

## Muslims in Gujarat and South Africa: State, Religion, Gender

(notes from the fields: not to quote!)

### Introduction and methods

This paper presents in cursory form my current ethnographic Ph.D. research on the migratory and religious practices of Gujarati-Muslims, particularly Sunni Vohras, in India and South Africa. It is embedded in the work and sponsored by the research group "Religion and Politics in Pre-modern and Modern Cultures" at the University of Münster/Germany ([www.religion-und-politik.de](http://www.religion-und-politik.de)). My supervisor is Prof. Helene Basu who did extensive research among the "African" Muslim Sidi communities in South Gujarat and with Hindu bards in Kutchch.

I use the method of multi-sited fieldwork and literally "follow the people" who migrate from the one continent to the other and eventually back or somewhere else. I examine the cross-currents of money, ideas, pictures and religious practices on 'both sides'. The particular interest lies in the tensions and chances, which the migration of friends, family members and co-villagers brings for the Sunni Vohra villages in India, especially for the norms of religious and gender related behavior. These are the two fields where the differences between the Indian and South African society might be the most obvious. I further choose the method of "Close participation" (Spittler 2001) which prefers natural conversation over structured or standardized interviews. That includes living within a family in India, respectively in South Africa in a bachelor's flat, for that is the most common habitat of the arriving migrants until they might marry. The first and prime contact in South Africa was the unmarried eldest son of my Indian guest family in the Bharuch area in Gujarat. I had taken courses of Hindi in Germany and picked up Gujarati in the village so I could and can at least explain my presence and project, although I'm always aware that it's "not enough".

And of course the method of 'following them' faces limits: Gujaratis and specified Bharuchi Sunni Vohras migrate not only to South Africa but indeed favor to settle in UK (Bolton, Leicester, London), USA, Canada, Australia, Dubai, Saudi and other 'western' and 'Gulf' countries. Also within the African continent you can find Sunni Vohras from the Bharuch area in countries such as Mozambique or Malawi. As I observed, also the multiple migration to various (African) countries with or without temporary returns to India happens. So the 'following' is limited by resources in time and money what shapes the focus on two regions in South Africa, where the majority of Bharuchis cluster. Both sites lie within former Homelands, Transkei and Venda. The spatial distance of the newcomers from the "Indian hub" in Durban is striking. But while in the former Transkei the settlements and shops are rather dispersed and families are scarce the Venda site offers another impression: in the last 15-20 years a multi-generational community developed which provides not only two Mosques and a Muslim cemetery but also announces in the local newspaper its demand for a Gujarati speaking teacher at the Madressah (religious school). The fact of the two Mosques there is not only due to the size of the community but also reflects a religious separation between two strands within Indian Islam. Further it is notable that there are rather Eastern Cape dwellers who visit Venda, which they call 'Little Gujarat', than vice versa.

In that paper I will briefly present my findings from India, concerned with the attitudes and expectations towards migration. Further I will give details about the South African research site.

## India: Land of Departure

### Muslim – Hindu context and tradition/modernity issue

In today's India Muslims generally face a Hindu majority and are, respectively feel, underrepresented or misrepresented in political negotiations and within the mainstream media. The Partition of 1947 with the foundation of Pakistan and the mass migration of Millions of citizens on both sides pushed Indian Muslims into a position of defense towards the Hindus. The changing of Names for cities or public facilities occurred not only recently, e.g. in Bombay/Mumbai, but also took place in my research site, some 40 years ago already. The Muslim village 'Mustafabad' was changed officially into 'Tankaria', where nevertheless the Muslim institutions keep that old Muslim name proudly. Time and again violent, so-called 'communal' riots between Hindus and Muslims break out and highlight that nowadays essentialized relation, the last big one in Gujarat 2002. From the nationalistic Hindu point of view the Muslims per se represent a foreign element in the sacralized country of 'Mother India' whose 'arms were chopped' with the foundation of Pakistan, respectively Bangladesh (Basu 2004: 233). But Muslims and Islam belong to India since the very first Islamic century and there were centuries of recognized Muslim rulers at least in the Northern and North-Western part of the subcontinent. During the reigns of these Muslim rulers Islam spread in Gujarat mainly through wandering holy men, Sufis or Pirs, rather than through institutions. The Sunni Vohras in Southern Gujarat are said to be converted from the non-armed castes at the turn of 14<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> century (Bombay Gazetteer Vol. IX, II 1990 [1899]: 58). The area has today many Muslim-majority villages and was perceived as a safe haven during and after the riots in 2002.

