairene merchants brought to Gujarat through Aden such products of Italy, Greece, and Syria as gold, silver, mercury, vermillion, copper, rosewater, woolen cloth, glass beads, and weapons. Traders from Aden itself dealt in all these commodities and in addition brought madder, raisins, opium, and horses. The return cargo of the Middle Eastern merchants included the economic products of Gujarat and those of the Indonesian archipelago: rice and foodstuffs, cloves, nutmeg, and mace, rare woods, Chinese porcelain, coarse pottery, indigo, carnelian beads, and above all cotton cloth. The textiles were traded from Aden to Zeila, Berbera, Sokotra, Kilwa, Malindi and Mogadishu, and to all places in Arabia.

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12 The “world system” refers to the mode of analysis developed by sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein in the 1970s to think about modern capitalism on a global scale in which a European core produced peripheries.


By the sixteenth century a number of these routes took shape with Gujarat at the center, including ones that ran from Malacca to Gujarat; Gujarat to the Red Sea ports; Gujarat to the Malabar coast and intermediate ports on the western coast; East Africa to Gujarat; and Gujarat to Hormuz. 17 Travelling at a time when monsoon winds dictated ocean-going traffic, merchants docked in Gujarat’s ports to wait out the monsoon rains. A range of travelers, who arrived in the region between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, describe Gujarat’s port-cities as bustling with itinerant merchants who were domiciled in distinct neighborhoods. 18

As denizens of Gujarat’s entrepôts, Gujarat’s merchants had access to ports across the Indian Ocean. Prior to fieldwork, I also read the work of Sinnapah Arasaratnam, Genvieve Bouchon, Om Prakash, Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Najaf Haider, who document the dominant presence of Gujarati merchants all across the Indian Ocean between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. 19 With the arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean in the sixteenth century, a matter discussed in greater detail in chapter 3, these historians explore Gujarat’s place in “Portuguese,” “Dutch” and “British” Indian Oceans. Working


18 Chaudhuri, Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean, 105.

from the bureaucratic records of the Portuguese, Dutch and British, historians vividly bring to life ports of Gujarat as its merchants interfaced with new imperial projects. Ashin Das Gupta’s portrayal of the “decline of Surat” in the eighteenth century in his eponymous book suggests the twilight of the Indian Ocean world, an assessment I call into question in chapter 6.20 Lakshmi Subramanian’s thesis on the Anglo-Bania consensus suggests that one explanation for the demise of this world was the partnership “banias” or Jain Gujarati merchants formed with the British, funding their war and imperial building only to be sidelined with racist legislation in the eighteenth century.21 Still, as Sugata Bose and Thomas Metcalf have argued more recently, this decline thesis fails to account for the ways in which the Indian Ocean continued to be an important arena during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.22 Bose argues that the challenge is to keep the Indian Ocean in play as an “inter-ocean arena” while accounting for continuity and change.23

Preliminary research trips to Gujarat and then a longer twenty-month period of dissertation fieldwork posed new questions to this literature. For one thing how do we make sense of the material remainders—as I saw in Nagarseth haveli—of this long history of trade and mercantile mobility in contemporary Gujarat? The existence of merchant homes like those in Makata Lane suggested the durability of oceanic social forms that continued to exist, even if now putatively anchored within the nation-state of India. While Indian Ocean

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23 Bose, A Hundred Horizons, 21
historians locate Gujarat within maritime flows, what remains unexplored is a sustained analysis of the kind of region that is produced through the arrivals and departures of merchants.

In the pages that follow I frame Gujarat as an intermediate region at the center of oceanic trade-networks: a place to which people, goods and ideas arrive only to depart again. Rather than a stable geography that was negotiated by various oceanic groups with different results, my project traces the way in which the region itself was produced as a crucible: a place that was being perpetually remade through the itineraries of those who passed through it. In calling this coastal region “terraqueous Gujarat” my aim is to give conceptual and narrative shape to a regional scale that was intimately connected to both (hinter)land and ocean. If a generation of historians--on whose work I build in the pages that follow--looked in on Gujarat through the records of maritime travelers, bureaucrats and others, my aim is to look outward from land’s edge and see what the Indian Ocean world looked like to merchants who called Gujarat home.

In making this observation I recall Gaston Bachelard’s observation in his book *The Poetics of Space* that “all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home.” I borrow this insight and pose it as a question for the Indian Ocean world: what kind of home is the Indian Ocean? In asking this question I elevate the most ubiquitous aspect of social life to the stage of political economy. In concentrating my analytic efforts on homes my aim

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24 As Ajantha Subramanian writes “capitalism has long been a space-making project.” Subramanian’s ethnography of the rights practices of Mukuvvar fishers of south India reveals the ways in which politics is itself productive of geographical boundaries that mark inland from coast, separate—in the case of her ethnography—low castes from moderns. In other words social life is itself productive of (coastal) space (Ajantha Subramanian, *Shorelines: Space and Rights in South India* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 7.

is to recover a conceptual position from where to consider the history of Indian Ocean
Gujarat through viewpoints that congeal in texts, material objects, memory and built space
that are not housed within imperial, colonial and national archives.26

Itinerant Subjects

At the heart of this dissertation is an argument about the cultural forms of capital. It
is perhaps a truism to write that capitalism has long been the subject of contentious debate.
Scholars have offered conflicting and overlapping views on when it “really” started:
nineteenth-century (industrial) Europe (Marx)27 or sixteenth-century Europe (Wallerstein)28
or thirteenth-century Europe (Braudel)29 or thirteenth century Afro-Eurasia (Abu-Lughod).30
Reading these debates from Gujarat’s shores brought home to me the way various kinds of

26 Cf. Antoinette Burton, Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home and History in Late
Colonial India (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). Burton makes an important
argument in her work about the significance of the home as an archive of history in late-
colonial India. Prior to her intervention, scholarship on late colonial India had generally
relied on the biographies of male nationalist leaders. Her work opened up new kinds of
archives, especially the semiotically rich home of memory, suggesting the significance of
women and domesticity to colonial and anti-colonial politics. Her book expands what we
think of as archives by exploring the writings of three nationalist women, Janaki Majumdar
(daughter of the first president of the Indian National Congress); Cornelia Sorabji (a Parsi
lawyer, itinerant in the British Empire) and Attiya Hosain (a novelist who wrote about
Partition) and their use of the semiotics of home to write about politics and history. Though
inspired by Burton’s work, my dissertation takes a slightly different approach by extending
the problematic of “home as history” beyond the terrestrial nation to itinerant histories of
the Indian Ocean. In addition, my efforts center around densities that accrue within
merchant homes of Gujarat that continue to stand testament to a long history of oceanic
engagement.

1990).


29 Fernand Braudel, The Perspective of the World, Civilization and Capitalism 15th-18th Century,

30 Abu-Lughod, Before European Hegemony.
capitalism coexist(ed) across its alluvial delta. In a way, each of these theories gives shape to a different dimension of Gujarat’s economic relationship to the Indian Ocean and the world beyond. As I argued in the previous section, Gujarat was at the heart of the world economy that Abu-Lughod charts that stretched from Western Europe to China in the thirteenth century. Fernand Braudel’s account of capitalism concentrated on specific city-states of Europe (Venice, Genoa, Antwerp, London), echoes in Gujarat as Gujarati merchants were active across the Red Sea ports that were gateways to the Mediterranean. Wallerstein’s argument about the production of cores and peripheries helps explain the ways in which imperial rule in the region rerouted lucrative trade-routes exchanging spices, textiles and gold to new metropolitan locations in Europe starting in the sixteenth century. Nineteenth-century Bombay greatly resembles the industrial capitalist world that Marx described as cotton and textile mills generated a class of urban wage earners. And yet, at the same time, parts of Gujarat between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries continued to resemble the world Abu-Lughod and Braudel described: merchants and port-cities of Gujarat sustained strong connections to specific long-distance markets as I outline in the chapters that follow. And merchants themselves, like Narendra bhai on Makata Lane, spoke with intimacy of oceanic encounters that had transpired in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which they continued to recall as a meaningful map of the contemporary Indian Ocean.

Rather than thinking about capitalism, which at least in Gujarat is difficult to locate within a single model, this project sets its analytic sights on capital instead, understood as a form of value connected in a multiplicity of ways to Gujarat’s trade geography. The merchants of Gujarat—the itinerant subjects of capital—stand at the center of my analysis: I

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explore the various cultural practices through which they put Gujarat’s historical trade
geography to work. My argument is that capital as a form of value in Indian Ocean Gujarat
was intimately connected to mobility across the region, including access to ports and
hinterland production locales. My argument is that capital is itself an itinerant subject, a form
of value that takes shape in cultural practice in historical specific circumstances. As I will
discuss in the following section the merchant home is one crystallization of this conjuncture
of mercantile practice and trade geography. In making this argument, this project takes
inspiration from Sylvia Yanagisako’s anthropological study of Italian family firms. Though I
do not explore the full extent of the theoretical implications of her work, I find provocative
her call to think in culturally and historically specific ways about capital, which she as she
puts it “is never abstract, save in economic theory.” Citing scholars writing in the late 90s,
including Dipesh Chakraborty, Donald Dunham and Lisa Rofel, Yanagisako argues that “if
labor is not abstract, but always provided by people with particular social
identities…capitalists are also constituted as particular kinds of persons through historically
specific cultural processes.”

Indian Ocean (economic) historians respond to the call to cultural specificity by
limiting their subjects of analysis to specific religiously-bounded groups like the Armenians
of New Julfa or the Hindu Sindhis. From within these boundaries they generate rich and
contingent analyses. In this dissertation I take a different approach and explore a
mercantile identity that formed in the crucible of oceanic mobility and manifested in the

University Press, 2002), 5.

33 See for examples, Sebouh Aslanian, *From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean: The Global
Networks of Armenian Merchants* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Claude
Press, 2000).
shared practices of a range of Muslim, Parsi and Hindu merchants who projected belonging across Gujarat through building homes. My argument is that Indian Ocean Gujarat was created through the work of such merchants who arrived in Gujarat from elsewhere—from Arabia and Persia and North West India—and that mobility, understood as a deep cultural investment in movement, continues to mark mercantile life even today. This dissertation explores the ways these itinerant origins were put to work in Gujarat as a form of capital that was invested, circulated and reproduced in writing, material culture, built space and memory.

The density of these itinerant forms within the merchant home constitute connected archives through which I can study Gujarat’s regional mercantile culture on its own terms. In other words I put an ethnographic phenomenon—merchant dwellings across Gujarat—to conceptual work as a way of studying the cultural forms of capital.

I am of course not the first nor the only to study capital in cultural terms. Perhaps my most illustrious predecessor—at least on the subject of Gujarat—is a Muslim poet, Asim Randeri, the scion of a merchant family, who embarked on a set of twentieth-century travels across the Indian Ocean to study the itinerant merchants of the port-city of Rander, who were spread out across the Indian Ocean. Asim relied on the hospitality of fellows Randeris in Durban, Port Louis, Oman and Singapore amongst other places to collect material to reconstruct a history of his port-city. In many ways Asim is the patron saint of this project because his poetic couplets and the work of Gujarati history he produced (the subject of chapters 2 and 3) offer a model for thinking about the Indian Ocean as a region of homes. He offers what I call an “oceanic poetics” a method for collecting and interpreting the detritus of oceanic trade and travel, of putting together texts, material objects, narrated memories, built space that collect and are recollected within merchant homes.
As I describe in greater detail in chapter 2, Asim was able to make his journey across the Indian Ocean because of his gift of poetry. In exchange for hospitality he gave mushaira (poetic performances) to packed merchant audiences many of them poets themselves who contributed to the call and response nature of the ghazal form. His work reveals that as Randori merchants tenaciously followed opportunity on the economic frontiers of the British Empire they also belonged to a transoceanic literary organization headquartered in Rander. Asim’s oceanic travels and performances present new views of the merchant subject: in this particular case as a poet. Mercantile participation in an organization that patronized the literary arts produced durable connections across the Indian Ocean. And so my project is also given to ethnographically describing a more capacious mercantile subject. Chapter 2, for example, explores the merchant as a collector of objects, which I examine as spurs to oceanic (re)collections. Chapter 4 explores the merchant as a patron of libraries, which were built to house the boom in Gujarati-language texts that began circulating across Gujarat and the Indian Ocean in the nineteenth century as well being themselves voracious readers. Many of the Gujarati-language texts circulating through these libraries were imbedded in this oceanic topography. In chapters 3 and 4, I examine the merchant as builder and architect, who shaped Gujarat through capital that arrived from various parts of the Indian Ocean world. Homes but also libraries, publishing houses, mosques, community centers and even texts then are “homes of capital.”

My argument is that these homes of capital produced shaded pathways across a region, which in the eighteenth-century, began to be hemmed into a British colonial state. While Bombay and the Bombay Presidency began to exert influence over Gujarat and ports like Aden and Rangoon in the Indian Ocean, homes of capital produced alternate routes across the region. In chapters 5 and 6 I explore the home of capital in confrontation with the
colonial state and its ways of shaping the region and cultural identity. My analysis centers on how merchants inhabited homes of capital in a variety of ways to shape mobility within British India and the British Empire.

**Oceanic Chronotopes**

**chrono-** comb form [Gk, fr. chronos] : time

**topos n.** : Gk. Fr. topos – place

**topographical adj of or relating to or concerned with the artistic representation of a particular locality.**

The word “chronotope” is a rich composite of two equally powerful Greek words: time and place. Chrono and tope are the roots for a range of other terms that designate the powerful ways in which space and time shape categories and meaning. We see these roots at work in terms like chronology, synchrony, chronicle and topography, toponym, topological.

The term chronicle, for example, suggests how narrative is giving shape by time.

Topography marks the interface between place and description. In the pages that follow I propose to study “homes of capital” as chronotopes, sites that give shape to the space and time of a littoral region that I have called terraqueous. The etymology of chronotope—a category I borrow from literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin via Paul Gilroy—is particularly powerful when applied to Gujarat because it marks the process through which a region is given form at the intersection of ocean and coast, hence also my interest and investment in the terraqueous.

While Paul Gilroy powerfully invokes the image of the (slave) ship crossing the ocean to suggest the transregional dimensions of the black (intellectual) experience of the Atlantic world, my aim here is to telescope the processes through which merchants made

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and make manifest travel and trade in the Indian Ocean on land’s edge. In Gilroy’s path-breaking book, he reads a range of literary and musical texts charting a (black) intellectual history across the Atlantic. Unlike Gilroy’s analysis, which is rooted in symbolic or literary chronotopes—as in the symbolic ship crossing the ocean—this dissertation is anchored in the materiality of homes of capital (understood here in the broadest sense of mercantile buildings across Gujarat). In addition to being responsive to space and time, homes of capital also archive the debris and detritus of oceanic travel and trade. Collected within such chronotopes, what may appear as fragmentary can be assembled into revealing densities of mercantile life. This is the work I propose to do in the pages that follow.

This dissertation builds on Gilroy’s work by offering a topographical analysis (an approach I discuss in greater detail in chapter 4), imbedding the textual, visual, material and affective debris within homes of capital in the political economic contexts of terraqueous Gujarat. The term debris does not frequently appear in this dissertation because one of my aims is to give semiotic and analytic weight to what only at first glance appears “broken or destroyed.” And yet it is a category that is central to my building of the concept of terraqueous chronotopes. This analytic move is of course not without precedent. In researching and writing this dissertation I have found company in the many scholars who take seriously the sensuous quality of imperial and colonial violence which manifests in the splintering of the material culture and takes shape in “debris.” Walter Benjamin is the consummate chronicler of the material terrain of early twentieth-century (industrial) capital, from the wonderous objects of his grandmother’s home to the trash of industrial

According to Irving Wohlfarth’s reading of Benjamin, “the collector [of such debris] is a man who systematically misquotes his finds by anarchically tearing them out of context, in which they are marooned, in order to piece them together into another truer order of things.” To me Benjamin is powerful for his emphasis on materialist history as building a setting for both those things that are broken and also those that are out of context. Home as chronotope then is a concept that seeks to construct a historically contingent house for the debris of mercantile capital in Gujarat.

In thinking of debris in this way, as densities in need of categorical homes, my work is not limited to those industrial objects that scatter the pages of Benjamin’s fascinating oeuvre. I am also interested for example in various kinds of Gujarati-language printed texts that circulated across homes of capital beginning in the nineteenth-century that also imbed detritus and debris. The texts I focus on were curated and not individually authored and so can be thought of as examples of the way merchants themselves used print to make meaningful a terrain of debris. The chronotopic home that registers these kinds of itineraries creates the ground to facilitate my scholarly interpolations and conjunctures. The chapters of my dissertation document the diverse ways in which this debris is brought to life in Gujarat by its merchants and traces the way it is mobilized to diverse ends and mixed results. It also offers a method for conceptually animating historical materials that appear at first fragmentary and out of place.

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This dissertation then argues for a chronotopic approach to the study of mercantile history and culture in oceanic Gujarat. What does the merchant family look like, for example, as it registers in the debris of homes of capital? What kind of historical narratives of mercantile love and intimacy are archived in the changing shape of merchant homes (one kind of home of capital) over the longue durée? And what are the formal possibilities for history-writing if we are to indulge these enigmatic signs of sentiment? If as the scholarship on the merchant family in colonial South Asia reveals that colonial legal definitions of the family shaped the way in which capital was maneuverable, then a chronotopic approach examines how the boundaries of merchant homes themselves became embroiled in and were responsive to debates on the boundaries of the merchant family. While scholars from Mytheli Sreenivas (on Tamils), Rochona Majumdar (on Bengalis) and Durban Ghosh (on Eurasians) have imaginatively mobilized colonial records to explore transformations of notions of family,40 this dissertation explores how the materiality of the homes itself was part and participant in these processes.

Another key issue that is addressed through such an approach is how the densities that accrued around historic homes of capital in Gujarat were drawn up in projects that put oceanic mobility in the service of the emergent enumerative identities of colonial India, specifically caste. David Rudner, for example, brilliantly shows how Nattukotai Chettiar, a caste of merchant-bankers from the coastal region of Chettinad in Tamil Nadu engaged in social practices that were generative of caste, including marriage, religious giving, preferential lending to caste members, which gave force to their banking networks across Tamil Nadu,

Bengal, Burma and Malaya in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For Rudner caste and capital are doubles and were mutually formed during the colonial period. In chapter 6, I am interested in how merchant homes themselves became capital for weaving castes. I examine weaving practices within homes as attempts to draw upon the resources of Gujarat’s historical emporia ports, which transformed into production centers from the eighteenth-century. My analysis suggests that as chronotopes the merchant home, even when abandoned by its merchant occupants who at times left for new colonial centers, retained potentials and orientations toward the Indian Ocean. I am interested in exploring how caste, understood as a space-making project, was adapted by new Gujarati migrants to the entailments of the densities that remained within the merchant home.

**Chapter Outline**

The chapters that follow chart an ethnographic history of merchants and mobility through a study of “homes of capital” across Indian Ocean Gujarat. The chapters can be read as individual chronotopes. They can also be read in composite as parts of a sustained argument about the way capital takes shapes in a terraqueous region that sits at the center of the Indian Ocean and how its mercantile residents might look upon such terrain. The first half of the dissertation traces “dimensions” of oceanic Gujarat, exploring space (chapter 2), time (chapter 3) and death (chapter 4). The second half of the dissertation centers on “inhabitations” of Gujarat by mobilizing the analytic categories I create in the first half.

Chapter 2, *A Poet’s Ocean*, begins with a set of couplets and an unusual work of “oceanic poetics” penned by a twentieth-century Muslim Gujarati poet, Asim Randeri, on his travels across the Indian Ocean. Grounded in Asim’s itinerant wanderings and the book of
history he writes as the result of his journey, this chapter brings to life the mobile merchants of Rander, an old Muslim port-city located near the famous emporium of Surat. Exploring the rich “book of wonders” Asim produces upon his return, I argue that Asim offers us an oceanic poetics, a historiographical and methodological model for studying mobility in the Indian Ocean. Such an oceanic poetics is at work in the narratives of contemporary Randeri merchant families, among them refugees from post-colonial Burma (Myanmar), who continue to inhabit historic homes, concrete sites of teak and brick and plaster. Echoing and reimagining Palladian houses of fifteenth century Venice and their reinvention in the twentieth-century British Empire, Rander’s homes are powerful alternative archives of oceanic history. They are repositories of centuries of material culture, detritus of travel and itinerant life. Centered on three merchant accounts within their homes, I explore the color blue, the aesthetic of austerity and the sentiment of loss at the intersection of merchant memory and the material culture of home.

Chapter 3, Charred City, explores the temporal dimensions of such an oceanic poetics. The chapter follows Asim’s search for his “ancestors,” itinerant Arabians from Basra who arrived in Gujarat in the twelfth century. Interweaving Asim’s account of Rander’s “itinerant origins” with five-hundred years of European travel accounts of Rander, I track the production of Rander as a “charred” (port) city. A chimerical place that appears dead to generations of European travelers but alive—even thriving—to its merchant residents, I explore the wedge between different notions of time at play in conceptions of port-city space, the difference between empire and mobility. I show that a poetics of home inflects Rander’s urban space more generally as Asim (and its residents who he interviews) produce a longue durée of Islamic itinerancy through renovations of their Neo Palladian homes and city mosques. My aim is to show in granular detail how Gujarat is imagined not as a place of
origin or return, but instead a place to which people arrive and from where they depart. Rather than looking “back” on a linear history, Randeris move back and forth across long tranches of time in search of signs from powerful merchant ancestors. I build on this argument in subsequent chapters, showing that such a longue durée is a key resource that merchants use to project influence over the region.

In addition to being an alternative archive of oceanic itineraries as I document in chapter two and the site of longue-durée oceanic imaginings as I explore in chapter 3, homes (and built space more generally) were also powerfully drawn into cultural schemes of life and death. In addition to being points of arrivals and departures for oceanic travel, homes can also be thought of as sojourning points between life and death. Chapter 4, *Building Life and Death in Gujarat*, focuses on Parsi merchants, Zoroastrian itinerants who arrived in Gujarat in the eleventh century. I explore the preparations Parsis made to make their journey from life into death, from one home to another. While historians have tended to isolate Parsis as a “colonial elite,” here I place Parsis squarely within a shared history of mobility I chart in chapters 2 and 3, exploring the oceanic poetics and longue durée time frame of their practices of building.

Based on a close-reading of a fascinating archive of obituaries and building notices, collected together in the nineteenth century, I examine how in the absence of rituals of burial, Parsi merchants built a range of structures from homes to schools to Parsi temples (agiary) to bridges and roads. They marked these buildings as if they were tombstones, endowing them with the figures of the dead. Routed through the period between the eighteenth century and the early twentieth, my analysis suggests that though this was also a time of British colonial territorial consolidation, Parsi merchants shaped Gujarat’s coastline and pathways across it in the image of their arrival and settlement across eight hundred
years. Like Asim and Rander’s Muslim merchants, Parsis mark Gujarat with their itineraries multiplying its putative past.

I build on this analysis in chapter 5, *Merchant Fortress*, which centers on Begumwadi, a three-hundred year old merchant home that was once inhabited by Muslim Nawabs and then the English East India Company before it was rebuilt by the Pestonji family, Parsi merchants based in Bharuch. Drawing on the categories built in chapters 2, 3 and 4 I chart an alternative history of colonial capitalism focusing on the cotton trade as it unfolded within Begumwadi. During fieldwork I added myself to its list of residents and the chapter alternates between a first-person account of Begumwadi during 2011-2012 and my analysis of aspects of the house, including account books, visual and material culture as well as merchant narratives. I document the production of a “merchant fortress,” the allying of the merchant home to the scale of the colonial economy during the nineteenth century. The parallel narrative structure of the chapter between the post-colonial present and a longer history of inhabitation mobilizes merchant narratives, allowing me to chart the emergence of an endogamous understanding of the merchant family and assess its transformation in post-colonial India. This chapter explores the confrontation of an oceanic model of home with a colonial model of capital through changing conceptions of family.

If as I argue in chapters, 2, 3 and 4 mercantile building produced a unique space-time of home, which kept Gujarat’s maritime borders porous and locked into longer-term imaginings of mobility, then how do we account for Gujarat also being a place in which powerful territorial imaginings of caste Hinduism took hold? In others words, what is the relationship between mobility and caste? This is the broad and cumulative question the final chapter of my dissertation turns to. Chapter 6, *Twilight in Surat*, explores a parallel history of

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42 I have changed the name here to protect the identity of the family.
inhabitation moving to Surat, the paradigmatic port-city of Indian Ocean Gujarat. In the late eighteenth century, as the Parsi Pestonjis arrived in Bharuch in search of opportunity and Randi Muslims journeyed to ports like Aden, Hormuz and Malacca, Hindu weavers from what is today known as the North West Frontier Province of contemporary Pakistan travelled down the coast on the heels of a mass exodus of merchants from Surat to emergent British Bombay. These weavers, known as Khattris, settled into abandoned merchant homes of Surat. This chapter examines the (abandoned) merchant home as a modern theatre for the production of caste. If the merchant home created a porous coastline, this chapter shows how this porousness became ironically tied to caste identities through weaver-merchants who mobilized home in the service of caste-based trade. This chapter addresses the intersection of control of women’s sexuality and labor as part and parcel of capital mobility.

My conclusion, Chronotopic History, returns to Paul Gilroy’s provocative analysis of the Atlantic slave-ship as a chronotope of history and makes an argument for doing “chronotopic history.” In the final pages of the dissertation I place homes of capital within a comparative framework and consider its theoretical implications for studying histories of oceanic basins. Merchant homes offer a way to think about space and time beyond the boundaries of imperial and national states, while still being attentive to moments of intersection and confrontation. In mobilizing a range of heterogeneous sources collected within homes, my project also seeks to build a methodology for working with sources across the longue durée. Rather than charting long-term patterns, my project redefines the longue durée in imaginative terms as a plane of mercantile consciousness that is produced at the intersection of material culture and merchant memory.

The Home in a Time of Violence
My first fieldwork visit to Gujarat during the summer of 2007 was a mere five years after “the carnage,” a phrase popularized by the Indian media to describe the riots which had led to the deaths of thousands of Muslims across cities in Gujarat in 2002.\footnote{For a discussion of the wider events and history that framed the 2002 riots against Muslims across Gujarat, set off by a train of Hindu volunteers catching on fire en route to Ayodhya, the supposed birthplace of the Hindu god Vishnu incarnated in the form of Ram, see, David Ludden, “Ayodhya: A Window on the World,” in David Ludden, ed., \textit{Contesting the Nation: Religious, Community and the Politics of Democracy} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 1-27.} Deep rifts remained and civil society groups continued to demand justice from Indian courts and support grassroots relief efforts to those who had lost family, property or who had themselves been victims of violence.\footnote{See for example the citizen’s report published by the civil society organization Citizens for Justice and Peace led by lawyer and activist Teesta Setalvad. Anil Dharkar ed., \textit{Crimes Against Humanity: An Inquiry into the Carnage in Gujarat, Lists and Incidents} (Mumbai: Published by Anil Dharkar Citizens for Justice and Peace, 2002). [http://sabrang.com/tribunal/tribual1.pdf]} At first I attempted to shield my research from contemporary events, worried that statist categories like “Indian Muslim” would take away from the social and historical nuances of Islamic mercantile life, furthering the violence of Hindu nationalists. But many homes I visited bore marks of the violence. Conversations veered toward it.

In 2007, Nitin Padte, a journalist and friend of mine, put me in touch with two activists, Zaid Shaikh and Monica Wahi, who were doing important work in rehabilitating women widowed during the violence. They had started a clothing collective in Vatva, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Ahmedabad. I had heard of the neighborhood in reference to the famous Sufi Pir Shah Qutb-i-Alam (1388-1453) who was buried there.\footnote{The Bukhari Sufi Qutb-i-Alam and his darga at Vatva feature in the khatima or supplement of the Persian history \textit{Mirat-i-Ahmadi} written by Ali Muhammad Khan. The text is a court chronicle of the city of Ahmedabad in the late eighteenth century. Ali Muhammad Khan, \textit{Mirat-i-Ahmadi}, Supplement, trans., Syed Nawab Ali and Charles Normal Seddon (Oriental Institute: Baroda, 1928), 26.} The
neighborhood was at least six hundred years old. I was curious to visit Qutb-i-Alam’s dargah or shrine complex and decided to stop and meet Zaid Sheikh on the way.

The textile collective was called Himmat, the Urdu-Hindi word for courage. It was housed in a whitewashed house composed of three connected rooms. Many of the women who worked here had left their homes after 2002 because their husbands, children and other family members had been murdered there by members of a violent Hindu mob. Himmat became a foster home, a place that offered comfort and companionship. There were sewing machines on every inch of square footage and women sewed as children wandered in and out on their way to school or play.

It was an impressive operation. Though Zaid and Monica were around for consultation, the women ran Himmat themselves. The ‘shop floor’ was organized and managed by a formidable and feisty young woman, Zeenat. I often visited to chat or have evening chai with the women. Fieldwork was lonely and I enjoyed the laughter and humor of the shop floor. I wasn’t a social worker or an activist, but the women got accustomed to having me around. And as the summer progressed my visits became a part of my day.

One evening, Zeenat invited me over to her house in Vatva. She was young and unmarried. She had not lost family during the violence but was outraged by the events that had taken place and the condition of fellow Muslims. She began volunteering at the collective to contribute to relief efforts. She told me that for many generations her family had been community leaders. I discovered that evening that she was a Bukhari sayida, a descendant of the great sufi Qutb-i-Alam whose dargah I had visited some months ago.

Visiting Zeenat’s home, a whitewashed compound near the dargah, brought into sharp relief what was and continues to be at stake in studying homes. For one thing the violence that

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46 I have changed the name here to protect identity and privacy.
continually erupted in Gujarat and other parts of India had to do with who belonged in India or put another way: who could lay claim to it as their home.

Qutb-i-Alam arrived in Gujarat from Central Asia in the fourteenth century. At the time, Ahmedabad was the capital of the Muzaffarid state. It was a major scholarship center and attracted jurists, scholars and poets from across the Indian Ocean. Zeenat’s ancestry went back seven hundred years. Her claim to her home and neighborhood, Vatva, was centuries in the making.

But this kind of temporality performed through the veneration of Sufi shrines has no place in colonial and post-colonial forms of Hindu nationalism. Instead the temple has emerged as a chronotope of (Hindu Indian) history. To be sure the temple has been a potent symbolic space of history for many centuries. But its unique ability to perform colonial understandings of religion is of a more recent vintage. In an entirely different context—and to be sure on the entirely other side of the political spectrum—anthropologists in the 1970s 80s and 90s galvanized the temple to counter enduring claims that India lacked social, economic and political institutions. For example, Arjun Appadurai argued that between 1350 and 1700 Vaishnava temples in South India were nexuses for transactions between the warrior-kings of Tamil and Telugu country.47 Hindu nationalists too latched onto the temple as an alternative site from which to forge an anti-colonial national public during the colonial period. As scholars have shown, public performances of the Ram-Leela or Ramayana, performed in the early twentieth century, enacted a historical narrative, making it tangible to South Asian masses under British rule. In these enactments Ram became a palpable historical figure.48 The temple was a central chronotope in these performances. As Arvind

Rajagopal argues, these historic performances morphed during the television age, during which time the Ramayana was televised on Doordarshan, the single state-sponsored channel in India.\textsuperscript{49} Alongside the emergence of a mass consumer public a mytho-history of temples became available to Hindu nationalists as a persuasive version of the nation’s past.

This dissertation unfolds in detail an alternative temporality of history and of the nation on ocean’s edge. In place of a “time of violence,” I put forth a “time of home.” I seek to explore what I experienced one day at Zeenat Bukhari’s home in Vatva: the powerful way in which Gujarati descendants of Indian Ocean itinerants intervened and continue to do so in Gujarat’s unfolding history. My research proposes to show that Gujarat merchants were not part of hermetically sealed religious groups, as they have been framed by scholars. These merchants entered into a wide range of social relationships in Gujarat and across the Indian Ocean. These kinds of capacious ways of being were powerful spurs to action that presented both peril and possibility. Perhaps they are still so today.


Figure 2. Indian Ocean Gujarat [Courtesy Akshay Dhavle]
DIMENSIONS
CHAPTER TWO

A Poet’s Ocean

There are so many stories of this life, made of artifice and dreams
that if you close your eyes, man becomes but a vision of the imagination.

~ Asim Randeri

We make so much of this life and its deceit and dreams,
But if you close your eyes then man is ephemeral, a figment of the imagination.

~ Asim Randeri

Introduction

Even the most skilled of translators struggle with the density of poetic form and its concentration of powerful ideas in a few strokes of the pen. Given the many meanings that can be read into the poet’s brief words, I offer two translations of the Urdu couplet above written in the cursive Gujarati script. Condensed in the poetic structure of the couplet are a range of ideas, including the role of imagination in historical knowledge; and the ephemeral quality of life and representations of it. The historical context of its authorship suggests deeper meanings still.

The couplet was written by a Gujarati Muslim poet, known by the nom-de-plum Asim Randeri (1904 – 2009), sometime between 1970 and 1983. Asim composed the poem as an ode to a prominent merchant and patron of the poetic arts, Alamkhan Rehmat Khan (d. 1921). Alamkhan, like Asim, was born in the port town of Rander on Gujarat’s coast, but

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1 Hajee Mahmood Miyan Bin Hajee Muhammed Bin Hajee Shaikh Imam Subedar (Asim Randeri), 
Rander Anjuman-e-Islam Plus The Past and the Present Glimpses of the Community [sic] 
achieved great success abroad, in ports of the Indian Ocean, in Bombay, Port Louis and Durban. After a peripatetic existence Alamkhan returned to Rander to spend the winter of his life. Asim penned these words to give shape to Alamkhan’s life in death.

Asim invokes the transience of Alamkhan’s oceanic life and the quickly disappearing traces of it, as if swallowed up in language itself. To a historian-anthropologist, Asim’s ode is both a compelling vision of oceanic societies and a characterization of a historical poetics at work. By poetics I mean those underlying literary forms, techniques, assumptions, arguments that structure narratives and make them persuasive. In this chapter and the project more broadly, I develop a historical methodology for giving shape to the quickly disappearing and ephemeral world Asim memorializes in verse. What kind of poetics enable such an examination of the Indian Ocean world, a place of movement and mobility, which I define as its cultural form(s)?

In one respect this chapter is about a poet’s vision of the Indian Ocean. It centers on the author of this verse, a twentieth-century poet who travelled the breadth of the Indian Ocean giving poetry performances (mushaira) and collecting material for a poetic history he wrote about Rander’s literary society of merchants titled *Rander: Anjuman-e-Islam Plus the Past and the Present Glimpses of the Community* [sic]. Randeris trace their origins to Arabian itinerants who arrived in Gujarat in the twelfth century. They are compelling mercantile figures not least because they are participants in this much longer history of travel and trade. For reasons that will be discussed in chapter 3, Rander was presumed dead and burnt to the

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ground in the sixteenth century. In the archives of the English East India Company, Randeris are therefore fragmented, known by many names, as “passengers” in Durban; Surtees in Port Louis and Vohras in Rangoon. But Asim’s poetic history brings Randeris across the Indian Ocean into a common frame, revealing the robust trade routes they continued to forge during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from a small port on Gujarat’s coast. The first half of the chapter mobilizes Asim’s text to unfold the dynamics of Rander’s society and the merchants who called it home.

Asim’s poetic labor concretized in his remarkable history is a gateway to the central focus of this chapter: the historic merchant homes of Rander. My analysis of Asim’s text draws out a literary oceanic poetics, which characterizes Rander as a place intimately connected to a range of ports around the Indian Ocean and its itinerant merchants as deeply moved by poetry. Asim’s text reveals that merchants contemplated their lives in affective terms. They pondered and perused, remembered and memorialized. My account of Rander’s homes shows how they did so in ways that exceed the literary poetics that structure Asim’s history and the love of poetry that was performed in male comradeship. While Randeris made do with the sound of couplets abroad, they maintained havelis of teak and brick in Rander to which they perennially returned. Homes, as I will show, were points of return and grew into dense archives of oceanic life to which merchants maintained strong affective attachments.

During fieldwork, I found many of Rander’s homes locked, indexing families who continued to be based abroad, now—after the breakup of the British Empire—in places beyond the Indian Ocean, in Europe, North America and Australia. They returned for Ramadan, weddings or to check up on family property. Yet some of Rander’s historic homes

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were inhabited, either by merchants who had returned to spend their retirement or by families who had chosen to repatriate. These homes were saturated with interior objects. Porcelain plates. Vases. Pots of all shapes and sizes. Painted glassware. Chandeliers. Medals. Traveling trunks. These objects were displayed in niche platforms in walls, teak cabinets, and as I will show, even sometimes crowded on every available surface of the home. As I was taken on tours of the homes, my hosts launched into fascinating historical imaginings of oceanic connections and history, spurred on by the objects around them. I frame these object-encounters as reflective of a poetics of home.

In the second half of the chapter, I write a history of Rander from the inside out, to unleash the condensations of oceanic histories and geographies intimated in affective terms in narratives compelled by the interiors of merchant homes. I conceptualize these narratives as examples of what anthropologist Rosalind Shaw calls “practical memory.” Shaw makes a useful distinction between discursive and practical memory. Whereas discursive memory is conscious, Shaw adapts Bourdieu’s theory of the habitus—quotidian practices that are forgotten as history because they are second nature—to point to forms of practical memory, which “suggest a different way of ‘remembering’ the past, in which not only everyday choices (marriage strategies, ethnic identifications, and alliances) but also…transregional processes…are rendered internal, (literally) incorporated into people and their social and cultural practice.”

I frame the practice of collecting objects as practical memory to draw attention to the way in which oceanic history gets condensed in the merchant home and in objects within it. My analysis centers on three examples of practical memory: the color blue, the aesthetic of austerity and the sentiment of loss.

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As I move between Asim’s literary poetics and a poetics of home, I cover the conceptual and methodological distance between the ephemeral quality of oceanic history invoked in Asim’s couplets and the material density that is found in the merchant home. But first a poet’s vision of the Indian Ocean.

Oceanic Patrimonies

Though Asim used his poetic signature—using the toponym ‘Randeri’ to style himself poet of the port—he was also heir to another formidable name, which he proudly displayed below his pen name on the cover of Rander: Anjuman-e-Islam: Hajee Mahmood Miyan Bin Hajee Muhammad Bin Hajee Shaikh Imam Subedar [sic]. Asim’s patronym is a compelling historical artifact. Three generations of persons are imbedded in his name. Asim was Mahmood, son of Muhammad, son of Shaikh Imam Subedar. All three generations of men went on pilgrimage to Mecca. This too is pronounced in Asim’s name as rehearsed in the appellate ‘Haji.’ From his name we also know that Asim’s forefathers were Mughal revenue collectors. The last name (nasba) Subedar is derived from the Persian word Suba or revenue district. The word dar is a suffix used in composite to mean possessor or lord of the district. Asim’s name gestures to powerful ancestors who had been influential in mediating between the port of Rander and a major Islamic state. This history is condensed in Asim’s name: it is inheritance consecrated in language.

In this respect, Asim’s family and Rander’s society more broadly shared in the Islamic, genealogical culture so vividly studied by historians of the Indian Ocean, in which names were powerful symbols with effects in the world, motivating trade, travel and cultural exchange.6 Perhaps the most powerful articulation of a theory of oceanic genealogy is set out

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6 See for examples, Anne K. Bang, Sufis and Scholars of the Sea: Family Networks in East Africa, 1860-1925 (New York: Routledge, 2003); Z.A Desai, “‘A’n-Nuru’s-Safir As a Source for the History of Gujarat,” In A Quest for Truth: A Collection of Research Articles of Dr. Z.A
by anthropologist Engseng Ho who thinks about genealogy as a cultural theory of history. In his book *Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean*, Ho examines how the Hadrami diaspora was mobilized across the Indian Ocean and held together through the semiotics of names. Names connected in genealogical form on gravestones and in scholarly texts created a discursive and by extension social space across the geography of the diaspora. Ho powerfully shows that this transregional world was not supported by a military infrastructure but instead through a shared commitment to Islam. Ho’s book demonstrates a genealogical world of Islam that operated independently of European empire, and eventually outlasted it. Its categories were quite different from ethnically absolute ones and Muslims of this genealogical world were members, even authors, of multiple states. Following Ho’s characterization of the Indian Ocean as a place in which names were meaningful I propose to study Asim’s poetics as a kind of oceanic inheritance or patrimony. I locate Asim’s poetics in the concrete itineraries and experiences his father, Muhammad, traced out during his life as an itinerant accountant (munshi) in Jeddah.

Muhammad was born in Rander in 1871. He was one of the first Randeris to be educated in an English-language school and was quickly absorbed into Randeri-owned mercantile firms in Bombay. Muhammad began his career in the offices of Ghulam Muhammad Azam on Princess Street, in Bombay’s busy port district. Azam was once of

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7 Ho, *Graves of Tarim*.

Rander’s most successful merchants and operated a shipping line that plied the western Indian Ocean, operating between Bombay, Durban and Port Louis. Muhammad worked as a munshi in Azam’s Bombay office. In addition to speaking English, Muhammad was fluent in Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Gujarati. He was an adept translator for a merchant concern that operated across multi-linguistic territory. Muhammad occupied an intermediate position in Azam’s concerns translating correspondence, commercial and bureaucratic documents. But beyond the minutiae of documentary work, Muhammad was translating across commercial cultures. In this his position has the echo of Mughal revenue culture. In their fascinating article “The Making of a Munshi,” Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam argue that munshis were key figures in the political transition between Mughal and British administrative rule in the eighteenth century which centered on a Persian-language bureaucracy. While their interests lie in the role Hindus played in this scribal culture, I am interested in how the qualities of the munshi—particularly their grasp of cosmopolitan languages—were translated on ocean’s edge centuries later. In addition to being educated in an English school, Muhammad was also trained at the Jamiya Islamiya, Rander’s famous madressa. Muhammad powerfully marshalled his own literary inheritance from Rander to place himself at the intersection of the commercial culture of the twentieth century Indian Ocean.

