



Asia

Transregional trade and traders: Situating Gujarat in the Indian Ocean from early times to 1900

Edited by EDWARD A. ALPERS and CHHAYA GOSWAMI

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Gujarat—the region of western India that borders the Indian Ocean—has long been a site from where scholars have traced novel geographies and histories of inter-Asian connections beyond those exclusively linked to Europe. The region's port cities, including Khambhat, Bharuch, Surat, and Diu, were part of long-distance trading networks linking Africa and Asia. Gujarat's agricultural hinterland, watered by rivers like the Narmada and Tapti, was famous for its cotton harvest and textile production. Because of its strategic location in the Indian Ocean and its lucrative economy, Gujarat was variously targeted and occupied by the Portuguese, Dutch, and British starting in the sixteenth century. After the 1947 decolonisation of British India, Gujarat was annexed into the new nation-state of India. Through this long history, the region of Gujarat has continually been shaped by shifting long-distance associations with places around the Indian Ocean and beyond. This is why Gujarat has been a charged location for historians interested in understanding global trading networks, especially those across the Global South. *Transregional Trade and Traders*, edited by Edward A. Alpers and Chhaya Goswami, brings together a new collection of essays that offer fresh insights on Gujarat's fluid histories prior to 1900.

The volume consists of 15 essays focused on 'products and people as they oriented themselves to the Indian Ocean trade' (p. 7). Chapters by scholars, including Lakshmi Subramanian, Chhaya Goswami, Edward A. Alpers, Phillippe Beaujard, Himanshu Prabha Ray, Ranabir Chakravarti, and Samira Sheikh provide insightful surveys of key historiographical and methodological issues in the study of Gujarat from its earliest recorded history through the nineteenth century. These are set against detailed case studies. Nishat Manzar's chapter 'Adjusting Output to Demand: English Weavers and Collateral Service Providers' Equation with the English Merchants in Gujarat in the Seventeenth Century', for example, reveals the entwined relationship of weavers and merchants, describing how long-distance demand inflected textile production in early modern Gujarat. The textile market, Manzar argues, was weighted against weavers. Through a skillful reading of printed English colonial sources, Manzar shows the quiet acts of defiance that notified states and English merchants of weaver agency. In a separate essay, Radhika Seshan reveals the extent to which Gujarat's merchant networks reached into interior South Asia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, delineating the terrestrial—and not only oceanic—dimensions of the region's trade routes. Ruby Maloni's essay provides yet another map of Gujarat, following the circulation of pepper and spices to chart linkages between Gujarat and ports in Southeast Asia. The volume concludes with a set of chapters that take up questions of diaspora—inquiring into how

Gujarat's commercial currents inflected Gujarati merchant communities, their commercial networks, and diasporas.

This edited volume has its roots in the third conference of the Darshak Itihas Nidhi, a research foundation based in Gujarat, which brought together scholars from Gujarat, elsewhere in South Asia, and the Western academy in the port city of Surat in 2015. The chapters capture the richness of this intellectual context. Taken together they describe in detail how the ocean impacted and shaped the region across a long history and changing political contexts, putting pressure on the map of India—and its contemporary state boundaries—as the predominant way in which we picture Gujarat. The focus on an extended time frame across the ancient, medieval, early modern, and modern periods is tempered by attention to individual cases. What stands out in the end is the centrality of maritime commerce and the methodological difficulties of assessing its histories from Gujarat across challenging archives, oral histories, and state-making projects that have variously emphasised and disappeared the ocean. The chapters in different ways voice a shared sense of history and the need for new ways of thinking about the past.

Yet, perhaps most significant is a well-known insight that emerges in a new light in this volume, which is the persistent way that the changing values of commodities across the Indian Ocean like the 'discovery' of lapis lazuli in Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka in the medieval period or the demand for Gujarati textiles in East Africa more than a millennium later reverberated in Gujarat. In this volume, the frame of the *trans-regional* is not only one that bridges regions: it puts pressure on our concept of the region itself. We are pushed to see the region as a reciprocally constructed space that emerges through the actions of artisans, agriculturalists, merchants, state officials, and the circulation of commodities across changing regimes of value.

This book makes an especially significant contribution to Indian Ocean studies and inter-Asian studies through its uniquely wide-ranging chapters focused on Gujarat's oceanic, coastal, and hinterland histories. Essays offer micro-studies of Gujarat's links across the ocean, from the coffee trade anchored in the port of Mocha to textile circuits bringing Gujarati cloth to central East Africa to wider circuits of shipping that placed Gujarat at the centre of oceanic trade routes. By juxtaposing chapters that incarnate various scales of analysis (oceanic, regional, and local), the volume significantly nuances the way we understand Gujarat's location in the world. *Transregional Trade and Traders'* focus on historiographical and methodological issues makes it ideally suited for teaching in upper-level undergraduate classrooms and graduate seminars on the Indian Ocean or Global South connections. It is especially noteworthy as a model for bringing together scholars from across the world and rooting intellectual exchange in Gujarat itself. Insightful and expansive, this book enriches our understanding of Gujarat's past and reminds us of its potential as a site of critical intellectual exchange.

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