Muslim practices in Gujarat include for many adherents the special greetings for the Prophet Mohammad after the compulsory prayers ('Salami') and the visiting of Dargahs, which are in South Africa called Kramat or Mazaar. These shrines of holy dead people were and are sites of religious celebrations as well as court for juridical matters and are often situated within a kabhrasthan, that is the Muslim cemetery. The spiritual power of that dead Pir is attributed to his pious live and closeness to god. Often there are miracles attributed to them, which are sometimes filmed and distributed through [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com). It is believed that they are not dead, but that a spiritual power remains. The believers seek assistance in their communication with God and often compare their prayers at the dargahs with the use of stairs to reach the top floor of a house. It is also a common practice to choose a living Pir as a spiritual guide for the whole life. The Pirs are of noble descent and trace their genealogy back to the Prophet himself. The most important Dargah in India is that of the Sufi Saint Moinuddin Chisthy, situated in Ajmer/Rajasthan. Hundreds of Thousands of pilgrims visit that shrine every year. But the followers are not only Muslims. The local Mujawars (hereditary shrine keepers) claim a rate of 80% (!) Non-Muslim visitors, which they say to recognize in their mode of praying. Although that number might be exaggerated it is obvious that at any Dargah you go, might it be in Gujarat or in Durban, you also find Hindu adherents. For the Muslim followers that is rather a reason to be proud, for it 'proves' the power of their saint. Although the veneration of Saints is also popular and possible in other parts of the Muslim world (Senegal, Sheikh Bamba) in South Africa it is seen as a genuinely Indian cultural practice. That set of beliefs and practices faces opposition from various sides. It appears in the shape of Hindu nationalist modernizers from the municipality in Baroda/Gujarat, who destroy an old Dargah for reasons of "traffic regulation" in 2006 as well as in various modes of Islam, which condemn what they call superstitious or heresy. The inner-muslim antagonism can be observed in the building of separate mosques and in small groups of wandering Muslims who visit their brothers on Saturday afternoons to teach them about the 'true' Islam.

Goolam Vahed gives an overview of the development of the conflict in South Africa from the 1960s. The ideological differences might be expressed in class relations as well for the meaning of education and learning/teaching Islam comes central at least to the 'reformers' (Vahed 2003).

What's the point in that for the gender relations? Firstly one has to admit, that Muslim women in India are discouraged from visiting the Mosques. The separation between the genders is generally very strict and the Mosques are conotated as male zones while the recommended space for women is within the house of her father or husband. So secondly the Dargahs can serve them as a site for prayer and relief and there are even Dargahs, whose Saints and Mujawars are female (Basu 1989, Bawa Gor's sister Mai Mishra, Sidis / Gissnar). The reformers, particularly Tablighi Jamaatis, might stress that social separation between the clearly defined genders as well. On the other hand they introduced a practice of 'Talim', that is 'kitaab-reading' sessions, which they claim to hold for the education of women. Women play active roles as community leaders within that circles and are measured firstly at their piety. Another practice might influence gender norms as well. In the Tablighi Jama'ats program men or women might leave their families for a prescript time to deepen their faith and spread their belief to co-Muslims. These preaching tours can be joined by any Muslim, who can afford the expenses of travelling. Barbara Metcalf reported a Jamaati Islami critic saying, that this movement would turn the Indo-Muslim men "abnormal" for it promotes non-confrontational and bashful strategies for its work of invitation to Islam (Metcalf 2000: 45). That is also what I heard in my own research: "You can't argue with them, you can only avoid them." The Tablighi Jamaat supports "[...] what may be core religious values but are also culturally defined as quintessentially feminine." (Metcalf 2000: 50). The Tablighi Jamaat is an Indian religious movement as much as the veneration of the Saints is. But in contrast to these practices the Jamaatis succeed in presenting their method and program as „modern“ in the promotion of equality of believers and specifically gender equity.