In 1908, he caught the attention of one of Azam’s Arabian colleagues, a man by the name of Haji Fazal Arab, who extended an offer to him to work in his offices in Jeddah. After a few years, Muhammad left his employ and went to work for the famous merchant

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9 Subedar, Rander Anjuman-e-Islam, 139.

Ali Riza.\textsuperscript{11} From 1908 till his death in 1926, Asim’s father lived and worked in Jeddah. According to Asim, he only returned to Rander three times. Despite his physical absence, Muhammad was an active participant in the goings-on of his hometown, especially in the activities of the Anjuman-e-Islam (hereafter Anjuman), an association that patronized the literary arts. He held various posts in absentia. He was honorary secretary for a year; president for three years; auditor for seven years; and held the honorary positions of general secretary and auditor for life.\textsuperscript{12} Though I was regrettably unable to access the Anjuman’s records—which I can only assume is a vivid and fascinating oceanic epistolary archive—it is clear that it operated as a transregional organization, connecting Rander to the oceanic ports in which its members resided. I will elaborate in greater detail on this in the following section through an examination of key figures. For now I want to highlight Muhammad’s ‘poetic work’—as both munshi and representative of the Anjuman—as constitutive of Asim’s patrimony. In a way this patrimony—the social capital generated from Muhammad’s poetic labors—was also a particular kind of orientation toward the world. Rander’s society and history, as its literary Anjuman, were scattered across the Indian Ocean. To write a book about such a society, as Asim endeavored to do in the mid-twentieth century, required a ‘multi-sited,’ transregional approach. He was able to undertake a project on this scale because of the hospitality of Randeris in Singapore, Colombo, Bombay, Aden, Zanzibar and Oman extended to him as his father’s son. For in addition to the poetic merit Muhammad accumulated, he was also remembered for his pious work, as helper and aid to those undertaking the Haj pilgrimage. Resident for most of his working life at the center of Islamic

\textsuperscript{11} Subedar, \textit{Rander: Anjuman-e-Islam}, 139.

\textsuperscript{12} Subedar, \textit{Rander: Anjuman-e-Islam}, 138-139.
piety and pilgrimage—Mecca—Muhammad was able to do a good turn to Rander’s residents who were dispersed across the ocean.

Asim’s name then carried weight. It was a passport. Over the course of his life, Asim built on his patronym, achieving distinction in his own right as a poet. As he gave poetic performances—mushairas—he created a space of literary performance and exchange. In doing so he rehearsed a form of diaspora, bringing into view a society created through a shared love of poetry. His book is scattered with images of such literary evenings, artifacts of diaspora. This unorthodox method for collecting research materials—tracking down members of a far-flung society through poetic recitation—resulted in an equally unorthodox and alluring work of history. It is to this marvelous book that I now turn.

**Book of Wonders**

After more than thirty five years of research, Asim published his book *Rander Anjuman-e-Islam* in Gujarati in 1986. Five years later, Asim published an English language translation. Though the foreword composed by Asim’s colleague Malam Abid Malam Rashid as an introduction suggests that the book was published to much literary fanfare in Rander, its audience was not a general or academic reader. The book was printed in small print runs, once in 1986 and then again in 1991. Rather than a price, a donation of seventy five rupees was encouraged on the front cover.

When I visit the Anjuman library in 2011 I find only an English language edition. The Gujarati text is missing. When I ask around in Rander, no one is able to furnish a Gujarati edition. I wonder to myself if I will one day find the elusive Gujarati version in the home of a Randeri in Durban or Oman or Singapore. Asim translated the English text himself and it has the feel of a poorly reproduced copy. And for this reason, for the
unidiomatic expressions and the bookish English, it feels even more expressive, as if it is a fragment of a more complete and richly imagined original.

I think of his book as a book of wonders because it has the feeling of a treasure chest. Asim collects together persons, events, organizations, photographs and images to suggest the shape of an oceanic society. You can imagine a reader perusing the book, letting his or her eyes settle on a particular image or biography or event. These wonders are not stitched together in the form of a cohesive argument but are instead arranged in a commemorative frame to celebrate the literary society and its members.

The title of his book Anjuman-e-Islam is itself suggestive of Asim’s objectives. In Persian (and also in Urdu-Gujarati which are closely connected to it), the word Anjuman has a range of valences, including society, institution, assembly and banquet. In one sense, the book’s title refers to the literary society or institution—the Anjuman-e-Islam of Rander—that patronized and published it. But Asim’s title turns on the capaciousness of the Persian language and the semantic range of the word anjuman. It can also be interpreted more broadly as the Islamic society produced by Randeris across the Indian Ocean. The doublessness of the definition of society as both a poetic and Islamic space, not coterminous with the boundaries of the port-town it calls home but rather dispersed across the Indian Ocean is good to think as an example of social formation of oceanic capital that was not dependent on imperial technology, armies, legal system or bureaucracy. Instead this is a society held together by a shared love of poetry, and the great distances its practitioners would travel to share it. My focus is on the poetic labors that produce such a society.

Founded circa 1880 by a collection of Randeri merchants, including Asim’s own father, to promote the literary arts, the Anjuman was a literary meeting place: members organized and funded literary readings, published books, maintained a library and endowed
educational fellowships. Though the Anjuman was formally housed in a white-washed building near the old bazaar—where it continues to stand--its members and even core leadership were scattered across the Indian Ocean. Asim’s father, for example, worked at a merchant firm in Jeddah. Other members were based in Port Louis and Durban. The Anjuman held a number of events abroad and in time spawned sister literary organizations. Abroad, the Anjumans functioned as both literary and diasporic spaces for Randeris to meet and socialize. In this respect, in addition to connecting Muslim men based on a shared love of Gujarati and Urdu poetry, the Anjuman produced a transregional—later transnational—social space which facilitated broader political, economic and social connections between Gujarat and the places along the littoral.

The presence of Anjumans across the breadth of the Indian Ocean also facilitated Asim’s research. Much of his research was achieved by giving poetic performances—mushairas—in Durban, Colombo, Singapore, Port Louis amongst other places at Anjuman events. During these performances, Asim collected material on major figures of Rander’s society abroad. He asked the leaders of Anjumans to author “brief histories” of the community, which he received and reproduced in epistolary form. He also reproduced photographs that accompanied these submissions. Though he titled these missives as “brief history” as for example “Brief History of Durban South Africa,” they encompassed the various poetic and charitable activities undertaken by Randeris.13

Part of the reason Asim was well placed to embark on such a project—in addition to being a gifted writer—had to do with hospitality. As I show in the first part of this chapter, Asim’s father was a well-respect person known across the Randeri diaspora. Asim was

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13 For example Asim records the remittances by Randeris in Durban during 1967 which were channeled toward helping relief efforts during heavy floods. Subedar, Rander: Anjuman-e-Islam, 208.
offered hospitality in the range of places he visited as representative of Rander and the Anjuman.

In an afterword to the book Asim reflects on the circumstances of the research, describing his travels to Rander’s Anjumans abroad. Particularly vivid is his description of his wife, Fatima, and his time in South Africa and Mauritius where they traveled to visit their daughter and other relatives. I quote at some length here to convey the texture of his recollections. He writes,

I left, with my wife, by S.S. Victoria on 9th August 1971, to see my daughter Mariambibi Muhammad Yusuf Kadirmiya Imam Subedar and other relatives and friends. I reached Durban on 20th August 1971. I informed there some brotheren of our ‘Biradari’ about my intention to write brief history of the ‘Rander Anjuman-e-Islam’ and biographies of marhum elders. Thereby I gathered several useful information from there. I was received with open arms on behalf of ‘Bazme-e-Adab’ of Natal, Johannesberg, Capetown and ‘Gujarati Societies’ and other literary writers and interested friends in literature. Number of ‘Mushaira’ and other meetings of the poetic arts were organized. I was offered and presented with, letters of respect, gold medals, as well as other memorable gifts and presents…We left by South African Airways from Durban, on 14th December 1971 to Mauritius. The news of my visit to Mauritius was published in local newspapers there, by my friends Janab Peeru Malek Ahmed and Janab Yakob Bharucha as well as a program on Television and a public ‘Mushaira’ in Gymkhana Hall was arranged. Staying there for 8 to 10 days non-planned, we arrived at Bombay on 23rd December 1971 by an Air India plane from Mauritius, as soon as the war [with Pakistan]. Thus whole year was passed in travel and its preparation and the writing work was withheld unintentionally.14 [sic]

The mushaira or poetic performance was a key context in which Asim produced historical knowledge. The literary gathering served as a point of confluence for merchants who were perennially away on business. Asim used the mushaira to interview, reconnect and beseech his peers to compose their own historical analyses based on family knowledge. Though a Gujarati-Urdu word in the context of Asim’s poetics, the term mushaira has Arabic roots. It derives from the Arabic word sh-‘ayn-r which means poet and designates the person who channels poetic knowledge. The oceanic mushaira that Asim participated in during his

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travels and research can be interpreted as a unique space-time of Randeri life. These collective and spontaneous gatherings generated historical knowledge that produced and was produced by Randeri itinerants who were both merchants and members of Rander’s literary and Islamic society.

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The transnational circumstances of Asim’s research are reflected in his poetic choices in the organization of the final book. Rather than a linear history of Rander with a beginning, middle and end, Asim arranged his subjects and objects as fragments. He did not provide a synthetic reading of these objects. Nor did he attempt to write theoretically or self-consciously about his methodology. Instead, the book has the effect of a set of oceanic fragments that condense complex itineraries and histories. Individuals, events, photographs and institutions are juxtaposed against each other to produce the effect of an esteemed collection. This strategy allowed Asim to marshal different kinds of sources, including historical memory obtained from elders abroad; written sources including obituaries collected by families; and the voluminous records of the Anjuman which was a collecting space for a range of literary debris.

Let us turn to examine these poetic dynamics at work. Though broadly propelled by the duality of the title—Anjuman as literary institution and Islamic society—the book also proliferates in objects that point up a diversity of oceanic memories. My argument is that such objects condensed diverse itineraries and memories but share a poetic orientation to the past that I gloss as a “renovated longue-durée,” which I examine in greater detail in the next chapter. For now, I examine mercantile figures Asim chronicles and examples of Gujarati-Urdu couplets he attaches to these biographies.
The figures Asim commemorated in his book—including his father—were prominent merchants abroad with literary leanings. Not only did they attend mushairas, they were also involved in creating and sustaining an institutional and transregional shape for literary knowledge. Their ‘poetic labors’ had a mercantile hue, they were inextricably imbricated with the flow of capital that motivated their progress from port-city to port-city in search of economic opportunity. Several examples illustrate this point.

Let me begin with the figure of Janab Seth Haji Alamkhan Rehmatkhan Sahab [sic] (1834-1941), a Randeri who would become one of Mauritius’s most powerful sugar barons in the early twentieth century. According to the biographic sketch Asim authored, Alamkhan began his career as a humble worker on the Bombay docks. From there he traveled to Port Louis. Asim does not delve into how Alamkhan worked his way from dock hand to owner of a sugar estate in Port Louis except to say that he worked doggedly and determinedly in Mauritius.¹⁵ He married a French creole woman who was known as Mariam after her conversion to Islam.¹⁶ From contemporary historical sources and interviews, we know that Alamkhan was in the company of fellow Randeris when he arrived in Port Louis, most notably the Botawallas and the Bahemias.¹⁷ And so Alamkhan would have likely had an existing social network to lean on for contacts and help.

The Botawallas were involved in both the sugar industry and the shipping business.¹⁸ They were prosperous and endowed a charitable trust (waqf) in Rander to provide medical

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¹⁶ Asim writes: “He was married to a French Lady in Mauritius whose Islamic name was Mariam.” Subedar, *Rander: Anjuman-e-Islam*, 154.

¹⁷ Interview, Ahmed Bham, Rander, April 24, 2012.

and educational services to the poor. The trust continues to thrive in Rander till date. The Bahemias first arrived in Port Louis in 1845. According to an almanac published by Alistair MacMillan in 1914, the Bahemias were initially money lenders. The family then traded coconut oil before sensing opportunity in the hardware business. They were agents for various industries in Mauritius and owned six warehouses on Corderie and Royal Streets. In Macmillan’s book there are several photographs of the prosperous Messrs. Ibrahim Bahemia and Company. The most striking is an image of the father and his two sons, Cassim and Ismael in a six-cylinder Mitchell motor car. By the time Alamkhan arrived in Port Louis such families had already established themselves as merchants and civic figures in Port Louis.

According to Asim, Alamkhan cut a sharp figure in Mauritius. He was impeccably dressed in an angerkha and white turban. He was known for his charitable deeds, feeding the poor daily. After acquiring Belem Estate and running a successful sugar producing business for many decades, a cyclone destroyed an important cargo of his sugar traveling to Bombay. He was ruined overnight. The family sold their home and returned to Rander, where Alamkhan had built the Kanch Ni Haveli (the haveli of glass), during the heyday of his sugar business. After embarking on Haj, Alamkhan reached out to contacts in Durban and moved his wife and son, Ahmed, to the booming port, where one of his ex-employees


from the Belem Estate offered him a position as a commission agent. In Durban, he started once again. And by all accounts Alamkhan enjoyed a second wind as a successful businessman in South Africa. He was elected as the administrative head (mutavalli) of the West Street Masjid, built by a Randeri in Durban.  

Alamkhan sent his eldest son Ahmed to England to study medicine. His younger children Muhammad and Ayesha were born in Durban. Ahmedkhan married a European woman, who converted to Islam and was known as Zainab. The family lived in Rander for several years in the 1920s and 30s with Alamkhan and Fatima, who returned to Rander in 1923 to retire. After Zainab died while chaperoning their son, Hasan’s education in London, Ahmedkhan moved to Cape Town, where he remarried. Asim describes his wife as a “Malay-Arab” woman. Ahmedkhan died there and was buried in a Muslim cemetery in London.  

Alamkhan’s youngest son, Muhammad, was educated at Al Azhar University in Egypt. He spoke French, Arabic, Gujarati and English. He was a close friend of Asim’s with whom he participated in a Randeri youth organization. After partition in 1947, Muhammad left for Pakistan. He died in Karachi in 1969 and is buried there. He had five daughters with his wife Sharifa Begum, all of whom were well educated.  

The various itineraries of Alamkhan and his children suggest the dynamics of Randeri mercantile activities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One key dimension of their travel—at least this bears out in the lives of Alamkhan and family—is

\[ \text{Subedar, } \textit{Rander: Anjuman-e-Islam}, \text{ 154.} \]

\[ \text{Subedar, } \textit{Rander: Anjuman-e-Islam} \text{ 155.} \]

\[ \text{Subedar, } \textit{Rander: Anjuman-e-Islam}, \text{ 155.} \]
marriage. Though Rander had a strong Gujarati hue, its residents married across the Indian Ocean and used Islam to incorporate diverse persons into society (cf. Ho 2006). The generation of people that Asim grew up with were borne of parents who had pursued opportunity abroad and found suitable partners in distant lands. Booms and busts of capitalist cycles of accumulation created opportunity for finding partners on economic frontiers. Foreign wives returned to Rander and many spent decades in the sleepy Gujarati town. Alamkhan’s family though strongly rooted to Rander made diverse choices in the twentieth century: they cast in their lot with a range of new nations. Their gravestones are a map of their choices: they are buried in graveyards in London, Durban, Cape Town, Rander and Karachi. Alamkhan died at the age of 107 in Rander where he is buried near his wife, Mariam, in the Rander graveyard (kabristan).

Asim wrote:

Today from the descendants of Alam Seth and his brothers far from Rander some are living in Capetown, some in Rhodesia, some in Burma, London and America. As also some are living in Pakistan and Surat. Thus a reputed and renowned family of our(s)...is scattered over the world and it is being forgotten. May Almighty Allah bestow upon honorable Seth and all the deceased (Marhum) members of his family, His mercies and their tombs be enlightened with Divine light. Amin. [sic] 

Asim describes a cosmopolitan family, one which was at home in a range of places. Cut up across new post-colonial nations, fragments of Alamkhan’s family can be seen as a whole only in Rander and in Asim’s historiographical style that condenses these various strands of a story into a single biography to commemorate the Anjuman’s major patrons and members.

Alamkhan was also a member of the Anjuman’s advisory committee. According to Asim, the Anjuman records show a donation made in the amount of two hundred rupees in 1901. Alamkhan remained a prominent member of the Anjuman through his itinerant life in

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Bombay, Port Louis, Durban and Rander. A majority of Rander’s mercantile figures were important members of the Anjuman, including Asim’s father Muhammad Subedar, Janab Muallim Husseinmiya Abdurrehman (d. 1927), Janab Haji Sheikh Hussein Sheikh Halim Saab (d. 1935), Janab Haji Shaikh Mohammad Peerbhai Fancy Sahab (d. 1945). Though it is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine these figures in details—a majority of them with interests in Colombo, Durban, Johannesburg and Rangoon—I list the additional names above to highlight the generation of the Anjuman’s figures born in the mid-nineteenth century. Fifty years later when Asim traveled the breadth of the diaspora they created through anjumans and poetic performances, he was experiencing a social formation that had survived various political projects.

Forged during the heyday of the British Empire, the Anjuman was an articulation of a quite different vision of cultural and society, based on peripatetic Islamic camaraderie and rooted in mercantile and literary activity. Asim on the other hand traveled during the age of post-colonial nation-states. Now cut up across South Africa, Mauritius, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Oman and so on, the hospitality Asim received can be interpreted as a historical remainder of a mobile society. Asim lists the Durban Rander Society, Rander Miabhai Benefit Society of Johannesburg and Rander Muslim Association of Canada as more recent articulations

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of this older model of an anjuman now with a national hue. In this sense, these poetics continue to be at work, giving shape to new forms of association in the Randari diaspora.

The Anjuman of Rander was funded from capital generated in frontier ports like Port Louis and Durban. It was imagined and produced by Randaris whose experiences were enriched by participation in various port societies. That Randaris abroad chose to invest their energy and capital in a literary society connected to their hometown suggests that they understood it as a key site of social congress. This social congress had an Islamic complexion both in terms of its membership and its poetic form. Asim’s own poetry in the form of ghazals is connected to an Urdu tradition of poetic composition and performance. Rander’s merchants abroad, though not all poets themselves, understood and participated in the call and response nature of poetic performances. The peculiarly Gujarati-Urdu couplet from Rander—of which Asim’s ode to Alamkhan is but one example—was experienced by merchants as a sign and impression of their small town in Gujarat. Their poetic labor then consisted of both their patronage of the Anjuman and also more broadly their tenacity in surviving the booms and busts of capital frontier economies. Alamkhan’s choice to return to Rander and then travel to Durban is an example of a poetics of place, of an imagination that envisions a small town in Gujarat as part of a wider world.

Nowhere is this idea more strikingly glimpsed in Asim’s book than in a stray photograph sandwiched amongst pages of photographs of merchants. The photograph is dated 1912 and shows the marriage ceremony of Janab Malam Ahmed Hajee Ebrahim Rangoonwala [sic]. Asim is pictured in the front row as a young child. There are more than two hundred men in the frame. Ostensibly Janab Malam Ahmed had returned to Rander from Rangoon to marry. It is likely that other family members had traveled to Rander from

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elsewhere, possibly Durban, Port Louis and Jeddah, other important points in the Randeri diaspora. The photograph is taken under a ceremonial tent that has been erected in the courtyard of one of the mosques. The women of the festivities are elsewhere.

During fieldwork I search for descendants of the family but find none. I find no trace of Janab Malam Ahmed in Rander, not in a plaque or a grave or a house. His home seems to have changed hands and is no longer known in connection to the Rangoonwala family. But the photograph, a memento of the wedding, has survived in Asim’s personal archive and is a fragment of the ephemeral history he laments in the couplet I opened this chapter with. The photograph is also a snapshot of a society of Randeri merchants that very rarely fit within a single frame. And like Asim’s historiographical technique, the image powerfully condenses social principles at work elsewhere.

This photograph also visualizes absences and blind spots in Asim’s poetics. There is not a single woman in the photograph. Though Asim pretends to no completeness—he is clearly cognizant of historical erasures—his work offers no explanation of the place of women in this far-flung society. Asim is at his best in thinking about the relationship between sons and fathers, as we see in the strong patronymic poetics at work in his text and life. When we encounter children or women, we get only glimpses and suggestions. So though Asim is an ingenious poet, his historiographical approach loses its power to illuminate when faced with questions beyond the boundaries of male comradeship. The powerful condensations possible in his poetry are reductive in his historical writing. Though I read the biographies capacious they raise many questions that are left unanswered. For example, widowed and alone in Rander in his centenary year how did Alamkhan look back on his life? And what were his imaginings—his memories—of the places he visited. What traces existed of that now long gone life within his Kanch Ni Haveli, which he built decades
ago? We may never know for when I visit Rander in 2012 no trace remains of the historic home.

Yet many others do remain and their residents offer ways of examining Asim's Indian Ocean in other ways, from other perspectives.

![Figure 4. Rander is across the Indian Ocean](image-url)
An Ocean of Homes

Houses register things that we do not, presences, absences, losses.\(^{32}\)

~John Banville

In Asim’s book, individual biographies of merchants and the ports they lived in created one kind of social formation across the Indian Ocean, which we can call diaspora, a vision of the Indian Ocean as a place composed of the movements of itinerant men. These men, as I described, were united by a shared love of poetry. The organization they formed to support the literary arts was a model of the Islamic society they envisioned for Rander based on Islamic fellowship. As I introduced in the previous section, the merchants Asim described maintained homes in Rander, even as their lives took them from port to port around the Indian Ocean. These homes—each one an index of a family abroad—usher us into a different kind of chronotope. While I found Asim’s verse in the pages of a compendium gathering dust on a bookshelf in the Anjuman library, homes beckoned to me from Rander’s contemporary streets.

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The seasonal inhabitance of these homes, during the months merchants returned to Rander, makes them unique archives of mobility. Built at the turn of the twentieth century during the heyday of Rander’s Anjuman, these homes continue to exist and be inhabited by descendants. Though they share in Asim’s poetics as dwellings that are oriented to ports abroad, they are also quite different in ways that form the crux of this final section of the chapter. What are the poetics of Rander’s merchant homes? What can they tell us that a historical text like Asim’s is silent about?

For one thing, homes are alive in a way that Asim’s text is not. Though I read Asim’s text as a kind of archive, a treasure chest, a book of wonders, it is printed and bound. Even if infinite new readers can push it into service to new ends, the text itself does not continue to accumulate material. The merchant home by contrast, many of which continue to stand tall, is constantly accumulating new material and materiality. It is a living archive. But before crossing the threshold of homes to examine their interiors, before interpolating Asim’s account of early twentieth century mercantile lives with the narratives of contemporary Randeris and their imaginings of the past, let me offer some brief introductory remarks on the built form of Rander’s homes.

Rander’s merchant homes are slim and tall. They are three-story structures that bring to my mind the stucco houses that line Venice’s canals (figure 5). They are painted in pastel colors: powder blue, peach, pink, and mint green. Their facades are festooned with Italianate elements: arches, columns, balustrades, pillars and stucco ornament. At the turn of the twentieth century, Rander experienced a building boom as the merchants Asim described returned to Rander with wealth earned on the frontier economies of the British Empire. They translated part of this wealth into the built environment, spearheading a wide-scale urban renewal of the city. Merchants tore down old homes and in their place put up
magnificent havelis that married the styles of English Palladianism with Gujarati carving and masonry. One example is Patail Mansion, the home of the Nanas, a Randeri family based since the turn of the century in Bangkok, Thailand (figure 6). The most famous figure is Ismael Ahmed Ibrahim Nana who, according to one Randeri I spoke with, was a member of Thai parliament. The Nanas are major national businessmen in contemporary Thailand and own the Nova City Hotel chain. Another example is Butler Manzil, built by the Butler family, who were based in South Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (See Figure 7). Rander’s mosques were also rebuilt at this time. Figure 8 is a pen drawing of the Nayatwada Ni Masjid pictured before its renovation. Figure 9 is a sketch of the new mosque that was built in its place in 1911 and still stands today. The sketch focuses on the entrance to the mosque and emphasizes the Palladian ornament of the entry way: stucco columns, arches and balustrades.

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33 Interview, Ahmed Bham, Rander, 22 April 2012.
Figure 6. Patail Mansion, Rander. 2012
[Photograph by Author]

Figure 7. Butler Manzil, Rander, 2012
[Photograph by Author]
According to Asim this line sketch depicts the original 1195 dimensions of Nayatwada-ni-Masjid and is pictured on the eve of its renovation in 1911 (Subedar, Rander: Anjuman-e-Islam, 180).

I made this rough sketch of the newly renovated Palladian mosque in 2012 during field research. My aim is to experiment with the idea of the “study” which I mobilise in the pages to come.
The visual continuities between Venice and Rander can be traced to the strong architectural influence of Andrea Palladio (1508-1580) on British colonial architecture. Palladio designed and built houses, palaces and churches in sixteenth century Venice, converting Venetian mercantile wealth into splendid buildings, adorned by majestic arches, stucco pediments, and Grecian columns. His great genius was translating architectural elements from disparate sources of the ancient past, like arches and pillars, into harmonious composites. Historian tells us that many of Palladio’s greatest ideas were achieved on-site, a result of his training as a mason. His ideas spread because he wrote these composites down in four books, which, given the birth of the printing press and its proliferation in Italy during Palladio’s lifetime, became available across Europe. When architects in Edwardian England were searching for inspiration, they were able to draw on Palladio’s buildings, which continued to stand in Italy and to consult his designs and notes in his books. British architects in London turned their hodge-podge city built from wealth generated in oceanic trade into a more self-consciously imperial capital. Through the example of the Palladian architecture of sixteenth century Venice, the English looked to Greeks and Romans, the iconic imperialists, for inspiration.

In the early twentieth century, colonial administrators across the British Empire commissioned monumental buildings in this Italianate style. In British India, Lord Curzon, viceroy between 1899 and 1905, abandoned Indo-Saracenic architecture in favor of a bolder,


“imperial vision.” The architects of this period took inspiration from English Palladianism but they also, as Thomas Metcalf tells us, attempted to sculpt a self-consciously new idiom bringing together European neo-classical architecture with select Indic elements, like chattris (pavilion) and chajjas (overhanging eaves of a roof). 39 In the case of Rander though, rather than borrowing Palladian elements of architecture in a monumental-imperial mode, merchants and their masons authored their own style centered on houses. In choosing to script their own version of Palladian architecture, creating slim and tall homes that approximated the dimension of Gujarati havelis, Rander’s merchants were actively interpreting architectural flows that were making the circuit of the British Empire. But rather than applying Palladio in an imperial mode, I want to argue that they adapted the sixteenth-century mercantile original to the diasporic attachments I described in the previous section. Rander’s Palladian homes were and are place-holders of mercantile wealth, of Randeris who are not at home. Built in the style of apartments, they accommodate branches of mercantile families dispersed in a various places, who meet upon their yearly returns to Rander. The ornament on the façade and its hodge-podge affect suggests a magpie approach to aesthetics reflective of travel to many places rather that attachment to a single one. Rather than proclaiming power to a colonial public, Rander’s Palladian homes are whimsical. The most striking example is Nakhoda Manzil (Home of the Ship Chandler), home to a family once active in Rangoon who now run a Burmese noodle (Khaw Suey) stand in the bazaar. If you look closely you can see the miniature ships, trains and motor cars incorporated into the stucco ornament on the façade. A history of mobility is sculpted into the façade of home.

39 Metcalf, An Imperial Vision, 236. See also Metcalf’s longer discussion of Lutyen’s Delhi as an example of such an architectural project, 228-239.
Locked Homes

During field research in Rander, a century after 2011-2012, I find many of these early twentieth-century houses locked. This arrests my vision because the houses do not look abandoned. Their locks are not rusted. They look freshly painted and many have had recent additions, like corrugated make-shift roofs erected to protect vaulted balconies from monsoon rains. Some homes have polished name-plates in teak wood prominently displayed on their doors. These scenes suggest that though locked for the moment these homes have not been forgotten.

When I ask around, the townspeople tell me that many families live abroad and return during the winter months for weddings and vacations or during Ramadan to fast with their kin. The most insightful of these explanations for the locked homes of the city is narrated to me by Mohammad Sabaq and Ibrahim Bham, two Randeris I meet at the Rander Kutubkhana40 (reading room) opposite the Quwat-i-Islam mosque in the main town square. Sabaq, an elderly man in his seventies, has spent most of his life in London and returned to Rander several years ago to spend his retirement. Ibrahim Bham is younger, probably in his early forties. He has bright white teeth and what can only be described as an oily disposition. Ibrahim is based in Rander but has ‘interests’ (mamle) in Saudi Arabia. Bham tells me that Randeris are known as the “qom i bawahir,” the community of the seas. According to Sabaq, with the exception of the few who have gone into civil professions, a majority of the community continue to live and work abroad. The ones who remain in Rander do so to maintain family property or are retired like himself. Homes are points of return after a lifetime abroad.41 And as I will find out, they are safety nets for others who were once

40 In the Urdu/Gujarati the term kutub is the plural form of the word kitab.
41 Interview, Mohammad Sabaq and Ibrahim Bham, Rander, January 22, 2012.
prominent citizens but ethnic minorities of nation-states like Thailand, Malaysia and South Africa.

So while merchants ploughed their wealth into building homes in Rander at the turn of the twentieth century, they were not taking capital out of circulation. Instead homes enabled and continue to enable the reproduction of capital across the ocean by creating stable nodes in a network of places. Trade routes are intimately linked to the architectural form, material culture and affective ties to homes in Rander. Given the circulation of generations of merchant families through Rander, homes were and continue to be rich repositories of the debris of these journeys, circulations, histories.

A city of locked houses suggests an interplay of interiors and exteriors. Homes become slumbering travel chests, boxes, drawers, places on which you can put a lock. In his fascinating analysis of drawers, chests and wardrobes as places that can be locked, Gaston Bachelard suggestively writes “that there will always be more things in a closed, than in an open, box.” Though my analysis is quite different from Bachelard’s psycho-analytic focus, I find his reading of locked things within the home suggestive. Bachelard ruminates that locks increase the surface area of the things they protect. Locked things beckon to be opened. They spark curiosity. Rander’s homes in a related but different vein accrue historical weight because they are locked, because their residents are living life elsewhere. Their interiors, shrouded in bed sheets during the year become littered with the remainders of journeys. They are not spring-cleaned or purged for the detritus of daily life. On the contrary, this detritus is given semiotic weight and become mementos, heirlooms and material signs in general of travel and lives lived elsewhere. In methodological terms, it is precisely because

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homes were built to remain locked or only partially inhabited by retired family members while merchants were abroad that they become archives and repositories of oceanic life. I propose that locked homes spur mobility through the operation of collecting together the miscellanea of travel and lives lived elsewhere. It is at home that the itinerant wanderings of generations of Randeris become condensed in objects and narratives. In this, the Randeri house closely resembles Asim’s historical method and book: it, too, is a place of wonders.

Three Studies of Home

Though a majority of homes were locked, I encountered several families whose ancestors had been part of the itinerant world that Asim describes in the first half of the twentieth century. Some families had been permanently repatriated to Rander after the mid-century collapse of the British Empire and the rise of nativist post-colonial states in places like Burma and Yemen. Some Randeris moved on to new locations in the oil-rich states of the Arabian Gulf and westward to Europe and North America, but many simply returned to their old stucco havelis in Rander. My goal here is to think visually, materially, and affectively about what Rander’s homes reveal about the history and culture of a region like Gujarat whose residents have sustained a long relationship to places around the Indian Ocean. To state the question again: what are the poetics of Rander’s homes?

The three studies below introduce descendants of the generation of Randeri merchants Asim memorialized. I interview them in their homes and the narratives they produce are open-ended and their poetics are quite different from the patronymic biographies Asim penned. Here we encounter a range of objects including porcelain plates, teak cupboards, frescoed ceilings, shrouded living rooms, travel chests. We hear the cadences of loss and austerity. We walk into dwellings with historical atmosphere.

A STUDY IN BLUE
Hathia Mansion is located on the corner of Variavali Street. It was built in 1902 by Mohammed Hathia, a Randeri who lived and worked in Rangoon. It is home today to his great grandson Anees Hathia who lives in a part of the enormous home with his wife, son, and daughter Neelam. According to Anees, the Hathias were in the real-estate market in Rangoon and Cambodia. Though Anees is not forthcoming about the circumstances under which his family left or was forcible deported, he says that they left their interests in Burma and Cambodia sometime in the 1960s. They earned their revenue from rents. His uncle—with who Anees is currently involved in a property dispute—lives in Paris and returns to Rander each summer with his wife. His apartment is locked year-round.

Anees’s son has recently been engaged to marry the daughter of the Esmael family, another old Rangoon family. The Esmaels were involved in the oil business. They are one of Rander’s most prominent families and started many charities in the city in the early twentieth century. Perhaps most prominent is a school that stands in the main town square. They too left Rangoon around the time of the expulsions in the 1960s. Perhaps like other Gujarati and Tamil Chettiar merchants, they were expelled, forced onto boats heading to Calcutta, stripped of their immediate property. Though the two families will soon be joined in marriage, no doubt in part because of their shared history as wealthy merchants in Rangoon—both families boast to me the skill of their women in the ways of Rangoon cooking—their homes provide a study in striking contrasts. This contrast centers on the color blue. In Esmael Manzil it is the dominant visual experience. The home is crammed with blue-white porcelain in the Chinese style. Hathia Mansion by contrast while also full of

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I made several visits to Hathia Mansion during the months of April and May 2012. This study and the two that follow are based on my field notes, a combination of my own account of my encounters and the home and interviews with the family. I cite specific interviews when I quote directly from my field notes.
precious china and porcelain acquired during the family’s heyday in Rangoon does not hold a single piece of blue. If we follow Michael Taussig’s call to take color seriously as an important material and cultural aspect of world history and analyze the attraction and repulsion to color as a fetish, a way in which people render the past in material terms then what might blue reveal to us about Rander’s Rangoon returnees? What might the visual and material experience of color tell us about the ways in which Randeris experience oceanic history and capital?

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When Mohammad Hathia first built Hathia Mansion at the turn of the twentieth century, it was an enormous empty house. At the time, his family fit into the small third-floor apartment. The rest of the house was built for a future family; it materially imbedded Mohammad’s optimism about the success of his family as merchants in Rangoon. In many ways his vision was prescient. More than a hundred years later, when I visit Hathia Mansion, I find a prosperous family, which, though splintered, has survived the collapse of the family’s initial source of wealth: trading in the frontier economies of the British Empire. Anees Hathia, Mohammed’s great grandson, is a successful lawyer in neighboring Surat and his great- great grandson is studying to be an architect.

Hathia Mansion is a gracious house. A small gate on street level with a metal clasp that loops over it leads a visitor up three small steps to an otla—a raised platform. The otla of Hathia mansion has the dimensions of a veranda. It is a composite of Gujarati haveli architecture and the British bungalow. Mohammad spared no expense in the house’s construction. Even today, the quality of the teak wood he commissioned is apparent. It has survived more than a century. Mohammad also purchased elaborate furniture: almirahs

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(cupboards), desks, chairs, four-poster beds and filigreed screens. With the exception of the main hall for entertainment and a few bedrooms with teak beds for show, the rest of the rooms of the house—as is common across Gujarat—were flexible spaces. The house, like many other Gujarati havelis, was built around an interior courtyard. A complex of passageways, doors and staircases, made the bustling house easy to convert into apartments.

The first floor of the house is an empty hall, with a large swing. In the first half of the twentieth century, Anees Hathia tells me that ground floor was a reception room for guests. There is still a roll-top desk on the ground floor. The reception area opens into a square room and a carved wooden staircase leads to the first floor. To the left of the staircase is an open-air courtyard, where rainwater was once harvested. Upstairs are the family’s apartments.

According to Anees, his grandfather told him stories of his yearly visits from Rangoon. Anees tells me that the house would be shrouded in white cotton sheets. The elaborate glass chandeliers (jhums) would be unwrapped and mounted on the ceiling. Local servants would be employed to sweep and awaken the slumbering house. Hathia Mansion had two enormous halls, designated for large parties (dawats) during which Mohammed would throw elaborate dinners to collect together Rander’s perennial residents. Over the years, the house filled up with objects—especially porcelain and china, which was all the fashion in oceanic circles between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Cabinets were built to house these objects and Anees is able to show me a subsection of the larger collection which he tells me is scattered across different branches of the family.

Anees and family have converted the main hall, once the site of elaborate parties, into a family room. There is a sofa and coffee table in the center of the enormous room. They have recently installed air conditioning units. And there is desk and a chair, a make-
shift study for Anees’s son when he returns from university. Unlike its original use, the living room has a relaxed, modest feel to it today. Teak cabinets built into niches in the white-washed walls continue to be full of porcelain plates and painted glassware acquired in Rangoon. The practice of displaying plates in the home resonates in other Indian Ocean regions. For example Prita Meier writes that in Lamu and Mombasa, local merchants responded to the incursions of the British and Zanzibaris through projecting a cosmopolitan self through ‘interior displays’ in domestic architecture. She writes,

> Patrician members of coastal society visualized their cultured sophistication, Muslim religious affiliation, social mobility, and privileged connection to other Indian Ocean rim cultures by constructing complex display, tableaux of exquisite objets d’art in their domestic spaces, such as locally constructed prestige chairs and wood ornaments and imported porcelain.\(^\text{45}\)

Unlike in Rander, where porcelain plates were displayed in glass cabinets, in East Africa sometimes hundreds of plates were mounted on walls\(^\text{46}\) and functioned as talisman (in the way that Koranic calligraphy did) to ward off evil spirits.\(^\text{47}\) In Rander, and in Hathia Mansion more specifically, though also aimed at projecting cosmopolitan life and travel in Rangoon, plates functioned more as mementos (which turn into heirlooms over time) of Rangoon. The audience of these displays were not representatives of empire but rather the city’s residents.

One Sunday afternoon, Anees’s daughter, Neelam, who I become good friends with and who agrees to accompany me during my interviews, invites me over to eat ‘Rangoon biryani.’ Anees and I spend the afternoon removing what remains of the precious collection


to examine it, piece by piece. Anees tells me that the pieces were selected with great care: the aim was for quality not quantity. The porcelain is mainly European: it bears the stamps of being produced in Rangoon, Czechoslovakia, England and the Netherlands (See Figures 10, 11, 12). We also examine rows and rows of painted glassware. These, Anees tells me, are less precious and have been produced in factories in Rangoon. He says that all families who had once had members away in Rangoon possessed these plates. After a delicious meal of chicken biryani—additional use of turmeric and eggs distinguishes it as Burmese—Anees’s wife says she will arrange for me to visit her future in-law, Fatima Bibi, so I can examine their living room as well. She says to me, switching from Gujarati to Hindi-Urdu, that Fatima bibi has a great love (shawq) for these objects and that the house is just brimming with objects.\textsuperscript{48} There is an edge to her observation.

\textsuperscript{48} Interview, Mrs. Anees Hathia, Rander, May 10, 2012.

Figure 10. Porcelain Plate, Hathia Mansion, Rander, 2012
Made in Rangoon, Burma
[Photograph by Author]
The following week, Neelam takes me to visit the Esmael home, Ahmed Manzil (Figure 13). Like Hathia Mansion it was built at the turn of the twentieth century, though it is much smaller. It has been converted into three apartments, one on each floor; and a carved teak staircase leads to the second floor where Fatima bibi and her family live. As promised, the house is teaming with objects. Unlike Hathia Mansion where they are
confined to glass cabinets, here objects cover every available surface of the house. They even line the tops of Godrej cupboards (Figure 14). And the abiding visual experience is the color blue. Fatima bibi does not speak of precious European porcelain like Anees Hatia does but instead chooses to focus on what looks like fairly poor quality knock-off blue-white porcelain.

Figure 13. Ahmed Manzil, Rander, 2012
[Photograph by Author]

Fatima Bibi tells me very little about the Esmael business in Rangoon. But she is effusive about the objects around her. When I ask about her family’s history and Rangoon in particular, she replies that she has a collection of glassware and porcelain from Rangoon: she casts history in “objective” terms. She did not describe her family’s history in Rangoon
through their wealth or involvement in the oil trade but rather through blue ceramics. From the quality of the porcelain it seems unlikely that these are brought back from Rangoon. They resemble in many ways the ceramics I see in the local markets. But it is significant that these objects possess the aura of Rangoon. The practice of displaying objects, in this case, appears to be more important than the objects themselves: the texture of color the central fetish. The contrast between the two homes can be interpreted through color as a fetish of oceanic travel.

Randeris are not the first nor the only in world history to covet blue and white ‘Chinese’ porcelain. In his book *Vermeer’s Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of Global History*, historian Timothy Brooks traces the global dimensions of the development of taste for this particular combination of color on ceramic. According to Brooks this style was not strictly Chinese to begin with. It owes its origins to Mongol rule over China and the influence of Persian material culture. What captured the world’s attention was the exquisitely gossamer look of cobalt blue on thin, white porcelain. Indian traders had been importing it from the fifteenth century during their travels in Southeast Asia. And the Portuguese and
Dutch first encountered this style in India. According to Brooks, porcelain imported from China commanded a high enough price that it was out of reach to everyone but the wealthiest. Portuguese and Dutch warfare in Southeast Asia also resulted in seizures of vessels carrying porcelain. But this desire also spawned a craze in the mass production of cheaper versions of the ceramics made in Europe. China produced high-quality porcelain for a more discerning market at home. If we are to follow Brook’s account, then the practice of displaying these objects can be attributed to the cultural mores of the Chinese elite in the fifteenth century: a Chinese savant, Wen Zhenhen (d. 1645) authored a manual, *A Treatise on Superfluous Things*, advising that collecting and displaying porcelain was a worthy pastime. But Zhenhen, Brooks tells us, anticipated the craze that would follow in centuries to come of mass-produced porcelain, by wryly observing that no decent porcelain had been made since the fourteenth century.49

The continued presence and marked absence of this blue and white visual scheme in Rander’s material culture is an example of the way in which complex—even oceanic and global—phenomenon become condensed in merchant homes. This condensing of histories of travel and trade into objects brings into view a historical poetics that invites residents to ponder distant places like Rangoon and past connections through material things. It propels residents to orient themselves outward; to dream in color of travel. The contrasting display practices of Hathia Mansion and Esmael Manzil suggest that though this orientation takes different forms, they take flight in the recesses of historic merchant homes.

