Identity of Indian Traders in contemporary Dubai

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Abstract
Indian merchants and traders have had a longstanding presence in the Persian Gulf region and particularly in the Trucial States (roughly corresponding to today's United Arab Emirates). However the tribal rooted and neoliberal model of citizenship installed by the UAE government, has meant that Indians despite their long presence and continuous commerce in the country have not received citizenship benefits from the government. However, Indian Hindu traders interviewed by the author reveal that this arrangement benefits them as they view Dubai as a cleaner, better India. An ethno national diaspora, they harbour no strong desire to return to India and owe their loyalties to the delocalised transnation that they have formed in the city of Dubai.
***Keywords**: Trucial States, Dubai, Neo Liberal, Tribal, Indian Traders, Identity, Ethno National, Transnation, Delocalised*
***Methodology**: Interpretive, Analytical, Oral history interviews*

A History of Indian Traders in the Gulf and UAE in Particular

Trade between the Gulf ports and India dates back to prehistoric times, evidenced by discoveries of ancient jars and seals with the Indus script in Oman around 2100 BCE. The Gulf region had a longstanding mutually beneficial relationship with the Indian subcontinent. Staples like rice, timber, and cotton cloth were in constant demand in the Gulf, especially in the Arabian Peninsula which was largely desert. Conversely, India sought Gulf products such as dates, Central Asian horses, and Iranian silk. By the mid-9th century, oceanic trade routes between Arabia, India, and China had become established. Monsoon winds facilitated sailing in both directions throughout the year. This led to the emergence of ports and entrepots along the West coast of India, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf. These regions traded goods like silk, paper, ink, and cinnamon from China, as well as sandalwood, ebony, and coconuts from India, along with various nuts and fruits from the Muslim world.

In the 19th century Dubai the Al Fahidi fort and its main mosque was the focal point of the entire port of Dubai. The Indian community consisting of — Khojahs and Hindus— was confined to this quarter, which had about 50 shops and 100 houses. Deira, on the east side of the creek, was at the turn of the 19th century the biggest quarter housing Arabs as well as Persians and Balüchis, in 1,600 houses. The *souq* of Deira had about 350 shops, and was thus the biggest market on the Trucial Coast. Here Indians functioned as financiers of the pearl diving and trade and as small shopkeepers and retailers bringing the small port of Dubai its necessities. The rule of the Dubai sheikhs was premised on making Dubai an attractive destination for traders. Dubai had no customs facilities for most of the 19th century. In 1905, the existing five percent customs duty was also abolished and Dubai was declared as a free port. The lack of productive and supportive hinterlands provided even more of an impetus to the cities of the Gulf littoral to become free ports since that remained a sole source to maximise their revenue. Al Sayegh says about Dubai, “The largest foreign community in the region was made up of Indian merchants. The effect of all this was that India had the major share of the Coast's foreign trade.” In Dubai, after 1865, an alliance of

Indian traders developed a system of financing pearling expeditions and using the revenue from those sales for transporting goods from Bombay to Dubai. The custom duties accruing from the ships and boats arriving at the Dubai harbour and the tax levied on pearling boats in the season was the only source of the rulers' income before the discovery of oil and the air agreements in the 1930s. Indian retailers were the most visible faces of the Indian community in the Gulf in the 19th and 20th centuries. These included shopkeepers, jewellers, builders etc. They were the people who sold the essentials of daily life from pencils to spices, tea and foodgrains to the local populace and it is through them that Indian influence found its way into the material culture of the Gulf ports, permeating everything from food to design.

The UAE Government's Citizenship Structure

After the proposed closure of British bases in 1967, the UAE wanted to maintain recent development progress following independence from British rule. The seven Trucial States united leading to the formation of the contemporary UAE. Post-independence, the UAE used its petroleum wealth to establish robust support systems for citizens. The UAE, along with Kuwait and Qatar, exemplifies rentierism in the Gulf, offering extensive disbursement systems for citizens. This challenges conventional understandings of governmental systems. In this rentier state setup, Indians in Dubai, regardless of economic security, are treated as exceptions to neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, as conceptualised by Ong was "a new relationship between government and knowledge through which governing activities are recast as nonpolitical and non ideological ones that need technical solutions. " The UAE government employs technologies of subjection, regulating populations for productivity. The crux of neoliberal governance lies in politics guided by market logics, allowing mobile citizens with valuable skills and capital to acquire citizenship-like benefits. This combination of neoliberal citizenship and tribal-rooted political systems suits the UAE government well. Decision-making and state-building in the Trucial States were rooted in Islamic and tribal customs like *shura*, which involves consultation, and *ijma*, which emphasises decision-making through consensus, a process involving both the ruler and community leaders. Thus the roots of the political system were based on long established tribal customs, which did not involve immigrants the right to participate in the body politic of the nation. People of all nationalities are welcome to contribute economically, benefit from civic facilities, and accumulate personal wealth. However, there is no pressure to assimilate into the UAE's national identity. Immigrants are not expected to adopt Emirati culture. Instead, the neoliberal governance system encourages people to maintain their own cultures, socialisation patterns, and ways of life.