The Indian research site is notorious for its strict anti-Jamaati attitude. Into that specific village people from other villages would come to conduct their marriage rituals, leaving their Jamaati Maulanas behind. But the religious picture of most of the other villages around is less homogenous and in the Diaspora the beliefs taken for sure are contested. In the next step I reflect on the relationship between the Diasporas and the villages of origin before I briefly sketch the South African site.

### Global Gujarat: considerations about migration

In India the State of Gujarat has been for a long time an economical and migratory hub with an extensive coastline and many harbors. The trade relations across the Indian Ocean stretched historically towards the Arabic Peninsula, Persia, Turkey and as far as Eastern Africa (cf. Pearson 1976). Also religious ideas spread and in Gujarat today there is a strong presence of Parsees, Jains and Brahmanic Hindus.<sup>1</sup> That State is supposed to be the most developed and most globalized in India (Basu 2004: 237).

Within that context the old town of Bharuch lost its glory as trading port with the rise of Bombay in the last century. The Narmada River which crosses the city once played another mayor role for the local economy. Today the region is known for its power plants and chemical as well as

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<sup>1</sup> Their values of vegetarianism and purity made Gujarat is a "dry state" where the trade, production and consumption of alcohol is prohibited.

pharmaceutical industries. Bharuch and the chosen village of departure are situated at the National Highway 8 which leads from Mumbai to Baroda. Sunni Vohras from South Gujarat keep their transnational relations and migrations since at least 100 years, as the Bombay Gazetteer suggests (Vol IX, part II, pg. 59 f.). And in South Africa there are still newcomers from the sites with long time relations to Durban as Kholvad and Kamboli. These villages as well as the ones in the Bharuch area developed with the investment of the migrants' money. For example the enlargement or restoration of dargahs, the building of mosques, water tanks, village roads and schools are at least partially financed by them, while the government seems to retreat (cf. Walton-Roberts 2004 for the Punjab). Generally there is not much confidence in the Indian State; respectively the evil is identified in Gujarats chief minister Modi, whose officials played an active role during the 2002 riots. The less the government is to trust, the more the influence of the NRIs (Non-Resident Indians) money is needed, felt and aimed for. The estimations have it, that in every second house of my Indian research site at least one family member is abroad. What that means in terms of money tells us the World Bank, which claims that the whole of the remittances to India increased from \$ 80 million in 1970 to \$ 3 billion in 1995 to reach in 2008 the amount of \$ 30 billion.<sup>2</sup>

### India - South Africa - UK

Accordingly, among the young male migrants-to-be, the value of a specific country to migrate to, is measured by the strength of its currency in relation to the Indian Rupiah. Number one among all whom I asked was UK, because for 1 British Pound one might exchange 80 Rupees. Items such as Shirts of British soccer clubs show off to the co-villagers, where the relatives earn their money. But also for the less fortunate it is desirable to have at least the soccer clubs emblems on their mobile phones. The glorification of UK is further perceivable for example in the symbol of the Tower Bridge. A picture of that bridge is not only hanging besides pictures of motorcycles in bachelors meeting rooms but also painted outside on newly built houses. In the indoors case it is additionally 'tagged' by two of the young men, who put their signatures on the picture. That is explained to me explicitly an act of virtual ownership.<sup>3</sup>

Besides currency the issue of security plays a major role for the dreams of a new life in the Diaspora, as the Hindu-Muslim antagonism spreads an awareness of the potential loss of life and goods through violence. This comes particularly onto stage in considerations about South Africa. In relation to the UK, as destination for migration South Africa is seen as less favorable because of the high rate of crime. In the Indian villagers imagination the business is generally good there, but 'the black people' (Khaliya loko) are to be afraid of. "They kill you for 50 cents" tells Munaf, one re-migrant from Venda, who is now waiting in India for his UK papers. He finally came to marry an Indian girl who is situated in London. She is the sister of his brother's wife with parents from the neighboring village in India. In another case the successful Gujarati shopkeeper got a South African passport after years of residence – only to apply with that one for papers from UK. Some stories also go the other way round but indicate the same. Ibrahim applied and failed three times for a UK visa and finally went to South Africa 'desperately' as he says. But the procedure to reach South Africa via travel agent also turned out to become much more expensive and difficult than it was in the mid 1990s when the immigration into the homelands might have started. On the other hand, among the ones