As historical sites then merchant homes invite us to think of sentiments that range from nostalgia to ambivalence and, as we will see in the next two studies, even to affective

registers like austerity and loss. A history of color brings to the fore the way in which objects serve many masters, and through time, as debris, become powerful in their own right.

**A STUDY IN AUSTERITY**

Ahmed Bham, or as he in known in Rander, Bham Mota (Bham the elder), lives in a single floor apartment carved out of Asia Manzil. The house is painted a light pink and has ornate stucco-work on the façade. It looks like many of the havelis built by Randeris in the early twentieth century. Like other houses in Rander, it was built for many branches of a joint merchant family, and though the façade suggests a single house, Asia Manzil is a collection of apartments in which Bham Mota’s unmarried sisters live.

In stark contrast to Hathia Mansion and Ahmed Manzil, Asia Manzil is an austere place, completely empty of ornamental objects. It is spare, elemental. Bham Mota is eighty five years old, and in old age has abandoned the vast house the stretches behind the room he lives in. He has positioned the four-poster bed, made of teak wood in the front room. On one side he has placed a desk and three plastic chairs. A single cupboard stands in the corner. The kitchen and other two rooms look dusty and unused. The only pleasure he continues to indulge is fresh coconut water brought to him every morning by a local vendor. On his bedside there is a bookmarked Quran. Bham Mota tells me he has had a lot of time for reflection during his retirement.

Bham Mota wears a blue and white checked dhoti, a mass-produced version of Azrak cloth, popular in western India amongst Muslims, woven and sold in Ahmedabad. He is hunched over with age, and has a difficult time hearing. But his grey eyes are alert, and he keeps a well-trimmed white beard, and wears a white scull-cap.

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50 This study is based on two interviews I conducted with Ahmed Bham in his home Asia Manzil. Neelam Hathia accompanied me on this visit and was a participant in the exchange. Interview, Ahmed Bham, Rander, April 22 and 25, 2012.
Bham Mota was born in Rander but spent a lifetime abroad. He returned to Rander two decades ago after an itinerant life, working in Mauritius, Karachi and finally London. Mr. Bham’s forefathers were also itinerants: his grandfather lived and traded for many years in Rangoon. He married a woman from the Du family of Rander who had diamond mining interests in Rangoon. Through contracting this marriage, Mr. Bham’s grandfather found allies and a firm footing in Burma for his own businesses.

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The phone rings and Mr. Bham springs up from his seat on the bed. “It must be my sons from Mauritius.”

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Mr. Bham only studied till standard six. In 1952, at the age of fifteen, his marriage was arranged to Sara Bibi of the prominent Bhaimia family of Mauritius. Maclean’s almanac, which, to recall, is the yearbook I cited earlier on this chapter which lists the Bhaimia firm in Mauritius, says nothing of the family’s women. From Bham Mota we know that the Bhaimia’s pictured in Maclean’s volume kept up relations with their hometown Rander. They remitted funds, maintained homes and kept up correspondence in order to find good marriage partners for their daughters in Rander. Bham Mota was incorporated into the Bhaimia business in Port Louis.

Bham Mota’s marriage to Sara Bibi was ill-fated and after the birth of two sons, it ended in divorce four years after it had begun. Mr. Bham admits that he was to blame for many of the problems in his marriage. He says that he fought with his wife’s brothers and cousins over the business. And soon found himself without a place in it.

He has light eyes, which he fixes sadly on Neelam and says (in Gujarati), “It was all my fault.”
Neelam says, “Have you called her recently?”

“I called her in 2007 when I had to operate a hernia. I told her I was sorry for everything. She said she had forgiven me as soon as we divorced. She said she prayed for me every day and asked for blessings (dua) on my behalf.”

“Then? That is all one needs. Forgiveness,” Neelam says.

Bham Mota is lost in his thoughts for a few moments. “Anyway,” he says, pulling himself together, “every Ramadan during Rajab, I send our sons a thousand English pounds in Mauritius. They live are under very poor financial conditions.”

After his divorce, Bham Mota worked for six years with the Pakistani Shipping Line Ltd based in London. He worked as a clerk in the office of a Mr. Karni in the import section. For the next forty years Mr. Bham would work for the English Post. He retired at 65, and returned to Rander. During his time in London, he married again, a woman from Rander, also Sara Bibi from the Dudha family. When they both returned to Rander they lived modestly in his ancestral home, and a handsome pension began piling up in their Hong Kong Shanghai Bank accounts. She passed away some years ago.

Mr. Bham’s life in the UK sounds lonely. Though he was happily remarried to another Sara Bibi, much of his life was spent in subways commuting to his job in the postal service. He worked hard to build a life that would have old age pension. But all of this was in the shadow of the life he had left behind in Mauritius—his ex-wife Sara and their two sons. It was only in 2007, after almost fifty years, that Mr. Bham called his ex-wife in Mauritius. And five years later, as he sits talking with Neelam and me, it continues to occupy his mind.

Few signs of this long and itinerant life can be gleaned from Bham Mota’s austere home. Instead, it is the absence of interior objects and lavish furniture in Asia Manzil that are spurs to Bham Mota’s memories of his family’s connections to the Indian Ocean. His
stories issue forth as much from this austerity as from his friendship with Neelam’s grandfather, who he spent his early years with in Rander. It is because of Neelam’s presence that Bham Mota is able to speak with such candor and vulnerability. It is almost as if in paring his life down to the essentials, Bham Mota is able to give free reign to a lost life of the past. This turn backward to contemplate the past is also a movement across space, a retracing of the different places Mota Bham has lived in and the many whom he has loved and lost.

Mr. Bham’s ancestral property is called Asia Manzil, renamed after he had it renovated three decades ago. It does not name the land mass Asia, but rather is an acronym for the family he started in Mauritius: Ahmed. Sara. Ibrahim. Salim. It is named for the family that he left behind in Mauritius in the 1950s. A family which is condensed in the empty recesses of home through which he continues to yearn and remember.

A STUDY IN LOSS

After weeks and months of walking Rander’s streets in search of examples of houses connected to oceanic trade, I become known for my interest in old houses. One day, a Parsi I meet, Rohinton Ruwalla, suggests I visit Variav, a town further down the Tapti River, which is populated entirely by people who once traded and lived in Rangoon: he called them ‘Rangoon Wallas.’ Like Rander it is a qasba, a satellite of the once prominent port of Surat.

At first glance, Variav looks more of a village than a town. It is a collection of wooden and stucco havelis built around a mint-green mosque. The havelis are quite different

51 A version of this section was published in Himal South Asian during the 2014 Indian Elections on their website. It is now available in their quarterly journal. See, Ketaki Pant, “Gujarat’s ‘Rangoon Wallas,’” Himal South Asian 27, no.3 (2014): 224-237.

52 This interview is based on several visits I made to Variav, a short distance along the Tapti River from Rander. I change the name of my informants here at their request. Interview, Mrs. Esmael (name changed), May 9, 2012, Variav.
from the ones I encounter in Rander. They are distinctive in style: they are two or three stories high with carved teak pillars framing the entrances and otulas (raised porches) leading up to thick carved darvazas (wooden doors). They are painted in bright colors and cut a striking picture set against the river and its sandy embankment. Unlike Rander’s havelis, which distinctively employ Palladian elements, Variav’s houses emphasize teak wood. Wooden beams are exposed in the living rooms, and the exteriors of the homes are bare of the stucco ornament that characterize Rander’s urban vistas.

Variav’s houses were built by Muslims, who call themselves ‘Vohras,’ and who were exclusively involved in trading in Rangoon. Thus the name, ‘Rangoon Walla.’ The town’s residents narrate elaborate accounts of their lives or family’s life in Rangoon, conveying in language deep attachment to a place beyond Gujarat. But their narratives center on loss, on a violent return to Variav occasioned by mass deportations of South Asian merchants from Burma in the 1960s. Though many Rangoon Wallas quickly found their footing and once again ventured out into the world, now westward to Europe and America, Variav’s homes continue to be charged spaces of memories of a Rangoon connection, now lost. Though Burma has opened up again in recent years and a younger generation of Variav merchants born in Gujarat have made journeys there to meet long lost relatives, an older generation of Rangoon returnees are ambivalent about traveling back to the city of their pasts. Mrs. Esmael poignantly tells me that there were steep staircases in the apartment building she lived in on No. 25 Street. She is too old now to climb them.

Below, I explore the connected narratives of three generations of Variav women in their apartments within merchant homes. I follow the seam of their recollections and desires centered on their families’ loss of their property and businesses in Rangoon. These
narratives, spurred on by material objects within the home, can be interpreted as ruminations on Gujarat’s historic place in the Indian Ocean.

In the spirit of the form of the study, I seek to convey the atmosphere of the home as a place of (re)collection.

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I arrive in Variav in a beaten up old Maruti Van which rattles on the road. Variav is a qaiba, a satellite like Rander, of the port of Surat. It is located 10 kilometres from the Indian Ocean along the Tapti River. It is home today to mostly Vohras, Sunni Muslim merchants who were almost exclusively involved in Rangoon, thus the name ‘Rangoon Wallas.’

Like in Rander, Variav’s homes were historically oriented to currents beyond their shores. In the 19th and 20th centuries, a majority of Variav’s families had at least one member away working in Rangoon. Families reunited perennially as people returned to get married, spend Ramadan and Eid with family and check up on ancestral property. This was a place that was constantly in flux: the city’s population ebbed and flowed with the arrivals and departures of its Rangoon residents.

Mrs Esmael née Keekeebai, whose home we are welcomed into, was born in Rangoon in 1937. She lived with her family on No 25 Street. She visited Variav for the first time at the age of five when her family returned to Gujarat to wait out the Japanese invasion of Burma. She spoke fluent Gujarati but recalls the shock of small-town Gujarat. She was accustomed to the wide thoroughfares of Rangoon and found herself in a town arranged around a single mosque. After the war ended her family returned to Rangoon, but the return to Gujarat foreshadowed events to come.

A decade later Mrs Esmael was married. She remembers her early marriage years fondly, particularly getting together with friends and going on Sunday picnics. She said that
Sunni Muslim Gujaratis kept together in Rangoon. They attended the same mosques and formed merchant organisations. Her family was part of the Sunni Surti Barra Bazaar, a mercantile organisation that provided a common meeting point for Sunni Gujaratis in Rangoon. The organisation coordinated a range of activities from mediation in commercial disputes to community events and feasts.

Burma was declared independent in 1948 soon after Mrs Esmael’s return from Gujarat. And the years following Burmese independence were prosperous ones. Many Gujaratis, like Mrs Esmael and her family, had lived and worked in Rangoon for generations and saw no reason to leave. Like many post-colonial hopefuls in new nation-states across Asia and Africa, they saw a burgeoning age of prosperity unfold before them. The leader of the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League, Aung San, though tragically assassinated six months after Burmese independence, persuaded many Gujaratis that there was a place for them in independent Burma. After World War II ended, Gujarati families set about offering their acumen to rebuild Burma. Mrs Esmael’s family came into a great deal of wealth at that time. She recalls lockers full of cash and precious stones, rubies, diamonds and emeralds. Life continued at a clip. She went out and watched cricket matches on the weekends.

As the decade wore on, seemingly isolated incidents of theft and violence against Gujaratis and other Southasians began to occur. Looking back today, Mrs Esmael cannot put her finger on how and why things deteriorated so quickly. She can only recall that there came a point when she felt unsafe walking in Rangoon on her own. From that memory she jumps forward to the last days before her family was expelled from Burma.

What Mrs Esmael does remember quite clearly is the enormous wealth that was left behind: lockers full of precious stones; carved teak wood furniture; and almaris full of expensive clothing. The return journey on ship – sometime in the 1960s – took Mrs Esmael
and others first to the port of Calcutta. From here people scattered. The Gujaratis amongst
the returnees found their way back to western India from where many regrouped and
travelled onward to Europe and North America. Mrs Esmael returned to Variav, to the
stucco home her family had built three decades earlier, now the only remaining material
texture of their wealth from Rangoon.

After the initial meet-and-greet over chai and biscuits, after introductions and
inquiries about the nature of my research and my motivations for finding out more about
Variav and the lives of its returnees, I am taken on a tour of the haveli by Mrs Esmael’s
granddaughter Sara.

Sara is 19 years old and has just returned from a busy day in Surat, where she works
as a partner in her father’s travel agency. She bustles into the room while we are drinking
chai. She is professionally dressed, and her head is fashionably wrapped in hijab. She has a
bubbly personality and greets her guests warmly. She is keen to hear about my research, and
she too reiterates the great wealth that was lost when her family left Rangoon, though the
events we discuss occurred many decades before she was born. Over the course of several
visits I rarely see her mother, who is often busy cooking, and I never meet her father. He
owns several businesses and is generally away on work. On my last visit Sara tells me her
father is in Rangoon: ever since Burma has relaxed its borders, many from Variav have made
trips back to reunite with relatives who were left behind or chose to stay. When I ask Sara if
she will accompany her father she tells me that it has always been her dream to return to her
grandmother’s city.

After washing up and changing into something more comfortable Sara offers to
show me the house. Like many Gujarati havelis, the house is oriented around a central axis
(often a courtyard) and the family apartments are tucked away in the privacy of the second floor. Vaulted staircases and dark attics make the haveli seem like a maze from the interior.

Male visitors are entertained on the first floor, separate from the family area upstairs. As a female, I am immediately granted access to the women’s apartments upstairs, but as I take the tour I get a sense of the ways the haveli is organised, in equal parts around hospitality and privacy.

As Sara walks me through the home, I encounter material remains of the history Mrs Esmael has just narrated to me. There is a large wooden chest, once used as a trunk for travel, gathering dust in the corner of one of the bedrooms. Glass cabinets built into the wall in many rooms display steel dishes and painted glass vases that Sara tells me were brought back as mementos of Rangoon. Much of the furniture is made of teak wood. And when Sara opens a trap door to the attic, she tells me that many of the wood beams used to construct the house were imported from Rangoon in the 1930s. Sara’s tour of the house is oriented less around the architectural layout of the rooms and more on this trail of objects, which, like Mrs Esmael, once travelled across the Indian Ocean. These objects function as material metonyms: a travel chest, mementos of Rangoon, and teak wood – in quite different registers – point to a life once lived somewhere else, now collecting dust in the recesses of home and memory.

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After my initial visit, I return many times to Variav to the house of Mrs Esmael. Over the course of these additional visits, I also visit the homes of other families who have an association with Rangoon. One afternoon after lunch, Sara and I visit the home of three sisters, distant relations of Sara’s family. They are in their fifties and have never been to
Rangoon, but they are excited to sit down and chat with me about the place they came to know through their father who spent his early life there.

Like Mrs Esmael’s home, the three sisters live in a house that is crammed with traces of the city. They too have carefully preserved the many objects that their father brought back with him, and when their father returned to Variav permanently, they remember his recollections about playing cricket there. When he left Rangoon he managed to carry with him the many medals he won as an ace cricketer, which are displayed in a glass case. The sisters offer to take them out for me to photograph, but instead of photographing the medals I turn them over in my hand, feeling the texture of the inscriptions and the weight of the metal.

When it comes time to leave, my gaze catches a peculiar image painted onto a teak wall cabinet. It is the image of a river. But upon closer inspection I discover that it is not the Tapti that flows a stone’s throw away, but rather the Irrawaddy, many thousands of miles across the Indian Ocean, as it cuts through Rangoon. Perhaps it is a reproduction of a postcard their father brought back as a keepsake. The river dominates the image and two country crafts float in the water. There are steps leading up to what looks like a shrine, and a footbridge leads across from one side to the other. A colonial clock tower stands tall across the bridge.

The sisters haven’t married. And though I do not pry, they explain to me that they would rather live in the home their father built than be “married-off” to some stranger and leave Variav. Their mother is still alive but ailing and they are happy to live in this tight circle of women. Perhaps the waters of the Irrawaddy that dominate the cabinet mark a different location of family, one that is long gone, and yet one that the sisters prefer to the life that unfolds outside. Though Sara’s energy is infectious and they are quickly drawn into asking
her many questions about her work and news of relatives now in the UK, their home possesses the atmosphere of a strange and beautiful twilight.

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The homes of the Rangoon Wallas were built in the 1930s after a half-century of travel and trade in Rangoon. Mrs Esmael tells me that perhaps the most striking of the buildings from this period is Madha Mansion, a large, now abandoned, colonial-era mansion. Madha Mansion spurred a boom in construction activity, which gave rise to the havelis that cluster today around the mosque. Wealth remitted home from the frontier economy of Rangoon in the early decades of the 20th century gave Variav a new complexion, the same one that today is saturated with the past.

The Madhas also built the Variav Water Works, which brought running water to homes in 1930. It was commemorated by a souvenir photograph, a black and white image of a silo-looking structure. In one of the homes I visit, it is mounted on the wall in a gilt frame.

Madha Mansion is set back against the Tapti River (figure 15). It is an enormous house, quite different from the two or three storey houses closer to the mosque. The house appears to be a mix of several different architectural styles. The oldest part of the house is a colonial-style bungalow with a veranda running around its perimeter. Its architectural features, like much of Gujarat’s architecture, are a mélange of different styles, combining Portuguese and later Victorian ornament with local Gujarati woodcarving and masonry. The Madhas seem to have tacked on additional structures to expand the more humble bungalow. The additions dwarf the bungalow shell and give the house a formidable look. There are staff quarters in the rear of the compound. The roof is caved in and once tended grounds are overgrown with weeds and trees. The house is in ruins.
The interiors of the house are covered in cobwebs and thick dust. Like the more modest homes I have visited, Madha Mansion is also chock-full of relics. But rather than buffed to a shine and treasured in glass cabinets, these relics are debris from another time. Walking through the remnants, it is clear that these objects are not spurs to memory. In the formal living room downstairs, there are cabinets full of plates and bowls, part of an elaborate dining set, embossed with the family’s crest. On a table sit two coal irons rusting. There is a large iron safe in another corner of the room: open, empty. The stained glass windows are still intact and bathe the room in hues of orange and red. Pigeons too have made their home here and the corners of the rooms are caked with droppings. There is a modern-style bathroom on the ground floor with a rusting metal pipe for a shower. Despite the dust, I can make out black and white tiles. Several wooden staircases lead to the top floors, but have been deemed too unstable to climb.
Though much of the furniture is gone, either appropriated by townspeople or sold to antique dealers, the remainders of the house mark it as a place suddenly evacuated, unexpectedly abandoned. Mrs Esmael is not specific about the fate of the Madhas. She simply says that after leaving Rangoon they travelled to the United States, where they now live in San Francisco. They have not returned to Variav but have also chosen not to sell the valuable land on which their home now decomposes. Mrs Esmael still holds out hope that Variav’s first family—who once brought running water to the town—will one day return.

Variav was built on profit from trade on one of the British Empire’s most lucrative frontiers and its residents today experience the fissures of the imperial – and now national –
economy through the remains of their homes. Scapegoated in the 1960s as a rentier class who exploited the local Burmese, the Rangoon Wallas found themselves unwelcome in the city they considered home. Forced to return to Gujarat – either to remain in Variav or try their fortune once again elsewhere – they continue to cast in their lot with the volatile currents of the global economy.

**Conclusion: Poetic Returns**

In July 2014 I publish an article titled “Gujarat’s ‘Rangoon Wallas’” in *Himal South Asian*, a politics and culture journal head-quartered in Kathmandu, Nepal. The article is a comment on the 2014 Indian elections that are in progress. It seeks to deploy my research within Gujarat’s merchant homes as a counter-history to Narendra Modi’s 53 ‘Gujarat Model.’ Modi’s platform hijacks credit for Gujarat’s vibrant economy as a result of his neoliberal policies over the last thirteen years as part of an exclusively Hindu rashtra (state). My article uses the example of Variav’s Rangoon Wallas to show an older version of transregional economic engagement and its authorship of Gujarat’s position in the Indian Ocean and the global economy.

In September 2014 I receive an email from Michael Madha in response to my article.54 Michael is a descendant of the Madhas who built Madha Mansion. He tells me that he was born in Surat, grew up in Rangoon and is now based in London. He receives my article from a cousin Usman Madha who, along with a hundred and fifty members of the Madha family, lives in Los Angeles, California. Michael, an anthropologist himself who wrote a dissertation in the 1970s on social structure on the Thailand-Burma border amongst

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53 At the time, the prime-ministerial candidate for the Hindu right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party. He went on to win the Indian Election and was sworn in as Prime Minister of India on May 26, 2014.

54 Michael Madha, e-mail message to author, September 11, 2014.
the Karen, says that he plans to return to Variav in the spring and writes ruminatively about what he might find. My article appears to have sparked his imagination. Rather than the political analysis, he responds to my description of Madha Mansion.

Michael’s impending return to Variav takes us full circle and returns us to the question of oceanic poetics. His return to the decomposing home, which he has not seen since his childhood, suggests one more dimension of a poetics of home as an incitement to return. Michael’s return to Variav in response to my description of his home suggests a poetics that continues to be in play.
CHAPTER THREE

Charred City

We are our stories. We tell them to stay alive or keep alive those who only live now in the telling. That’s how it seems to me, being alive for a little while, the teller and the told…To begin you must be traced into the landscape, your people and your place found. Until they are you are in the wrong story.

~ Niall Williams, *A History of the Rain*

हुए नामवर बे निशां कपसे कपसे?
झमी आ गढ़ आस्माँ कपसे कपसे?²

~ Asim Randeri

The illustrious have left without a trace
The earth has been devoured by the sky.

Introduction

In 1532, approximately four hundred years before Asim began his Indian Ocean travels, historians tell us that Rander was sacked and burnt to the ground by a Portuguese armada, never to remerge as the powerful port that it once was. This account echoes across the historiography of Gujarat and of the Indian Ocean world more broadly.³ In one respect this chapter is a reckoning with this authoritative historiographical verdict. How do we make sense of such a historiographical consensus when our poet of the ocean so persuasively brought to life in the later decades of the twentieth century Randeri merchants, domiciled in port cities from Rangoon to Durban, connected by a shared love of poetry?

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Rander’s alleged demise is plotted in a broader story of Portuguese conquest, which historians mark as a watershed in the political economy of the Indian Ocean world. While itinerants and states of the Indian Ocean were engaged in generally peaceable trade until 1500, with itinerant merchant communities protected by the rulers of port-cities in exchange for their business under the broad banner of Islam, the Portuguese entry brought with it new understandings of maritime sovereignty. Specifically, the Portuguese borrowed from their experience in the Mediterranean and introduced a system of trade passes (cartazas) and armed conflict into an oceanic arena in which states did not project power over the ocean.

K.N Chaudhuri writes

In general, no merchant in the Indian Ocean traded with sword in hand and most of the commercial community emporia were neutral ports of trade without defense walls, standing armies and naval fleets. The main political principal which governed the policy of their rulers was to provide complete protection to an international community of merchants who were often granted extra-territorial juridical rights in exchange for not violating the ports neutrality.⁴

Rander’s alleged destruction was part of a wider oceanic war in which the Portuguese annexed ports across the Indian Ocean, creating a linked network of emporia. Even as historians—from pioneers like Ashin Dasgupta and Lila Abu-Lughod to scholars like Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Sugata Bose more recently—credit itinerant merchants of the Indian Ocean with constructing sophisticated trade networks later annexed by the Portuguese, Dutch and English, they continue to delineate the temporal horizons of their studies based on the linguistically separate archives of these companies. Thus we have studies of the Portuguese Indian Ocean, the Dutch Indian Ocean and the British Indian Ocean. Even

when itinerant merchants themselves are placed at the center of analysis they have generally
been studied in the short-term horizons dictated by the records of a single trade-company
archive. Rander’s perseverance and its thriving society (anjuman) of itinerant merchants offer
a powerful challenge to existing temporal paradigms of studying mercantile history by
offering an example of a mercantile society that has thrived across eight centuries, three
empires and one nation-state. A broader aim of this chapter then is to chart a method for
approaching such an expanse of time and plurality of archives. I begin with the temporal
dimensions of Asim’s oceanic poetics as he charts his own path through the remains of
Rander’s charred history.

In the pages that follow I explore how and why a (port) city like Rander continues to
be active in the Indian Ocean, even as the state-making projects of the day, be they
Portuguese or British, are convinced of its demise. The chapter follows Asim’s search for his
“ancestors”—itinerant Arabians from Basra who arrived in Gujarat in the twelfth century—
across a historiographical terrain of ruin and absence produced through imperial travel
writings. Interweaving Asim’s account of Rander’s “itinerant origins” with five hundred
years of European travel accounts, I track its production as a “charred” (port) city. A
chimerical place that appears dead to generations of European travelers but alive—even
thriving—to its merchant residents, I explore the wedge between different notions of time at
play in conceptions of port-city space, the difference in other words between a history of
empire and a history of home.5 I show that a poetics of home inflects Rander’s urban space

5 The term empire has of course been defined in numerous ways depending on the historical
and historiographical context of inquiry. See for examples Lauren Benton, In Search of
Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400-1900 (New York: Cambridge
University Press, 2010); Frederick Cooper and Ann L. Stoler eds., Tensions of Empire: Colonial
Cultures in a Bourgeois World (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Alison Gaines,
The Web of Empire: English Cosmopolitans in the Age of Expansion, 1560-1660 (New York: Oxford
University Press, 2008); Anthony Pagden, Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain,
more generally as Asim and its residents who he interviews and imagines produce a longue durée of Islamic itinerancy through renovations of their Neo Palladian homes and city mosques. My aim is to show in granular detail how Rander is imagined not as a place of origin or return but instead as a place to which people arrive and from where they depart. Rather than looking “back” on a linear history, Asim moves back and forth across long tranches of time in search of signs from powerful merchant ancestors. I build on this argument in subsequent chapters, showing that such a longue durée is a key resource that Gujarati merchants use to project influence over the region.

**Itinerant Origins**

While Asim embarked on a number of oceanic journeys to trace Randeri merchants and their social organization(s) (anjuman) in ports across the Indian Ocean, he returned home to find his ancestors. In the previous chapter I explored the strong patronymic poetics at work in Asim’s historical project. Venturing out into the Indian Ocean, Asim mobilized

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*Britain and France, c. 1500-c. 1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). In my dissertation I draw on David Armitage’s analysis of the Roman roots of empire in *imperium*, a category of Roman law. Armitage argues that imperium was originally understood as the authority of the collective vested in the magistrate to act on its behalf beyond the city limits of Rome. Though to be sure as he himself outlines in a thought-provoking set of pages, the Roman imperium almost immediately morphed into a broader notion of unlimited authority with territorial expansion, I am interested in how diverse models of empire are genealogically linked together by the figure of the magistrate and therefore the law and the state. And how this shared genealogy is reflected in the temporal paradigms within which we study “empires,” which generally frame histories in short-term horizons that mirror the bureaucrat archives of empire, which of course exist under the sign of the magistrate (David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000). In Gujarat—and many connected Indian Ocean regions—sites like the assemblage of “homes of capital” offer an alternative model of sovereignty that do not hinge on the state or the figure of law. Furthermore, there is an essential urban/terrestrial quality of empire which hinges on the boundary between the city and the world. My argument is that such a distinction does not work in a region like Gujarat where the coastline, dotted with merchant homes, generated a “terraqueous” zone (see chapter 4), neither fully maritime nor territorial but always in motion between the two.
his patronym to seek the hospitality of his fellow Randeris in places like Port Louise and Durban. Many Randeris had been assisted by Asim’s father, Muhammed Subedar, who to recall built his career in Bombay and Jeddah as an accountant. Based in Jeddah for much of his professional life, Muhammed Subedar made Haj arrangements for Randeris domiciled in ports across the Indian Ocean. Long after his father’s death, Asim traveled across this map of his father’s good deeds. But upon his return to Rander he searched beyond his powerful patronym for his ancestry. As his health began to fail—hinted at in the afterword to his book—postponing work on his manuscript, Asim found himself back in Rander, and much to his displeasure confined to his bed. He took his time to collate the disparate materials he had gathered and plumbed his own home for old photographs, memorabilia and mementos. As he pondered the material in front of him, Asim turned his attention to the past.

In a short section at the end of his book, Asim penned a chapter on the historical origins of Rander. Asim wrote that contemporary Randeris were descendants of Arabian merchants, known as Nayatas (or Navayats) who had arrived on the western coast of India in the twelfth century at the end of the period begun by the spread of Islam in the sixth century. As a young person, Asim was regaled with stories of these itinerants by community elders after prayers at the mosque. Asim did not specify the particular port the Nayatas came from, designating them simply “Arabians.” During field research in Rander in 2012, a number of people I interviewed claimed that the Nayatas were from Basra in contemporary Iraq. This is entirely possible given evidence of settlements of merchants from Basra, Siraf and Baghdad on the west of India from the tenth century.

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According to Asim, the Nayatas were predominantly merchants. From Rander, the Nayatas operated long-distance trading operations to Malacca, China, Tenasarim [sic], Pegu and Sumatra. They traded cotton and a variety of textiles sourced from the Gujarat interior in exchange for spices, silk, musk and porcelain. Engaged in the lucrative trade of high-value goods, the Nayatas positioned themselves at the intersection of trade routes of the Indian Ocean world. Between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, Rander was an integral part of Gujarat’s coastline, alongside port-cities like Khambat, Bharuch, Diu and later Surat. At a time when trade was regulated by the monsoon winds, Gujarat’s position at the center of the Indian Ocean, made it a natural stopping point for vessels traveling between the western and eastern arenas of the Indian Ocean. It is this lucrative location, at the nexus of trade routes that brought the Nayatas to the western coast of India.

Itinerant merchants, like the Nayatas, were a key feature of the Indian Ocean trading world. Writing about the Malabar Coast to Gujarat’s south, Amitav Ghosh observes that thirteenth-century Mangalore and Calicut had large communities of “expatriate Middle Easterners.” Drawing on the observations of Portuguese traveler Duarte Barbosa, Ghosh writes that many of these itinerants were settled in these ports and had local wives with whom they maintained families. In the fourteenth century, Moroccan jurist Ibn Battuta

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8 K.N Chaudhuri cites that Arab geographer Al-Mas‘udi, who, referring to India’s west coast, recalls “ten thousand Muslims settled there [Saymur], Bayasiras and Sirafis, Omanis and Basrans and Baghdadis and [those] from other cities, who had married and settled in those parts, including some outstanding merchants.” Al-Mas‘udi, Muruj al-Dhabab wa-Ma‘adin al-Jauhar quoted in K.N Chaudhuri, Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 98.


10 Pearson, Merchants and Rulers of Gujarat, 11.

arrived in western India as part of his wider set of travels in the Indian Ocean. He described Cambay, to Rander’s north, as one of the finest cities he had visited because of its architecture. He writes that the majority of its residents were itinerant merchants who built fine mansions and mosques. Anthony Reid describes the significance of “foreign compounds” across Southeast Asian ports between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. Asim’s description of the Nayatas is significant because it is to my mind a rare—perhaps only—example of the continued existence of Gujarati Arabians who continue to trace their ancestry to Red Sea itinerants who arrived on Gujarat’s coast in the twelfth century.

Historians assume that after centuries of European trade-company incursions, the British conclusively dismantled Indo-Arabian settlements on Gujarat’s coast and South Asia more generally in the late eighteenth century. Though under attack, Indo-Arabians found lucrative employment as mercenaries in imperial armies in South Asia. As itinerant merchants, they continued to trade across the Indian Ocean. As the British consolidated territory after the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the Battle of Wandiwash in 1761 and the Battle of Buxar in 1765, these Indian-born Arabian merchants and mercenaries, known as Muwallads, posed a military threat to the emerging boundaries and ambitions of British India and the British Empire more broadly. Like their Eurasian contemporaries, they also posed

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14 Durba Ghosh for example recovers and examines the sexual and familial relationships British men and Indian women entered into with each other in the eighteenth century, which came under increasing attack by the consolidating British state in India (Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). See also Maya Jasanoff’s portrayal of various Europeans who were part of inter-racial families in the eighteenth-century India. Most striking is her portrayal of Antoine Pollier who was a prominent art-collector in eighteenth-century Lucknow, where he lived with his two
a social threat because they were creoles who did not fit easily within new colonial social
categories of race, ethnicity and religion. The population swap that occurred between the
western coast, now controlled by the British, and the Muslim state of Hyderabad in 1797, is
the event cited in the historiography to mark the disappearance of distinctly itinerant
Arabian trading communities on the western coast. While heuristically an important
threshold—and certainly the event itself had social consequences giving rise to a Hyderabadi
community of Arabians known as Jemadars—this assumption obscures the persistence of
Gujarati ports like Rander that continued to be home to itinerants (like Asim) who
continued to inhabit Gujarat and the Indian Ocean according to a terraqueous model of
society. Here, ‘home’ made porous the boundary between ocean and land. It was a place of
arrival and departure, a place from which things became possible once you left.

**Historiographical Erasures**

The gradual erasure of Gujarat’s Muslim itinerants from the historical record and of
an understanding of Gujarat as a participant in the shared culture of the Indian Ocean world
is nowhere clearer than in the vernacular historiography of Gujarati port-cities published
from the late-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. Between 1890 and 1940, a hundred years
after Indo-Arabians were deported to Hyderabad, a new wave of historians writing in the
Gujarati-language published books on littoral society. Organized in the form of histories of
port-city states, these works offer a window to contemporary understandings of Gujarat’s

Indian wives and children (Maya Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire: Lives, Culture, and Conquest in the

Relations Between South Arabia and the Deccan: From the 17th till the 20th Century A.D.”
(PhD diss., Osmania University, Hyderabad, 1971).
place in the Indian Ocean. They also form the wider scholarly context in which Asim published his own Gujarati-language work. Though Asim finally published his book in 1984, it was a project--from his own account--that had been fermenting in his imagination from the early days of his career as an itinerant poet and journalist in Rander, Bombay and then briefly Mombasa in the 1920s. Educated in Rander and Surat and besides a bibliophile, it is likely that Asim read many of the port-city histories available in libraries across Gujarat funded and built by merchants. I will have more to say in the next chapter about these merchant libraries across coastal Gujarat and other regions of the Indian Ocean where Gujarati was read and spoken. I understand these libraries as connective sites that linked “homes of capital” to literary cultural institutions (of which the Anjuman that I discussed in chapter 2 is but one example) in which new genres of writing were distilled. With this broader context in mind, I focus on the specific circumstances of Asim’s reading of Gujarati-language histories. He cites at least three of these works directly in his account of Rander’s past. Situating Asim’s work within this broader collection of texts draws out further the significance of the Nayatas and the itinerant origins of Rander and its society. Before turning to this comparison, let me offer Asim’s own analysis of the scholarship he saw before him.

At least in part, Asim put forth his account of Rander as a corrective to the works of Gujarati scholars whom he viewed as both flawed in their use of what he called “legendary stories” and also inaccurate in their handling of Islamic sources. He writes,

\[\ldots\text{whatever is written in ‘Narmad Gadhya,’ ‘Surat Sonani Murat’ and ‘Gujarati Sarvasangrah’ and other Gujarati books, about ‘Rander,’ Nayats’ and Nayatwada-ni-Badi Jooma Masjid,’ are largely based on legends, hypothesis, inferences and self-willed stories. Besides they are full of bias and predisposition. Corresponding Islami names are also found written there in disorder, one in place of the other and vice-versa, and the Hijri years written therein, are quite inconsistent.}\]

\[\text{Subedar, Rander: Anjuman-e-Islam, 216.}\]
One subgenre of works like *Narmad Gadlya*¹⁷ (Narmad’s Prose) and *Surat Sonani Mural*¹⁸ (*Surat: Vision of Gold*) were researched and written under the patronage of Muslim princely-state rulers of Gujarat. Recently installed by the British, the Nawabs of Bharuch, Khambat and Surat, commissioned port-city state histories of their newly acquired dominions. The two examples of these port-city histories, which I managed to track down in tattered condition in rare-book shops, were devoted to implanting and legitimizing the political lineage of the Nawabs in the longer history of Gujarat. These texts include *Bharuch no Ittihās* (History of Bharuch) by Ganpatram Himatram Desai in 1914 and *Khambat no Ittihās* (History of Khambat) by Ratanmanji Rao Jhote published in 1935. Written during the heyday of anti-colonial nationalism in British India, these texts can be read as political arguments to justify the sovereign boundaries of the port-city state at a time when anti-colonial nationalists were making arguments in favor of the broader collective of the nation.¹⁹ Desai was patronized by the Nawab of Bharuch and the Jhote was patronized by the Nawab of Khambat. In one sense Jhote and Jhote share Asim’s historiographical objective to write from the perspective of a port-city as a significant form of political community distinct from colonial and national


states. However, as I will show the ittihās genre of their work was deeply imbedded in colonial forms of history.²⁰

A detailed study of the historical works in question are beyond the scope of this chapter, but is underway in an article under preparation titled “Writing History on Ocean’s Edge: Port Historians, Princely State Rulers and Merchants in Indian Nationalist Debate, 1890-1947.” Here I want to focus on how it was ironically princely state rulers writing against Indian nationalist historiography by asserting the port-city as a sovereign unit that brought Gujarat under the purview of a territorial state model of national history.

In contrast to Asim’s book which was titled “anjuman” itself a model, as I argued in the previous chapter, for writing an oceanic history under the sign of peripatetic Islam, both Jhote and Desai categorize their works as ittihās (history). The ittihās genre has a number of influences, and emerged in vernacular languages like Bengali, Telugu and Gujarati. In the case of Gujarati-language historiography, this included the Persian-language model of tavarikh perpetuated by Persian-educated Parsi and Muslim scholars as well as the influence of positivist historian writing and orientalist translations and publications of other history. Unlike Asim’s work, which I described as a book of wonders, crammed with biographies, photographs and other snippets on social activities in Rander and abroad, Jhote and Desai organized their histories in terms of political time periods called ‘samay,’ ‘kal’ and ‘waqt.’ ‘Samay’ can be translated from Hindi/Gujarati as both meaning time and the condition of things. ‘Kal’ has the connotation of time. And ‘waqt’ suggests duration or time. All three words are capacious in their meanings. So while both Jhote and Desai also dealt with long time frames, they did so in a linear way, moving in one direction. They also segmented the
linear piece of time according to discrete periods, not addressing continuities and changes across these segments.

In *Khambat No Ittihās*, for example, Jhote organizes the history of Khambat according to periods (samay): puranic samay (ancient period), madhyakal Hindu Samay (middle Hindu period) and Mughal Samay (Mughal period). To these ‘samays’ he adds chapters on Muftakir Khan’s (Momikhan) Rajya (rule) and Angrezi Kothi (English Factory/Rule). Though Jhote does devote a chapter to merchants and seafarers titled “Vepar Ane Vahavatu,” the chapter is topical and views both itinerant groups as part of a wider political fabric, rather than shapers of history.\(^\text{21}\)

*Bharuch no Ittihās* follows a similar organization. Here too we see a “pracheen kāl” (ancient time), “madhya kāl” (middle period), “Musalmān waqt,” “Maratha period” (the word “period” transliterated into Gujarati suggesting the influence of English-language histories). In this work too, while there is topical interest in a variety of aspects of Bharuch’s history, including architecture, its port, the Narmada River and its merchants, they do not shape time but appear as objects in a history that is moving forward in time from one “period” to the next.\(^\text{22}\)

In both examples, such a model of history “samay” or “waqt” or “kal” become historiographical devices for subjugating sui generis time to the state. While the aim was to assert a sovereign port-city identity, the historiographical effect is to morph littoral Gujarat into a territorial state with discrete borders under the sovereignty of a succession of rulers.

Breaking with these popular modes of history writing, Asim instead chose to think about the


Randeri merchants he was writing about as part of a longer history of itinerancy and the Indian Ocean. By locating Rander’s origins in itinerant ancestors—rather than states—plotting Rander’s origins at the point of arrivals and departures, Asim expanded time by issuing it multiple spatial referents. Time like space could be traversed by following the journeys of itinerants, past and present.

Put another way Asim’s claim that he grew up hearing stories of the Nayatas, ancestors eight hundred years removed marks a powerful awareness—even imagining—of a longue durée of itinerancy in the Indian Ocean. In the remainder of this chapter, I probe this notion of time (travel).

In travelling across the Indian Ocean, first to visit his father’s grave in Jeddah and then onward to trace the perimeter of Randeri homes across the ocean, Asim traced the journey of his ancestors in reverse. In this, Rander’s merchants and their (port) city poet share a common inheritance: a pull to travel in search of knowledge and wealth. Furthermore Asim’s choice to tether his ancestry to (apocryphal) itinerant ancestors suggests that for him the question of origins was not a return to a single place (like Basra), but rather to locate his society at the point of mobility, to a place that was created through centuries of trade and to merchants whose wanderings brought them to the shores of Gujarat.

Though his mobility was severely constricted upon his return to Gujarat, he was probably not too disappointed to be back in the city of his birth. For it was a place that Randeris returned to only to embark again.