Thus Indians were valued as traders who conducted business and contributed customs income without disrupting the balance of power in Dubai. They were excluded from certain benefits and political participation, serving only as beneficiaries of Dubai's longstanding free trade policy. This arrangement suits Indian traders in the Gulf, aligning them with the category of mobile citizens with both capital and skills to thrive in Dubai.

Living in Dubai, thinking of India: Perceptions of Identity among Indians in Dubai

Vora has mentioned how in Dubai, Indians challenge the conventional understanding of diaspora in various ways. Firstly, they simultaneously have and haven't completely "settled." They've established specific communities that are both connected and distinct from India. They are and weren't acknowledged by

the efforts of the Indian state to integrate its diaspora into the nation when this process began in the early 2000s. They aren't a minority population, but they do exist within a racialized and economic power structure alongside those considered native. Furthermore, Dubai, in many respects, isn't truly "elsewhere" due to the intertwined histories of power, migration, and cultural exchange across the Indian Ocean. Additionally, two significant elements of diasporic identity in academic literature—nostalgia and hybridity—are largely absent from the narratives of Indians in Dubai.

Ashwin Ghaghada, a jeweller from the Soni community in Gujarat sees himself as Indian even today. "Y*ahan rehke Indian humesha Indian hi rahenge.*" He says that unlike the UK or Canada which offer passports and visas to immigrants after they fulfill a mandated period of stay or meet other requirements, no one can consider himself Emirati since that is not possible. Moreover, anybody coming from India would not consider themselves out of place since it is so heavily populated by Indians. As mentioned above the Trucial States and following that the United Arab Emirates ruled out the option of providing passports of citizenship to foreigners, especially those of non Arab origin. In this situation Dubai becomes a more attractive prospect for Indian merchants, most of whom are religious and culture conscious individuals. There is no pressure in Dubai to assume an 'Emirati' identity or way of living. Languages spoken by members of the Indian diaspora range from their native mother tongue (which can be Gujarat, Kutchi, Sindhi), to Hindi which may be spoken with those who speak the language to English which is Dubai's lingua franca. Most of my interviewees socialised comfortably within the Indian community at large and enjoyed their time with their own communities most. These cultural and linguistic enclaves offer Indians the sense of fraternity and belonging that they need to feel at ease living in Dubai. For Mukund Vaya, a jeweller involved in making exclusive designs for an elite clientele that visited his store only on appointment basis, Dubai offers the "best of both worlds". By "worlds", he refers to the amenities and luxuries of the West coupled with the familiarity and comfort of Indian culture.

Lalit Karani describes himself as an Indian and Bombayite even. His perception of identity is still rooted in his childhood and happy memories of the rains and times with friends and extended family in Bombay. "Our children used to come to Bombay and it was unfortunately always the rainy season, and when they would go down everything would be dirty and wet. We have grown up there so the rains don't matter to us." he says. Lalit recalls this with fondness but there is no longing for a return to this beloved Mumbai in him. For him Dubai is not so different from Mumbai. It is a cosmopolitan city which accommodates a multiplicity of ethnicities, allowing everyone to set up their own cultural spaces. Like Mumbai, Dubai too doesn't have a homogenous culture which necessitates everyone learning a singular language or mode of being. Like Mumbai, Dubai too offers the opportunity to grow and level up professionally if one is talented and resourceful. Like Mumbai, Dubai offers a cornucopia of choices in dining and recreation, ranging from picket friendly Indian cafes and restaurants to mid range family diners and upscale fine dining options, nightclubs and bars. Lalit lives in Emirates Hills, a posh gated residential community far away from what once was the heart of Dubai, the old Creek. He too has moved there from his first home which was in the Al Fahidi area bordering the Dubai creek. For Lalit Dubai is an ideal home, the place where he has made his fortune. And Mumbai is a short flight away, which he admits takes lesser time to reach than the time it

takes for him to commute from his home to his office in Dubai's famous traffic.

The geographical and cultural proximity between Mumbai and Dubai and frequent flights between Dubai and major Indian metros makes India immensely accessible for Indian traders especially, with their wealth. Many of my interviewees reported travelling to India atleast once a year, if not more. There are hundreds of flights daily between Dubai and various Indian cities and it is not difficult at all to fly between the two countries anymore. Mumbai and Dubai alone are connected by 24 daily non stop flights.