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<sup>2</sup> [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPROSPECTS/Resources/334934-1110315015165/MD\\_Brief8.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPROSPECTS/Resources/334934-1110315015165/MD_Brief8.pdf), (16.03.08). Additionally one must think about the non-official (Muslim) banking system 'Hawala', which is legally restricted but especially for the fast transfer of small amounts nevertheless in use.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly that marking happens vice versa virtually: NRIs denote their houses of origin at [www.wikimapia.com](http://www.wikimapia.com), presenting themselves as „king of bolton“ etc.

who choose South Africa, there is a clear awareness that the opportunities to run an own business are much better here than in UK. The local shop assistants play the part some of the Gujaratis themselves fear to play in UK: underpaid manual labor.

### South Africa

I suppose that in the context of that seminary, held in Durban, it is not necessary to go deeply into the history of Indian migration to South Africa. Here I want to make the point that the “new” migrants I worked with oppose themselves to the established ones, although or maybe because they might depend on them partially as suppliers for their stores.

In one case it was explicitly a behavior change that stunned the ‘newcomers’: for them it is not common but possible to visit a music club in a bigger city of Eastern Cape Province, to sit and watch the crowd. To dance there is generally not approved, respectively only confessed in private talk: “Dancing is not in our culture” they would say. In the Gujarati Muslim culture shame is not only attributed positively to women and girls but to young men as well. When I was with them and noticed two supposed ‘Indians’ on the dance floor, I was told that these **must be** ‘Local Indians’, “not like us”. The opposition goes further when the pros and cons of a marriage with a 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Indian woman are discussed among the 1<sup>st</sup> generation bachelors. Some of the ‘bosses’, the wealthier and more established ones among the newcomers, are married to that kind of woman and it is difficult to distinguish if or how successful they had been before the marriages and how much that relationship boosted the business. Although the secure residence status achievable through such a marriage might be a temptation the discussion goes into another direction: “these women” are only looking for money, respectively a “naukar”, that is a waiter. In the cases keenly observed by the bachelors, the husbands are asked to bring tea to their wives on Sunday mornings and, worst of all, the wives try to turn them religiously. Turn them away from the belief in Saints and dargahs and make them feel bad about their “cultural habits” and their “poor” families. That is not acceptable for at least two of the Sufi followers who say to stay aloof from that kind of temptation, which the women provide. For there seem to be vivid match making efforts from their side, offering contact details of other SAI women to shop assistants of their husbands, e.g. through the phone chat website [www.mxit.com](http://www.mxit.com).

So the majority of the Bharuchi newcomers I work with stay not only geographically far from supposed ‘Indian’ South African centers but also mentally. They choose in both cases regions where also few white peoples reside, what might happen primarily due to business interests. For there is less competition in the markets they aim for.

### Business in South Africa

Typical items for Gujaratis in South Africa to trade are mobile phones and all kinds of accessories as well as locally produced furniture, hardware and plastics for households. Gujaratis are often found in small supermarkets, but rarely in the clothing business, which is dominated by Chinese and African merchants. While the electronic goods find their way through Pakistan, the plastics are as well produced in as imported from India. Shopkeepers might also be said to import additional workforce from India, preferably from their families or villages of origin. In a working environment without written contracts but with responsible jobs these are the parameters to rely on at first hand. Included is the concept to form a community which also relies on shared religious values. If there are only ‘useless’ family members in the Diaspora an aspirant can also ask a friend for help in the first

months. In case of a successful and trustworthy relationship the more often than not very young shop assistant might open his own shop after some years. For that he receives interest free credits or stock from his former boss or others. Business partnerships between two aspirants in similar position are also quite common, although the validity of this is possibly estimated differently among the partners. Another option is to stay in a comparatively tense free assistant position, e.g. when the salary is felt to be right or the chances for own success felt to be too small.