**Time Travel (Writing)**

The historiographical erasures that culminated in the port-city histories I described above began five hundred years before they were published and can be traced to wide-scale political economic changes in Gujarat and the Indian Ocean world. In the sixteenth century,
the Portuguese waged war on Gujarat’s coast and connected regions of the Indian Ocean. At the close of the fifteenth century, the Portuguese were a fiscally starved nation in search of spices and gold. To this end, the crown supported aggressive maritime exploration, which finally paid off in the “discovery” of a sea-route to the Americas\(^2\) and rounding the Cape of Good Hope, arriving in the Indian Ocean. These economic objectives coupled with religious ones of proselytizing and fighting Islam (in the spirit of the Crusades, which remained fresh in people’s memories) shaped Portuguese action in the Indian Ocean. In a relatively peaceful zone of trade, the Portuguese erected a system of taxed passes (cartazas) by annexing ports and building forts (feitorias). They annexed Cochin in 1503; Sofala in 1505; Mozambique in 1507; Goa in 1510; Malacca in 1511 and Hormuz in 1515.\(^3\)

In Gujarat, Portuguese efforts were met with greater resistance, especially as a result of formidable Islamic mercenary-rulers, who acted on behalf of a decentralized Muzaffarid state centered on Ahmedabad. The Portuguese attempted to annex Diu—then one of the most lucrative ports of Gujarat, ruled from an island fortress—controlled at the time by Malik Ayaz, a manumitted Abyssinian slave-soldier.\(^4\) For many years Ayaz fought back, reaching out to Islamic allies, like the Mamluks across the ocean in Egypt, the Ottoman Empire and the Zamorin of Calicut to Gujarat’s south. Though they operated from Goa to Gujarat’s south, the Portuguese continued to battle for Gujarat. A decade after Ayaz’s death in 1522, the Portuguese unleashed a violent spree of war across Gujarat between 1530 and


\(^3\) Pearson, *Merchants and Rulers of Gujarat*, 31-33.

Rander, a major port at the time, very much on the Portuguese radar, was sacked and burned at this time.

With almost fifty ports across the Indian Ocean, the Portuguese successfully monopolized and taxed Indian Ocean trade until the arrival of the Dutch and the English in the following century. The decisive defeat ironically would come from Surat, when East India Company officials based there offered naval support to the Shah of Persia to conquer Hormuz in 1622. This event symbolizes the arrival of the Dutch and English into oceanic trade and the waning of Portuguese maritime supremacy. In the midst of this inter-imperial competition the port-city of Surat—located across the Tapti River from Rander and once a major Mughal port—rose again to prominence and became the major emporia of Gujarat’s coast.

These dramatic changes in the political economy of the region of Gujarat coincided with the publication of a set of travel narratives. The historiographical erasure of Gujarat’s itinerant Muslims can be traced to this political economic transformation and its representation in the works of subsequent travelers who interpreted it. I argue that these events and texts shaped the categories with which subsequent generations would imagine Rander. I am interested in how Asim’s oceanic poetics take on a five-hundred year old archive of travel writing that characterized Rander as a charred city, burnt to the ground and no more. If the biographies, photographs, recollections and testimonials, which I analyzed in the previous chapter, were directed to Randeri merchant readers active in Indian Ocean

26 Pearson, Merchants and Rulers of Gujarat, 67-73.

27 Chaudhuri, Trade and Civilization, 85.

28 See, Das Gupta, Decline of Surat.
ports, Asim’s account of Rander’s past shifts registers and engages a different set of scholarly interlocutors who were not removed in space so much as they were removed in time.

In her classic and yet unparalleled book *Imperial Eyes*, Mary Louise Pratt writes that travel writing was a particularly charged mode through which imperialism was made meaningful to metropolitan subjects, that it was, as she puts it, “a key instrument...in creating the ‘domestic subject’ of empire.”29 But as she herself admits, one aspect of travel writing that her analysis opens up but does not adequately address is the reception of such works amongst non-metropolitan readers, who constituted a quite different readership and reception. Here I extend Pratt’s observation to consider non-metropolitan readers who engaged travel writings centuries after its publication, still powerful in its categorical reach. I want to argue that Asim is an example of one such non-metropolitan reader of imperial travel writing five hundred years removed from its initial publication. What place does such a twentieth century reader/reading have in the reception of imperial travel writing? What kind of “contact zone” or social space of cultural encounter does such a reading produce? In this section, I follow Asim’s footnotes, looking at the travel texts he imagined and responded to in his search for the elusive Nayatas of Rander. In addition to writing against travel texts that claimed Rander’s days of oceanic trade were in the past, Asim also used this archive to bolster his account of a longue durée of itinerancy. I locate my analysis at the wedge between Asim’s account of the Nayatas and the insistence of a canon of travel writers that Rander had been conclusively destroyed in 1532.

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Though Asim first heard of the Nayatas at the mosque, a precocious child who hung around Rander’s elders as they chatted after prayers, he would find signs of his ancestors in numerous books in Surat’s many merchant-funded libraries. One of these books, which he cites in his account, is the English translation of Duarte Barbosa’s travels printed as The Book of Duarte Barbosa: An Account of the Countries Bordering the Indian Ocean and their Inhabitants, Written By Duarte Barbosa About the Year 1518.30 He quotes directly from the text:

Of Rander or ‘Ranel’ as he writes it and the Nayatas, the traveller Barbosa (1514) gives the following details: ‘Ranel’ is a good town of the Moors. Built of very pretty houses and squares. It is a rich and agreeable place because the Moors of the town traded with Malacca, Bengal, Tawasery (Tennasserim), Pegu, Martaban and Sumatra, in all sorts of spices, drugs [sic], silks, Musk, benzoin and porcelain [sic]. They possess very large and fine ships and those who wish Chinese articles will find them there very completely. The Moors of this place are white and well dressed and very rich. They have pretty wives, and in the furniture of this [sic] houses have china-vases of many kinds, kept in glass cupboards well arranged. Their women are not secluded like those of other Moors, but go about the city in the day time, attending to their business with their faces uncovered as in our parts.31

Devoid of conventional quotation marks or formal references, his “citation” makes for enigmatic reading. In most regards it reproduces the English translation of Barbosa’s text prepared by William Dames in 1812. But as I wrote earlier, I am only able to consult Asim’s work in English, a translation of his Gujarati-language original. As I read Asim’s “quotation”

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30 The Book of Duarte Barbosa: An Account of the Countries Bordering on the Indian Ocean and their Inhabitants, Written By Duarte Barbosa, and Completed About the Year 1518 A.D., Volume I., Including the Coasts of East Africa, Arabia, Persia and Western India as Far as the Kingdom of Vijayanagar. Trans. Mansel Longworth Dames (London: Hakluyt Society, 1918). Duarte Barbosa is a fascinating figure, a Portuguese “escrivao de feitoria” who was fluent in Malayalam and led a peripatetic life based in Cannanore and Calicut. Though nominally a Portuguese official, he was a controversial figure who more than once challenged Governor Albuquerque and found himself out of political favor. As Joan-Pau Rubiés writes in his fascinating book on European “ethnological” writing in South India, Barbosa was part of a wider cohort of Portuguese officials who developed their own scholarly interests on Indian society (Joan-Pau Rubiés, Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes, 1250-1625 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 204-205.

of Barbosa aloud, I hear the hint of a translation of a translation. It is likely that this
citation’s itinerary was across several languages, from the Portuguese original to an English
translation quoted and translated by Asim into Gujarati and then translated back into
English. Compare Barbosa’s text with Asim’s. The Portuguese factor writes:

"Coming forth from this town of Limabudra, and returning to those with havens on
the sea, and going beyond Guindarim further along the coast, there is a river on the
hither side of which stands a Moorish town named Reynel, wherein are very fair
houses and open places. It is a very pleasant and wealthy place, for the Moorish
inhabitants therefor trade in their own ships with Malacca, Beguala, Camarasym and
Pegu, also to Martaban and Camatra, in spices of diverse sorts and drugs and silks
in great abundance, musk benizoin, porcelain and many other wares. Those who
dwell here have many and great fair vessels, which carry on this trade, and
whosoever would have at his disposal things from Mallaca and China let him go to
this place where he will find them in great perfection than in any other place soever.
The Moors who dwell here are wealthy and distinguished, fair in colour and gentle in
birth. They go well attired, their women are beautiful and they have good houses well
kept and furnished. They use, in the front of their houses, to have many shelves all
round, the whole room being surrounded by them as in a shop, all filled with fair and
rich porcelain of new styles. The women are not shut up as elsewhere among the
Moors, but for forth of their house much in the daytime, doing whatsoever business
they have in hand, with their faces uncovered, as among us."

It is also possible that though Asim “quotes” Barbosa, he accesses his writings
through a set of intermediate citations of later travel writers (ambassadors, doctors,
merchants, bureaucratic officials) who visited Rander after the Portuguese conquest of
Gujarat in 1532. A majority of these visitors did not arrive in Rander by design. Instead, they
wandered into the city, escorted by hosts who wanted to tour Surat’s environs. But all these
writers echo Barbosa’s text and write about the once thriving community of Nayatas who
lived in Rander. Amongst these visitors to Rander, more famous for their journeys
elsewhere, were John Albert de Mandelslo, the Ambassador to the Duke of Holstein, the
English physician John Fryer, the French traveler Jean De Thevenot and Mansel Longworth

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Dames, the Indian Civil Services officer and scholar who translated Duarte Barbosa’s Portuguese voyages in the early nineteenth century.\(^{33}\)

In 1635 John Albert de Mandelslo visited Rander as part of a wider set of travels in the western Indian Ocean. In his travelogue, *The voyages and travels of J. Albert de Mandelslo (a gentleman belonging to the Embassy, sent by the Duke of Holstein to the great Duke of Muscovy, and the King of Persia) into the East-Indies*, he recollected that some English and Dutch merchants had taken him across the Tapti River to “an old ruin’d city called Reniel, where the Dutch have a warehouse. The inhabitants of the city are called Naites and are for the most part either Mariners or Tradesmen, and of the Muhametan Religion [sic].”\(^{34}\)

A few decades after Mandelslo’s journey the English physician John Fryer had cause to visit Rander. Sojourning in the port-city of Surat for several months during his travels in Persia and India, he took a boat or country craft across the Tapti to Rander. His observations were brief. He writes, “Ro Neal [Rander] was once…now abandoned to Seamen and Washermen.”\(^{35}\) His observations of the city stand in stark contrast to his wordy descriptions of Surat’s neighborhoods and streets. And yet his words are oddly reminiscent of his predecessor, choosing to focus on the contrast between a ruined city and an extant itinerant population.

Around the same time, French traveler Thevenot arrived in Surat, tracing a now well-travelled route through India. The booming port attracted a steady stream of visitors. It was the seventeenth-century gateway to India.\(^{36}\) Thevenot also took a break from wandering

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\(^{33}\) It is unclear from Dames commentary whether he visited Rander or simply traveled to it through four hundred years of citations.

\(^{34}\) John Albert de Mandelslo quoted in Dames, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, 146, fn.1.

\(^{35}\) John Fyer quoted in Dames, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, 146 fn.1.
around Surat and travelled to Rander, which he too described in the language of ruin. He wrote, “Renelle [Rander] [was] an old town about a quarter of a league distant from Surrat. It stands on the other side of the Tapti and…daily fall[s] into ruin.”

These visitors published accounts of their travels, which were translated into the English-language during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by British administrative officials and scholars. These writings were also collected together in the Gazetteers that the British colonial state published, also available in merchant-funded libraries and reading rooms. In his unconventional footnotes, a plane of analysis where he ruminates on the analysis he produces above, Asim mentions reading these chroniclers of his town, writing, for example, that Mandelslo “recognized Nayats as the traders of highest rank, adventurous navigators and good citizens.” He continues: “He has made a mention about the existence of the warehouse of the Dutch in Rander and he has also mentioned that the English of Surat centre…had fascination for Rander.”

36 John Ovington’s travelogue A Voyage to Surat in the Year 1689 and Jean Baptiste-Tavernier’s account of Surat in his voluminous French travelogue Travels in India (1676) are examples. It is especially evident in Tavernier’s route through India that Surat was a key pivot for travelers, merchants, bureaucratic official. He arrived from Hormuz to Surat and made several trips to Golconda, Burhanpur and Goa via Surat. John Ovington, A Voyage to Suratt, in the year, 1689. Giving a large account of that city, and its inhabitants, and of the English factory there. Likewise a description of Madeira, St. Jago, Annobon, Cabenda, and Malemba…St. Helena, Johanna, Bombay, the city of Muscatt…Mocha, and other maritime towns upon the Red Sea, the Cape of Good Hope, and the island Ascension. To which is added an appendix (London: Printed for Jacob Tonson, 1869); Jean Baptiste-Tavernier, Travels in India by Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, baron of Aubonne, translated from the original French edition of 1676 with a biographical sketch of author, notes, appendice, etc., by V. Ball (London: Oxford University Press, 1925).

37 Jean de Thevenot quoted in Dames, The Book of Duarte Barbosa, 146 fn.1.
So from the sixteenth century sack of Rander to the arrival of European travelers on its charred shores, copies of these impressions of an old port-city and its Islamic itinerants proliferate. In the twentieth century, in the hands of an aging poet they are placed in a succession of citations of travel writing. Based on Asim’s own intellectual practice, one can see citations as repetitions that morph and change as they are filtered between texts. Though Asim’s intentions are not clear, his use of references casts travel writing in a citationary mode that is reminiscent of Edward Said’s characterization of the orientalist canon. “The Orient,” writes Said, “is less a place than a topos, a set of references, a congeries of characteristics that seems to have its origins in a quotation, or a fragment of a text, or a citation from someone’s work on the Orient…” I borrow Said’s analysis of nineteenth century orientalist texts to draw out how Asim’s reading or engagement with texts composed five hundred years earlier is reinterpreted through Asim’s oceanic poetics.

As Asim paraphrases travel writing from five centuries ago, he holds up these accounts of his city to the place he witnesses in front him. His reading of this travel writing bares marks of this engagement with a long history in the present of writing his book. We can see this longer time frame of analysis, for example, in his engagement with Mandelslo above. Mandelslo is not a removed historical figure for Asim, but rather an interlocutor whose observations he verifies with his own experience of Rander. And as he engages this trail of travel writing he transforms it through a unique practice of citation, so that his reproduction resembles the original text in an English that is uniquely Gujarati. In this he infuses the text with his poetics, in the style of Gujarati sentence structure and also by incorporating historical travel writing into an account of Rander in his present day. Like his

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predecessor he too practices citation but rather than reproducing the ruin that travelers like Mandelslo and Fryer describe, he shows how Rander comes in and out of focus.

For example, he notes that while Mandelslo witnessed ruin, the Dutch traveler Joannis de Laett wrote about a quite different place in his *Imperio Magni Mogolis* (1649):

Now in the river (Tapti), a little further in the north, on the right side, you will see that Fort (Surat) whose description has been quoted just above, and on the left side, a little ahead, farther from city of Surat, a beautiful town of ‘Raneli’ (Rander) will come upstream. The inhabitants of this place (town) are known as Nayat and they speak quite a different language than those of Surat (means Arabic). Mostly they are navigators and sailors. The lanes of Rander are narrow and the buildings are having many staircases to go up and down.\textsuperscript{41}

And so we see here, a hundred years after Barbosa’s description of a city of houses stocked with precious porcelain, a hundred years after its “destruction” by the Portuguese, Rander is a place that echoes. It is a place where Arabic is spoken in the streets. It is a place of lustrous buildings inhabited by Arabian merchants.

In knitting his own account of the city through five hundred years of citations of Rander, in equal parts splendor and ruin, Asim brings into focus a temporal framework that shows that a long history of itinerancy is constantly in play. The society of merchants and their journeys are iterations of a patterning of Arabians who go out into the Indian Ocean to find their fortunes, admittedly with mixed results. But as the city and its residents are felled in political economic transformation, they seem to rise once again, almost phoenix-like out of the ashes.

To return to Pratt’s analysis of the contact zone of travel writing, I find that Asim nests journeys within journeys. His own journey begets his book which tells the tale of the itineraries of Rander’s nineteenth and twentieth century merchants. He (re)writes the journeys of five generations of European travel writers in order to frame his own journey

through the history of his city. Rather than contrasting his own account of a thriving town with a historic account of ruin, he rewrites ruin as a condition that is constantly being addressed and allayed by merchants who continually resurface.

And Asim inscribes this travel through time into urban space, into the (port) city he beholds. In other words, the (port) city was the pivot on which Asim moved across space and time.

Asim’s encounter with ruin offers an oceanic perspective on what anthropologist Shannon Dawdy has called a “ruin revival” in anthropology and history. In a provocative article titled “Clock-Punk Anthropology and the Ruins of Modernity” Dawdy reviews, reframes and sketches what she sees as a new “archaeological horizon,” in the social science that places renewed focus on materiality to generate new paradigms for thinking about time, in the wake of “modernity’s” demise as the primary temporal frame for studying society, culture and history. In the following section I follow Asim’s rewriting of “ruined” accounts of Rander into conceptions of built space. This section builds on this recent “archaeological turn” by examining an oceanic example in which the absence of archeological evidence is the semiotic stuff around which an account of a longue durée emerges. In chapter 5, I engage this literature in a different mode by drawing on recent scholarship in art history to explore

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43 In 2008, two years before the publication of Dawdy’s article, anthropologist George Marcus also issued a programmatic call for renewed attention to the problem of time, urging anthropologists to replace the “being there” of ethnography with a different kind of engagement with “history unfolding in the present.” He writes: “What’s left to do [in anthropology] is to follow events, to engage ethnographically with history unfolding in the present, or to anticipate what is emerging. The great majority of projects of anthropology are pursued in this defining kind of temporality, which, in my view, has become much more important than traditional spatial tropes of “being there” in situating ethnography in time and space.” George Marcus, “The End(s) of Ethnography: Social/Cultural Anthropology’s Signature Form of Producing Knowledge in Transition,” *Cultural Anthropology* 23, 1 (2008): 1-14. See also, Ann Laura Stoler, “Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination,” *Cultural Anthropology* 23 (May 2008: 2): 91-219.
the role of the picturesque—one pictorial mode of ruin, according to Romita Ray—in homes of capital.

**Renovating the Longue Durée**

One way in which Asim rewrites travel accounts of ruin is by emplotting the longue durée in urban space. Perhaps the most striking example of this historiographical maneuver is his linking of the perseverance of Rander to the presence of Islamic Sufi saints (wālī; auliyā) buried in the (port) city’s soil, addressed neither by European travel writers nor by Gujarati historians. Asim writes that Rander is a city of both “ups and downs, rises and falls.” And yet it perseveres in its “grandeur” and “splendour” because it is a city of venerated graves (dargah). As part of the city’s subsoil, the “learned and religious personalities,” of Sufis who arrived in Rander between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries continue to inflect the city. In Asim’s analysis these saintly burials were one reason the city persevered. The material remainders of long gone itinerants gave him confidence that Rander was once an important point in Muslim scholarly networks of the Indian Ocean. The interred bodies gave the city what Asim called “spiritual benefits and showers [sic] of the Divine.”44 In other words, even if European travelers witnessed a destroyed city, they were looking at Rander as a city existing above the ground. By narrating Rander’s perseverance (at least partly) through the subterraneous grave, Asim is using a spatial metaphor of layered soil to make an argument about time. At least in Asim’s account of Rander, the problem of time—and history—is therefore always imbricated with its spatial referent: time is buried in space. I will have more to say about the work of death and its rituals in producing oceanic space-time in the following chapter. For now, I stay focused on

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the particular issue of Rander’s buried Sufis and the production of a longue durée in urban space.

Asim writes that the Rifa’i was the major tariqa (Sufi path) that put down roots in Rander. Like their mercantile counterparts, the Nayatas, the Rifa’i tariqa originated near Basra in contemporary Iraq. It was the most prominent tariqa until the fifteenth century. Though scholars have traced the Rifa’i to contemporary Egypt, Turkey, Greece, Yugoslavia, Albania and the United States, less is known about the Rifa’i in contemporary South Asia.  

The Rifa’i tariqa in Rander then is a powerful example of the social shape of oceanic itineraries, which took root in Gujarat and persevere till date.

Asim writes that the most famous Rifa’i, Hazrat Shah Saifullah, who arrived in Rander from Iraq was buried in the city in 1694. According to Asim, he “encamped” near one of the city’s mosques and after his death a tomb was erected, which is the site of the contemporary Rifa’i khanqa (Sufi lodge). At the time of Asim’s writing in the 1970s and 80s it continued to be an important city space. In a footnote, Asim describes the Urs celebration marking the death anniversaries of the Rif’ai Sufis that continues to be a major city event. He writes, “The sandal Sharif of Hazrat Shah Saifullah Rifaee Sahab is held every year…in which thousands of disciples, followers and believers gather together and the said ‘Urs’ is celebrated with high pomp [sic].” Through this yearly patterning of ritual practice, a long history of Islamic itinerancy continued to be (re)buried in the soil.

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47 Asim is referring here to the sandalwood paste with which the grave is washed during the Urs ceremony.

When I arrive for fieldwork between 2011 and 2012, the Rif’ai are still a prominent tariqa in Rander. The current Sajjada Nashin of the dargah, (Dr.) Sayed Omer Faruq, a medical doctor by profession, is an important city-figure and maintains an office in the Rif’ai shrine compound of white-washed graves overhung by a lush mango tree. He is renovating an enormous haveli in Rander’s neo-Palladian style next door. While he operates a clinic in Surat and takes after the family “business” in Rander his brother has established himself in Los Angeles and returns every year.

Dr. Faruq is a busy person, occupied with matters both medical and spiritual.49 But he finds time for an interview, welcoming me into his dusty offices, piled high with folders and papers. His office is otherwise spare, save for a prophetic genealogy in Arabic hung on the wall behind him. He gives me five minutes to outline my research, interrupting me with the promise of putting me in touch with old families of Rander who were based in Rangoon and Durban. And then he opens a drawer in his creaky teak desk and pulls out a sheet of typed paper from a stack. The seemingly innocuous document is a prophetic genealogy linking himself to Prophet Muhammad. The genealogy has been tabulated on a spreadsheet, listing dates, names and places. It is a lineage that spans thirteen hundred years. And for this it is an impressive piece of paper. Like Asim’s book, we can think of the genealogy as a document of the longue durée.

In addition to being persuasive evidence of Rander’s settlement by itinerant Arabians between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries it is also a powerful example of oceanic poetics at work. Over a stretch of fourteen centuries, the genealogy inscribes Islamic itinerant figures—in this case itinerant religious scholars of the Rif’a’i—who connect Rander to Basra, Kufa, Najaf, Howeza, Ahmedabad and Bharuch. So if Asim engages travel writers

49 Interview, Dr. Sayed Omer Faruq, Rander, January 16, 2012.
five centuries removed he does so from a place where such a time horizon is meaningful, where figures removed in time are engaged in everyday practice. The spatial referent of the genealogical text is the materiality of the white-washed graves that are shaded under the Sufi compound, swept daily and visited regularly. These graves are not in ruin, nor are they preserved untouched by contemporary practice. Instead they are constantly worked upon, white-washed yearly and the compound constantly refreshed with new funds that are brought every year during the Urs. In other words, Asim’s account of Rander’s subterranean history and the Rifa‘i genealogy Dr. Faruq preserves are examples of a “renovated longue durée.”

The material layering that I describe of Rander’s past, sedimented in the city’s soil, is not an uncommon feature of historic cities that have been the object of imperial interest. The “treasures” of the subsoil be they the dead bodies of the saintly—as we see in Rander—or material culture in the form of objects deemed “archaeological remains” stand at the heart of debates of national sovereignty, of who a city belongs to and why. Perhaps the most vivid example of the significance of subterranean historic soil is the city of Jerusalem, which has been at the heart of territorial conflict in Israel/Palestine. In her remarkable study of the relation between the field of archeology and the creation of territorial political identity, anthropologist Nadia Abu El Haj explores the ways in which archaeological excavation in the region following the 1967 war shaped the development of settler nationhood. 50 Her

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50 It is worth noting that El Haj is insistent that Israeli archaeology was not informed by a crass ideological nationalist bias but rather was operating within a scientific paradigm that placed social and cultural issues outside the boundaries of archaeological practice and knowledge. She finds that archaeologists in the 1960s and 70s were working with “a conception of history defined by events and architecture, by stories of war, heroism and (national) destruction” and that within such a framework there was “little place for sustained curiosity about other kinds of questions that one could imagine asking about the city’s past.” El Haj, Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) 140.
extraordinary analysis of archaeological debates, excavation documents and material culture catalogues generated during the Jerusalem digs persuasively shows how existing paradigms of history—namely one that framed history in terms of conclusive rises and falls of empires and peoples—produced a visible archaeological record (which would then become the basis of renovations of the Jewish Quarter undertaken by the Israel state). In her analysis, a longue durée in the form of empires and states was emplotted in urban space through practices and discourses of the national discipline of archaeology.

Perhaps because a five-hundred year archive of travel writing deemed Rander a defunct port-city imperial, colonial and post-colonial states of South Asia have not latched on to the city’s soil as symbolically valuable in struggles around articulating national sovereignty. Though located on the coast, Rander does not constitute a charged (national) borderland. And so Rander’s long history does not take the form of excavation in the hands of the national discipline of archaeology. Rander’s historic subsoil holds the remains of dead bodies which are powerful precisely because they are interred and venerated and is thus not held to modern scientific models of empirical proof. Furthermore Rander is—and this is certainly true in Asim’s case—are themselves not interested in making “territorial” claims.

Both the Nayatas and the Sufis Asim points to as examples of Rander’s most revered early residents were Arabian itinerants. Locating these figures is not a matter of fixing them to soil but rather mobilizing their peripatetic lives as examples to emulate and follow across the Indian Ocean. I want to suggest that we can apply the same kind of approach to conceptualizing Rander’s built space, its mosques and merchant homes.

As I introduced in the previous chapter, Rander went through a period of architectural effervescence in the early years of the twentieth century. Between 1900 and

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1940 Randeri merchants domiciled in ports from Rangoon to Durban commissioned new homes in a whimsical (Neo) Palladian style that married the dimensions of Gujarati haveli architecture to the designs of Palladio. While merchants first encountered Palladio in an imperial idiom, in the facades of new British colonial design in places like Durban, they authored their own itinerant style that proclaimed their attachment to many different places rather than a single one. This architectural boom was funded by a generation of merchants who had made huge profits on the frontier economies of the British Empire, in sugar in Port Louise, oil in Rangoon and futures trading in Durban. In chapter 2 I traced the lives of these merchants, showing a majority of them were part of the Anjuman-e-Islam of Rander (hereafter Anjuman), a literary organization that patronized the arts and that operated across the ports of the Indian Ocean.

In 1911, a decade into the spate of construction in Rander, the Anjuman convened a meeting and began organizing fundraising efforts to commission the renovation of the oldest city mosque, Nayatwada Ni Masjid (the mosque of the Nayata settlement). According to Asim, a plaque that stands in front of the mosque today, proclaims that it was originally built in 1195 by the Nayatas. (I search for this sign but never find it). A pen sketch of the mosque’s original dimensions is the only image that remains. The mosque was part of the oldest neighborhood, Nayatwada, located near the original town square and the site of the Friday market. In 1911, the crumbling mosque was likely a stark contrast to the lanes of brightly colored Palladian homes, including the powder blue “Butler Manzil,” owned by the Butler family based in South Africa at the time.

Perhaps the single most influential figure in the efforts to renovate the Nayatwada mosque was Janab Haji Shaikh Mohammed Peerbhai Fancy Sahab [sic] (d. 1945). 52

Mohammed Peerbhai, as Asim referred to him, was born in Rander but spent the majority of his life in Johannesburg, South Africa. Orphaned at a young age, Peerbhai was not able to complete his matriculation. Instead he began working at an early age for a trading concern. According to Asim, despite these early challenges, Peerbhai was a prominent advocate of literature and education more broadly. He was a member and on-time president of the Anjuman. Upon retirement in 1915, he returned to Rander from Johannesburg with a great deal of capital. He donated part of it to the rebuilding of the Nayatwada mosque. According to Asim, Peerbhai had already began to take up a collection from Randeris in Johannesburg. But almost immediately, Peerbhai began to face shortages and called upon Randeris in Surat, Bombay, Calcutta and elsewhere to contribute additional funds. Peerbhai mobilized the communication network of Anjuman to funnel capital to the city to rebuild the mosque.

Though Peerbhai spearheaded the renovation efforts—Asim credits him with operationalizing the rebuilding plans—the dilapidated condition of the mosque in the early twentieth century was the subject of much conversation. Asim’s family, for example, were closely associated with the mosque: his own grandfather had been mutavalli. The fundraising efforts of Peerbhai and the discussions around the condition of the mosque offer unique insight to the ways in which Randeri merchants perceived the powerful link between the Nayatas and urban space. The final design that Peerbhai settled on is suggestive. From the pen drawing of the original mosque, we know that it was a spare courtyard-mosque built in stone with minimal ornament, surrounded by trees. In many ways its architectural form connects it to the style of mosques built in Red Sea in the twelfth century.\footnote{See Alka Patel’s discussion of “idga”-style mosques in twelfth-century Bharuch, Mangrol and Khambat (Alka Patel, Building Communities in Gujarat: Architecture and Society During the Twelfth-Century through Fourteenth Centuries (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 105-129.} Rather than preserving this structure, Randea decided to renovate the structure in the Neo Palladian
style of their merchant homes. Like Rander’s home the mosque has a busy façade and is festooned with ornaments (figure 3.1)

Even today, the similarities between Rander’s homes and mosques create an ocular horizon that is dominated by powerful displays of oceanic wealth. This aesthetic choice is compelling because it reveals a historical imagination at work. Instead of keeping to the original design of the mosque, why did Randeris choose to renovate the Nayatwada Mosque in a new style? Furthermore what is the significance of their choice to rebuild the mosque in the style of their new havelis? As I have argued thus far, Randeris saw themselves as the descendants of itinerant Arabian ancestors. My argument is that in sculpting their oldest mosque, and the only tangible remainder of the Nayatas, into a new Palladian style, they were mobilizing the structure by incorporating it into the circuits of trade in which they were involved that funded the efforts in the first place. And in doing so merchant patrons of the city’s renewal invested their new style of havelis with a longue durée of itinerancy. Placed in this broader urban context as part of a wider architectural trend, the merchant home can be framed as a chronotope--drawing on Paul Gilroy’s use of Bakhtin—as a site that is responsive to time and plot.
Asim offers further explanation for the longue durée taking shape in Palladian form. While Asim laments the loss of “several documents, old minute books of Nayat-Wada Badi Jooma Masjid…[and] stone inscriptions” he writes that “memories” of the Nayatas are “preserved with the names of ‘Nayatwada’ and ‘Nayatwada no Badi Jooma Masjid.’”\(^{54}\) The Nayatas, Asim argues, are preserved in the nomenclature of Rander’s everyday life, in the naming of the city’s neighborhood and mosque. If merchants chose to renovate the mosque and their homes in a Palladian idiom of design Asim adds to this complex of space and time the power of names—as we saw in the genealogy as the “inscribed longue durée”—to

perpetuate the past in memory. But beyond this Asim saw greater figurative purchase in the historical name imbedded in the mosque. He writes,

This mosque is not merely existing as a mosque, but it is personified by a complete life stories of Nayatas. This mosque whose every brick and granule and its particle is conveying a narrative of Nayatas for eight centuries. Everyday our eyes see the same, but on! We have given deaf ears to hear it! [sic] 55

The Nayatas, in Asim’s analysis, were “personified” in the mosque: it was an extension of the lives that had beheld God within it. Asim saw “each granule” and “each brick” as saturated with eight centuries of prayers, of prostrated limbs turned toward the west.

Though the pious regularly beheld this vision many did not make the link between their contemporary practice and the historical ancestors who made it possible with their original oceanic journeys, that their turn toward Mecca in prayer was also a daily turn toward itinerant origins.

If the Nayatwada Ni Masjid was built on the edifice of a structure constructed by the Nayatas, Asim saw this as true for Rander’s homes as well. In a footnote to the biography of his grandfather Janab Hajee Shaikh Imam Sherbhai Subedar Sahab [sic] (1847-1924), Asim writes that his own family was one of Rander’s “ancestral families” descended from the Nayatas. From his grandfather and friends he had learned about Chhapan Karodi Nagar Seth, the head Nayata merchant of Rander. Chhapan Karodi’s palace was once located according to Asim in the “East from ‘Adussa’ tree to westward upto the mainroad and in the north from the boundary of Paliawad Street to southward upto Halimbhai Jamadar street (now Subedar) Street.” 56 And remains of this palace could be found in Asim’s own home compound. A part of the original palace wall was incorporated into their home and bric-a-


brac attributed to Karodi’s palace was routinely found in the compound. Though the original fortress that once protected Rander was destroyed and all that remained at the time of Asim’s writing was the qiladar’s bungalow (sentry’s post), located near the fortress gate, it was the inhabitation of the Palladian home built on debris that persuaded Asim about the existence of the Nayatas.

Returning to Asim’s reading of Barbosa’s sixteenth century description of Rander as a city of Arabian merchant homes which are full of precious objects from trade abroad, I propose that it is the longue durée emplotted in urban space—through buried Sufis and renovated mosques and homes—that facilitates an oceanic (poetic) imagination of home, that helps Asim and also Rander’s contemporary merchants see their own material practices of coveting objects as part of a genealogy of Islamic Arabian itinerant ancestors. Thinking with Michael Taussig, imaginative reader of Walter Benjamin, one has to wonder then if the merchant home in its chronotopicity is mimesis or alterity?

In his brilliant study of the mimetic function, Taussig calls into question early ethnographic accounts of the Kunas of South America that invest them with particular mimetic facility described famously by anthropologist Frazer as sympathetic magic. Instead, Taussig persuasively argues that Kuna practices can be seen as a copy of a copy, the mirroring back of colonial use of mimetic technology like the camera to represent otherness. Taussig argues that Kuna copies of colonial representations of themselves, in needlework for example, are part of a desire of inhabiting or miming this difference, inhabiting it to various ends.57 I want to draw here on Natasha Eaton’s pithy summary of Taussig’s argument as a conceptual entry point to draw together the arguments above of itinerant origins, travel

writing and the longue durée. Eaton writes that Taussig shows mimesis in Kuna practice is “not merely to ape colonial power but to serve as curative objects in a cultural context that existed beyond the purview of colonialism.”

In Asim’s case, his account of travel writing can be read as a miming of imperial accounts of Rander in precisely this vein. European travel writers to Rander used travel writing as a mimetic technology which produced ruin. Asim cites or textually mimes these writers in his account but transforms them by staging an encounter between Barbosa’s original description of Rander—as a city of lush merchant homes—with writings of ruin. This encounter opens up a unique temporality of history, which recalls Benjamin’s observation:

History is not the object of a construct whose site is homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by now-time [Jetztzeit]. Thus to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with now-time, which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution was itself as Rome incarnate. It quotes ancient Rome. [emphasis added]

We can say that Asim too quotes and curates these accounts to a reading public temporally now removed from the iterative moment of imperial travel writing. Merchant renovations of Rander, part of a wider set of urban practices that endow the soil with the longue durée, are antecedents of Asim’s mimetic practice, as they translate into architectural form and material culture a likeness to buildings they experience in the British Empire as well as devotion to what is mirrored back to them as their itinerant ancestors.

Thus the longue durée in Rander is not simply “the long run” as a patterning across linear time that locates the causality of contemporary events in the distant past. Instead such a renovated longue durée is rooted in an oceanic poetics through which merchants of

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Rander perceive and are motivated to act in ways that make temporally removed processes intimately experienced in time and space. And as I have sought to show in this chapter this phenomenon is imbedded in the social life of mobility rooted in and routed through an old port-city, its mosques and merchant homes.

**Conclusion: Time and Space in Indian Ocean Gujarat**

To conclude I want to draw out the broader implications of my analysis of Rander, its merchants, Neo-Palladian homes, mosques and most importantly (patron) poet who offers us a way through the charred terrain of its history. I want to explore the ways in which Asim’s method of putting together a history of oceanic fragments in his “book of wonders” offers us a model for thinking about space and time in the region of Gujarat. My argument is that reading Asim’s text in a topographical way—an approach I outline in greater detail in the next chapter—imbedding his analysis in Rander and reading his text against the narratives of contemporary merchants within their homes, offers a way of conceiving and ethnographic history of a region like Gujarat that is produced through mobility, an elusive subject. Plotting Asim’s (conceptual) move(ment)s offers a path forward through the dissertation.

Asim travels in pursuit of knowledge of his port-city, across the Indian Ocean giving mushaira (poetic performances) and back and forth across time through a literary terrain of ruin. Asim’s peripatetic quest for historical knowledge echoes both the itineraries of Rander’s Indo-Arabian ancestors who arrived in the port in the twelfth-century, and its nineteenth- and twentieth-century merchants who are spread out across the Indian Ocean from Durban to Rangoon. In this respect the circumstances of Asim’s itinerancy and the work of history that is a product of it are reflective of Rander’s location in the Indian Ocean.
As evidenced by Asim’s need to go elsewhere in time and space, Rander is not a place of origin nor is a place of return but emerges as a crucible of oceanic mobility.

As Asim shows in his (time) travel and documentation of Rander’s (port) city-scape, from the subterranean Sufi saints who materially mark the port with the stuff of the longue duree to its mosque which is renovated in a Neo-Palladian mode though venerated as originally built in the twelfth century, to Rander’s itinerant ancestors who are imagined as twelfth-century migrants from Basra, Rander’s (terraqueous) space and time is constantly in play. And Rander’s merchants and itinerant poet put this mobility to work in a range of ways. As Rander’s Rangoon returnees suggest: with mixed results.

And yet despite the dense inhabitations of the port that I have charted this far, Rander continues to be considered a charred city, a place that is no more. If it is erased in the historiography, ruined by the slight of citation that fixes it to the moment of its sacking in 1532, it is equally absent in contemporary discussions of Gujarat. Despite its vibrant oceanic trade networks, Rander and its merchants have—at least to my knowledge—never been used as models for Gujarat’s famous mercantile acumen, beyond the pale of the Hindu nationalist state of which Gujarat is a part today. Writing against this terrain of ruin, following Asim Randeri, I propose we think of Rander and its Muslim merchants as iconically “Gujarati.” As I show in the chapters to come on Parsi and Hindu merchants this analytic assumption reveals shared (itinerant) orientations to the Indian Ocean at the same time as it provides a conceptual pathway across the region.
CHAPTER FOUR
Building Life and Death in Gujarat

Introduction: Paper Trails of Capital

On September 24 1884, Parsi scholar, lawyer and general Bombay bigwig Framjee Dosabhai Karaka (1829-1902) looked out over the slate-grey waters of the Indian Ocean from his abode on Bombay’s fashionable Malabar Hill as he penned the introduction to his two-volume History of the Parsis. No doubt the view of the ocean and the lands that lay beyond it—namely Persia where the Parsis had embarked eight hundred years previous—were foremost in his thoughts as he contemplated Parsi settlement in India. Yet in the introduction he penned for the British readers he anticipated as his primary audience he presented only episodic glosses of these long years of coastal settlement, describing them as centuries that “passed away without an event occurring to find mention in history or to vary the monotony of an agricultural existence.”¹ For Karaka, Parsi history only began with the arrival of European trade-companies which employed Parsis as “commission agents” and “middle men.”² To him it was work as contractors that gave Parsis the initial capital that led to the establishment of commercial concerns in their own right.

Persian Zoroastrians—or Parsis as they are known in South Asia—arrived on the coast of Gujarat in the eleventh century. We know little of the early years of settlement. As archaeologists Rushana Nanji and CyrusDhalla argue, while Parsis continue to tell the arrival story of the first landings at the small port of Sanjan little remains in the way of empirical

² Karaka, The History of the Parsis, xvii.
evidence. But despite the lack of epigraphical and textual remains of early settlement it is clear that Parsis fanned out from Sanjan and evidence of their settlement can be found across Gujarat, particularly in cities like Navsari, and Bharuch; smaller towns like Bilimora and Valsad; and villages like Tadgam, Saronda and Nargol. By the sixteenth century the Parsis were present across the region.

Karaka’s disinterest in and dismissal of the early years of Parsi settlement is surprising given the significance of these patterns, namely ownership of cotton-rich farmland, ginning workshops and properties in cities which spanned the region’s fertile alluvial delta central to mercantile capital. Contrary to what Karaka suggests—and to those contemporary scholars who echo his observations—Parsis did not become powerful merchants solely because of their work as agents. This is only part of the story. As I will argue in this chapter, like Gujarat’s Hindu and Muslim merchants, Parsis were involved in cotton farming, processing, weaving and trading along the river networks that connected the cotton (textile) trade from hinterland to coast. Parsis did not only rise to prominence with their move to the ports of Surat and Bombay like Karaka suggests but rather also as a result of a dense patterning of building—homes as well as other kinds of architecture—which they undertook across oceanic Gujarat. Furthermore, in stark contrast to the temporal scheme of Karaka’s argument, Parsi mercantile success was not limited to the years of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but rather accrued over a longer period of time during which a range of oceanic itinerants settled Gujarat.


Like the Nayatas, itinerant Arabian merchants who settled Rander in the twelfth century, the subjects of chapters 2 and 3, Parsis put down both roots and routes over the course of the eight hundred years they were settled in Gujarat. They did so, I propose, by building homes as well as other structures including temples (agiary, dar mehar, atash behram), dokhma (towers of silence), schools, community centers and—as will become central to this chapter—libraries across the region. Connected to each other in networks across villages, towns and ports of Gujarat, I propose to think of these dense clusters of buildings as “homes of capital:” shaded routes across a region of textile-production that was increasingly cut-up across multi-sovereign borders.

The sixteenth-century annexation of Gujarat by the Portuguese, which I discussed in chapter 3, was the beginning of a five-century period during which various political hopefuls, including Mughal revenue-collectors later styled “Nawabs” (later absorbed into the category of princely states), the English East India Company, the Marathas and other regional projects fought over Gujarat’s strategic coastline and cotton-rich hinterland. As Gujarat’s political borders ebbed and flowed, mercantile building(s) assured protected pathways from hinterland to coast at the same time as they—as demonstrated in chapter 2—kept Gujarat’s maritime borders porous and oriented outward into the Indian Ocean.