At this point it becomes important to mention the significance of Mumbai. Most of my interviewees have homes in Mumbai. Mumbai is perceived by diaspora people in the Gulf as a suitable place to have a home. It is cosmopolitan, has all the amenities that their wealth could buy, including cheap house help, food delivery apps, malls and shopping centers, and a vibrant global food culture. Falzon has remarked on how global Sindhis treat Bombay as their cultural heart. He says, "During family and business visits, sites which are anything but central and certainly not primordial homelands, periodically and situationally become 'cultural hearts' in that they serve as nodes within the translocal network which is the Sindhi diaspora. These manifold centres, of which Bombay is the most important and the least shifting, are the lifeblood of the Sindhi diasporic imaginary." While has made this remark about Sindhis in particular this pattern is seen as common across my interviewees. Narendra Sadhwani, who is a former insurance executive, makes it a point to visit Bombay every year. Hailing from the suburb of Thane, he recalls with great fondness his neighbours in the *chawl* (a communal living residential structure) that he grew up in. Lalit Karani on the other hand mentions that his children don't share his fondness for Bombay. For his children, who are settled in the USA and UK, Bombay is a destination to attend weddings, go shopping, live in the best five star hotels and then return back to their chosen homelands. It holds no emotional significance, it is not a repository of good memories, holds no prospects for further education, investment or employment and certainly is not a place they aspire to return to.

My interviewees often spoke of Dubai in various phrases such as being a "clean India". Dubai is second home to Arvind Bhatia, a 'cleaner Mumbai' with a much higher standard of living. Dubai is famously clean and efficiently run. It has a municipal body, which vigorously ensures most public spaces are litter free with a combination of regular cleaning and fines as deterrents to littering. The World Population Review ranked it 28th in the world's safest cities to live. Mukund Vaya a jeweler who specialises in catering to exclusive, appointment-only clients opines that Dubai offers a level of safety and security that is difficult to emulate even in the West. He says he is always worried if his daughter is out in the UK, USA and India, but not in Dubai since it is the safest of them all.

Arvind Bhatia called Dubai his 'second home' that is to say that after his hometown Mumbai, it is his second home. For Jayesh Suru, in marked contrast, Dubai is his first home and India is second. One key reason binding him to Dubai is that his business, a profitable one, is run with relative ease in Dubai, which would be difficult in India, a place which is still perceived as difficult to do business in. This view was shared across the entrepreneurs I interviewed. India was seen as still ruled to a great extent by red tape and the inability to get licences or any other official work done without paying substantial bribes at every level of approval was seen as a hindrance to their ease of doing business. On the other hand Jayesh

also acknowledged how Dubai is "artificial" in the sense that its various comforts like air conditioned buses, metro and malls were causing health problems to people, whereas India allowed for a healthier lifestyle. But even then he says, "*Aadhe se zyada life to nikal gaya, toh we are* Dubaiites" (More than half our lives have been spent here, so now we are Dubaiites")

Conclusion

Indian businessmen in Dubai can also be characterised as an ethno-national diaspora given that they still identify Indian as their homeland or ancestral land in some way. Sheffer has defined the ethno-national diaspora as " a cultural social- political formation of people who actually are united by the same ethnonational origin and who reside permanently as minorities in one or more host lands". While Indian merchants in the UAE may not be minorities in terms of nationality, the other features of the definition still apply to the group. This is a group that still proudly identifies itself as Indian, carries out rituals and practises of belonging that anchor them in their ethnic and religious cultures and maintains contact with the homeland in some way or another.

However, according to them they do live in a sort of a 'India of their own making' in a sense. Their repeated characterizations of Dubai as a 'clean India' and their continued socialisation in their own ethnic circles, patronage of Indian restaurants and entertainment modes, coupled with geographical accessibility of India through cheap flights means that there is no sense of 'missing' the homeland as such. For them Dubai is as good as a replacement to India. Very few among my interviewees view Dubai as a foreign location that is different from their homelands back in India. For them India is a repository of cultural and spiritual values, practices, and meanings which are easily transmitted across the Arabian Sea through social media, films, music, religious pilgrimages and travel. India is a site for fond nostalgia, associated for most of my middle aged interviewees with simpler times. Their patterns of contact with India included annual visits to monitor small investments made in the country, to attend weddings of close relatives, and leisurely visits to various tourist sites in India. Some of them continued to hold property in their native towns while most reported having a property in the cosmopolitan, affluent Bombay.

However, few if any of them felt the need to return to India. Appadurai's notion of a delocalized transnation can be applied suitably to the Indian mercantile diaspora of Dubai. Appadurai speaks of a delocalized transnation that is formed when members of a community leave their homeland to become a diaspora collectivity that only retain ideological linkages to the homeland and whose first loyalties continue to remain with this non territorial transnation, more than with either their place of settlement or the homeland which they left. Indian businessmen continue to hold Indian passports, keep an active interest in developments in Indian politics and business and maintain some semblance of connection to their native towns or to Bombay. However, they hold no aspirations of going back to India. They now owe their loyalty to the 'non territorial transnation' that they have created in neoliberal, multicultural Dubai.

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