In that network the figure of the 'boss' is that of a modern hero in the thoughts of his 'followers' who pay him respect (vgl. Walton-Roberts 2004, Mand 2006): He endured hardship and now he knows everything and everybody and is experienced with all sorts of problems. He provides not only jobs and the tricks how to do them for the newcomers, but in one way or another also shelter and food. His is the power to rule over his assistant's time, place and conduct and sometimes they still obey to him when they open their own business. He keeps the spirits of the homesick high and controls also the moral standards to adhere to. In several ways he replaces the family and especially the father left behind in India. He is supposed to have valid papers, to have left the refugee status behind. But that does not mean automatically that he invites the shop assistants formally or provides work permissions etc. for them. It is a common topic that help with the paper work is promised by the one or the other boss but nothing happens.

### State

Generally I want to make two points which need more attention. My ethnography describes the multiplicity of choices, challenges and options in the various stages of the first generations multi-directional migration processes. The Gujarati migrants per se are neither only helpless male or female victims of globalisation nor simply multi-national capitalistic entrepreneurs. The once popular divide into migrations push- and pull factors does not seem to figure for it gives a too simplistic view. The migrants have various backgrounds and a wide range of formal education – from illiterate to college absolvent – and the time they have spent here when I meet them first is between 1 week and 25 years. The South African or formerly 'Homeland' state in the guise of administration meets these diverse economic and social backgrounds, while the Constitution guaranties freedom of religion. State's regulations remain a defining force or rather shadowlike companion for the individuals and their status within the transnational relations as the migrants high concern about 'paper work' indicates. For making the migration a 'success' not only refugee, residence, shop or work permits are needed but also police clearances, driver's licenses, bank accounts and eventually marriage papers. Beside that the economically sustainability, e.g. having a paid job or running some kind of business and establishing trustworthy relations with suppliers, creditors and debtors, and customers is the second task to fulfill. There are hybrids such as successful businessmen who possess bank accounts, driver's license and cars but still fear the 3 months obstacle posed by the Refugee Reception Center in P.E. which might the next time not extend the necessary paper. For them a temporary return to India, e.g. for marriage or dying parents, is difficult to obtain, for they have to fear facing problems at the re-entry. At least in the Eastern Cape the application for Refugee Papers seems to be the most common way. In the more established Venda site the arrival with Visitor's Visa is more likely, papers which are 'upgraded' within some months into work permissions (that is: residence permission with a specified working place). These different relationships with the South African State at the arrival identify the Gujarati newcomer and the according duties and rights accompany him or her throughout their stay.



### Religion

The interrelated next point to develop in the ethnography aims at the variations within the Muslim practices and ideologies in India as well as in South Africa. The construction and representation of the migrants' identities is strongly related to the idea of Muslimness which gives the migrants a code of conduct and a community, to which they can opt to adhere. Then they are provided with interest free credits or stock for example. To focus more on Indian Islamic practices means to enter a highly contested field for there is an ongoing differentiation between Sufistic and for convenience's sake called "reformist" ideologies. I avoid the term 'Sunni' for the Sufis as well as the Jamaatis who claim that label and I'm not theologian enough to decide about that. The appearances of that differentiation are described by Goolam Vahed and I touched on that only superficially here. I discussed it the other paper, which I had sent to Keith earlier (cf. Transnational religious practices of Muslims in Gujarat and South Africa, Julia Koch, Erfurt 18<sup>th</sup> June 2009). Within these ideologies and practices gender norms are negotiated what is particularly relevant in the context of migration, respectively living in a Diaspora. For South African gender related behavior patterns; especially the "free" conversations create a "shock" for Indian Muslim newcomers as I heard several times and the bachelors use different strategies to cope with that. The most accepted way is to stay aloof from African women, but hidden relationships occur nevertheless. That topic needs further inquiry.

### Literature

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