Homes of capital, then, were also spaces of circulation that served as shaded sites of mobility in a region that would be carved up into discrete political units, known as the princely states, under the aegis of British India. Significantly, the major ports of Gujarat,

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which form the 500-kilometer stretch on which this project predominantly focuses, were under direct British rule. This layered colonial state that emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries owes much to its predecessor, what Philip Stern has recently theorized as, “the company-state.”³⁶ Stern argues that the English East India Company’s early-modern tenure in the Indian Ocean and across Asia suggests a form of composite sovereignty in which there were no “singular, sovereign monarchies but intersecting empires, pluralistic legal cultures, and a variety of shapes and forms of hybrid and competing jurisdictions.”³⁷

Though I do not explore all of the implications of Stern’s important work here, I work from his insight that sovereignty’s early-modern history shows that it was always reliant on composite and plural forms, especially in regions like Gujarat in which various kinds of mercantile actors (merchants, states and empires) interacted.

In this chapter I propose that Gujarat’s “homes of capital,” were part and participant in designating the multiple sovereignties of oceanic Gujarat.³⁸ My argument is that


³⁸ Cf. Partha Chatterjee, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question,” In Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History, eds. Kumkum Sanjari and Sudesh Vaid (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 233-254. My argument about homes of capital and sovereignty in oceanic Gujarat diverges a great deal from Chatterjee’s masterful analysis of the space of home in Indian nationalist debates of the late nineteenth-century. Drawing on his research on colonial Bengal, Chatterjee argues that Indian nationalists created a distinction between the economic superiority of the “West” and moral superiority of the “East” in order to create a domain of society beyond the domain—at least rhetorically—of the colonial state. He brilliantly shows how this ideological separation was spatialized into an opposition between “ghar” (home) and “bahir” (world). In espousing this idea of home as a sovereign space separate from the colonial state and as the domain of women, nationalist men accepted a colonial Victorian distinction between public and private and inscribed it ironically into the spatial forms of anti-colonial nationalism. My emphasis in this project is on the multiple temporalities (and geographies) that were embedded in homes and other dwellings of Gujarat. Given the role played by Gujarat’s merchants in Gandhi’s campaigns
chronotopic homes of capital, connected through the semiotic labor of nineteenth- and twentieth-century merchants to earlier itinerant ancestors, histories and geographies, produced shaded routes between Gujarat’s princely states and port-cities under direct British control. These routes connected cotton farming areas under the control of princely states with the industrial British ports like Bombay and Surat (after 1759) in which cotton was processed into cloth and loaded onto ships.

However, as should be clear from my analysis of oceanic poetics and longue durée materiality in the previous chapters, mercantile connections across Gujarat were not only instrumental. Political and economic objectives, as we saw in the context of Rander’s literary society and poetic circulations, were inextricably bound with other kinds of cultural circulations, which had an affective hue motivated by memories of attachment to a wider Indian Ocean world. In this chapter, I turn from a focus on memory and material traces of history to the emergence of print and paper. I am interested in what the emergence of new genres of Gujarati-language printed texts and their circulations through homes of capital, between the coast of Gujarat ruled by the British and cities like Rander and Navsari, nominally under the rule of the princely state of Baroda, might tell us about the way Gujarat’s itinerant merchants—in this case, Parsis—shaped the region.

In the early nineteenth century—a few decades before Karaka’s writing—this long history of mercantile settlement and sovereignty began to be brought on to paper following

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and Gandhi himself as an itinerant Gujarati, it certainly makes sense that some merchants perceived their homes in the way that Chatterjee discusses in the case of late-nineteenth century Bengal. However, in choosing to focus on mercantile circulations not primarily allied with Indian nationalists, I seek to broaden the role played by homes and capital in Gujarat by linking it to a geography and history beyond India.

the emergence of Gujarati-language printing presses associated with newspaper publishing.

Though perhaps the most cited nineteenth-century view of Parsi history due to its easy accessibility in English,¹⁰ Karaka’s insistence on European capital being the motor of Parsi progress was not the only one in circulation. Armed with the new technology of print a range of Parsi scholars, merchants and others contemplated the Parsi past producing a number of Gujarati-language texts in ways, as I will show, that were interpolated in homes of capital that connected Gujarat. For one thing many such texts were based on detritus collected from within merchant homes including old notebooks, records of buildings, births and deaths. Furthermore, Gujarati-language textual circulations were routed through mercantile buildings of all kinds, including libraries, printing presses and homes.

Conceptualized in this way as part of circulations through homes of capital, I integrate the question of literary genre and production into Gujarat’s oceanic political economy.

¹⁰ Anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann, for example, cites Karaka’s work extensively in her account of the nineteenth-century Parsi community. As she herself admits, she did not learn Gujarati and chose instead to focus exclusively on English-language historical sources. This is the major problem with her work: she characterizes the Parsis as a distinct “colonial elite” based entirely on obsequious English-language treatises like Karaka’s that were meant as political arguments to project loyalty to the British to attain civic positions within the government. Her argument that Parsis became prominent colonial businessmen because of their “fair skin” and Anglicized manners caricatures what from the vantage of Gujarati-language sources was a complex set of maneuverings. Her analysis, for example, almost entirely focused on Bombay does not see the ways in which a longer history of Parsi settlement in Gujarat shaped the ways in which Parsis participated in Bombay. Notably many Parsis continued to maintain property and businesses in older cities, towns and villages across Gujarat. Parsis left Bombay regularly for these seemingly provincial places where presumably they put on a different mask and spoke Gujarati, not English. Tanya Luhrmann, The Good Parsi: the Fate of a Colonial Elite in a Post-Colonial Society (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996). Mitra Sharafi in her new work on Parsi lawyers in the British Empire, for examples, shows how Parsi lawyers mobilized the opportunities and limitations of colonial law to diverse ends often in ways that went contrary to colonial goals. Mitra Sharafi, Law and Identity in Colonial South Asia: Parsi Legal Culture, 1772-1947 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
What place does the Gujarati-language have in the history of capital in Gujarat and the Indian Ocean more broadly? While linguists describe Gujarati as a modern language that can be traced to circa 1800, many nineteenth-century writers, including those I briefly discussed in the previous chapter who worked in the ittihās genre, drew from Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Sanskrit morphology and syntax as well as from genres and modes of argument. Asim wrote in at least two of these languages, in both Urdu and Gujarati. Drawing on Asim’s oceanic poetics, I propose in this chapter that nineteenth-century Parsi texts were imbedded in longer term processes involved in the circulation of mercantile capital, namely the history of building that I alluded to earlier. The inscribing of buildings and merchants onto paper gave these texts longue durée purchase by linking them to sites and persons beyond their immediate materiality.

In this chapter I explore examples of entanglements of language, print and homes of capital to show that on ocean’s edge the “language question” was not exclusively the domain of national imaginings—if it ever was—but rather part of mercantile formations that linked Gujarat to the Indian Ocean world. Like Asim’s ruminative tracings of apocryphal ancestors and their itinerant origins, these texts were themselves spurs to circulation. Two recent works of scholarship have offered brilliant analyses of the role of paper and documents in the production of sovereignty in South Asia: Matthew Hull’s *Government of Paper* and Bhavani Raman’s *Document Raj*. Both works—one focused on the materiality of

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12 For an exemplary work on the language question as it played out in regional form in Tamil India see, Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Colonial Tamil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
bureaucracy in post-colonial Pakistan and the other on scribal practices of authority in the British colonial Madras—have opened up powerful new directions in the investigation of state authority and its relationship to semiotic practices associated with paper. Here I take a slightly different approach and examine the materiality of sovereignty in the non-state focused, non-bureaucratic context of mercantile circulations through Gujarat. What role does paper and its signifying practices play in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Gujarat and connected regions during a time of British colonial consolidation?

One way in which paper achieved these ends was through linking the figures of the mercantile dead (in the form of obituaries) with buildings (in the form of dedications and endowments) that continued to exist across Gujarat. For the eight centuries that Parsis called Gujarat home they did not bury their dead instead practicing excarnation rituals in which their dead were deposited in mortuary sites called dokhmu (tower of silence) to decompose or be consumed by birds of carrion. Only bones remained and these were emptied into circular pits. I propose that in the nineteenth century new possibilities for printing and circulating texts resulted in the re-consecration of excarnated dead merchants onto paper; and the proximity of this re-consecration with building notices that chronicled buildings across the region linked long dead merchant with these sites that continued to exist across Gujarat. Put another way I examine how homes of capital (more broadly construed in this chapter) were drawn into cultural schemes of life and death. In other words, homes were also sojourning points for merchants as they moved between life and death from one home, as it were, to another.

This chapter centers on one particularly significant Gujarati-language compendium, the Parsee Prakash, compiled in 1888 by Parsi scholar Byramjee Bomanjee Patel, as an entry point to the wider genre of mortuary texts produced at this time.\textsuperscript{15} It is significant because it was a staple in libraries and reading rooms across Gujarat and connected regions of the Indian Ocean. I encountered copies of the text through the geography I traced as a traveled during fieldwork. I think of the Parsee Prakash as a historical archive of this entanglement of print and mercantile sovereignty because Patel curated the debris of Parsi homes, agyiaries, libraries and other buildings, snippets from personal notebooks and community documents, including obituaries, building notices and biographical sketches. Unlike Karaka, Patel takes on eight centuries of Parsi history in India until 1860. In a region in which life and death were subject to the vagaries of oceanic travel and within a community who excarnated their dead I want to show how homes of capital were key cultural resources. My argument is that in the pages of the Parsee Prakash, Patel and the Parsis who collaborated with him sought to figuratively rebury their dead in an environment in which mortuary ritual became a charged site of colonial debate.

As literary scholars have shown, the eighteenth century witnessed a heightened obsession with death and its meanings,\textsuperscript{16} an obsession that was shared by both British colonials and Parsis in Gujarat. Literature was one domain in which an obsession with death

\textsuperscript{15}Bomanjee Byramjee Patel, Parsee Prakash: Being A Record of Important Events in the Growth of the Parsee Community in Western India Chronologically Arranged From the Date of Their Immigration Into India to the Year 1860 A.D., Volume 1 (Bombay: Duftur Ashkara Press, 1888).

proliferated in Britain. Gothic novels of the period are replete with buried bodies and ghosts, the two poles of dead bodies: those with homes and those who are homeless. In fact, as literary scholar Jolene Zigarovich argues in her fascinating book *Engraved Narratives*, missing bodies were central to Gothic novels and sparked the most fertile imaginings of death. In this chapter I focus on how the “missing bodies” of a generation of eighteenth century Gujarati merchants were reimagined in a nineteenth-century Gujarati-language historical text. The *Parsee Prakasb*--and within it dead bodies and buildings--circulated across the region in the hands of merchant-readers and housed in libraries and reading rooms constituting a kind of paper trail of capital.

My aim here is to put paper in its place, to offer topographic readings of emergent nineteenth-century texts. I want to show that paper is not the primary trace of Gujarat’s history, but rather a historically contingent part of a terrain in which capital was rendered meaningful and put to work in various ways through memory, material culture and built space, as merchants moved between hinterland and coast, between littoral and ocean.

**Topographies of Reading**

Though I had previously encountered the *Parsee Prakasb* in libraries, smaller reading-rooms and personal libraries across the geography of Indian Ocean Gujarat my first reading of the copious text occurred in Navsari, once a major Parsi mercantile town. Though not a port, Navsari is located only twenty-five kilometers from the coast and is connected to the Indian Ocean via the Purna khadi (creek). Navsari is also positioned between the port-city of Surat to its north and cotton-rich farmlands further inland. Thus, Navsari was an important territorial transshipment point. Parsis first settled Navsari in 1142 as recorded in the Persian

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Though we know little about this early settlement, evidence of Nāvsari’s continued importance can be seen in the installment of the Atash Behram (the oldest sacred fire allegedly brought with pioneer Parsis and installed in Sanjan) in the town in 1485. By the sixteenth century, Nāvsari was a major center for Parsi commerce, evidenced by Motta Falla, an old Parsi neighborhood that rings the Atash Behram and dates to this time. Nāvsari was and continues to be an important theological center, home to illustrious dasturs (Parsi priests). The most accomplished amongst these is Dastur Meherjirana (1514-1591) who, as I will discuss further on, was given Motta Falla as a land grant by the Mughal emperor, Akbar. Many of Bombay’s major mercantile figures, including Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy (1783-1859) and Dadabhai Naoroji (1825-1917) were born in Nāvsari. Jeejeebhoy, who made his fortune in the cotton and opium trades, spent the first thirteen years of his life in Nāvsari. Widowed at an early age, Jeejeebhoy’s mother made her living spinning textiles within her home. Her son’s success in large part owed to Nāvsari’s importance within trade networks and opportunities to learn from merchants based in the town with links to Gujarat’s major ports.

The context of my reading of the Parsee Prakash is deeply imbedded in this history. I arrived in Nāvsari as a guest of the Meherji Rana Library and Trust, a major global center of Zoroastrian and Parsi scholarship. The library, which has been expanded in recent years, is located in Motta Falla, a few blocks from the Atash Behram. During a walk one evening, I found myself in front of the home of Jamsetejee Jeejeebhoy, which is managed by a trust and serves as a memorial. Of course the library itself is perhaps the most striking example of the history of paper I seek to tell in this chapter, built around the textual collections of Dastur Meherji Rana. Though the trust governing the library was only established in 1874, the library possesses caches of manuscripts and books collected in personal collections and

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18 Patel, Parsee Prakash, 9.
libraries, including one of the oldest Avestan manuscripts of the Parsis, composed in Persian in 1323. In 1872 a Parsi merchant Navsariwala Seth Burjor Bamanji Padam donated land for the building of the library. Over the centuries, other Parsi merchants have contributed additions, including the building of the current structure by Rehanji Kavasji Meherji Rana in 1906. In 1967 Rustomji Hormusji Kolah donated money for the building of an annex and in 1999 the Tata trust funded renovations of the interiors. The library is run by the formidable Mrs. Bharti Gandhi, who first pointed me to a quiet room in the courtyard where she said I could read uninterrupted.

The library itself is a bungalow-like structure, located in the busy Tarota Bazaar and painted a pleasant yellow with green trim. The library boasts high ceilings with a mezzanine-like floor for its more precious manuscripts locked away in glass cabinets. Tall ceiling fans hang down and make the library a pleasant temperature. Dark wood book shelves, tables and benches are arranged around the room for the comfort of the local public that makes its way through the doors, including secondary school students looking for a quiet place to study and elderly men looking for a copy of the day’s news. In addition you can usually find a number of scholars and fellows from Bombay and other parts of the world who, like me, have arranged to spend some weeks at the library. Dr. Gandhi accommodates many of these scholars, as she did me, in the library itself, in the guest rooms of the annex. This influx of research-scholars keeps a steady traffic through the library. And we all read under the watchful gaze of portraits of Dasturs and the merchants who have funded the library over the years.

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As is evidenced by Padam’s generous donation Navsari’s merchant families, though many relocated to Bombay by the late nineteenth century, continued to sustain strong connections to the town. Many visited the library as a kind of pilgrimage to honor Dastur Meherji Rana. Though the library was not his birthplace or his place of burial—given Parsi excarnation practices—it came to stand in for his life, a kind of tombstone of texts. In one respect then, the library itself can be seen as a form of mercantile building that created a route between Bombay and Navsari. This was a route traversed by capital in money-form wired by Padam no doubt to the Navsari branch through the Bank of Bombay;\(^\text{21}\) in manuscripts and books from Bombay and elsewhere in Gujarat; and in the steady stream of visitors who came to look for themselves at the shiny new library. A visitor’s book in the library marks this steady stream of traffic the connected Navsari to Bombay. But more broadly the library took on greater semiotic purchase by being named for the life of a great dastur.

In addition to being a new home for manuscripts and books that required both scholarly circulation and professional care the Meherjirana library also acquired newly published books hot off the press from Bombay, which was a major center of nineteenth-century Parsi scholarship. It would have been one of the first places that ordered a copy of the *Parsee Prakash*. I want to suggest here that this context of circulation across buildings from Bombay to Navsari needs to be incorporated into a reading of nineteenth-century Gujarati texts. The curator of the text, Patel, describes the *Parsee Prakash* as “a record of important events in the growth of the Parsee community in western India chronologically arranged from the date of their immigration to India to the year 1860 AD.”\(^\text{22}\)

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\(^{21}\) The Bank of Bombay was centralized as the Imperial Bank of India in 1921 and then nationalized into the Reserve Bank of India after Indian and Pakistani independence. \(^{22}\) Patel, *Parsee Prakash*, 1.
text in the Meherjirana library in Navsari, it became clear that the encyclopedic scope of the text was not limited to its temporal scope but rather a broader topographical one. And that too not simply one topographical reading but multiple ones given the many routes the text imbeds. In other words given the terraqueous location of Navsari this topographic reading can be further specified as one which mobilizes an oceanic poetics to animate, what has thus far been read, as a quintessentially nineteenth-century list of major figures of the Parsi community. Furthermore, I explore how such a poetics emplots a longue durée—given the scope of Patel’s work—in various buildings. As I embark across this literary terrain, I seek to theorize the site of the merchant library/reading room in particular as a literary institution of the longue durée. But first let me begin with the route of the Parsee Prakash’s initial publication.

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The Parsee Prakash was published in two volumes in the Gujarati-language. Patel was a prolific Bombay-based scholar. He wrote on a range of topics in both Gujarati and English. He had wide-ranging interests and his scholarly production included essays on Parsi history as well as more eclectic endeavors on aspects of Bombay, like his essay “Statistics of Suicide in Bombay during the year of 1896.”24 We can think of him as a modern colonial, a city dweller who was a keen observer and recorder of life in Bombay. Patel was a member of a number of scholarly societies, including the Bombay Royal Asiatic Society. The Parsee Prakash is his most enduring work. It was published in 1888 and was lauded as an important

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text by the Parsi community. One reason perhaps is that it offered a synthetic account of Parsi history in Gujarati in condensed form. A magpie text, it collected together a heterogeneous history of itinerant settlement and brought it within the ambit of single encyclopedic text.

The title suggests the ambition of his work. The word prakash has a range of meanings in Gujarati, including light, lustre, fame and glory. One translation of the title is “The Glory of the Parsees.” Another translation of prakash is possible as a verb to suggest a process: to come to light or to be disclosed. This second meaning of prakash is significant because it captures an important quality of the work, which is that it was productive of a new sense of Parsi community that was religiously and culturally defined. In the eighteenth century, the Parsees were settled across Gujarat and though they had a strong cultural fulcrum around the ritual practice of Zoroastrianism as well as an arrival story,25 it was only in the nineteenth century that they began to define themselves self-consciously as a colonial community. This emergent definition of community is powerfully crystallized in the second possible translation of the title: “The Coming to Light of the Parsi Community.” But there is a third valence to the term, which the text itself was part of producing: to publish or be published.

This third definition entered the Gujarati language at the same time as the Parsee Prakash, with the emergence and explosion of printing presses in Gujarat (particularly Bombay) and Gujarati-speaking areas around the Indian Ocean in the early nineteenth century. In the 1820s and 30s, the old merchant neighborhood of Bazaar Gate, located within the old fort boundaries of Bombay, became the center of a renaissance in Parsi

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Gujarati scholarship and writing. At one time the headquarters of the Marwari bankers (shroffs) who coordinated the entire banking of the city from their otlas (porches)—until the establishment of the Bank of Bombay in 1840—Bazaar Gate transformed into a neighborhoods of printing presses, swarming with news and gossip, a favorite haunt of journalists and others trafficking in information.\(^{26}\) Bombay sheths (merchants), amongst them Jamsetje Jejeebhoy, funded this publishing boom. *Bombay Samachar* was established in 1822. *Mumbai Vartaman* followed in 1830. And *Jam-e-Jamshed* began circulation in 1832.\(^{27}\) Many of these newspapers were spearheaded by Parsi journalists and newspaper men who had cut their teeth a generation earlier in British colonial newspapers. Newspaper owners diversified their businesses by printing other kinds of scholarly work. The Daftar Ashkara Press, for example, where the *Parsee Prakash* was printed, was founded by the sons of Mazbanji, the founder of the *Bombay Samachar* and *Rast Goftar* newspapers. The press features prominently as a major publisher in Alexander Grant’s *Catalogue of Native Publications in the Bombay Presidency*.\(^{28}\)

The mushrooming of newspapers set off a chain reaction in Gujarati-language publishing. Eager to add their voices to the tide of texts, Gujarati scholars and writers, many of them members of the Royal Asiatic Society, began composing monograph-length works that would be printed for popular consumption. These texts were printed in relatively small runs and were circulated through three spaces: the private libraries of merchants, community


libraries and smaller reading rooms. My evidence for this claim is research I conducted in merchant endowed libraries in Bombay, Bharuch, Navsari, Surat, Zanzibar and Dar-es-Salaam, which are rich archives of Gujarati-language scholarly works published during the nineteenth-century.

A Public of Paper

Before turning to merchant libraries and the networks they created I want to think for a moment about Gujarati as a language of oceanic poetics. Linguists date modern Gujarati to 1800 and distinguish it from middle Gujarati and old Gujarati by the omission of the final “e” sound that is the hallmark of “vernacular” languages derived from Sanskrit. But such a definitive marker of birth for an oceanic language seems exaggeratedly precise, especially for a language like Gujarati that had so many different regional forms, like Kachchi, Rajasthani and Gurjari which became distinct languages c. 1500. Furthermore, given the arrivals of various kinds of itinerants, including the Arabian Randeris I wrote about in chapter 2 and 3 and Persian-speaking Parsis I explore here, Gujarati also absorbed a number of influences from oceanic languages. Portuguese presence in Gujarat from the sixteenth century also left its mark on Gujarati, which is full of Portuguese vocabulary. There is however merit in speaking of the distinction of the nineteenth-century usage of Gujarati, especially from the 1830s with the rise of Gujarati-language printing. For the first time Gujarati began to circulate in paper across a vast geography, including Gujarati-reading areas of the Indian Ocean world, especially East Africa. My argument is that merchants—and Parsi merchants in particular—were key to the birth of Gujarati’s nineteenth-century iteration because of the role they played in bringing the language onto paper; and that “homes of capital” were key arenas of circulation of this oceanic language formation. This argument stems from my ethnographic research in which the practice of reading and the mercantile
public it generated emerged as an important dimension of nineteenth- and twentieth-century port-cities.

For the majority of merchant families I interviewed between 2007 and 2012 across Indian Ocean Gujarat, from Bombay to Rander to Zanzibar and Dar es Salaam, Gujarati was one among a quiver of languages. Most merchants were trilingual, speaking at least Hindi, Gujarati and English. Many families also spoke the languages of places to which their families were historically connected. Narendra bhai Nagarseth of Diu and his family—who I wrote about in chapter 1—for example, also spoke Portuguese. Mrs. Bhaimia, who I wrote about in chapter 2, spoke Burmese. Sulochna ben Rupawalla (née Singapuri) of Surat, who we will meet in chapter 6, spoke Malay, having spent her childhood with her parents between Jakarta and Singapore. Gujarati merchants with ties to Zanzibar and Dar-es-Salaam spoke Kiswahili. This pattern has historical antecedents. As K.N Chaudhuri observes, Gujarati merchants were known for their multi-lingual skills which added to their commercial acumen.29 Prior to the nineteenth century, Gujarati was the language spoken amongst family and for internal business. A striking example of this mercantile diglossia is Jeejeebhoy, who maintained voluminous journals that are available to peruse at the University of Bombay’s library in Fort. In his eighteenth-century journals, of which I perused the years of 1833 and 1834 his financial notes are penned in a rough Gujarati shorthand, while his observations were scribbled in an inky cursive.30 This is further evidenced in framed examples of his notebooks available for viewing at Jeejeebhoy’s home in Navsari which now operates as a museum (see figures 18 and 19). Several pages from account books, journals and other office ephemera are framed in glass cases on walls. They are examples of

29 Chaudhuri, Trade and Civilization, 100.
the different kinds of documents composed in English and Gujarati. For example, there is a single memorandum from 1836 in English cursive (figure 4.1), a longer letter ostensibly to colleagues is composed in Gujarati ink (figure 4.2), and there are several examples of Jeejeebhoy’s English signature. With the emergence of printed Gujarati a new kind of community based on the shared knowledge of a mercantile language emerged. I think of this community as a “public of paper,” adapting Jurgen Habermas’s provocative formulation of the public sphere.

Figure 18. Memorandum dated 1825 displayed in the Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy Memorial Museum, Navsari [Photography by author]
While I take heed of Sandria Freitag’s important caution to take seriously the historical and ethnographic specificities of the collective in South Asia, which she frames using the category of the “public arena” in her own study of mass politics during the late nineteenth century, I find Habermas’s formulation helpful for thinking about the literate and literary merchants of Gujarat. While I do not address the entirety of Habermas’ provocative argument I find quite useful his attention to the mercantile nature of the emergence of the public. To summarize what is a more nuanced argument, Habermas argues that in Europe prior to the eighteenth century only the monarch was a “public” figure. Private and public did not exist as distinct categories of society. Changes to the economy, especially the emergence of capitalist mercantile wealth created a new class of people—the bourgeoisie—

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who were accommodated in the new states of nineteenth-century Europe. This is perhaps most powerfully illustrated in the 1789 French Revolution and the emergence of the third-estate. The public opinion of this new class was looked upon as critical to maintenance of new formulations of the state. This new class was gated by shared education and developed “rational critical debate” in spaces like salons and cafés. Building on Habermas’s insights historians have explored new genres of texts that emerged during this period, including newspapers, treatises and novels in which this new public took shape on paper.

The emergence of a sphere of a (mercantile) collective in oceanic Gujarat, which was active across multi-sovereign borders separate from the states, is itself not noteworthy given the tenuous reach of various kinds of states between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. However what is significant is the way in which this new public of paper became entangled with homes of capital across oceanic Gujarat, both giving it semiotic shape and in turn being imbedded in its materiality.

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capital is key. One example of this interface is the merchant library and reading room through which texts like the Parsee Prakash circulated. Earlier I explored the merchant library as the initial site of my own reading of the text. Now I want to expand that analysis to show how it was part of a wider cluster of libraries that connected merchant-readers to the texts being printed in Bombay. I do so by documenting the various libraries in Bombay, Bharuch, Dar-es-Salaam and Zanzibar through which the Parsee Prakash circulated.

I found the Parsee Prakash, for example, in Bharuch—which I explore in greater detail in chapter 5—in the Raichand Deepchand library. In the mid-nineteenth century, Bombay merchant Premchand Raichand endowed a number of institutions in Surat and Bharuch, the cities of his father's childhood. Raichand, like Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy, made most of his money in cotton and opium trading, and had a windfall during the American Civil War during which time the ports of the American South—major cotton producers—were blockaded. In 1858 he funded the building of the Raichand Deepchand library and reading room—named for his father Deepchand35—which continues to be an important site of scholarship, a repository of more than two thousand books and manuscripts. The library is located in Koth Parsi Wad (Parsi neighborhood within the fort). It is located within the fort’s ramparts and walking up to it you can see the Narmada River in the distance as it flows into the Indian Ocean. Gujarati-language newspapers and various other periodicals are set on a wooden table in the center of the room and like the Meherji rana library there is a steady stream of readers.

Though called “reading rooms” (sometimes even transliterated as such in Gujarati) these sites were quite different from their colonial counterparts.36 While reading rooms were


36 For a comparative perspective focused on the reading culture of the Dutch colonial Indies, see Ann Stoler’s analysis of the sensibilities that are produced around paper and its
staples of the archival complex—a chaperoned room for reading government documents—
Gujarat’s reading rooms emerged in large part because of the newspapers that circulated through them. Only the very wealthy merchants of Gujarat had subscriptions; others frequented the reading room to get a gloss of the daily news in print. In this respect, the building of libraries created sites in which merchants could engage in the practice of reading daily news. Such a practice of reading the newspaper is the basis for Benedict Anderson’s powerful formulation of the origins of nationalism and its location in the “horizontal ties” produced through a community of readers who might never meet but simultaneously read the news each morning. What is significant about Gujarat’s reading rooms is that they occasioned the possibility of other kinds of temporalities and publics. I want to propose that a text like the Parsee Prakash is an example such a text made possible by the emergence of new spaces of reading. Presumably an expensive book, given its high-quality printing and binding, it was published for a space like the reading room, where it could be kept in a glass cabinet and taken out for perusal.

A topographical reading of the Parsee Prakash in the Premchand Raichand library and reading room of Bharuch suggests that printed paper created new ways in which merchants approached the terraqueous space of Gujarat. The construction of libraries is one example of a new category of buildings that sprung up across the geography of Gujarat. Bharuch, though no longer a major port in the nineteenth century, became a major node of cotton inscription in the colonial archive. I find especially suggestive her observation that “Dutch colonial archival documents serve less as stories for a colonial history than as active, generative substances with histories, as documents with itineraries of their own.” Ann L. Stoler, Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 1.

farming and ginning. While, as I explore in detail in the next chapter, Bharuch became an important production satellite to Bombay’s cotton mills, I want to emphasize here the ways in which a booming cotton industry was connected through the production of new genres of texts. That the Parsee Prakash found a home in the library built by Raichand, a Jain from the Dosa Oswal Bania caste, suggests that Gujarati as an oceanic language and libraries were shared by Gujarati-speaking merchants across religious lines.

Perhaps the most striking example of the corporate alliances that Gujarati-language print created can be glimpsed in the literary activities of the Indian Merchant’s Chamber (IMC) which was formed in Bombay in 1907 with the mandate to “look after and voice the interests of the various trades and industries which were worked and financed by Indian merchants.” Though I visit the IMC’s library in its most recent incarnation renamed in 1967 for F.E Dinshaw, whose trust continues to be the largest landowner in Bombay (Mumbai), a library was under discussion in the Bombay Chamber of Commerce as early as 1902. Today the library is located in the blue and white Art Deco building located a stone’s throw from the Arabian Sea, but its collections draw from the private collections of various merchants who donated their books here. The copy of the Parsee Prakash I find in the library is worn with age and sits in a row alongside other Gujarati texts printed in the late nineteenth-century, including the Mumbai Bahar (The Bombay Sea), a genealogical dictionary of merchants of Bombay across religious lines. The cohabitation of such texts suggests the wider archive of texts that were circulating across Gujarat at this time.

38 Dwivedi, Premchand Roychand, 11.
Bombay was not the only nineteenth-century port-city in which libraries and reading rooms played this role. Across the Indian Ocean in the port-cities of Mombasa, Dar-es-Salaam and Zanzibar, Gujarati merchants and Parsis in particular participated in this public of paper. The Gujarati merchant T.B Sheth for example built memorial libraries in his own name in both Mombasa and Dar-es-Salaam. The T.B Sheth library of Dar-es-Salaam continues to stand on Kisutu Street and when I visited in 2010 during fieldwork it continued to be an important meeting spot for Gujarati Tanzanians. Bapuji Bhatt, whose home I lived in for two months and who ran a grocery store and grains business, left each evening around six after he closed his store for a walk to the library, a practice he said he had engaged in from the earliest days of this arrival in Dar-es-Salaam in the late 1930s. An avid reader of Gujarati, he perused Gujarati newspapers and checked out other texts in circulation. The Parsee Prakash also sat gathering dust here suggesting the perimeter of the texts circulation.

The port of Zanzibar located off the coast of Dar-es-Salaam, once part of the Omani Sultanate, was also bound up in this history of print. Zanzibar’s most famous Parsi is of course Freddy Mercury, the charismatic lead singer of the band Queen. But he was part of a wider community of Parsis. Though no Parsis remain in Zanzibar today, either deported during the revolution of the 1960s or since migrated, it is worth recalling *Samachar* (News), the Gujarati-language newspaper founded in 1901. Though it began circulation seventy years after the major printing boom in Bombay, it is connected through a tip-of-the-hat to *Bombay Samachar* (Bombay News), its famous predecessor as well as through Bombay Parsis who

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41 For a longer history of the T.B Sheth library in Mombasa from the perspective of Gujarati philanthropic work in East Africa, see Gregory Roberts, *The Rise and Fall of Philanthropy in East Africa: the Asian Contribution* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1992), 103-104. In this chapter I am interested in showing how such libraries were part of developments related to an emergent literary public connected to Indian Ocean Gujarat.
were major printers and publishers in twentieth-century Zanzibar. Perhaps the most striking example of Parsi publishing is Rati Balsara, who founded the newspaper *Adal Insaaf* (Liberty) in Zanzibar in 1948. *Adal Insaaf* was quite different from *Samachar* and printed pro-African revolutionary views. I became poignantly aware of the tragic end of this pocket of Gujarati-language publishing in the Indian Ocean when I discovered Rati Bulsara’s son, Ronnie, living in Bombay in a leafy Parsi neighborhood called Malcom Baug. According to Ronnie, his family along with the many other Arab, Persian and Gujarati merchants of Zanzibar were expelled after the revolution of 1968. His father was heartbroken. A refugee in Bombay transporting his family from Parsi housing shelter to shelter, Rati Bulsara insisted on carrying with him the bulky type-set from his Zanzibar printing-press, which remained a precious possession to the end of his days. The view from Zanzibar—the rise and demise of Gujarati-language publishing and its diverse politics—and its place in this public of paper suggests the broader geographical coordinates of the history of building homes of capital. It is also one example of how entanglements of language, print and homes of capital unfolded across the Indian Ocean to diverse ends. As we see in Rati Bulsara’s case, he used the Gujarati-language to circulate revolutionary views against the British government and other power groups of Zanzibar. While libraries created oases of reading in busy bustling ports, newspapers put Gujarati to work in ways not anticipated by its pioneers in Bombay.

Thus far my topographical reading of the *Parsee Prakash* has involved tracing some of the points through which it circulated in the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, focusing particularly on the space of the merchant library and reading room and its

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42 For an account of participation in the “Hundred Days Revolution” and a more detailed characterization of his politics, especially his anti-American and pro-Chinese political leanings see, Helen Louise Hunter, *Zanzibar: The Hundred Days Revolution* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publishing House, 2010), 26.
43 Interview Ronnie Bulsara, Malcom Baug, Bombay, February 7, 2011.
intersection with the paper routes of news. Now I want to deepen my analysis of the mercantile impulse to construct libraries by connecting the endowment of libraries to a longer history of building that is itself interpolated within the text. While until this point I have traced the contours of textual circulations in the nineteenth century I turn now to exploring how Patel’s treatment of the lives of merchants and their building activities within the Parsee Prakash tied the text to a history of mobility beyond its materiality and circulation. In the remainder of the chapter I will show that not only was the Parsee Prakash immersed in terraqueous Gujarat but its author Patel also turned his historical gaze onto merchants and their building activities across it.

If, as I outlined earlier, Patel claims that the Parsee Prakash covered the years between the eleventh and the mid-nineteenth centuries my topographical reading lays bare the way in which this seeming linear time frame of eight centuries was more entangled on the printed page. Specifically I am interested in looking in greater detail at the way in which Patel treated mercantile figures and the temporality of their lives and deaths. If nineteenth century merchants like T.B Sheth, Premchand Raichand, Navsariwala Seth Burjor Bamanji Padam and others bargained for their names emblazoned across the front of libraries persevering in perpetuity after their deaths, I will show they were following a generation of eighteenth century merchants before them who had begun a feverish wave of building across the region. Looking back from the mid-nineteenth century when he began collecting materials for his book, Patel organized his materials in the form of obituaries and building notices. Perhaps Patel chose the obituary form—a written notice of death—because Parsis practiced excarnation, depositing the dead in mortuary sites called dokhma, with no ritualized inscription. The obituary form served as a material trace on paper of the lives of eighteenth-century Parsis, who Patel commemorated as important pioneer figures who shaped Gujarat
during a time of imperial consolidation. Patel arranged building notices marking the endowment of a range of structures as an additional kind of obituary alongside biographical ones. In the pages that follow I engage in a final reading of topographies of mercantile death as they intersected and overlapped with a long history of building.

**Bringing the Dead back to Life**

Obituaries and building notices were part of a larger heterogeneous set of materials Patel brought together in the *Parsee Prakash*. The years he covered were not uniform in genre. In the courtyard of Navsari’s Meherjirana Library I paged through Gujarati-language translations of the Revaiyats, Persian letters that circulated between Parsi settlers of Gujarat and Persian priests; community proclamations recorded in the books of the dasturs; religious disputes and a range of other eclectic material. Patel organized this motley material chronologically and used a column format and short bolded dividers on the page to make the material commensurate. In a review of the text soon after its publication, a prominent orientalist lauded Patel for his ingenious use of existing manuscript sources on Parsi history as well as “old and trustworthy documents” from personal records of Parsis.\(^{44}\) These included materials archived within homes, snippets of papers from desk drawers, notebooks and private offices. One striking example is Patel’s reliance on the materials from within the home of Pestonjee Bamanjee Wadia, the powerful ship manufacturer of Bombay. Patel thanks Wadia’s sons Dadabhoy and Mancherjee who made “old papers and documents” available to him in the introduction.\(^{45}\)

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Within this larger magpie-collection of material of Patel’s two-volume work, I focus on obituaries and building notices, which I propose functioned as historical fulcrums in the text. As Patel himself admits in the English-language introduction to the Gujarati text, he was “fully aware that the first portion of the narrative between the 8th and 18th centuries [was] only approached at considerable intervals.” He writes that despite his tenacious efforts to comb archives across Gujarat, from the personal collections of merchants like Wadia’s to the records of dasturs and merchant libraries, little material remained from that time. He writes that he thus relied on the Persian Revayats almost entirely to reconstruct the years between the 5th and 15th centuries. In other words, though he presented those years in chronological sequence the sources he used were not contemporaneous. In contrast the obituaries and building notices of the years of the seventeenth and eighteenth century culled from the notebooks, desk drawers and generally “materials that have been rescued from old records scattered across Bombay and Guzerat [sic],” richly animated figures of the Parsi community with, as I will show, eclectic details of lives only possible from the point of view of individual observations not originally intended for public purposes. I want to show that Patel’s curation of these individual snippets together in the form of obituaries produced a “commemorative density” that allayed the thinness of traces of the early years of settlement. In choosing the temporality of death and connecting it to endowed buildings—a move that echoed mercantile practice—Patel’s text opens a longue durée temporality in

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46 Patel, Parsee Prakash, 11.

47 I borrow this term from Yael Zerubavel via Sumathi Ramaswamy’s use of this concept in her imaginative book, The Lost Land of Lemuria. Ramaswamy uses the concept to bring into view the process through which the “lost” continent of Lemuria is given particular symbolic importance in Tamil histories (Sumathi Ramaswamy, The Lost Land of Lemuria: Fabulous Geographies, Catastrophic Histories (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 97.)
which eight centuries of Parsi settlement in Gujarat accrue the semiotic weight of mercantile life.

Mercantile obituaries were not the only mortuary texts to crowd the pages of the *Parsee Prakash*. For the years covering the seventeenth century, the lives and deaths of dasturs and desais (Mughal revenue-collectors) were also distinguished as significant events. So merchants were part of a wider category of figures used to construct Parsi settlement in Gujarat. Partly this has to do with the centrality of these two categories of Parsis during this time period. Consider the obituary of Dastur Meherjirana as an example, which I reproduce in English translation:

**Death** – Dastur Meherjirana – Navsari’s Anjuman’s (society) most important and accomplished dastur. He travelled to Delhi to Akbar’s court to inquire into a farman that applied to Zoroastrians. There he spent a great deal of time, after which Akbar endowed him with two hundred bhigas of land in Navsari as a gift. Upon return from Akbar’s court, he was made the main dastur of Navsari and the Atash Behram. An inscription or document dates this event to March 12 1579 and another to 1580.

As the obituary suggests, Dastur Meherjirana was an important figure because he was a liaison between Navsari—an important center for Parsis originally settled in the twelfth century—and the Mughal Empire, which nominally ruled the coastal city. As a priest the dastur’s duties also extended to working out the position of Parsis within the legal system of the Mughal Empire. In the seventeenth century, this was connected to debates around key religious texts, which the dastur impressively achieved. The focus on liaisons with the Mughal state (dasturs and desais) likely reflects the political economy of seventeenth century Gujarat. During this period, Gujarat was a densely multi-sovereign region and as religious

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intellectuals (dasturs) and revenue-collectors with scribal skills (desais) were important figures within the Parsi community.

It is significant that Patel chooses to frame this political history in terms of death (marn) and within the obituary form in terms of a gift. Historians have spilled a considerable amount of ink on the question of gift-exchange in the political culture of early modern South Asia, especially drawing on the experiences of travelers in various courts. The iconic example is Sir Thomas Roe’s visit to the court of the Mughal Emperor, Jehangir. Drawing on Marcel Mauss’s theory of the gift, scholars have put this encounter (and others like it) to various conceptual ends, using it to evince shared and clashing political expectations and understandings. A recent example is Kim Siebenhuner’s article that explores gift-exchange between various European travelers and Jahangir to show how this practice reveals both shared understandings of gifting as well as the semantic contingencies of exchange in practice. Of course the case of Meherji Rana’s tenure at Akbar’s court is different because—at least to my knowledge—the Dastur did not present Akbar with a gift other than his knowledge of Zoroastrian theology. But it is worth placing Meherji Rana’s encounter with Akbar in the context of this wider practice of gift-giving because it shows how a piece of terraqueous Gujarat—in this case a unit of Navsari—was given away to a Parsi priest by the Mughal sovereign.

