



# Mobility and the Region: Pathways of Travel within and beyond Central Gujarat

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## Abstract

A rich body of historical and anthropological scholarship has critically interrogated the making and remaking of ‘Gujarat’, exploring not only the political and social contestations around the formation of Gujarat as regional territory but also the articulation of distinct regional identities in various parts of the region and by various ‘minority’ communities. This article contributes to these discussions through a case study of a transnational community of Gujarati Muslims, Sunni Vohras from Charotar in central Gujarat, drawing on travel-along ethnographic research with a migrant visiting his ‘homeland’. The tensions brought about by the unfolding politics of Hindu nationalism in post-2002 Gujarat have influenced how mobile members of this group reproduce social relations in a transnational social field and cultivate social and material ties to the region. Conceptualizing the region as constituted by various kinds of mobilities, and paying special attention to social relations and social–economic practices, the article demonstrates how a regional homeland can be uncovered through ‘travel-along’ ethnographic research.

## Keywords

Region, mobility, transnationalism, Muslims, central Gujarat

‘It’s hot’, Idris comments as I open the door of his car and install myself next to him.

‘Still you always come in April,’ I reply. ‘Last year also I met you in April. Why is that?’

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‘April is good for business. You can meet people. There is social life. People like to spend time on the streets, especially in the evenings, sometimes till late at night. In winter, the people here feel cold so they stay inside the house, especially in the evening. Anyway (laughing), I am used to the heat; it doesn’t bother me; it takes the fat off!’

This conversation took place in the town of Anand in central Gujarat. It marked the start of an intensive day of travel-along research, on which I build in this article to raise questions about the politics of making and remaking of the region from the transnational perspective of a migrant visiting his region of origin.<sup>1</sup> Idris Vohra is an overseas Indian. He has lived in the UK since 1999, where he works in the production department of a pharmaceutical company and sometimes as a driver. In Gujarat, he takes on the role of a businessman. We were introduced by a common acquaintance who thought him a worthy informant for my research project on migration and transnational ties among Sunni Vohra Muslims in central Gujarat. At that time, Idris received me in the grand villa of his family in Anand town and explained that he was taking a ‘sabbatical’ from his working-class life in the UK to spend six months doing business in Gujarat. Coming from a relatively wealthy Vohra family of landowners, traders in agricultural produce and real estate brokers, Idris wanted to get more involved with the family business because his father had then recently passed away. During that year, we met several times, both in Gujarat and in the UK, developing a relationship between a curious anthropologist and a sharing interlocutor. As part of these interactions we also spent a day in his car, touring the region around Anand town and exploring the multiple landholdings of his family in the past and present.

That day, and at other times, Idris talked about the ‘art of networking’ and about how community politics and business were interconnected, both in Gujarat and in the UK. He complained that there are many ‘groups’ in Gujarat, which makes business challenging, but he also talked about ‘friends’, especially friendships across caste and religious community boundaries. He mentioned a group of men he meets frequently in his hometown in the UK, who also come from central Gujarat but belong to the (Hindu) Patidar community, whereas Idris is a Vohra (Muslim). He suggested that the cultivation of relations across community boundaries requires skill and social labour, but he also seemed to derive a sense of virtue from this relational embedding. He affirmed that ‘it is politicians that divide the community, nothing else’, making clear that in his view the ‘community’ encompasses both Hindus and Muslims. Through this articulation, he was upholding the notion of an inclusive regional community identity and thereby challenged the exclusive Hindu nationalism that has become prevalent in contemporary politics in Gujarat.

Mobility can be a key entry point to understanding processes of regional formation. This point has been made in an earlier scholarship on ‘the region’, but has taken on entirely new meanings in contemporary South Asia where local, translocal, trans-regional and transnational flows of people and resources intersect to produce dynamic spatial imaginaries and realities (as outlined in the introduction to this special issue). This article builds on a specific set of discussions that conceptualizes the region as constituted by various kinds of mobilities and interconnections, connecting scholarship on the region in South Asia with discussions

of 'homeland' in transnational and diaspora studies, to develop a particular way of thinking about mobility and the region that focuses on the pathways of travel through which a series of places and people become interconnected. This article draws on a 'travel-along' ethnographic research methodology to arrive at a 'bottom-up' understanding of a region from the perspective of transnational migrants. I illustrate this method by describing how I followed the individual 'pathways' traversed by Sunni Vohra Muslim migrants like Idris.