A topographical reading of this obituary underlines the significance of Patel bringing this gift-giving onto paper and then couching it within the temporality of death. In her wonderful essay “Conceit of the Globe in Mughal Visual Practice,” Sumathi Ramaswamy re-

visualizes Roe’s visit to Jahangir’s court and his gift of the Mercator Atlas by tracing the pictorial history of the globe form as it found a place within Mughal painting showing how it was deployed as she puts it “in the service of agendas that had little to do with Europe.” Her fascinating essay, though itself beyond the scope of this chapter, offers an example of the renegade career of the gift in the Mughal court and how it was often put to unanticipated semiotic labor and across media, from, as we see in Ramaswamy’s analysis of the terraqueous globe-form, from cartographed ink (as in the case of Roe’s Mercator Atlas) to Mughal painting. Borrowing the analytical shape of her argument I want to consider how Patel put this sixteenth-century embassy Meherjirana made to the Mughal Court to work in a printed text of the nineteenth century. By condensing the political economic relations forged between the Mughal state and Navsari in the figure of a sixteenth century Dastur Patel inscribes a link (in inked print) between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. By inking this connection in obituary-form, he also shaped this link by tethering it to the time-frame of death, tying it to the semiotic purposes of commemoration that abounded beyond the text. For example, as I outlined earlier, the Meherjirana Library of Navsari was built in 1874 (fourteen years before the Parsee Prakash was published) to commemorate the sixteenth century Dastur suggesting one connected form of a wider commemorative materiality of which Patel’s text was part.

The desai was another figure whose death was mobilized for tracing the contours of the geography of Parsi settlement in seventeenth-century Gujarat. Consider the obituary of Desai Sheriyar Bamanji (d. 1622) of Navsari.

**Death** – Desai Sheriyar Bamanji—Navsari’s historic gate-keepers (poliya) Desai Bamanji Beheramji’s son. After his father’s death in 1655, he assumed his role in the

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Desai business together with his older brother. After his death in 1657, Navsari’s Anjuman lost a great leader.\textsuperscript{51}

This obituary turns on the use of the Gujarati word “polia.” In Gujarati the term pol refers to a gated neighborhood or street. The word polia is the nominal form designating a street-guard or gatekeeper.\textsuperscript{52} Navsari, as is the case for a majority of urban settlements in Gujarat, was protected by a city gate. Though not a literal sentry the obituary casts Bamanji as protector of the boundaries of the city through his skills as an accountant and revenue-collector of the Mughal state. Here is one more example of how seventeenth-century Parsi settlement of Gujarat’s (terraqueous) soil in the imagery of the gated coastal city and its keeper is brought onto paper through the figures of the dead. Other examples of this commemorative focus on priests and revenue collectors include Dastur Azar Keran (d. 1614); Dastur Kekobad (d. 1619); Desai Behram Faredoon (d. 1622); Desai Khurshedji Behramji (d. 1687); and Desai Sorabji Behramji (d. 1687).

In the pages marking the eighteenth century, there is a shift in emphasis in the Parsee Prakash to focusing on mercantile deaths. I want to propose that while Parsis had been involved in commercial activity in the seventeenth century and the years preceding it, a new kind of mercantile figure comes into focus, known by a range of terms from Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit, including saudagar, sheth (merchant) and dalal (agent). Amongst the first mercantile deaths to be recorded in the Parsee Prakash is that of Surat dalal, Rustom Maneck (d. 1721). I reproduced the obituary in some detail below to give a sense of the shape and tone of the text:

\textsuperscript{51} Patel, \textit{Parsee Prakash}, 16.

\textsuperscript{52} L.R Gala, \textit{Gala’s Universal Combined Dictionary English-English-Gujarati, Gujarati Gujarati English} (Mumbai: Navneet Publications), 570.
Death – Rustom Manek Seth—Age 86) The Sheth family’s ancestor or grandfather. He was an agent (dalal) of the English fort/factory (koth) in Surat. In 1660, he travelled to the court of Aurangzeb to register a complaint between the Surat Nawab and the English factory. After that, he also acted as an advocate for the famous Turkish large-scale trader (saudagar) Usman Chellaby, whose ship was confiscated by the Portuguese without cause, and on whose behalf he traveled to Goa to make an official complaint to the Governor General Senor Vizeral. And from his advocacy there, the trader (vyapāri) got justice (insāf). In the midst of oppression of the Mughal amildar against the Zoroastrians of Surat, it was only he who built a number of bridges, wells, lakes, dharamshalas (rest houses), in Surat and its environs. In Surat, the neighborhood ‘Rustom Pura’s’ originates from that time and in that way through its name he continues to be remembered. His death occurred in Surat.53 (emphasis added)

By the eighteenth century the Mughal Empire had devolved into a range of regional states and a kind of frontier of political projects including the Marathas, Muslim Nawabs (once amidars or Mughal governors), the East India Company and others—a topic that will be addressed in greater detail in chapter 5—opened up in Gujarat. As Maneck’s obituary suggests, the role of political economic liaison shifted from dasturs and desais to merchants. Rustom Maneck distinguished himself and the Parsi community by creating a space for Parsis within a contentious political geography. That he acted on behalf of Usman Chellaby suggests that merchants united together against incursions on their trading operations by aspiring and devolving states. It is noteworthy that Chellaby, a Turkish merchant, sought the experience of his colleague, a Gujarati Parsi, to act on his behalf on in Portuguese Goa.

And as I emphasize in the translated obituary above this political economic engagement included building. It is significant that Patel sets Rustom Maneck against the Nawab of Surat, showing how a Parsi merchant asserted control over space by building rather than vying for nominal political sovereignty. The structures that the obituary lists include urban infrastructure like bridges, wells and lakes. As homes of capital these buildings, produced mobility by facilitating travel across the region. But Patel does not only

53 Patell, Parsee Prakash, 23.
commemorate the deeds of Rustom during his seventeenth-century life: he brings built structures onto the page. The material durability of these structures shows how mercantile building in the seventeenth-century continued to shape Gujarat in Patel’s nineteenth-century present.

Perhaps the most striking example of this space-time that opens up between the text and Gujarat’s buildings is contemporary Rustom Pura, the neighborhood of Surat that emerged around Rustom Maneck’s merchant home-warehouse. A Portuguese map of Surat, produced circa 1720, pictures Rustom Maneck’s home as the center around which a neighborhood of homes and warehouses cluster near the wharf that led to the Indian Ocean. In 2012, I visit Rustom Pura, still a discernible Parsi neighborhood of Surat. It has dwindled to a few havelis that can be recognized by the rangoli (colored powders stenciled onto the entryways) that adorns the otlas (porches) of Parsi homes. Still, the neighborhood is distinguished by two agiaries, and the Surat Parsi Panchayat continues to be active. Three hundred years after it was built, Rustom Maneck’s building activities continues to mark a part of the coastal area occupied by the city of Surat. While the bustling port activities that once thronged the lanes are no longer in motion and Rustom Maneck’s home does not remain, the act of building and its endowed nomenclature continues to shape the way people navigate the city.

Though Rustom Maneck is marshalled by historians as an exceptional Parsi merchant—he is lauded by Karaka as a pioneer of the community—Patel places him within a wider group of mercantile figures operating across Gujarat not limited to major ports like Surat. This is not the approbation of “big men” and their exemplary deeds but rather a

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The re-collecting of merchant figures who shaped the region in ways both big and small. Patel’s nineteenth-century readers were intimately familiar with these figures already through the experience of buildings. They lived in dharamshalas during travel. They prayed in agiaries and consecrated their dead in dokhma. In re-membering the merchants who built these structures—through printing, circulating and collectively reading within a wider public of paper—Parsis memorialized and gave thanks. Though the Parsee Prakash, unlike newspapers, did not circulate to individual households, the importance of the text within the community makes these obituaries collective commemorations of sorts, readerly visitations of the dead.

Patel’s interpolation of building notices amongst such obituaries suggests that these eighteenth-century merchants themselves found symbolic potential in endowing buildings, that Patel was echoing a commemorative ethos that was already in play. In fact as one building notice suggests merchants even re-endowed buildings, adding their names via renovations and additions to already crowded semiotic space. For example, Patel writes that in 1722, Kavasji Khurshedji Camdin built a darmehar (wing of the agiary used for ritual instruction) in Elav, a small town near Ankleshwar, located near the larger port of Bharuch. 

Patel’s entry in his text, like a majority of obituaries and building notices, is accompanied by a footnote used ingeniously by Patel consistently across the pages of the text as a space of nineteenth-century commentary on recorded events from earlier periods. Patel’s use of footnotes adds another temporality to the text, showing how Patel himself was acutely aware of the complex space-time at play in his encyclopedia. The footnote in question comments that the darmehar was renovated in 1840 by the Surat merchant Mehervanji Hormusji Ferozwala. It was renovated a second time by a Bombay merchant Rehanji Burjorji Mistry.

\[55\] Patell, Parsee Prakash, 24.
Patel adds that he found this information in the records and notebooks of Nanabhai Bhikaji, an elusive figure who he does not offer any other comment on.

As is clear from my analysis above, a terse building notice was built on the layering of multiple lives in the main body of the text and supplemental footnotes. I want to argue that this layering of life and death in various planes of the printed text simulates the spatiality of burial sites that play on the ground and its underneath to separate the living from the dead or in the case of Parsi excarnation practice between the dead and an unmarked elsewhere. Archived in libraries and interred in glass cabinets across Gujarat, the Parsee Prakash entombs remainders of mercantile life gathered together by Patel during his research. As readers requested the text and opened it up, I want to suggest that the effect was to bring this history to life, both in the sense of disinterring the dead and animating it with literary flourish.

To deepen this topographic suggestion of text as tombstone I want to turn now to events that were unfolding in nineteenth-century Bombay connected to debates about Parsi mortuary ritual.

**Figurative Reburials, Posthumous Inhabitations**

Around the same time that Patel was working on the Parsee Prakash, making his way through the crumbling papers of personal records of Parsis across Gujarat, excarnation ritual became the object of a fascinating set of public debates. A prominent public figure and representative of the Parsis of Bombay, Karaka addressed these debates in his work. Though the question of how to properly dispose of dead bodies was an important aspect of Parsi ritual practice, it took on heightened importance in colonial Bombay. Parsis ritually

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56 As Leila Vevaina has recently argued in a brilliant article, the contemporary practice of ‘dokhmenashini,’ the sacral term for excarnation, continues to be the locus of struggles within the Parsi community to define itself within the religious and secular terrain of contemporary Bombay and India. Vevaina examines a fascinating set of debates around a dokhma in Bombay that because of ecological transformations finds itself without vultures.
consecrated their dead by placing them in dokhma, towers that were built on the peripheries of towns and settlements away from life. The dokhma consisted of circular pits where bodies were laid out on slabs till flesh disintegrated or was consumed by birds of carrion. The rituals and prayers that preceded the laying out of the body were aimed at aiding the spirit (ruvān) to leave the body of the deceased. The bones were then tipped into pits. At least in Karaka’s coverage of colonial interest in Parsi excarnation, the debates appear to have centered on some skepticism amongst the British colonial elite of Bombay about the sanitary quality of excarnation.

Addressed primarily to a metropolitan, English-speaking reader, Karaka’s treatment of excarnation can be interpreted as a statement in an English-language public. Rather than an ethnographic analysis of mortuary ritual, Karaka used his book as an arena to counter claims that were circulating in English-language newspapers at the time. Perhaps the clearest evidence of his motivations are his own words:

To any other persons than Parsis this mode of disposing dead bodies, namely, by allowing vultures to devour them, seems revolting, but usage from time immemorial has not only reconciled the most sensitive Parsi to it, but has led him to think that it is the best that could be adopted under the circumstances. Cremation doubtless is the best of all methods, but according to the law of Zoroaster it is sinful to pollute fire with such an unclean thing as a dead body.

What, she asks, is Parsi religion and ‘tradition’ without the practice of excarnation? In doing so she shows how these categories of community have formed around urban practices connected to the built environment. Her work suggests fascinating contemporary dimensions and tangles of the history of building I seek to trace here. See Leilah Vevaina, “Excarnation and the City: The Tower of Silence Debates in Bombay,” in eds. Marian Buchardt and Irene Becci, *Topographies of Faith: Religion in Urban Spaces* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 73-99.

According to Karaka in 1878, Parsi merchant Nasarvanji Ratanji Tata built a dokhma in Navsari and took the opportunity to invite the then Bombay Governor Sir Richard Temple to visit it. Tata was a prolific builder and recently also built an agiary in Bandra. According to Karaka, Temple was “pleased with the sanitary precautions which were adopted by the Parsis in their method for the disposal of the dead.”

Karaka cites another encounter, this time between a member of the Parsi Panchayat, Nasavanji Beramji, and a Professor Monier Williams, then Professor of Sanskrit Literature at Oxford University. Williams was taken to observe the dokhma on Malabar Hill. Apparently Williams was a skeptical participant asking “how it was possible to become reconciled to such usage.” Beramji responded:

Earth, fire, water…ought never to be defiled by the contrast with putrefy flesh…the decaying particles of our bodies should never be contaminated in the slightest degree. In fact, our Prophet was the greatest health officers, and following his sanitary laws, we build our towers on top of the hills, above all human inhabitation.

Later that year Williams visited the dokhma again and published his opinion in The Times:

“My second visit has confirmed me in the opinion that the Parsi method of disposing of dead bodies is as perfect as anything can be in a sanitary point of view.” While colonial hygiene appears to be a dominant theme in these debates—an issue addressed provocatively by Mridula Ramanna in her work on nineteenth-century Bombay—I find Karaka’s staged encounter of excarnation remarkable for other reasons. Specifically, I interpret his account

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59 Karaka, History of the Parsis, 208.

60 Karaka, History of the Parsis, 208.

to reveal an ontology of death that helps to explain the dominance of the obituary form in the Parsee Prakash and the related symbolic importance of building.

At the end of his account of these encounters at the dokhma, Karaka turns to the question of how the excarnated dead are re-membered. He writes that Parsis recall the dead on specific days marked for mourning. He writes:

Parsis do not forget their deceased relations who have quitted this sublunary world for another...It is...affirmed in Pehlevi books that the souls of the dead are extremely gratified and pleased in heaven at seeing that the dear ones on this earth have not forgotten them, and that their memory is preserved in the minds of their relations.62

I want to argue that we amend Karaka’s analysis and add homes of capital—buildings across Gujarat—to the mortuary rituals of nineteenth century Parsis. For I argue, based on my analysis of the Parsee Prakash, that endowed buildings marked the passage from life to death, from one home as it were to another. And that the obituary form was the literary genre that made death material by bringing it onto paper.

To consolidate this argument let me return to the dokhma itself, not as a site of debate on colonial hygiene, but as a particularly important dimension of Parsi building. In the eighteenth century, many Parsi merchants with interests across Gujarat began to converge on British Bombay. Amongst these were Bahmanjee Jeevajee Bhata (d. 1762) who was granted a large piece of land by the E.I.C. and who is memorialized in the Parsee Prakash as a figure who was known in every part of Bombay. Bhata cultivated farms on the outskirts of Bombay.63 Then there is record of Rustomji Dorabji Patel (d. 1763) who Patel claims was amongst the first Parsis to arrive in Bombay.64 Another Bombay arrival is Cawasji

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62 Karaka, History of the Parsis, 213.

63 Patel, Parsee Prakash, 44.
Khurshedji Jeejeemodi (d. 1779) who was a doctor of both village and English medicine. He was known as a “Hakim” or medicine man. He also ran a thriving fodder business and had contracts with foreign countries according to Patel’s obituary. In a footnote, Patel ties this pioneering Hakim to the nineteenth-century Modis, a prominent family of Bombay.

Burjori Shaporji Major (d. 1782) arrived in Bombay from Umra Gam near Surat in 1751. He was an amildar of Surat and his obituary credits him with having an important voice in the fledgling Parsi community.\textsuperscript{65} Interspersed within this wider cohort is Dhanji Shah Manji Shah (d. 1787) who was a major mercantile figure and is dealt with extensively in the historiography.\textsuperscript{66} Dhanji Shah’s obituary describes him as a major merchant, ship owner and land owner. The obituary notes his involvement in the China-Bombay trade axis and his work as a dalal for the English factor in Surat. The opium trade to China became an important dimension of Parsi commerce in Bombay suggesting how a move to Bombay spawned new trade routes.

While scholars argue that this exodus occurred because the British held out incentives and land grants to foster commerce, I want to propose here that this movement from older Parsi cities and towns to Bombay was made possible at least in part by the existence of a dokhma that would ensure merchants make the journey properly between life and death. In 1669—a hundred years before this migration—merchant Modi Heerjibhoy Vacchagandhi petitioned General Augier of the Bombay Castle to build a dokhma.\textsuperscript{67} The

\textsuperscript{64} Patel, \textit{Parsee Prakash}, 44.

\textsuperscript{65} Patel, \textit{Parsee Prakash}, 57.


\textsuperscript{67} Vevaina, “Excarnation and the City,” 77.
dokhma then was perhaps the most important home of capital, as a merchant dwelling with the power to motivate mass migration. The centrality of the dokhma to eighteenth-century merchants is nowhere clearer than in the obituary of Mancherjee Jeevanjee Readmoney (d. 1786).

**Death – Mancherji Jeevanjee Readmoney—Age 75** One of Bombay’s famous merchants (vyapari), shippers (vahanvati), and landowner (zamindar). He left his birth place, Navsari, in 1728, and got involved in trading. He traveled internationally. He was an important person in the Parsi Panchayat. He built a Jewish cemetery (dokhmu) on his own property.68

The accompanying footnote adds:

It is said that the reason for this is that on his way to China on the ship, an Armenian merchant put it to him that after your death if your bones mix with others then your family will lose all its money. For this reason he built his own Jewish (Elahedu) dokhmu on his land and for his burial and forbade anyone else to be buried (naki) there. Despite this, his brother Hirji Jeevanjee and his son as well as Sheth Kaikhushroo Sorabjee also made ritual preparations to be buried in the cemetery upon death.69

Readymoney’s decision to build his own dokhma in which he was buried and not excarnated is peculiar because of the centrality of excarnation to Parsi practice. Aramgarh (Parsi graveyards) were only built on the outskirts of Parsi settlement in towns like Porbander and Bhavnagar or Rangoon where Parsis were few in numbers. Even more enigmatic is Patel’s footnote that recounts a strange conversation Readymoney has with an Armenian merchant on a ship bound for China, which motivates his decision to build his own graveyard. For one thing, the topography of this exchange is distinctly maritime, a conversation about death taking place out in the Indian Ocean. That the dokhma itself and the way in which it curates

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death is at the center of this dialogue is one example of the ontology of death imbedded in building(s). To recall Karaka’s comment, the dokhma separates the decaying flesh of the dead from fire, earth and water. But Readymoney’s Armenian colleague observes that in doing so it produces a horizontality amongst Parsis as bones mix together in the pits. This mixing threatens Readymoney’s fortune metaphorically by mixing remainders of his life with others.

Parsis were not the only merchants who flocked to eighteenth-century Bombay and the building of mortuary sites was not unique to them. In fact, the question of death and how to mark it was central to the diverse groups that settled Bombay. Gillian Tindall in her evocative book *City of Gold*, describes early mortuary practices and the ways Muslim, Jewish, Armenian and European Christian tombs clustered together, dotting what is today Colaba, which in the seventeenth century lay beyond the forted ramparts of Bombay.\(^7^0\) Over time, as Bombay’s seven marshy islands were settled and joined together the mortuary landscape evolved, as graveyards were swallowed by ocean and over the next three centuries new kinds of mortuary sites emerged. By the nineteenth-century, community specific graveyards and mortuary sites became a matter of colonial governance, a stark contrast from the early years of overlapping graveyards.\(^7^1\) A century before this happened Readymoney appears to have anticipated these anxieties of mixing dead bodies by choosing to build his own mortuary site, by attempting to shape death itself. Patel on his part brings onto paper the materiality of

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\(^7^1\) Mridula Ramanna describes the fascinating urban geography of graveyards in nineteenth century Bombay. Her analysis suggests that in the early nineteenth-century the colonial government on account of public health concerns began to police more closely “native” graveyards and designate separate spaces for different ethnic and religious communities. Ramanna, *Western Medicine and Public Health in Colonial Bombay*, 94-95.
terraqueous locations of death and inhabitations that are washed away across this long history of coastal settlement. Readymoney’s obituary is an example of an ephemeral story reconsecrated on paper.

Perhaps the most suggestive analysis of the politics and poetics of burial can be found in Katherine Verdery’s book *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*. Verdery writes that reburial of dead bodies in post-socialist states had consequences for the reordering of time and space during political transitions and transformations. Though Verdery writes about a quite different context, what she calls “the intense burial regimes” of post-socialist states from Romania to former Yugloslavia, I borrow her insights to underline the transformative possibilities of the posthumous commemoration or figurative reburial of Parsi merchants on the printed page.

Verdery argues that “burial and reburial are a matter of earth, of digging into the very dust of the spaces and territories in which the bodies lie.” Here, she argues, lies the potential to make claims about national sovereignty based on the substratum of the earth. The temporal correlate to these terrestrial practices are significant: Verdery suggests that the reburials of a range of dead bodies, from sacred figures to the unnamed dead of war, create “compressed time,” a temporal link between events far removed and new political regimes. National reburials therefore have the potential to symbolically harness the lives of the long dead for contemporary political purposes.

As should be clear, in terraqueous Gujarat, death, excarnation and reburial (on paper) was not about colonial or national sovereignty but about a mercantile formation that was

active across the region and concentrated in buildings that were central to the flow of capital from the hinterland to the coast and back and forth. The obituary form and its reliance on dates of death charted a region through the lives of Parsi merchants who had shaped Gujarat for centuries. A nineteenth-century reader might have perused the Parsee Prakash, reclined on a wicker chair and come across the obituary of the merchant who endowed the library and reading room in which he reposed. In that moment the obituary would have become an epitaph, narrated near the material remains that marked a long gone life.

Of course eighteenth-century merchants had some sense of the dynamics of death since they had constructed buildings in which their names would be rehearsed and their good deeds remembered in centuries to come. Unlike in dokhma, where the bones of dead Parsis were indistinguishable decomposing with others over the longue durée, merchant names enshrined on public buildings and thoroughfares would be remembered and rehearsed daily. Even before their lives were unleashed in nineteenth-century print (only to be re-consecrated in a printed text) they had already put death to work.

**Conclusion**

**dimension.** n. 1 a (1) : measure in one direction; *specifically:* one of three coordinates determining a position in space or four coordinates determining a position in space and time… 5 : a level of existence or consciousness.\(^{75}\)

**inhabitation.** n. the act of inhabiting; the state of being inhabited.\(^{76}\)

In choosing to center the first part of this dissertation on questions of oceanic space (chapter 2), time (chapter 3) and death (chapter 4), my goal has thus far been to ethnographically describe Gujarat as a region that is shaped by the work of merchants who were mobile across it. As should be clear by now the spatial and temporal coordinates of this

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region were constantly in play, drawn upon by merchants and given form in texts, material culture and built space. As I reach midway in the dissertation homes of capital accrue denser semiotic weight as the merchant home is conceptualized and drawn into broader schemes of building across Gujarat. It is worth noting now that while we have explored the merchant home as dwelling (as we saw in the case of Rander’s Palladian homes in chapter 2) and in terms of itinerant belonging (in chapter 3 through Arabian ancestors), this chapter sought to show how building itself was a practice that projected inhabitation across both space (terraqueous Gujarat) and time. In this respect capital can be further specified as the value that is accrued in the crucible of such activity as a terraqueous region like Gujarat, located between ocean and territory is brought into the cultural schemes of itinerant merchants. If Gujarat’s ports were located at the center of the Indian Ocean at the intersection of lucrative trade-routes I have shown in the last three chapters that merchants put this location to work in diverse ways. In choosing to attend to the minutiae of building activities my aim has been to avoid over-determining “mobility” as necessarily maritime or terrestrial, but as emergent from the contingencies of mercantile life and death as it unfold across terraqueous Gujarat.

What emerges is the shape of a region in which homes of capital produced shaded pathways across multi-sovereign territory in the form of homes, bridges, mortuary sites, religious sites of worship and so on. In the introduction I called this formation an example of interstitial sovereignty, a kind of power that exists in the in-between and intermediate. In the next chapter I address this question more explicitly by digging down into one example of a merchant home that was part of a route of capital from cotton farm in alluvial delta of the Narmada Valley to the city of Bharuch to Bombay. While I center my analysis on a single home, I situated it within the space-time of Gujarat as a dwelling place of oceanic capital. While in this chapter we see homes of capital as they were interpolated in texts from the
colonial center of Bombay, in the next one we look upon this geography from a different point of view. The next chapter changes my orientation and looks at the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century transformation of oceanic Gujarat under the aegis of the British colonial state from an old port and home that accrued materiality over the longue durée. As I make this transition I conceptually move from an analysis of dimensions to a focus on inhabitations.

The entry for the term “dimension” in the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines it in multiple ways from specification of space-time coordinates to a figurative term for a plane of consciousness. In the first half of the dissertation I explore dimensions of homes of capital from both ends of this semantic spectrum. As I have mapped the contours of merchant homes I have also sought to explore the kind of mercantile consciousness or imagination that shape and are shaped as merchants move across Gujarat. In turning to the question of inhabitations, my aim is to explore the ways in which merchants drew upon homes and the built space of terraqueous Gujarati more broadly to intervene and participate in the region as the British colonial state centered on Bombay began to emanate outward bringing Gujarat’s port-cities, towns and villages into its ambit. The following chapter traces one strand of this history of home as it came into confrontation with the colonial state.
INHABITATIONS
CHAPTER FIVE

Merchant Fortress

Introduction

Begumwadi is a sprawling colonial mansion that sits nestled within the fort walls of Bharuch, a historic port city on Gujarat’s coast. The compound is located on a craggy hillside overlooking the Narmada River as it meets the Indian Ocean. It is home to a Parsi merchant family, the Pestonjis, who were at one time the preeminent cotton merchants of Gujarat. For a hundred years, roughly between 1850 and 1950, Begumwadi was the lynchpin of cotton farming, ginning and trading operations that connected the hinterland of the Narmada delta to English Bombay and other metropolitan markets of the British Empire. It was not only a place of residence, but the site of offices and an enormous warehouse. A retinue of Hindu munshis (accountants) kept the books and trooped in through the gates each day. There were gardeners and daily workers, watchmen and ayas who also constituted the houses residents.

Though the home is a hundred and fifty years old, built sometime in the 1850s, the patch of land on which it stands, overlooking the river, is even older. It has been known by the same name—Begumwadi—since the early eighteenth century. Begumwadi can be translated as “neighborhood of women” and it is known as such because the property was once the zenana (harem) of the Nawabs of Bharuch. In the 1770s, naval troops in the employ of the East India Company scaled its walls in an effort to annex the port. It lay empty for almost fifty years, abandoned by the Nawab who fled the city. Begumwadi was

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1 Names have been changed to protect the identity of the family.

then purchased by the Pestonjis, at the time new merchant migrants from nearby Surat. In 2000, the Pestonjis—now primarily based in Bombay having lost their fortune in the 1950s—embarked on an extensive restoration of the property. A photograph of the home after the restoration that shows it gleaming white and green, flanked by papaya trees and trellises of pink bougainvillea. It was distributed to the current generation of Pestonjis who are spread out between Bombay, Australia and the United States.³

Begumwadi is an astonishing site not least because it stands witness to several hundred years of transformations of Gujarat’s political economy. It is also beguiling for its perseverance and the ways in which its inhabitants have harnessed the property to different ends. But above all perhaps, during field research in 2011-2012, Begumwadi presented me with the sharpest formulation of this dissertation’s central conceit—the space-time of the

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³ This photo is tacked to the doorframe in the room of the house that serves as the agiary (Parsi temple) and I was asked not to take photographs in that space. I took my own version of the commemorative photograph during fieldwork which I reproduce in figure 20.
merchant home—because I became a part of its long list of inhabitants. Living and breathing the dust of its interiors forced me to reckon with the emergent history of capital in the most intimate and tangible terms. Resident within its walls, walking through echoing hallways and dusting off old account books, I found myself inhabiting the space between the twin poles I described in chapters 3 and 4, between oceanic ruin and mercantile building. The 2000 renovation of the property suggests the ways in which a place like Begumwadi is both part of a longer history and also constantly reshaped by merchants in contemporary Gujarat.

Inhabiting Begumwadi sparked my imaginings of my predecessors: the Nawab’s abandoned wives; the English troops who scaled the walls and camped in the courtyard; and the Pestonji family who had built the house I slept in, during the heyday of the British Empire in India. What does a history of political economy look like as a history of such motley inhabitations? What kinds of marks did these forgotten inhabitants leave on oceanic Gujarat and what are their consequences across the longer history of Begumwadi? What would the colonial nineteenth and early twentieth centuries look like if they were studied as a composite of the deeds of these residents and of the powerful home they inhabited and shaped? Further still, what light does such a place shed on post-colonial Gujarat and the identity of the contemporary Pestonji family, the most recent mercantile inheritors of this home of capital? While there has been a thicket of debate on the history of South Asian merchants, there is to my mind no (academic) work that addresses the contemporary dimensions of this history. Further research needs to be done on post-colonial inhabitations of oceanic Gujarat, a task this project has set itself.

My inhabitation of this history also led to unexpected questions: At night, as I retired to my room in the empty house—reading by torch light under a mosquito net draped on an enormous four-poster teak bed—my mind traveled to my hosts, Cyrus—the youngest son of
the Pestonji family—and Malti his Hindu wife who lived in the bungalow at the entrance to the house with their four children. What, I wondered, had made their love possible? How had the son of an ostensibly endogamous Parsi merchant family managed to marry the Hindu woman he had fallen in love with on one of his hinterland farms? If I began the dissertation by calling Hindutva one of neoliberalism’s monstrous forms, was Cyrus and Malti’s relationship one of mercantile Gujarat’s intimate ones? What place did such seemingly aberrant intimacies have in the history of political economy?

The chapter sketches the mercantile formation of Begumwadi between the late eighteenth century and the present day. My aim is not to tell a linear history, but rather to write a mercantile formation centered on home into what we are familiar with as a colonial economy. Manu Goswami in her book Producing India argues that between 1870 and 1930 colonial India was “terrestrialized,” ring-fenced by the technologies of colonialism to create “colonial state space.” This chapter argues that on land’s edge, in oceanic Gujarat, this process remains incomplete. In her persuasive account about the colonial economy, Goswami makes an argument for the “homogenizing of financial space” starting in the 1870s. She examines a range of colonial policies, such as standardization of weights and measures and the introduction of a single currency where there had been many different, including bazaar economies in which bills of credit (hundis) were the universal commodities. Though she pays lip service to resistance to these efforts on the part of “indigenous” merchants and the resulting “anxious discourse” around the persistence of indigenous financial flows, she writes that these practices were incorporated into the ambit of a homogenized economic space. After 1857, she argues, Bombay and Calcutta became the

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new banking centers of India. Centering on Begumwadi in Bharuch, this chapter seeks to show how oceanic Gujarat and homes of capital across it formed shaded spaces through which capital moved across terraqueous (and not colonial or national) space to colonial commercial centers. Such homes of capital are examples of nodes in colonial economies that existed in relation to—since Begumwadi was a connected to the colonial cotton economy—and yet distinct from the homogenized financial space of colonial centers. These routes have their origin in an older set of connections between hinterland and ocean, grounded in Gujarat’s terraqueous geography. At the same time, I am interested in the ways in which such a history is always rooted in and routed through inhabitations, connected to chronotopic understandings of the merchant family and the terms in which merchants looked back on their own pasts from within their homes.

**Echoes**

Two thousand years before Begumwadi became the home of the Pestonjis, an Indian Ocean traveler stood out and looked out at the Narmada River from the ramparts of the fort. He saw a sheet of green. The unknown mariner left an account of his experience. He called Bharuch “Barygaza” and described it as a “fertile country, yielding wheat and sesame oil and clarified butter, cotton and the Indian cloths.” He described the cattle that pastured on the land alongside the river as it led to the Indian Ocean. He called the Narmada “Nammadus.”

Bharuch is one of Gujarat’s oldest port-cities. It is even older than Rander and Navsari, and has been the site of a port since the first century. The fortified hillside that

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Begumwadi stands on overlooking the Narmada has been an enduring feature of Bharuch’s geography. Located between hinterland farmland and the Indian Ocean, Bharuch was historically home to merchants.

My first days in Begumwadi were encounters with this enduring geography. The room I had been allotted by the Pestonjis opened out onto the long promenade called “agashiye” that ran the length of the house and overlooked the Narmada River. Though the river course had shifted over centuries and the river is now farther away, the historical riverbed remains. It is a thick patch of green that snakes across the landscape. Cows and buffaloes wander the loamy soil; and in the evenings the town’s children make their way to the dried riverbed and set up cricket stumps. A few fisher boats dot the horizon but only as an echo. Begumwadi was built in the eighteenth century by the Nawab of Bharuch on this hillock overlooking the Indian Ocean.

**Bharuch circa 1700**

In the early eighteenth century, Bharuch connected cotton farming villages like Jamsbusar, Ankleshwar and Amod, located inland along the Narmada River, to arterial routes leading to Ahmedabad and Cambay. A coastal sea-route linked Bharuch to the port of Surat. Up until the 1730s the Mughals continued to hold sway over the subah (principality) of Gujarat, which for centuries had been their main access to the Indian Ocean. Gujarat’s ports were also the connective points from where the Mughal royal families embarked on Haj. As a fertile region connected to the Indian Ocean, Bharuch was also a prized possession because of its geographic position, strategically located as a station along transportation routes in South Asia. Places like Bharuch were key points at which the

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government taxed merchant networks that connected hinterland India and the Indian Ocean. Already in 1686, the Marathas plundered Bharuch and set up an arrangement to exact a “chauth” tax, a quarter of revenues. But intermittent warfare in the region kept revenue and taxation in constant flux.\textsuperscript{8} The English and Dutch had already set up factories in Bharuch in 1614 and 1617 respectively, and their early presence in the port is evidenced by graveyards that commemorate their dead from this period.\textsuperscript{9} It is beyond the scope of this chapter to outline this shifting political landscape in detail, but suffice it to say that Bharuch was the object of charged political interest and it was placed within a range of political imaginaries. In 1714, Bharuch fell under the rule of Momin Khan of Surat. And then in 1731 with help from the Nizam rulers of Hyderabad, Nek Alam Khan I (Abdulla Beg) styled himself Nawab of Bharuch.\textsuperscript{10} Begumwadi was constructed during this time as a part of a larger Nawabi palace built on the hillock overlooking the Narmada.

We get one snapshot from within Begumwadi in 1772 in an Urdu narrative poem titled \textit{Qissa-i-Ghamghin} composed by Munshi ‘Abbas ‘Ali, the Nawab’s munshi who witnessed the events surrounding the annexation of Bharuch by the English. I consulted a Gujarati-language version of the Urdu text in the Cama Institute Library in Bombay translated by a Parsi scholar, Sorabji Framji Byramji Vakil. Vakil translated the text for a popular audience in 1895, and so the translation does not possess the poetic structure of the Urdu original. Still, it offers the outlines of the events from the Nawab’s point of view and shines unique light

\textsuperscript{8} Rashmi R. Batchu, \textit{Socio-Political Structure of Gujarat in the Eighteenth Century}, (Ph.D. Diss., The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, June 2009), 21.

\textsuperscript{9} Jivanji Rehanji Modi, “A Few Notes on Broach from an Antiquarian Point of View” in \textit{Asiatic Papers, Part II, Papers Read Before the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society} (Bombay: The Times Press, 1917), 43.

\textsuperscript{10} S. Maqbul Ahmad, \textit{A History of the Nawabs of Broach: Based on the Persian Manuscript Majmu’a e Daanish} (New Delhi: University of Delhi, 1985).
on the region’s merchants, who conspired with the Nawab’s Diwan (minister) Lalubhai to foment trouble with the English East India Company. One of the merchants was Dhanji Shah Manji Shah who we encountered in the previous chapter. He complained at the English factory in Surat that his cargo was being held up in Bharuch. Dhanji Shah’s complaint gave the English the pretext to demand compensation from the Nawab and wage war against Bharuch when he did not comply.\textsuperscript{11}

Studies of eighteenth-century Gujarat reconstruct this shifting patchwork of states in western India. Indulging the delicious political economic history of this period, of intrigue and double-crossing, a range of scholars have shown the tenuous circumstances under which the English East India Company came to power in South Asia.\textsuperscript{12} Perhaps the most nuanced account is Lakshmi Subramanian’s reading of English East India Company records which reveals the importance of Gujarati Hindu merchants (banias), who put their financial networks in the service of the English East India Company. Banias used their territorial credit networks, which used promissory notes called hundis to transmit funds across vast distances to fund the East India Company’s divided troops. She documents the rise and fall of an “Anglo-Bania” order over the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. She argues that though a partnership was forged between the banias and the English in the late eighteenth century, it quickly closed with the creation of racist colonial laws against


indigenous merchants. Building on Subramanian’s arguments I seek to illuminate another dimension of these events, namely the role of Parsi merchants during this transformation. Though scholars have focused on Parsis in Bombay, we know little about Parsi mercantile activities in older ports further north in Gujarat.

In the previous chapter I argued that the eighteenth-century wave of building activities was an attempt by Parsi merchants to shape an oceanic region. I showed how merchants built across multi-sovereign boundaries to gain unfettered access to Bombay. As we saw in the previous chapter, Parsi merchants created new linkages across Gujarat that were not limited to trade but also took the shape of built space, especially endowed agiaries, schools and dokhmas. In this chapter, I will show that within this volatile and shifting political landscape, merchant homes in particular were particularly significant anchors in multi-sovereign terraqueous space. I propose to show that Begumwadi, as it grew into a colonial mansion on the detritus of the Nawab’s (e)state, embodies a transformation of merchant homes connecting Bharuch to Ahmedabad, Surat and the hinterland of Gujarat.

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The writings of military officers, bureaucrats and East India Company (EIC) merchants, who were involved in the war of Bharuch in 1772 and the subsequent years during which Bharuch became a colonial port-city, suggest that the British were not only dependent on the credit that merchants offered them to finance their armies as Lakshmi Subramanian and others have persuasively argued, but also on the spaces through which it was passed, specifically the houses of merchants which functioned as banks, warehouses,
and offices across multi-sovereign territory. Two examples are particularly revelatory. First, there is the case of homes being used to secrete the wealth of the Nawab’s castle out of Bharuch and away from the British. This example suggests that homes were flexible, that they could be purposed to different circulatory ends. Second are the observations of the British resident at Bharuch who sought to replace Lalubhai the once Diwan of Bharuch who had colluded with the British against the Nawab and was now being sidelined in favor of a more lucrative alliance with another merchant, Haridas Nagur. This example suggests that while merchants came in and out of favor with the emergent colonial state, homes persevered as significant nodes in (colonial) capital networks.

**Treasure Hunt: Homes as Spaces of Evacuation**

According to intelligence reports sent to the Bombay Castle, the Nawab fled the city and left his harem in the care of his Diwan, Lalubhai, who conspired against the Nawab with the English. Nestled in the fort walls, Begumwadi would have been a prime location to witness the attack. On November 12, troops consisting of 200 European officers and 600 sepoys or mercenaries of mixed Indian Ocean ancestry fired on the fort. It was Begumwadi’s walls that the troops would have scaled to access the city from the river.

Begumwadi would lay empty for some years while the English conducted a treasure hunt for valuable possessions of the Nawab, rumored to have been secreted out of the castle and harem through a network of houses. On November 21, ten days after the offensive, H. Watson of the Bharuch Factory observed:

> I think it would be proper to make a publication by Beat of Drum, that any of the Mercantile Inhabitants, or others who shall have in their Houses any Goods or Arms belonging to the late Nabob or any of his officers or adherents and do not discover the same in twenty four hours, that then their houses and effects shall be forever forfeited and they will lose all benefit of our protection.\(^{15}\)

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\(^{15}\) John Watson Esq., to Colonel Robert Gordon, 21 November 1772, Broach Factory Records 1772, p. 17, Maharashtra State Archives, Mumbai.
Watson’s observation suggests that while homes were used to finance war, as merchants offered the English credit to finance their campaign against Bharuch, they were also drawn upon by others, who felt the Nawab had been wronged, to secrete his possessions and wealth out of Bharuch. The English recognized this and issued threats framed in the idiom of home.

Significantly, the women of the zenana were left behind at mercy of the Diwan, evidence of their betrayal by the Nawab. The Nawab died soon after rumoured to have been poisoned. That the name Begumwadi has survived across three hundred years is ironic, since the Begums are likely to have slipped into poverty and died nameless deaths, as the Nawabi of Bharuch crumbled.

**Enduring Home Networks**

Two decades later, Lalubhai, the once coveted Diwan of Bharuch, was out of favor with the British. In a letter to Bombay Castle, Bharuch resident Nathan Crow made known his intentions to cultivate new merchant connections in Bharuch. Crow proposed a merchant by the name of Haridas Nagur known as Hirjeevandas, also prominent in Bharuch and an opponent of Lalubhai. Crow described Harjeevandas as “a respectable Merchant and Shroff, who has Houses in Surat, Broach, Jumboosar and Ahmood.” Crow wrote that such merchants provided credit to the British for paying their troops, who were central to their military activities across Gujarat in the late eighteenth century. After the takeover of Bharuch, Crow wanted to appoint Nagur as the head Dubash in order to capitalize on his connections and replace Lalubhai. Crow wrote:

Having experienced continued occasion for the services of a shroff in the payment of sepoys and in assisting people who have come to Broach upon the Hon’ble Company’s concerns, such as contracts and supplies, I deemed it expedient to establish a regular Factory Dubash upon whom I might depend. Herjeevandas being already through his connection to Takoordas (*agent to the Company in Surat*)
within the protection of the Factory, his connections being good and extensive, his character respectable and his intelligence very general; and as no expense would accrue to the Hon’ble Company for an Alliance, the credit and occasional profit of serving them being of all which he was desirous, I named Harjeevandas as factor Shroff.  

Crow’s correspondences reveal an awareness of the importance of merchants, especially bankers (shroffs) to EIC control of the region. And they also make oblique references to homes that were at the foundation of these operations. This particular document is compelling because Crow singles out houses to give shape to the network of Gujarati merchant he sought to tap into. By naming Haridas the shroff of the Bharuch factory, Crow was harnessing Haridas’s home network to the service of the company. That Crow sought to replace Lalubhai shows how in certain circumstances homes were drawn upon by the EIC as a political economic resource.

It is the final irony that Begumwadi, once the property of the Nawab, would turn into the most important merchant home of the region, coordinating cotton trade across Gujarat. Though merchant homes were in operation across Gujarat even in the eighteenth century, Begumwadi became a merchant fortress: it multiplied the political economic resources of merchant homes and allied them to the scale of colonial capitalism. In the next section I seek to sketch the broad history of the Pestonji family and to ethnographically examine Begumwadi as a lynchpin in an expansive colonial economy of cotton trading. It was only in the 1950s after land reforms that the Vakharis lost out. And in a way it is this arc—from merchant fortress to ghostly home—that marks the condition of possibility for Cyrus and Malti’s love and marriage.

Interiors of Capital

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16 Nathan Crow to Bombay Castle, 23 April 1792, Secret and Political Department Diary, p. 305-306, Maharashtra State Archives, Mumbai.
In its nineteenth century incarnation, Begumwadi grew into a colonial compound. The Pestonjis razed the Nawab’s property to the ground and built a colonial-style mansion on the debris of the zenana. At least this is what is hinted at in the Gujarati-language history Bharuch No Itihās, which is based on ethnographic interviews its writer Ganpatram Himmatram Desai conducted in the early twentieth-century. But during my own stay in Begumwadi, as I became inured to the rhythms of the big house, taking late evening walks through the property, I liked to think that the central gardens that led to the river echo the gardens of the zenana; that the women of the Nawab’s harem once took their evening walks where I did.

According to Cyrus’s elder brother, Rehan, who I interviewed at his home in Bombay, the Pestonjis were originally from Surat where they were small-time merchants who traded in agricultural produce. The Pestonjis appear to have been modestly successful in the early nineteenth century and chartered coastal vessels that traveled between Surat and the Malabar Coast. According to family lore, the Pestonjis lost a major shipment to a cataclysmic storm and lost their entire fortune. Disappointed by their bad luck, the Pestonjis decided they needed a new start and traveled to Bharuch.

In Bharuch, they achieved almost immediate success, arriving at a lucrative time on the heels of war. Due to the machinations of Parsi merchants in Surat a half-century earlier, Bharuch’s Parsi community had grown in importance, unfettered by the trade routes once divided between the Nawabs, Marathas and English. The “Koth Parsi Wad” (Parsi Neighborhood of the Fort) had expanded. The Koth Parsi Wad had initially been a favored enclave of merchants patronized by the Mughal and Nawab rulers. The Koth was and

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17 Desai Bharuch Shaberno Itihās, 197.
18 Interview with Rehan Pestonji, Bombay (Mumbai), January 2011.
continues to be the highest point in Bharuch. The ramparts protected the rulers from attack from the river. In symbolic terms, the hilly fort marked sovereign power.

Begumwadi grew into an elaborate compound surrounded by a high wall. The compound today retains its historic shape: it is rectangular and though its ornament proclaims colonial loyalties, it has the feel of a Gujarati haveli built around an interior courtyard. Near the front gate is a modest two-room bungalow that marks one end of the compound: it was built most recently in 1915, upon the return of Ferozshah Pestonji, who was a barrister in Rangoon. The north wall of the compound was taken up by stables and a row of offices, where the family’s accountants (munshis) worked. Then there are the kitchens and utility spaces, still in operation today.

The main house is located on the eastern edge of the compound. The agashiye runs the length of the west wall overlooking the river. The interior of the house is designed as a colonial bungalow with a formal sitting and dining room downstairs. There are also a set of day rooms on the ground floor meant for afternoon siestas. A corridor overlooking the agashiye with shuttered windows is outfitted with a chaise longue and is likely to have been a spot to read the morning newspapers or recline in the afternoons. Upstairs there are the family bedrooms with hefty teak wood furniture, buffed to a shine.

But the home is empty, except for Cyrus’s family who are its caretakers. They live in the two-room house near the entrance to the property. The home therefore possesses a strange atmosphere of history, akin to a museum that has few visitors.

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19 Historian and Bharuch resident Ganpatram Himmatram Desai writes that he knew Ferozshah Pestonji (son of Rustom Pestonji, brother to Jamsetji Pestonji) who he remembers as an excellent lawyer in Rangoon. Ganpatram Himmatram Desai, Bharuch Shaberno Itihaas: Prachin Ane Arvachin (Broach: Gnananodaya Press, 1914), 198.
One day, Cyrus takes me out on his moped to the dried riverbed of the Narmada. From the river, you can make out Begumwadi jutting out from the fort walls, mint-green against the slate-colored ramparts. Though the English nominally annexed Bharuch in 1772, it is worth repeating that a merchant family rose to power within the fort and asserted the port’s place in a new colonial economy tied to a classic extractive politics in which cotton was farmed, processed, woven and then shipped to the metropole.

**Home of the Colonial Economy**

Cyrus remembers a time when his family spent the harvest season in Jambusar. They would caravan down the Narmada to their house in Jambusar and set up shop, so to speak, for the season. The family traveled on horse driven carriages and even into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries they employed security to protect them along the backwater roads. This is perhaps an echo of the eighteenth century, a time when merchants employed mercenary troops to protect their routes across multi sovereign and constantly shifting boundaries.

Cotton farmers from across the district would arrive at the Pestonji ginning property in Jambusar to sell their raw cottonseed. They would queue up in long lines and weigh out their produce on enormous scales. A close friend to the family Rohinton Jambusarwala, whose family too was once involved in cotton trading—and who continues to live in an old colonial compound called Phudina ni Wadi (the garden of mint) dating back to the late nineteenth century—tells me he grew up hearing stories about this yearly family journey to the farmlands along the Narmada River.\(^{20}\) Rohinton is in his seventies and his father was a colleague of the Pestonjis. The Jambusarwalas, whose surname is a toponym for the town, also harvested cotton and ran a more modest ginning operation. What Cyrus and Rohinton

\(^{20}\) Interview with Rohinton Jambursarwala, April 2, 2012, Bharuch.
witnessed as children was the tail end of a period that stretches between the early nineteenth century and the years after independence during which cotton became a lucrative cash crop and commodity in western India.\textsuperscript{21} Bharuch district, as it was enumerated and named in British India, fell under the jurisdiction of the Bombay Presidency and it was an important region from which “raw materials” were extracted from India. Merchants like the Pestonjis and the Jambusarwalas ginned cottonseed collected from farmers into processed cotton and then loaded it onto trains headed to Bombay. These shipments would arrive at Cotton Green train station, named for the large field of green on which stacks of cotton were sorted. From here, the cotton was transported to the many cotton mills of the city.

I rehearsed this nineteenth century itinerary when I periodically traveled from Bombay to Bharuch and back. A hundred odd years ago, the Pestonjis would make this same journey, shuttling between Begumwadi and the fashionable flat they kept in Bombay. As they travelled to Jambusar during cotton season so too did father and son, uncle and cousin, travel to Bombay to liaise with British officials, negotiate contracts with mill owners and conduct other kinds of business. The conquest of Bharuch undertaken in the second half of the eighteenth century was completed almost a century later with the laying of the train tracks. It was this action that finally linked Bharuch definitely to British Bombay. The merchant fortress symbolized this new linkage: it echoed a link to another rising fortress, Bombay.

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\textsuperscript{21} Madhoo Pavaskhar, an economic historian and consultant for the Tatas, wrote a fascinating history of the Bombay cotton exchange commissioned by the East India Cotton Association in Mumbai which was the preeminent corporate body of Bombay mill owners. The work is noteworthy because the association opened up its archives to Pavaskar. See, Madhoo Pavaskar, \textit{Saga of the Cotton Exchange} (Bombay: Published for the East India Cotton Association, 1985).
My train pulled in to Bharuch Junction at around six in the evening. For the last hour or so of the journey, I had balanced on the edge of the train compartment, holding onto the rail with my face upturned to the wind. The setting sun had cooled the air and a bright pink stripe ran across the horizon. The landscape that stretched out before me was a sheet of green. The Narmada River was visible in the distance, the train tracks following the contours of an ancient river route. Dusk brought Bharuch’s geography into sharp focus. From my perch on the steps, I could see the rich farmland that ringed Bharuch. Later, I would remember this parting shot, this final frame of the journey as a view of the enduring geography that gave Begumwadi its advantage.

A few months later, as I sat in Phudina Ni Wadi with Rohinton Jambusarwala and discussed the mechanics of Bharuch’s connections to the surrounding countryside, it seemed that the railways were only the final segment of cotton’s long progress—in different forms—from the hinterland to the coast. The geography I glimpsed from the edge of the train was thicker and denser than the technology of travel that sliced through it. Yearly caravans, bullock-driven carriages, not to mention the annual cultivation of the cotton crop were key to cultivation of linkages across the Narmada delta. This geography, of river, farmland and backwater port, has largely been ignored in the historiography of the political economy of the British Empire and western India. From economic histories, like Rajnarayan Chandravarkar’s study of the cotton mills of Bombay *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Class in Bombay, 1900-1940*22 to works of political economy like Manu Goswami’s which I explore below, scholars have privileged British Bombay as the primary site of capital. Even Ritu Birla’s recent book *Stages of Capital: Law, Culture and Market*

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Governance in Late Colonial India,\textsuperscript{23} makes broad claims about the production of mercantile identities through British law without paying attention to the regions that gave Bombay its force. In this chapter, and the dissertation more broadly, my aim is to ethnographically bring into view a terraqueous and regional geography centered on chronotopic merchant dwellings that connected Bombay to a range of ports, like Rander and Bharuch, as well as rich hinterland production locales.

Manu Goswami writes that railways were “metonyms of a colonial modernizing project, as mediums for the reconfiguration of social space, and as producers of a hierarchical, fragmented, and contradictory topography of social encounter and exclusion.”\textsuperscript{24} But the railway has also worked as a metonym in the historiography of the cotton trade and the political economy of western India more generally. It is a metonym for industrialization and it is a figurative strategy historians have used to privilege an urban and technological view of British colonialism. Railways stand in for the complex processes through which the British reshaped Gujarat. The problem with this metonymic view is that it obscures the wider political economy of the region and it achieves an undefeatable teleology of the success of industrial intervention. That the cotton industry, the engine of industrial progress—to use the railway this time as metaphor—was a more interpenetrated network, crisscrossed and worked over, points to another shape of capital. If Manu Goswami writes that capital became rationalized through the infrastructural intervention of the British, my work suggests it was also powered by the technologies of home.


\textsuperscript{24} Goswami, Producing India, 104.
In living and writing from Begumwadi, I want to show how merchant homes worked upon capital. As I argue in the next section, rather than a simple two-way route between Bharuch and Bombay facilitated by a steel rail track and coal driven engines, the value generated from processing cotton was funneled into other streams including the futures trade in precious metals (gold and silver) and off-the-books short-term loans. The ginned cotton, collected annually in towns like Jambusar, processed in Bharuch and loaded on to trains, was a product of these invisible forms of value as well. Invisible at least to those who have not cared to search for other non-state archives of capital.

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One day, as I am wandering through Begumwadi, I stumble into the old office of Rehan Pestonji. It is dark, but sunlight streams in through an attic window. When my eyes adjust I can make out an enormous heavy teak desk in the center of the room. A portrait of Rehan Pestonji stands in the corner, and with Cyrus’s help later that day I dust off the ledgers of the family business. There is not a complete set of account books. It looks like the complete set was either lost or was moved elsewhere. But of the volumes that do survive in the office, two suggest the extent of the home network during its early twentieth century heyday. The first catalogues the accounts of the Pestonji money lending business for the year 1934 and the second is a record of silver and gold trading in 1924.

The account books were ordered from Bombay. They were printed at the Bombay Press, who advertised themselves as Printers, Book-Binders and Account Book Makers. The account books are bound journals with double-entry columns. Given their standardized nature, the account books can be read as instructive of a larger culture of commercial record keeping that existed in the region of Indian Ocean Gujarat connected to Bombay. Still, even if the Pestonjis used standard account books and techniques, their accounting records were
housed in the private space of the merchant compound. It is unclear that the books I recover, which are composed, according to Cyrus in the hand of his grandfather, were ‘official.’ More likely they were records kept by Rehan Pestonji for private use. Public records were likely re-issued by the family’s retinue of Munshis, or accountants who worked in the offices near the stables. In this respect the two account books, a decade apart, are useful to us for at least two reasons. First, they suggest the geographic coordinates of Begumwadi’s home network. Second, they suggest the financial instruments that were rooted in and routed through the merchant home. In addition to being a space of work, housing offices and ginned cottonseed, the merchant home also enabled a point of confluence for different values of capital to come together under a single roof.

Based on an analysis of the two account ledgers, I argue that the robust Pestonji business was partially bolstered by Rehan Pestonji’s aptitude for investing in futures markets, like silver and gold. Also keeping capital circulating in the form of short-term loans to associates not only kept capital productive but also ensured the health of cotton production, the Pestonji’s depended on for their ginning and trading operations in Bombay. Short-term loans allowed businesses with cash flow problems to remain solvent. Off the official books, these loans also created bonds between the Pestonjis and their clients. So in addition to being geographically located at the center of the Narmada Valley, Begumwadi was also at the center of a number of connected lines of credit. Though certainly not a conclusive snapshot of the entirety of the Pestonji business, the remaining account books reveal aspects of Begumwadi’s connections across the region. They are compelling objects of analysis because they are both fragmentary historical records as well as fragments of a defunct home of capital.
Since my aim then is not to compose a complete picture—since it would be complete but unrepresentative—I choose instead to present my observation in six connected fragments, as propositions to consider, as broad characterizations of Begumwadi’s place in the year 1933-34. \(^{25}\)

I.

The account book is composed in the confident cursive of Jamshet R. Pestonji, the youngest brother of Rustom Pestonji. According to Cyrus, Rustom wanted his sons to be independent and so leased his ginning factories to each of the three brothers. Whatever the official legal status of the Pestonji businesses, it was not a joint-family firm. Instead, in the 1890s Rustom encouraged his sons to take the ginning business forward. Ritu Birla argues that in the early twentieth century a rich conversation took place between ‘native merchants’ and the British colonial state on the location of the family firm. Birla argues that in the years after the First World War, the family firm and the adjudication of capital more generally, became key sites from where merchants articulated a gendered argument about the importance of the family firm as a moral center in the community. I want to assert that a merchant home like Begumwadi also defined the routes of capital.

Jamset distinguished himself and built the largest business: he inherited Begumwadi. His eldest brother moved out of Begumwadi and built Palm Lands, a bungalow in the new civil lines neighborhood of colonial Bharuch. The middle brother, Pheroshaw, chose to leave Bharuch and after getting a degree in law, spent his working life in Rangoon. He was never married. And it is in his home, a modest two-bedroom bungalow at the entrance of Begumwadi that Cyrus and Malti now live.

II.

Though Jamset’s business centered on cotton processing and trading, his current account showed a robust business in money lending, extending short-term credit to family, friends, associates and employees. In the year 1934, Jamset offered credit to more than three hundred firms and persons, from the Maharaja of Baroda who had started an electric company to one of the stable hands who needed a small personal loan. Each of these transactions was meticulously entered into this account books. When I ask Cyrus about these transactions, he says that his father told him that Jamsetji saw a steady stream of visitors at the gates of Begumwadi. In this sense, Begumwadi was also connected to places across the region—the account book lists Jambusar, Bombay, Nadiad, Valsad, Godhra, Baroda and other ports and towns in the region—through these individual journeys to the compound’s gates and to the private offices of Jamsetji. The personal relationships these transactions fostered contributed to the robust nature of the Pestonji cotton trade.

Among the loans entered into the account book are loans to associates in the cotton trade, farmers, agents and ginning factory owners. Though all we see are columns with double entry places for debt and credit, no marginalia or notes, it is likely that these ties, borne of confidential conferences in the Begumwadi study created a certain kind of influence. So while Jamsetji offered liquidity, the loans created invisible ties that bound his associates to him. Loans likely inspired both loyalty and a certain kind of bondage.

III.

Jamsetji also listed three colonial banks in his current account: The Central Bank of India Ltd., The Broach Narmada Banking Co. and the Imperial Bank of India. The large sums of money Jamsetji maintained in these three banks were viewed as forms of short-term credit to the banks. According to Cyrus and his elder brother, Rehan, who lives in Bombay,
English banks depended on their grandfather for liquidity. He maintained good relations with the banks and leveraged these relations in his dealings with officials in Bombay.

Cyrus tells me the perhaps apocryphal story about the time Jamsetji was treated disrespectfully at the Imperial Bank of India. The clerk apparently did not know whom he was dealing with because Jamsetji demanded his account be immediately emptied. The bank apparently exploded in crisis as senior managers entreated Jamsetji to not withdraw his money since they depended on his account for liquidity. Apologies and remonstrations were made and Jamsetji relented. But the point of the story is that colonial banks depended on the family. They depended on Begumwadi.

IV.

The list of names that are entered in the account book reveal the multi religious composition of the cotton trade and mercantile relations more broadly in the Narmada Valley. Jamsetji gave loans large and small to Jains, Hindus, Muslims, and Parsis. This multi-religious community of borrowers hailed from across the region, from Jambusar to Bombay. So while Jamsetji and the Pestonji family were amongst the most prominent members of the Bharuch Parsi community and the Parsi Panchayat, their dealings were with a much larger multi-religious group. As individuals entered the premises and were offered water, they too became a part of Begumwadi’s network. It was a fortress built on relationships and transactions large and small.

V.

In addition floating small personal loans to his associates, Jamseth also extended loans to a number of businesses in the region.

VI.
The account book from 1924 that records Jamsetji’s adventures in the precious metals futures market\textsuperscript{26} shows that these human transactions on the scale of personal relationships along the Narmada River were interpenetrated with global financial markets and also a global financial system in which value was ‘financialized,’ in the way Ian Baucom has brilliantly described in his book \textit{Specters of the Atlantic}. Baucom’s argument is that the twentieth century is an inheritor of a hyper-speculative moment in the history of capital and we can see these in its cultural forms.\textsuperscript{27} My argument is that Begumwadi was a pivot that allowed Jamsetji to participate in various economies of value. He funneled capital into speculative ventures. He also invested in a range of people, investing in relationships that gave his business a robust quality. He maintained accounts at colonial banks ensuring a seat at the political table in Bombay.

The architectural layout of Begumwadi itself reflected these various investments. Jamsetji maintained two sets of offices: one within his house—the study I wandered into one day—and one near the stables, where his munshis sat. Rather than a public vs. private space, Begumwadi can be thought of as a place of layered access. It is a place that brings to mind a key passage in Giovanni Arrighi’s book \textit{The Long Twentieth Century}, in which he argues that while generations of scholars have taken up Marx’s entreaty to explore the ‘hidden abode of production...[to] at last force the secret of profit making,’ few have responded to Braudel’s keen observations about an ‘anti-market,’ the shadowy place in which capitalists dealt with

\textsuperscript{26} Jamsetji Pestonji, Account Book, Silver Futures, 1929. Courtesy CyrusPestonji.

political power. Arrighi describes this as “Braudel’s invitation [to] explore the real home of capitalism on the top floor of the house of trade.”

VI.

Placing Begumwadi in this larger framework of a history of capital also bears out Braudel’s (and Marx’s) argument about capital tending to flexibility and eclecticism. What is significant about my ethnographic method is that I do not privilege the account book as the pre- eminent debris of capital or eclecticism, but rather place it within the broader set of traces and marks that are left within Begumwadi, a place itself with a three hundred year history of political economic engagement. It is the “home of capital,” a social form of value particular to the region of Indian Ocean Gujarat, that gave shape to flexibility. In the case of Begumwadi, this home scaled up to a fortress.

This approach also says something about the approaches to the historical study of capital. I bear in mind Baucom’s observation about the nature of value in a financialized economy, that by the twentieth century, with the rise of insurance, “the real test of something’s value [came] not at the moment it [was] made or exchanged by at the moment it is lost or destroyed.” At the risk of conflating a theory of modern insurance with a theory of history, my argument is that there is an affinity between the mode in which scholars deal with financial records of the past (as signs of a lost time), and the value forms they gave birth to in the first place. Baucom argues that “amongst the other violences [the trans-Atlantic slave trade] inflicted on millions of human beings was the violence of becoming a ‘type:’ a type of person, or, terribly, not even that, a type of nonperson, a type of property, a type of


29 Baucon, *Specters*, 95.
commodity, a type of money."

My point is that the account books are useful not for their abstractions (of turning social relationships into monetary values) but rather for their revelation of participation in a broader empire of value. And rather than fetishizing and reproducing the entries in the column of both account books in which numerical values stand in for social relationships, my focus remains on the home, the fortress, that formed a pivot that connected these values together. In choosing this approach, to study economic facts through social relationships, I retain the classical definition of political economy. But in enacting political economic analysis from the space of an old merchant home, I illuminate a little studied vantage of its history.

**Restoration: Love in a Port-City**

All that helpfulness of his, now that she thought about it, was *restoration*. Mother’s iris garden reclaimed, the Adirondack chairs repaired, the treads replaced on the back porch steps. It was a little like having the family come to life again to have him there, busy about the place the way her father used to be. When he had first come home, fearful as he was that he had become a stranger, he still came around to the kitchen door, that old habit.

~ Marilynn Robinson, *Home: A Novel* (emphasis added)

That was 1934. Almost eighty years later I stand in a house that appears to be stuck at that precise moment in time. For there is no sign of Cyrus’s father, Zubin, under whose watch the business crumbled. There is no sign of Cyrus’s childhood, no debris of the lavish parties his father threw for him or his brothers and sisters. The first automobile the family purchased, a red Ford, has not survived either. All that remains is the house itself, a gleaming memorial to a lost time. Cyrus and Malti live with their four children in a separate smaller bungalow near the entrance to the property, built in 1915 for Ferozshah Pestonji, who returned from Rangoon where he had spent his career working as a barrister. The main house is only opened when the family returns. I am given a bedroom in Cyrus’s eldest brother’s wing, which remains locked most of the year.

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In this final section, I propose that a past and present version of the merchant family are juxtaposed--are brought into confrontation with each other--in contemporary Begumwadi. While the main house continues to architecturally and materially preserve the memory of a family that once fit into its rooms—an endogamous joint-family—Cyrus and Malti’s life presents a stark contrast. Cyrus has chosen to marry a woman who once worked in his family’s fields, not only a non-Parsi but also a person outside of his class. How do we read this temporality of the merchant home, in which a renovated past is strikingly contrasted with a form of post-colonial love? What place does this specific time of home have within the longer history of merchants in oceanic Gujarat? In methodological terms, I want to draw attention to how my ethnographic inhabitation of a historic merchant home, creates a genre of recollection and argument that brings a shadowy issue like inter-marriage into sharp analytic relief in affective terms. In what follows I interleave the rhythms of living within two kinds of connected but temporally different versions of the merchant home at once. And I set this narrative alongside a history of post-colonial economic decline and its possibilities for the shape of the merchant family in Gujarat.

I want to say here that I am ambivalent about drawing attention to Cyrus and Malti’s relationship in such terms, since it feels like my own transgression, of outing a family secret. But the possibilities of such intimacies in a place like Gujarat—and post-colonial India—in which mercantile histories are obscured and put in the service of (ethno) national narratives, are crucially important, if only to point to the open-endedness of mercantile futures, of an orientation outward that can be directed to diverse ends.

Post-Colonial Picturesque

In the 1960s, Begumwadi was one of many disintergrating nineteenth century mansions, abandoned by its residents for Bombay. Scores of properties across the
subcontinent, once important in British India, the homes of revenue collectors or Muslim
Nawabs or merchants sat crumbling, no longer important to the new nations of India and
Pakistan.\textsuperscript{31} Cyrus tells me that part of the reason for the loss of the Pestonji fortune was the
government confiscation of their vast holdings in farmland across the Narmada delta during
land reforms. After independence, the structure of the cotton industry changed as labor
began to assert itself in Bombay. And there was also the sui generis question of bad luck, of
the family falling on hard times. Cyrus’s elder brother Rehan left for Bombay and began to
apprentice at his uncle’s shoe production factor, eventually striking out on his own and
running a successful business exporting leather shoes to Europe and America. In 2000, with
capital generated in this new line of business, Rehan funded a major restoration of
Begumwadi.

Each day Hema—in equal parts a domestic worker and Malti’s confidante—opens
up the doors of the locked main house in which I sleep. Cyrus and Malti, like I mentioned
earlier, live in the bungalow at the entrance of the property. Hema lets air into the main
house, unfastening shuttered windows, unlocking doors to bedrooms and freeing the
country animals that have been trapped inside the house overnight. I can swear I hear a cat
meowing at night, wandering the house. (I never find it.) Under Malti’s supervision, Hema
scrubs the floors and dusts the rooms. She runs the taps in the bathrooms to make sure that
water continues to circulate through the pipes.

The restoration of the house and Cyrus, Malti and their children’s inhabitation of its
periphery are compelling because they bring to light a fascinating post-colonial iteration of

\textsuperscript{31} The most striking of these sites to me continues to be the Maqbara (mausoleum) of the
Shia Babi rulers of Junagadh, a city on Gujarat’s northern coast, one of the few Muslim
princely-states to decide to merge with Pakistan. Junagadh was invaded by the Indian army
and the Babi dynast was forced to flee to Pakistan. It is rumored that he took his hunting
dogs with him and left behind his wives.
what art-historians call the colonial picturesque. One example of this scholarship is Romita Ray’s recent book, *Under the Banyan Tree: Relocating The Picturesque in British India*. Ray argues that the picturesque, as a visual trope of British colonialism—including the twin poles of Begumwadi which is both ruin and colonial bungalow—worked across genres from travel writing to colonial painting to post cards to obscure the contemporary moment of colonization, its dislocating effects on the environment as well as its gross violence and inequalities.32 Like the colonial picturesque, Begumwadi’s restoration to the 1930s and its careful maintenance through the labor of custodianship each day can be interpreted as a post-colonial mercantile picturesque. It suspends the Pestonji family in time to its heyday.

In addition to the daily cleaning, which I follow with great interest as it leads me to new corners of the house, this post-colonial picturesque is enabled by the material culture of the house. Carved and painted teak furniture has been reupholstered in the formal living rooms downstairs. A black grand piano that no one plays sits in one corner. There are marble side tables with photo frames of the family in the 1960s, perhaps the only moment of—to adapt Swati Chattopadhyay’s argument about the anxiety that peeks out from beneath the picturesque—a (post) colonial uncanny.33 Upstairs, the bedrooms are fitted with newly painted and varnished teak beds (like the one I sleep on downstairs) and elaborately carved wooden screens.

The enclosed verandah overlooking the agashiye and beyond to the Narmada frames the landscape in a way that obscures the changes that have occurred to the family and the city, through producing a panoramic simulacrum, to borrow Michel De Certeau’s suggestive


reading of the optics of height and distance.\textsuperscript{34} This view continues to frame the Narmada and the Indian Ocean from afar and above obscuring the ways in which this geography has now passed Begumwadi by.

But like the colonial picturesque (and uncanny), its post-colonial version is unstable at the edges of the picture. The teak almaris are empty, but for bottles of Parachute coconut oil and shampoo, anachronisms in this 1930s world. There are western-style toilets that have been added for convenience during the family’s visit from Bombay and Australia. And above all, the house has a stuffy feel to it, as if its over-determined historicity is literally taking up too much room. And so as its’ only resident—for the months I lived there at least—I find myself yearning for the rest of the compound, for Malti and the smells of an inviting meal in the kitchen. For conversation over a cup of tea. Or just some company while I read. After hours of looking through account books or looking deeply at the quite average oil paintings of the European countryside, my instinct is to go find Malti’s youngest daughter Farzeen, who will be likely getting up to some mischief outside, an electric child in a sleepy compound.

\textbf{Family Matters}

As I mentioned earlier, perhaps the most striking absence in the material culture of Begumwadi is signs of Zubin Pestonji, Cyrus’s father. During my time in the big house I find few signs and am given little testimony of Zubin’s management of the family business. I find no books of his. But this absence is filled with Cyrus’s many tales of his father’s great love for his mother. This does not strike me as odd during the time, but looking back at my field

\textsuperscript{34} Michel De Certeau, \textit{The Practice of Everyday Life} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 93. De Certeau argues that the panoramic view available from the top of the World Trade Center is based on a “misunderstanding” of practices of the city below. I see Begumwadi’s scopic orientation to obscure the history of the landscape beyond.
notes I am struck by the shift in register for discussing the family’s past. Cyrus speaks expansively of his great grandfather Rustom and his grandfather Jamshet’s commercial acumen. But Cyrus chooses to emphasize his father’s love for his mother and his affection for his family. Cyrus remembers his father, who died too young probably under the stress of a collapsing business, as a generous man who lavished his family with gifts and love. Cyrus’s childhood was spent in the English-style garden on the banks of the Narmada, now overgrown with weeds. The restoration of the house erases all these years. It smoothes over the years of the financial collapse and the dissolution of the family business. But in remembering his father in terms of his great capacity for love, I propose that Cyrus has changed the way in which he inhabits Begumwadi as a home of capital. In the previous section I sketched the contours of Begumwadi as part of the colonial economy. Now I want to draw attention to the relationship between participation in the colonial economy and the production of the endogamous merchant family. I propose that we read Cyrus’s shift in register as a shift in the way the merchant family is understood.

I argue that Begumwadi registers changes in the structure of the (Parsi) merchant family and the Parsi community more broadly. And that this transformation manifests in changings understandings of love, which I understand as a category of what Ann Stoler calls the “intimate,” which in the case of this dissertation can be further specified as the intimate life world of the merchant subject. A home like Begumwadi and the Pestonji family that lived and live within it help us to understand dimensions of the intimate, a task which to quote Stoler “reflects a basic commitment to identifying the political stakes lodged in what is
defined as public or private, to studying the quotidian shaping of racialized colonial worlds and their disparate sites of production.”

Cyrus’s father decision to choose a Parsi wife was at least partly been shaped by colonial understandings of the relationship between intimacy and conjugality. Drawing on the brilliant recent work of Mitra Sharafi I trace this colonial influence to the ways in which colonial law defined Parsi law and how Parsi lawyers drew upon it to shape marriage and the family. I want to emphasize that the endogamous Parsi (merchant) family that existed in the nineteenth century was at least partly produced by colonial law, that it is not a timeless iteration of a religious community.

And yet, as Mitra Sharafi and Jamsheed Choksey have argued, during the colonial period many Parsi men in South Asia and connected regions like colonial Burma and Ceylon, did enter into formal and informal relationships with non-Parsi women, since Parsi men could still inherit and initiate their children into the Parsi community. But this was not the case within the Pestonji family. Intermarriage was a frowned upon choice within the Parsi community of Bharuch. One reason could be the formative (and conservative) influence of the Parsi Panchayat, a collection of prominent Parsi men, formed sometime in the late seventeenth century to adjudicate social matters of the community. According to Rusheed R. Wadia, though its power waned in the middle of the nineteenth century with rise of the

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English courts as the main arbiter of social and religious matters including regulating marriage, the panchayat had by then successfully produced an endogamous’ community or at least a community that understood itself in terms of racial and sexual purity through the threat of excommunication.\(^{38}\) Another reason for the Parsi family’s boundaries to be clearly delineated is the unpopularity of inter-marriage amongst elites.\(^{39}\) Though there are cases of wealthy Parsis like the Tatas taking non-Parsi wives, this was an aberration and Tata’s European wife was not allowed, for example, to be placed in the family dokhma.\(^{40}\)

In addition, the development of British colonial law in India, and the tenacious ways in which Parsis shaped it to their advantage, the main subject of Sharafi’s work, suggest new tools for the senior patriarchs of Parsi merchant families to police the sexual behavior of members of the family. As prominent Parsi merchants, the Pestonji family’s major patriarchal figures Rustomji and Jamsetji were part of a mercantile culture in which their capital was at least partly shaped by English law, since Parsis were not included in personal law.\(^{41}\) Specifically, as Sharafi shows, wealthy Parsi families used the English law of testamentary disposition, which allowed merchants to stipulate who they would bequeath property to and make it contingent on particular kinds of behavior, including ostensibly


\(^{40}\) Sharafi, “Judging Conversion,” 159.

choice of marriage partner to regulate the behavior of their dependents and children. Also, Sharafi shows that Parsi lawyers rejected primogeniture and instead argued for Parsi sons to inherit equally after the death of their father. In such a scenario it was crucial to make sure sons married within the community, since upon their death their widows had access to their share of property.

By making property more “maneuverable and alienable” the colonial legal system integrated Parsi mercantile control of property with control of the family members who depended on it. As we saw in the previous section, Jamsetji’s business relied on a set of interconnected colonial networks that intersected powerfully within Begumwadi. Within this new colonial legal system, Begumwadi became the site at which the home of capital was defined in endogamous terms. Threatening the boundary of the merchant family through intermarriage also threatened the boundary of Begumwadi.

Whereas Zubin had married for “love,” his choice had been shaped by his father, Jamset’s choice. Though he had thrown a fit and insisted that he marry Shireen—who was objected to because of her dark skin—his so-called choice emerged in the context of his father’s iron-fisted upbringing. He would marry a Parsi woman from Bharuch. He would inherit Jamset’s fortune and of course he would inherit Begumwadi.

But Cyrus’s choice was different because the business had crumbled within post-colonial India. Begumwadi lost value because its connections to the hinterland dried up. As a piece of real estate Begumwadi was not worth much. And so as the home became untethered from the (post) colonial cotton trade economy, it also became untethered from

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defining the boundaries of the family in endogamous terms through wills that adjudicated its inheritance. The restoration in 2000 created a shell of Begumwadi evacuated of its perilous and profitable links to colonial capital, which tied it to conservative definitions of family. On the edges of this palimpsest Cyrus and Malti shape a new kind of family.

**Conclusion**

Bharuch lost out in the 1950s, as land holdings were nationalized and the cotton industry went bust, workers protesting their working conditions through new national labor rules. As the Pestonji family business combusted, Begumwadi was reabsorbed into the geography of ocean, river and farmland and was abandoned for Bombay. Cyrus says it was overgrown with weeds and the stucco of the house was peeling; parts of the house were unstable. It is only in 2000 that the property was restored and Cyrus and Malti founded a new home on the peripheries of a memorial to an older quite different kind of merchant home. It is as though the abandonment of the home turned it back into a frontier, a boundary between contemporary post-colonial India and an imperial past hey-day. It is as though the frontier of colonial Burma and Sri Lanka, places in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in which Parsis married local women and created creole families, has opened up in Bharuch one of the Parsi community’s oldest cities. In this new frontier Bharuch, Cyrus and Malti’s relationship can be interpreted to suggest that the merchant family (firm), once an endogamous unit produced as much by British colonial law as by nineteenth century patriarchy, becomes ironically an alternative to the national state that continues to hold to an older, colonial definition of family and identity.
CHAPTER SIX
Twilight in Surat

Introduction: Abandoned Homes of Capital

In the eighteenth century, the port-city of Surat emptied of its merchants. Surat had been the major emporia port on the west coast of India, mediating traffic between the western and eastern arenas of the Indian Ocean for two centuries. It was the major nexus through which precious metals travelling from the Atlantic via the Mediterranean were exchanged in the Indian Ocean arena for textiles from India and spices from South East Asia. Das Gupta’s Surat was a city of merchant warehouses clustered together around the river’s wharf that led out into the Indian Ocean. This is why Surat’s preeminent merchants like Mulla Abdul Ghafur, Rustom Maneck and Suleiman Chellaby maintained pleasure gardens on the peripheries of the city, away from the bustle of commercial life in and at the heart of the port. Das Gupta’s account of Surat’s decline marks the end of Surat’s commercial prowess as much as it marks the end of the cosmopolitan society that made its home there.¹ Lakshmi Subramanian, in many ways Das Gupta’s historiographical heir, picks up where he leaves off and tells the remarkable story of Surat’s bankers (shroffs, banias) who survived the collapse by picking a new side: they put their sophisticated hundi networks, promissory notes that were payable from Calcutta to Surat, in the service of the English East India Company, funding their takeover of the coasts of South Asia in the late eighteenth century and the creation of English Bombay, which would rise to take Surat’s place.²

together these two accounts form the ground-zero for thinking about Surat and the rise of British Bombay.

Though I locate this chapter within the broad history Das Gupta and Subramanian sketch, I explore it from a slightly different angle. Rather than focusing on Bombay’s rise, I am interested in thinking about Surat’s twilight. If, as I argued in the last chapter, merchant homes were powerful condensations of the work of capital, what happened after merchants abandoned them? Focusing on nineteenth-century Surat, I propose to explore how port-cities, which were once major emporia, continued to hold out resources to new itinerants, who drew upon historical merchant networks concretized within merchant homes to position themselves in nineteenth and twentieth century British India. The focus of this chapter is a group of weavers from the region today known as the North West Frontier Provinces of the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderland, a group who identified themselves to the E.I.C in the language of caste as Khattris.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, these itinerant weavers moved into merchant neighborhoods of Surat’s once thriving wharf, from where ships once embarked on oceanic journeys. They purchased homes once the site of robust site of banking operations of Surat’s famous bania shroffs, who abandoned the city for British Bombay, then but a forted settlement, an archipelago of seven marshy islands to the south. This chapter centers on these abandoned homes of capital and explores how they were drawn into the creation of a mercantile caste identity rooted in and routed through Surat. If as Nicholas Dirks has argued what we think of modern caste was “the product of an historical encounter between India and Western colonial rule,”\(^3\) I propose to show that homes of

capital were one arena in which it was articulated. The abandoned homes of Surat’s bankers and their inhabitations by Khattris is a compelling episode of India’s history of caste because it formed during a major political transformation of the Indian Ocean as the British began to assert control over key ports around the littoral. My argument is that Hindu itinerants drew upon the idiom of caste to harness the geographical, economic and urban power condensed in the abandoned homes of Surat’s wharf, as the E.I.C embarked on enumeration efforts. The chapter that follows centers on Khattri dwellings called karkhana (weaving workshop).

The Khattri karkhana is good to think with as a home of capital because it housed both the weaving operations that were central to Khattri trade as well as to Khattris themselves who lived within their workshops, inhabiting the top floors. The Khattri karkhana is also important because it brings into view the way the identity of “seth” (merchant) came to be adopted by itinerants who the E.I.C. enumerated as weavers. In this chapter, I think of Khattris as weaver-merchants. I propose that their karkhanas, workshops that were also sites of business and family life, show how newly inhabited abandoned homes of capital absorbed this slippage of identities between merchant and weaver.

This chapter is organized in three parts. Part one describes the inhabitation of karkhanas—once abandoned banker homes—in Surat and traces the ways in which, over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Khattris drew upon them to control female labor and sexuality both central to the production of jari cloth and the reproduction of the khattri caste family. Part two explores what I call “heirlooms of caste,” analyzing how nineteenth-century house deeds that enumerated Khattri ownership of banker homes became central to Khattri caste identity. Part three explores how Khattri karkhanas located near Surat’s wharf were mobilized to forge links to Southeast Asia and Japan.

**Caste Arguments: Khattris in History**
The first karkhana I visit in Surat is Hasmukh bhai Talia’s, located on a quiet lane in Salabat Pura. From the first moment I arrive in Surat, I am struck by historic resonances in the urban nomenclature I rehearse on a daily basis just to get around the city. Surat’s neighborhoods continue to be named for its seventeenth century merchants and Mughal rulers. Rustompura for Rusom Maneck. Gopipura for Malik Gopi. And now here I stand in Salabat Pura, named for Surat’s Mughal ruler. Though the city walls are long gone, Surat continues to be a concentric city, divided by two phantom walls—the shaher panna (boundary of the city) and alam panna (boundary of the wall). Salabat Pura is on the outskirts of the old city located near Rustom Maneck’s old warehouse.

Like the neighborhoods, the houses that line the streets of Salabat Pura conform to historic measurements. Priyanka Gonawala, a Khattri herself and a fledgling architect, tells me that Khattri homes are measured according to a unit called gāla. The unit denotes the approximate dimensions of the teak beams that are used as the load-bearing members in a house’s construction. The word gāla is also the term for warehouse. Hasmukh bhai’s karkhana is what Priyanka calls a single-gāla space. Even when Khattris have amassed larger spaces they measure in according to gāla units. Karkhanas continue to be thin and tall and they are accumulated horizontally: Khattris speak in terms of possessing two- or three-gāla karkhanas. Though it is unclear if there is a relationship between this measuring system and the warehouses that were the kernel around which neighborhoods grew, the resonance is suggestive.

Before he takes me on a tour of the karkhana, Hasmukhbhai offers me a cup of Surti tea. Like the kind I’ve consumed from the street stalls, the tea that is brought to me is milky black and boiled together with mint and lemon grass. Over one such cup of chai a few days

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\(^4\) Priyanka Gonawala, Interview, December 2, 2011, Surat.
earlier, Priyanka and I wonder if we are experiencing Surat’s oceanic history boiled into morning tea, mint from the western Indian Ocean—probably Persian in influence—and lemon grass from Southeast Asia, possibly Malacca or Singapore. The tea itself, imbedded as it is in the Surti (as well as Indian and South Asian) diet also invokes the displacement of China by India and Ceylon tea plantations in the colonial period as major tea manufacturers.

Hasmukhbhai tells me that his family purchased the single-gāla karkhana in 1856 from a Patel merchant who had left Surat for Bombay. He tells me that he will show me a land deed to prove it. (He never does.) Hasmukh bhai says that while his family had arrived in Surat at the turn of the nineteenth century, they had only managed to collect enough money to purchase a gāla after five decades or so of grueling work. He says that the family has retained the earlier structure of the house. He points to the polished teak banisters and says that though the house is now three hundred odd years old, the wood is excellent in quality.

He takes me on a tour of the house. The ground floor has been converted into a retail space now that the family has moved out, and there is a long glass counter that runs the length of the room. White mattresses are laid out on either side and customers sit drinking tea examining their Zari borders. Hasmukh bhai takes me to a vaulted mezzanine and tells me that this was once the office of the Patel banker that he bought the house from. Because of the low ceilings, looms would not fit there and so the family used the space as a place to roll out thin mattresses to sleep during the night. The top floors of the house are lined from end to end with mechanical looms. It is remarkable to see the remainders of banking networks and how they have been inventively adapted to weaving operations.

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5 Hasmukhbhai Talia, November 3, 2011, Surat. This section is based on an interview I conducted with Hasmukhbhai Talia in his karkhana in Salabat Pura, Surat.
Though Hasmukhbhai and family have used mechanized looms since the early twentieth century, he points to large hooks in the ceiling to show me where the old wooden looms once hung. He says that because of hundreds of years of traveling down the coast of India, from the area around Kabul, the Khattris required only a wooden loom with pedals that they could even string up to a tree to weave. This kind of loom is corroborated by an eighteenth-century engraving by Pierre Sonnerat that shows a weaver using such a wooden loom (Figure 6.1). The contemporary looms resemble the design of the original portable loom and show how a portable skill has been incorporated into the merchant home. The karkhana can be interpreted as a concretizing of portable weaving looms and skills into a localized space.

Hasmukhbhai tells me that Khattri weaving practices center on the production of Zari (or Jari), a kind of lace or brocade woven of gold and silver threads. Though Khattris today make imitation zari with copper wire treated with chemicals, historically the families produced only pure silver and gold thread. Zari could be woven into silks or added on as borders to produce lustrous saris. It was a staple of wedding trousseaus and found markets domestically and internationally. The skill of zari weaving is a closely guarded secret by the Khattri community even today, when many Khattris now are involved in various branches of the textile trade, especially in synthetics. Priyanka, who is my contact to Hasmukhbhai,

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[7] Abigail McGowan suggests the broader consequences of the development of new identities that emerged through the conjuncture of artisan production. In her brilliant book Crafting the Nation, McGowan places ‘crafts’ at the center of the ways in which the British colonial government and Indian nationalists framed debates around politics, economics and culture. Abigail McGowan, Crafting the Nation in Colonial India (New York: Palgrave, 2009), 91.
tells me that older weavers in the community like Hasmukhbhai were reticent about speaking with caste outsiders. She says that over the years, Hasmukhbhai had approached her on a number of occasions to write a history of the Khattri caste of Surat. Unlike many Khattris of her generation, biding their time in school until they were married and joined the family business—Priyanka excelled in school and went on to university, where she studied architecture. Many Khattris I met know Priyanka and are proud of her accomplishments. I imagine that many Khattris open their homes and workshops to me because of her introduction. The salient point here is that the caste community is defined, as it is by Khattris like Hasmukhbhai and Priyanka, around the skill of Zari, which I want to argue was localized within the abandoned banking homes of eighteenth century capital. I trace this localization to the early twentieth century and read it as a moment in time during which the skill of weaving, sexual reproduction, family came together in a powerful way within the material space of the Khattri karkhana. While in previous chapters I have shown how homes of capital were sites of oceanic connection and temporal density, in this chapter I show how homes were drawn into modern definitions of caste that hinged on an inequitable gendered division of labor connected to weaving.
In 1906, approximately a hundred and fifty years after Hasmukhbhai’s family had arrived in Surat and settled into their karkhana in Salabat Pura, the Khattri panchayat, a body that adjudicated community matters, outlawed Khattris from employing other castes in their karkhanas, workshops. The punishment for not accepting this ruling was to be declared an outcaste and barred for the social life of the Khattri community. Historian Douglas Haynes, who outlines this event in his excellent work *Small-Town Capitalism in Western India: Artisans, Merchants and the Making of the Informal Economy, 1870-1906*, found this extraordinary edict in the private collection of a Surti Khattri merchant Bhukandas Nathubhai Gotewala. Haynes interprets the document to suggest the complex competition between the diverse weaving communities in Surat, including the Momins and Padmasalis, of which the Khattris were a part. Haynes argues that this ruling suggests the ways corporate organizations responded to the precarity of the rise of wage labor in the early twentieth century. 8

I frame this edict here in slightly different terms. I am interested in what it tells us about how a modern caste identity developed from within the merchant home. Khattris call workshops karkhana in Gujarati, and it is the term also used for the place of residence. The karkhanas in question that the panchayat barred Khattris from employing other castes in were the merchant homes they had bought from Surat’s bania bankers. The karkhana in addition to being the site of weaving operations was more importantly the site of sexual reproduction through which the Khattri community reproduced its skills. As I learned during fieldwork while interviewing descendants of the community, women of the family are the most skilled weavers, and weaving operations therefore depend on marriage to bring in

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crucial skilled labor. Since wage labor only entered the fray in the early twentieth century, women stood at the center of these operations.

My argument is that the edict was not only a protection for Khattri weavers who did not have karkhanas of their own and were dependent on daily employment, but also an attempt to sequester the karkhana from outsider access to protect the skill of Jari weaving that was practiced within in. This skill was gendered, embodied by Khattri women, whose circulation through marriage amongst the community was central to weaving operations and the reproduction of the caste family. The edict then also put Khattri women in a kind of caste purdah rooted in the sexual and gendered division of labor, keeping women sequestered and spatially within the home, even if busy at work. The salient point is that the abandoned merchant homes of bankers were drawn upon in this localizing process. This caste argument was rooted in and routed through a spatializing of gendered and sexual difference inscribed in specialized weaving skills within the merchant home.

If as Nicholas Dirks has argued what we think of as modern caste was “the product of an historical encounter between India and Western colonial rule” then Surat’s evacuated homes offer one example of such a modern theater of caste in oceanic Gujarat. More recently, Anupama Rao has argued in her book The Caste Question that “caste, once a modal form of social organization identified with backwardness and underdevelopment, is today a vibrantly contested political category and identity.” Using the example of Mahar Dalits, Rao charts the extraordinary history of how caste has been reimagined as a form of rights

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politics, how Dalits have used the historical encoding of caste in definitions of colonial subjecthood and Indian citizenship to make demands on the state.

Here I argue that Khattris, who trace their origins to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border land, once part of global networks connected to Russia and central Asia, made an argument in the language of caste—in gendered terms as I argued above—a burgeoning discourse in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries around cultural difference in order to make claims over old merchant homes in Surat. Why? Part of the reason has to do with the distinction between the category of merchant and weavers or artisans. The previous residents of Khattri homes were Hindu bankers who identified themselves as bania bankers. Khattris were also known in other historical contexts as bankers (and not weavers or artisans) as we see in the work of several historians. For example, Khattris were described as bankers in the seventeenth-century Eurasian trade Stephen Dale has written about; bankers in Benaras according to C.A. Bayly’s study of merchants and markets; and bania-bankers in Claude Markovits study of a trade route that stretched between India, Iran, Russia and Central Asia. In Gujarat, they were drawn into the category and role of artisanal labor by the E.I.C, which practiced repopulating cities with artisanal workers to turn defunct ports into production centers. Lakshmi Subramanian places Khattris as one of the artisanal groups that emerged during the upheavals of the late eighteenth century. Ghulam Nadri counts four thousand Khattri homes in eighteenth century Surat who operated three thousand six


hundred and sixty three looms. In making a caste argument around the karkhana, Khattris were attempting to forge and inhabit a mercantile caste identity as opposed to an artisanal one shackled to procurement agents, brokers and others.

As I will show in the next section, the housing deeds that the English who took over Surat drew up (one conspicuously mentioned but absent in my conversation with Hasmukhbhai) became central artifacts of caste.

**Kharwar Street: Heirlooms of Caste**

Perhaps the most prominent figure of the Surati Khattri community is Nagindas Kharwar (d. 1903). Nagindas was the president of the Surat Vankar Sahakari Sangh, a cooperative society of weavers. We encountered him earlier as the man behind the panchayat order that Khattris would only employ and be employed by other Khattris keep their caste. In addition to operating a multi-loom operation out of three adjacent gālas in Kharwar No Mohullo or Kharwar Street, Nagindas was involved in trading in Rangoon, which was at the time one of the most lucrative frontiers of the British Empire. The karkhanas in Kharwar Street were connected to Rangoon through Bombay, where the Kharwars had offices on Princess Street near Zaveri Bazaar.

I meet Nagindas Kharwar’s grandson, Ajay, by chance at a Khattri celebration during Uttarayan, the festival of kites. I am invited to the Bhanavala house, also a single gāla house, tall and slim, located near Hasmukhbhai’s karkhana. I am there because many members of the Khattri community will be in attendance; and it will provide an intimate setting for making contacts and conducting interviews. But I am also eager to see the old city alight with kites. Though many Khattris have undertaken renovations to modernize their homes—

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to add western toilets and kitchens—the gāla dimensions of the homes remain. Few of them are taller than three stories. During Uttarayan, Surat’s historic merchant neighborhoods can be seen from the karkhana rooftop ablaze in color.

When I arrive on the terrace, many of the younger members of the family are already there and have kites in the air. Songs from the latest Bollywood movies are blaring on loud speakers. Across the horizon of houses that stretch in front me, there are kites as far as the eyes can see. I meet Ajay Kharwar near the refreshments counter. He says that he has heard that I’ve been visiting Khattri karkhanas and am interested in the history of Surat. He says that his grandfather Nagindas Kharwar was a prominent member of the Khattri community. He wonders out loud about the merits of conducting interviews. He wonders how much people know about history. He says that I should consult a Gujarati-language history Surat _Sonani Murat_, in which his family features prominently. I explain to him that I am interested in homes themselves as sources of history; and that they are not described or investigated in any great detail in textual histories. I say that I am interested in experiencing the kind of history that is often ignored, like this moment on the top of the roofs of old Gujarati homes, when for an evening, the city exists in the sky. I point out that many historic families are gathered together and they are all flying kites. Ajay bhai, if he is not convinced by my argument, is at least amused, and invites me over to his family home, to have tea with him and his wife the following week. And weeks later still, when I visit Kharwar street, he goes into his offices—located in the rear of the karkhana—and opens a box of documents, which he produces as heirlooms of his family’s history.

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Kharwar Street is a narrow lane of wooden houses. Otlas, or raised porches, set the houses apart from the narrow street. Like Hasmukhbhai’s karkhana, Kharwar ni Haveli (Kharwar House) retains its historic shape. It is a three gāla space, constructed of stucco and teak wood. Ajay bhai uses the term haveli for the house rather than karkhana—even if functionally it may be accurately described as one—because though his family continued to operate weaving looms, they were also involved in trading to Burma and Japan. The term haveli them becomes an umbrella term under which karkhana is one aspect of a more variegated set of commercial operations, including finance and trade. Ajay’s father, Bimal, was born in Japan; and the house on Kharwar Street operated as a point of return. The house on Kharwar Street though very much a multi-purpose space like other Khattri karkhanas I visited was distinguished by more lavish interiors. Rather than a spare foyer or retail space like Hasmukhbhai’s karkhana, Kharwar House has a formal living room which Ajay bhai claims dates back to the time of his grandfather. Portraits of his father are hung on the wall.

Though now predominantly based in Surat, the Kharwars spent a large part of the twentieth century based in Burma and Japan. Though the Khattris were renowned for Zari fabric in the nineteenth century, in the twentieth century, wealthy Khattris like the Kharwars oversaw a shift to the production of polyester threads in high demand in South East Asia. Ajay bhai tells me that under his father’s stewardship, the family expanded their businesses in the early twentieth century. Building on trading connections that Nagindas made in Burma and Japan, Bimal began to broker the importing of weaving machinery for Khattris in Surat.

Still, the Kharwars remained dependent on the Khattri community for staffing their now far-flung trade network. Because of Nagindas’s endorsement of the Khattri ruling in 1906, even the production of cheaper cloth was dependent on historic methods of weaving
guarded within a localized, caste community. The importing of Japanese weaving technology and the trade in cheap piece goods depended on production processes in Surat. The house on Kharwar Street functioned as a point of orientation: a place from where the Kharwars could produce cloth, but also symbolically participate in religious and community events in order to access the marriage pool of eligible men and women for the reproduction of their family and weaving business. From what I observe during the Uttaryan celebrations, Ajay bhai is held in high esteem within the community. His daughter’s marriage into the Bhanawalla family has been viewed by others as auspicious and meritorious because of the work of the house on Kharwar Street that has stood as a marker of the family’s commitment to the community and to the city of Surat.

My argument centers on the role of heirlooms, historical objects passed down in families across generations. Heirlooms are compelling caste objects because they invite us to think about how histories of caste accrue in material things of the merchant home. The specific category of heirloom I am interested in is the colonial house deed or title, occasioned as the English conducted censuses of existing property relations in Surat in the nineteenth century.

When I return for a second visit to Kharwar Street, I am invited into the offices at the rear of the house. Ajay bhai removes a large wooden box from his desk. And then takes out a cache of documents. I initially assume when he tells me that he has old records that he is referring to account books that might help me to corroborate and interrogate the geography of the trade network that he has described. But as I shift through the crumbling file of the house deeds, attested by the seal of the British Empire, I find that I am in the presence of Ajay bhai’s most precious family heirlooms: evidence of ownership of the karkhana-havelis on Kharwar Street. It is significant that brittle paper, yellowed with age, and
not a shrine or a particular weaving loom, serve as heirlooms of the Kharwar family. Even as their fortunes took them to Burma and Japan, the Kharwars maintained their caste identity through the inhabitation of karkhana-havelis, attested by the new legal system inaugurated by English rule over Surat in the early nineteenth century.

Anthropologist Rosemary A. Joyce argues that “the concept of the house provides a way to link the interests of ethnographers attentive to the role of material goods in creating relationships between social actors, with the goals of archaeologists concerned with the ways histories accrue in material things, and through their anchorage in those things, facilitate the continuity of particular forms of social relations.”16 The title of the karkhanas becomes a kind of symbolic center for the Kharwars in the performance of caste identity. There is a tension between a narrative of arrival of the Khatri as itinerant weavers from the NWFP in the late eighteenth century and their contemporary narratives of themselves as a local community of Surat. The karkhana deed as heirloom brings into view the role the English East India Company policies of settling weavers into the abandoned port neighborhoods of Surat and creating a legal system that joined together the performance of caste with property ownership played in the creation of caste in a port-city.

These karkhana deeds are also compelling visual documents: they are a product of the attempts of the British government to impose private property codified through English law. They reveal the survey attempts that continued into the late nineteenth century to post factum grant property rights.

_Caste Under the Sign of the British Empire_

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As a visual document, the karkhana deed is composed under the sign of the British Empire. The header of the deed is the coat of arms of Great Britain, the lion and the tethered unicorn. The coat of arms reads: “Honi Soit Qui Mal Pense,” *Evil be to him who evil thinks,* and ribboned under the lion and the unicorn “Dieu et Mon Droit,” which is the divine right to rule. The history of this coat of arms dates back to the seventeenth century, to the marriage of a French Queen and an English King. The Latin used is of even earlier vintage tracing back to the twelfth century when it was used as a war cry in battle. Here, the coat of arm appears on a “Sunnud” (Sanad—land deed in Persian), which was issued to the Kharwars by the English collector of the Surat Municipality.

The connection between ownership of land and the symbolic representation of family is connected to a genealogy of royal kinship and warfare that spawned the modern nations of Europe. The intermarriage of royals across nation-states created a set of mutual alliances and interests to prevent war. The incorporation of the coat of arms into the insignia of the British Empire further internationalized European national history, imbedding a representational mode of family into an idiom of land ownership. In Gujarat, the emblazoning of the coat of arms in a mercantile idiom—on the land deed of a merchant home—spawned other visual and material forms of caste identity on the surfaces of home.

For example, this heirloom of caste echoes in the crest that is carved on the entrance of Kharwar House. The crest, a stylized English letter “K” was a key visual mode of representing the family business, which was registered variously as Kharwar brothers or B. Kharwar Brothers. Family as materially produced through the merchant crest emblazoned on the entrance to the karkhana-haveli was a key way in which Khatris gave their relatively recent caste identity the look of an identity centuries in the making. The visual continuity between the form of the crest of the British Empire and the merchant crest is evidence of
the forming of caste in the crucible of visual English enumerative and ethnographic efforts. The translation of a visual form to the material surface of the karkhana-haveli brings into focus how homes of capital, here in the shape of Khattri habitations of once abandoned banker homes, were central to the production of Hindu identities during the nineteenth century.

**Artifacts of the Census**

We can read the karkhana-haveli deed as an artifact of the census. Though it is dated April 24, 1872, property ownership was conferred by the Governor of Bombay post factum (figure 6.2). The property document appears to be the result of a survey of existing properties in Surat. The deed is composed in both English and Gujarati. Analyzed side-by-side, the two columns of the form reveal assumptions of both the emergent Bombay Presidency government as well as the spatial practices of weavers of who supplied the census-collectors information.

According to the cursive script adjacent to a sketch of the plot of land on the document, the property was historically owned by a Surti banker Balaji Veethuldas. Ramchander Moolchand, likely Nagindas Kharwar’s father, purchased the property from Balaji’s sons, Murlidhar and Khrushuram. The document reads: “Whereas his Excellency the Governor of Bombay in Council, with a view to the Settlement of the Land Revenue, and to the record and preservation of proprietary rights connected with the soil, has put in force, in the City of Surat, Bombay Act I. of 1865 and ordered the necessary inquiries connected therewith to be made, this Sunnud (sic) is issued to…” Part of the goal of these efforts was mapping the historic merchant neighborhoods of Surat for the purpose of municipal taxation. The document continues:

The ground above described is declared to be private property, and will, therefore, be continued by the British Government, without any objection or question as to
title, to whosoever shall from time to time be its lawful holder. The said ground and all buildings erected thereon will be subject Municipal taxation, and to any taxation, for local purposes affecting the whole District, including the City of Surat…

What is interesting about comparing the two columns is that the Gujarati language version is slightly different from the English one. The Gujarati language version reads more as an announcement of a new government. The Gujarati translation reads:

The above enumerated land’s ownership is resolved from here on out whoever the legal owner (kaydasar malik) of the property is they will not be disputed or involved in by the British government (angrez sarkar).

The Gujarati translation of private property is particularly instructive in this document. Rather than private property the document in Gujarati declares that the legal ownership of the property has been resolved. Rather than the nominal form of the word resolution (ṭarav), the document translates it as a past participle in verbal form. While the English document uses the term private property as a concept of English law, the Gujarati translation gives shape to the process through which karkhana-havelis have been granted to its residents as alienable property.

This land deed reinforces the conclusions of scholars like Nicholas Dirks, who have shown how caste was produced through an encounter between the British colonial-state. What is significant about this example is it suggests that this encounter also occurred through documents, which worked as material objects. Though the land deed itself bestowed property rights, in 2011—a hundred and thirty nine years after it was drafted—it was presented to me as a family heirloom, evidence of the historicity of the Kharwar karkhana-haveli. Mr. Kharwar was not curious about the contents of the documents; he presented the

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17 Sunnud (Land Deed), April 24, 1872.

18 Ibid.
documents to me as proof that his karkhana-haveli had been in the family for generations.

His claims about his family’s history in Surat do not match a linear sense of time, but rather he draws upon the symbolic power of the karkhana deed to project a kind of general long term. The temporal scheme of the heirloom/deed eschews the history of mobility Hasmukhbhai outlines and replaces it with a caste identity that lays claim to Surat’s old neighborhoods.

Figure 22. Land Deed (Sunnud) of Karkhana Property on Kharwar Street (Courtesy Ajay Kharwar)
The Singapore Connection

The wedding hall in Surat in which all Khattris consecrate their weddings is called Singapuri Ni Wadi. It is named for the Singapuri family who had businesses in Singapore, Jakarta and Melaka. Though the Singapuris eventually diversified their business, trading seafood, especially prawns and tea from South East Asia to Japan, they first arrived in Singapore to trade Jari. While in South Asian markets, Jari was used in Kanjivaram saris and borders, in South East Asia, Jari found its way into martial uniforms and in the dress, longyis, and slandangs (scarves) worn in local fashion.

I meet Sulochnaben Rupawalla (née Singapuri) in her home in Rustompura,\(^\text{19}\) once a neighborhood exclusively of Parsi merchants built around the warehouses and gardens of Rustom Maneck, who we encountered in chapter five. She was born in Jakarta to Farasram and Manharben Singapuri. She spent the first sixteen years of her life in Jakarta witness to the transnational rhythms of her family’s lives. Live many Khatri women, Manharben learned Jari weaving from a young age. Her own family was a prominent Khatri family who had karkhanas in Surat and Delhi. In Delhi, they owned a karkhana next to Hasmukhbhai Talia’s workshops in Chandni Chowk, the old market area in Mughal Delhi. When Manharben joined her husband Farasram in Jakarta, she started her own business, designing tops, lungis and slandangs for local consumption. She sourced the material from Delhi. She would live in her brother, Jawaharlal Jariwala’s karkhana; have the outfits woven in her parents’ karkhanas in Surat. In Jakarta, she employed artisans and taught them how to embroider Jari and embroider saris to sell on her return visits to Delhi and Surat. Manharben’s life and her painstakingly constructed weaving and trading business is one example of how Khatris put their karkhanas to work across oceanic space.

\(^{19}\) Sulochnaben Rupawalla, Interview, April 11 and 18, 2012, Surat.
Manharben began running her business alongside her husband, Farasram’s, already thriving business in Singapore. Farasram was born in Surat and traveled to Singapore to join his uncles Keshavram and Gangaram who were spread out between Malaysia and Singapore. The two brothers are enshrined in Singapuri ni Wadi in Surat in the form of garlanded marble statues (Figure 6.3). In Singapore, Farasram joined the lower rungs of his uncles’ operations where he learned the lay of the land. The business took him all over Southeast Asia and his daughter Sulochnaben tells me that it is during this time that he met Subhash Chandra Bose, the nationalist leader who was fund raising. Farasram was persuaded by Bose’s vision for a free India and supported his armed resistance. He joined other Chettiar and Gujarati merchants in donating large sums of money to the training of troops for the Indian National Army. Through Bose, Farasram socialized with the rising political elite of states that would become independent after World War II, like Indonesia, Burma and Malaysia. He would finally settle down in Jakarta where he managed to obtain a lucrative government contract weaving Jari lapels and insignia for the Indonesian police and army under Sukarno.
Figure 23. Sheth Sri Keshavram Singapuri, Marble Bust, Singapuri Ni Wadi, Surat. [photograph by author]
Sulochnaben remembers growing up in a lavish compound in a suburb in Jakarta. She was the youngest of eleven children. Their neighbors were also Gujarati, Vaishnavs from Rajkot who also traded textiles. Her parents threw grand parties in the winter months and socialized with Indonesia’s political elite. But during the 1960s, political turmoil in Jakarta and turn against foreign merchants made it an inhospitable place for the Singapuris. Sulochnaben remembers the fear that spread amongst Khatri families. They felt unsafe, and her parents did not let the children play in the streets unchaperoned. Sulochnaben remembers spending a lot of her years within the compound walls of her family’s plush home. Farasram’s uncles and cousins continued to trade in Singapore on Arab Street. But when Farasram died of a heart attack Manharben was forced to suspend her business and return to Surat with her children. Sulochnaben was married into the Rupawalla family at the age of fifteen at Singapuri ni Wadi, the marriage compound her uncles had built, a year after her father’s death. She never returned to Jakarta or Singapore.

Sulochnaben speaks English with a slight Indonesian accent. Even her Gujarati is quite different from the Surti Gujarati I am familiar with. She welcomes me into her karkhana dressed in a sarong. Though in her sixties, she looks at least a decade younger. Sulochnaben no longer weaves Jari, imitation or otherwise. Following in her mother’s footsteps she runs a thriving tailoring business, making a range of women’s clothing she learned in her mother’s home and then in Surat from her mother-in-law. She tells me: “My mother worked hard at her business and I work hard at my tailoring business.” She recently lost her husband this year. Her eldest son has helped scale her tailoring business. Her younger son is based in Singapore and is an architect. At the time of my interview in April 2012, he is currently in Dubai working on a project. Though Sulochnaben has never
managed to return to Jakarta or Singapore, she hopes that her sons will follow in the footsteps of their father and uncles. She says: “the future is not in just one place.” (sic)

Conclusion

The success of the Singapuris in translating their Surat-based Jari weaving operations into diverse trading operations across Southeast Asia began in the merchant neighborhoods of Surat, when they transformed abandoned banker homes into karkhanas, turning them into homes of capital, understood in its most capacious terms. The karkhanas concretized the strategies of mobility that itinerant weavers had developed across centuries. The portability of weaving looms and the multipurpose use of karkhanas for business and family life created flexible persons. The centralizing force of marriage relations, concentrated within the space of Singapuri Ni Wadi and the controlled and intertwined nature of gender and labor, ensured social reproduction was coupled with material reproduction (zari weaving). The localization of these various activities within the space of the karkhana created portable skills, which could be applied in different geographic locations and contexts. My argument is that these various threads of social life were bound together in the idiom of caste.

The three sites of homes of capital I examined in this chapter—the karkhana, the heirloom deed and the orientation of Khatri karkhanas (and havelis in the case of the Kharwars) to the Indian Ocean—offer unique sites for critically examining the emergence of caste Hinduism in Surat (and Gujarat more broadly). My historical analysis suggests that in mercantile Gujarat, the infrastructure of trade—merchant dwellings as multipurpose spaces (warehouses, workshops and apartments) as well as proximity to the wharf was a resource that Hindu itinerants drew upon to insert themselves into the political economy of the region. The karkhana is both witness and participant in this transformation.
Still, as Sulochnaben’s story bears out this history is also subject to the contingencies of human experience. Unexpected deaths and a fragile caste structure in which women were moved around based on the authority of senior males. Even if Manoharben ran a successful business, the death of her husband resulted in upheaval. The gender hierarchies inscribed within the space of the karkhana are reproduced across space and time.

If I began the dissertation by quoting the melancholic couplets penned by a Muslim poet who gave literary shape to the ephemeral quality of oceanic life in Gujarat, I end this final chapter by pointing to the ways in which the chronotopic home was a durable fixture that was drawn upon, again and again by itinerants. Rather than disappearing into history, as Asim’s couplets suggested was the path of mercantile lives, merchant dwellings were incarnated in various forms through the spatial and temporal labor of itinerants who mobilized them as capital. This is the cumulative sense in which I conceptualize “homes of capital.”

As the case of Khattri inhabitations should suggest, homes of capital were imbedded and drawn upon by various kinds of mercantile projects. Perhaps the most powerful one of them all was the kind of transformation witnessed in Surat, as Hindu itinerant weavers made a bid for mercantile identity by projecting belonging in the region through occupying historic banker homes and transforming localized weaving operations into transoceanic trading networks. Like the Muslims and Parsis who arrived in Gujarat six hundred or so years before them, Hindu Khattris did so by acutely honing the space-time of the dwellings they inhabited. But unlike them, they projected localized belonging in Surat by eliding their itinerant origins.
CONCLUSION

Chronotopic History

To conclude let me return to Asim Randari, poet of the ocean and patron saint of this dissertation. To recall, Asim travelled across the breadth of the Indian Ocean in the mid-twentieth century giving poetic performances (mushaira) in exchange for hospitality from merchant hosts, who he interviewed as the subjects of mercantile history. Not only this: Asim rolled up his sleeves--part anthropologist part historian--and amassed photographs and other itinerant objects that families kept as mementos, keepsakes, remembrances and tokens of their peripatetic lives.

It is worth pointing out that Asim’s travels through merchant homes of the Indian Ocean diverges considerably from the scholarly conditions of contemporary transregional research on the Indian Ocean, which continues to center largely on archival materials within the bureaucratic records of European trade companies or “continuous” textual sources that constitute an internally referential cannon. Presumably in the first case this is in part because of the transregional reach of the imperial archive of the English East India trade-company and its various colonial successor states (of which British India is one example). This vast epistolary archive has, no doubt, revealed important aspects of the Indian Ocean world from the late eighteenth century, even in ways that exceed the aims of their original authors as many of my colleagues in Indian Ocean studies have shown in their work. In the second case, I am thinking for example of Sebouh Aslanian’s book on Armenian merchants, which is based on a cache of correspondence and other textual materials that are internally
consistent and referential.¹ No doubt these approaches have taught us a great deal about merchants and their activities. And yet what I have tried to painstakingly examine in this project and what I resolutely insist upon in this conclusion are other kinds of densities that amass in repositories that as historians and anthropologists we continue to know very little about: repositories not necessarily structured around imperial communication and not always primarily made manifest in texts. Homes of Capital is my attempt to bring into view the coherent, patterned and nevertheless diverse ways in which merchant homes and dwellings were drawn up by Gujarat’s merchants in their encounters with the space and time of oceanic life.

In building an alternative geography for the study of merchants through merchant homes and dwellings more broadly on the coastline of Gujarat, my project is to place merchants themselves at the center of my analysis. Though scholars from K.N Chaudhuri to C.A Bayly have showed us the centrality of merchants to British India and the British Empire, we know little about how merchants themselves perceived their place in the world. In this project I have sought to address this question by exploring how Gujarat’s merchants imagined and placed themselves in relation to the Indian Ocean. As denizens of Gujarat’s major entrepôts, merchants were located at the center of Indian Ocean traffic. As is seen in the diversity of examples in the chapters of my dissertation, Muslim, Parsi and Hindu merchants assessed this positionality in a number of contingent ways that took material, visual, textual and affective form across Gujarat. I first glimpsed these forms, as Asim had on his travels, within merchant homes. In chapter 2, for example, I discussed the merchant homes of Rander, festooned with stucco ornament, which drew on the architectural idiom of

Palladianism. The architectural form of Rander’s homes, built by merchants active in Rangoon, Port Louis, Durban and Jeddah, brings into view the ways in which Rander’s merchants interacted with and reimagined imperial design in the British Empire. If Thomas Metcalf shows us a new kind of “imperial vision” as the British put sixteenth-century Palladian ornament to work in cities of the British Empire,² I argued that in Rander I found a mercantile Palladianism in which Randeri merchants deployed this new aesthetic mode of capital within a port-city society invested in itinerant origins linked to an Islamic ecumene.

In chapter 3, I explored how this (oceanic) poetics imbedded in built space, material culture, visuality and an affective orientation to terraqueous space was at work in Randeri (scholarly) modes of engagement with textual treatments of their port-city’s history. Drawing on the example of Asim’s analysis of (European) travel accounts of Rander, I examined the dimensions of a mercantile longue durée that is closely connected to the built environment, especially around the space of historic mosques. My research suggested that these sites invite semiotic labor. Historic mosques localize and materialize itinerant arrivals—the building of a mosque being the marking of “first contact” settlement—in port-city sites that are spaces of social congress and (Islamic) ritual practice. The transformation of Rander’s twelfth-century mosque into a Palladian building is one example of how oceanic capital was mobilized in efforts of imaginative translation and interpretation. I am left wondering: what transformation is wrought on Palladian design itself as it is drawn up in mosque architecture in a port-city of Gujarat? If Palladio designed and built mansions for the Venetian mercantile elite in the Veneto “terraferma” inland to display new wealth in a terrestrial idiom,³ what do

³ Ho, *Graves of Tarim*, xxi.
we make of the power of Palladian ornament when it is put in the service of reenergizing itinerant Islamic debris that points to a history that precedes its genesis in a “terraqueous” Indian Ocean region? For one thing such citations, which move agilely back and forth in time, raise important questions about the spatial and temporal dimensions of Indian Ocean Gujarat. In addition, while scholars have emphasized how the arrival of European trade-companies destroyed Islamic networks from the sixteenth century as gauged from transformations inscribed in trade data—and we certainly see this in the Portuguese attacks on Rander—a focus on Rander’s Palladian homes and mosques suggest other venues in which political economic changes were made manifest and contemplated such as Gujarati-language texts, architectural form, material culture and social practice. Coordinated by Randeri merchants, who donned the hats of architects, designers, construction managers, fund raisers and donors, the renovation of mosques and urban space more generally reveal the multiplicity of ways in which merchants imagined and produced their place in relation to the Indian Ocean during the age of empire, incorporating it into older and other histories.

Asim, though perhaps the most prolific of Rander’s merchant society, at least in a literary sense, was not the only Randeri to speculate on merchants, port-cities and the Indian Ocean. As I show in chapter 2, Rander’s contemporary merchants were and continue to be deeply invested in the Indian Ocean, which they know intimately as a world of both peril and possibility. The existence of a generation of resident merchants is itself imbedded in historical events on an oceanic scale, namely the emergence of a nationalist Burmese nation-state and the deportation of Randeris based there for generations. In the past, with a bulk of merchants abroad, in Port Louis, Rangoon, Jeddah, Singapore, Durban and elsewhere, homes of Rander were locked for most of the year, as I show. They were only opened during perennial visits to fast for Ramadan, celebrate Eid or attend weddings. Rander’s homes
accrue historical weight and become what we might call archives or depositories because they were locked up. Their interiors, shrouded in bed sheets during the year come to be littered with the remainders of journeys. They were not spring-cleaned or purged for the detritus of daily life. On the contrary, this detritus was given semiotic weight which turned ephemera and debris into mementos, heirlooms and material signs in general of travel and lives lived elsewhere at other times. Merchants I interviewed in Rander interpolated visual and material objects within historical narratives of merchant mobility, which were themselves produced through a gesture to the materiality of home. Across the chapters of the dissertation—including the final two examining merchant homes in Bharuch and Surat—I explored the complex created between merchant narratives and their semiotically saturated homes as examples of the production of chronotopes in Indian Ocean Gujarat.

I developed this argument further in chapter 4 by showing how a shared oceanic poetics and mercantile longue durée rooted in such chronotopic homes were also at work in Gujarati-language texts produced through Parsi mercantile materials that collected within homes. So another key argument of the dissertation is the imbrication of “oceanic texts” and the material debris of merchant mobility in terraqueous Gujarat. My goal was to show how beginning in the nineteenth century, with the energizing of Gujarati-language printing, this chronotopic history began to come onto paper. Asim’s text, penned in the mid-twentieth century, was part of this process of bringing things onto paper. The wider cannon was composed of Gujarati-language texts produced in Parsi presses and by a range of Gujarati-language writers for a Gujarati reading public. Such texts were imbedded within a broader topography in which homes and dwellings more broadly were given semiotic weight and importance.
My argument is that such compendia also took on the shape of “homes of capital,” by serving as depositories to store the detritus of merchant mobility. Not only this, such compendia created a venue within which to contemplate, peruse and imagine this mobility as well. In the case of the Parsee Prakash, which relied heavily on the semiotics of death and the obituary form to organize material, I argued that this quality of home took the shape of a tombstone of burial. Since Parsis practice excarnation, the pages of the Parsee Prakash took on the value of burial sites in which Parsis could mark and commemorate a mercantile history in which their ancestors had shaped the region of Gujarat more broadly, even as the British and their Gujarati mercantile allies placed sole emphasis on Bombay. This analysis marks a sharp departure from existing historiographical narratives that continue to almost exclusively examine the Parsis through English-language materials and characterize them as a “colonial elite.” This reliance on English-language sources has obscured the important diglossic dimension of Parsis and Gujarati merchants more generally, an issue I address in this dissertation. I argue that Parsis said different things in English and Gujarati. And that paying attention to this diglossia expands our understanding of the ways Parsis negotiated colonialism by showing how they shaped oceanic Gujarat. As I develop this dissertation into a manuscript I plan to broaden this dimension of my analysis by incorporating more genres of Gujarati and English texts. This dual—even triple and quadruple—quality of Gujarat’s merchants is a theme that runs through the dissertation, as merchants maintained multiple spatial and temporal affiliations, at home in the Indian Ocean more broadly.

It is worth emphasizing my argument that Gujarati itself is as an oceanic language that is connected to Arabic, Persian, Portuguese and English in addition to Sanskrit and Hindi. If Gujarati is classified by linguists as a “modern” language that was codified through the production of dictionaries in the early nineteenth century, my research asks us to view it
in its oceanic dimensions. My analysis of the Parsee Prakash, newspapers and the genesis of Gujarati-language printing more broadly suggests the topography of this language formation. Homes of capital, here in the form of printing presses, libraries, reading rooms and merchant homes, were central to the emergence of Gujarati. Parsi merchants built homes and other structures including schools, dokhma, agiaries and so on to shape pathways across Gujarat to a newly emergent British Bombay. During fieldwork I found—and I plan to add this material to the book manuscript—many of the plaques that endowed these buildings were in the Gujarati language, embedding it materially and semiotically in the surface of homes of capital. My goal and argument was to show how homes of capital were interpolated in language, texts, and other kinds of material circulations across Gujarat. These are also examples of the many routes merchants traveled to make sense of (remember, memorialize, ponder, commemorate, yearn for and even read) Gujarat’s place—and by extension their own—in the Indian Ocean world.

The first half of my dissertation developed three connected concepts: oceanic poetics; longue durée materiality; and the approach of topographic reading. These three concepts amount to an ethnographic method for doing research and asking new questions about mercantile culture in Gujarat. In the second half of the dissertation I used these categories to analyze examples of merchant homes, understood as chronotopes of oceanic history.

In chapter 5, my aim was to think about the merchant family in chronotopic terms as its boundaries shifted between the late eighteenth century and the present day. While I talk about “love” in this iteration of the project, moving forward I want to conceptualize the boundaries of the merchant family thinking with Ann Stoler of sentiment and carnal
Looking back on my narrative, it appears to me that what we see is shifts in the merchant family—no doubt underwritten by British law as I show drawing on Mitra Sharafi’s work—structured in gendered terms with Malti, Cyrus’s Hindu wife, at its center. Moving forward I want to ask: what does the Gujarati merchant family look like from the point of view of a person who is considered beyond its endogamous boundaries? And even more: what happens to a merchant family when the transgressive relationships on which it depends to give endogamy a hard edge get incorporated into it? What kind of new mercantile union does this make for? Furthermore, what reliance do such notions of family have on the chronotopic home?

One of the underlying arguments of this dissertation is that Gujarati merchants share common itinerant origins. Many of Gujarat’s merchants arrived from elsewhere, from Arabia, Persia and Northwest India, locations they kept in play. In Chapter 5, which picks up in the late eighteenth century and centers on a single home following it to the present day, the merchants who featured in the Parsee Prakash were integrated players in the colonial economy. My goal was to show that merchants used the home as a resource to navigate it. In Chapter 6 which moves to a different example, in eighteenth-century Surat my investigation of home as resource turns to the abandoned home. Ashin Das Gupta and Lakshmi Subramanian gave us the evocative picture of a port-city that emptied of its merchants. Ghulam Nadri and Douglas Haynes complicate this by showing us that the British resettled

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weaving communities in evacuated Surat. My ethnographic research ties this historical literature on Surat to the broader work on merchants in South Asia by recognizing these weavers as itinerant Khattri merchants who were part of the circulations C.A Bayly, Stephen Dale and Claude Markovits identified in North and Northwest colonial India. Despite this clear history of mobility, a majority of contemporary Khattris I interviewed espoused a resolute localism, diverging from the figure of “local cosmopolitan” advanced in Engseng Ho’s work. And yet, Khattri weavers also authored oceanic trade routes connected to Japan and Southeast Asia through their trade in precious Jari. And so I see again a duality, in this case less a diglossia, than an insistence on choosing one way of being located rather than another. In the dissertation I proposed that situating this duality in the developing enumerative identity of caste shows how merchant homes and chronotopic imaginations were drawn into terrestrializing identities that asserted control over he colonial and later post-colonial urban space of Gujarat. That Khattri women weavers are lynchpins in weaving workshops that are located within historic homes warrants further reflection and analysis but certainly shows how the question of gender remains a central one to consider moving forward.

To return a final time to Asim Randeri, it seems to me that much of what I have written and what remains to be done depends on the hospitality of those who welcomed me

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into their homes. I learned from Asim the value of knocking on a door and being invited in as both research method and sociological characterization of the dynamics of an oceanic society. Asim’s couplets performed across the Indian Ocean also shaped a “call and response” form of sociality. In the introduction I described this project as ethnographic history, which I amend here as chronotopic history. Put a different way this project is an exercise in anthropology and history. Using Asim as a model, this project attempts to do anthropology-history in the mode of hospitality. The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines hospitality as “the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors and strangers.” As I show in this dissertation, hospitality also shows a mode of inhabiting a home that is not yours, a way to keeping cultural difference in play while considering a shared oceanic region like Gujarat. Asim’s couplets, which elicit a response from the audience, is one example of a poet in a foreign land and the kind of exchange that becomes possible in such a mode of hospitality. I would say that anthropology and history have this to offer as a team: one calls and the other responds.
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BIOGRAPHY

Ketaki Pant was born in Bombay in 1984. She has been educated at the Bombay International School, Mumbai; Emirates International School, Dubai and Kodaikanal International School, Kodakanal. She received her B.A. in Historical Studies and Africana Studies at Bard College in 2006 where she was awarded the Marc Bloch Prize for the Best Honor’s Thesis in Historical Studies. In 2005, she was selected for a semester of study at the Central European University, Budapest, Hungary. She has been trained as an anthropologist at Harvard University, where she received an M.A. in Social Anthropology in 2008. She will receive a PhD at Duke University in the Department of History in 2015. She is part of the inaugural class of the Anthropology-History certificate program at Duke University. She is the recipient of a number of grants and awards, including a Wenner-Gren Foundation Dissertation Fieldwork Grant, an American Institute of Indian Studies Junior Fellowship, a Harvard South Asia Initiative Research Grant and an Ernestine Friedl Research Award from Duke’s Women’s Studies program. Her article “Gujarat’s ‘Rangoon Wallas’” was published in *Himal South Asian* in 2014.