The case of Idris shows that even within the contemporary scenario of communal politics in Gujarat, various kinds of social and economic alliances between Hindus and Muslims continue to exist, not only within Gujarat itself but also overseas, among those described as the 'Gujarati diaspora', who meet each other in their places of settlement and construct transnational networks with other Gujarati migrants in different parts of the world. Some of these migrants also remain involved in land investments and other kinds of business in the region of origin, travelling back and forth, and thereby continue to be actors in processes of spatial and social transformation within Gujarat. In the process, regional identities are being reproduced as well as questioned and reworked.

I draw extensively on the case of Idris in this article, as his case presents an opportunity to think through why and how some Sunni Vohras in the UK purposefully endeavour to cultivate an inclusive regional identity encompassing both Hindus and Muslims, and what kind of social labour is involved in the maintenance of a regional identity overseas. Not all Sunni Vohras in the UK are that keen on maintaining close ties with their region of origin or with other migrants from the region—some have become discouraged by the intense politics of Hindu nationalism of recent years, which has found its way into their social lives even in the overseas context. To understand this diversity of views and orientations, I pay attention to the politics of community, caste and religion, as well as class, occupation and transnational investment practices, in order to unravel the sociocultural and political as well as economic aspects of region-making.

Theoretically, the article builds on the literature on the forging and reproduction of 'regions' and 'homelands', revisiting an earlier body of scholarship in South Asia that views the 'region' as constituted by mobilities and circulations, and incorporating more recent work on the region as relational. More specifically, the article analyzes a particular kind of region-making that emerges through mobility and interconnections, and demonstrates how a regional homeland can be uncovered through 'travel-along' ethnographic research. In this way, the article reveals how a region is being reproduced as well as reworked within a transnational social field, which in turn shapes the practices by which migrants remain embedded in the region and contribute to shaping its transformation.

## **The Making of Gujarat and Charotar**

Historians and anthropologists of Gujarat have examined, in rich detail, how the region was forged over time (Sheikh, 2010), how the recently constructed 'idea of Gujarat' eventually came to be perceived as a natural geographic unit (Simpson, 2011;

Simpson & Kapadia, 2010), how this idea came to be confined to a particular kind of (religious) community (Sud & Tambs-Lyche, 2011), how it rests on a selection of notions from other more varied cultural and political histories (Simpson, 2011, p. 2), and how officially promoted views of 'Gujarat' have been challenged or destabilized from the margins (Ibrahim, 2011).

Historians have highlighted the complexity and dynamism of the sociocultural worlds that existed in the various landscapes that later came to be described as 'Gujarat'. Societies emerged at the confluence of interconnected actors, including merchants and sultans, saints and patrons, townspeople and peasants, goddesses and pastoralists, kings and bards (Spodek, 1976; Tambs-Lyche, 1997). In medieval times, according to Sheikh, identities could not be fixed because 'the entire edifice of religion, trade, and politics was conceptually and institutionally dynamic' (2010, p. 175). Rulers faced the challenge of regulating and administrating a complex society without losing the dynamism that was the foundation of its prosperity and forged a regional identity not by enforcing homogenous ethnic or cultural values but rather by allowing multiple voices to be heard simultaneously and in dialogue (Sheikh, 2010, pp. 175–186).

Special attention has been paid to the figure of the merchant (*bania*) in Gujarat, who functioned as a kind of social glue between distinct geographic zones and social groups, forging economic links between ports and markets and between villages and capitals (Spodek, 1976, p. 30). Trade networks have historically been interlinked with a wide variety of seaports across the Indian Ocean (Simpson & Kresse, 2007) and with various overland routes of pastoralists and pilgrims, so that a wide range of intersecting mobilities encouraged shifting patterns of social exchange. The Charotar region in central Gujarat, part of a corridor region with a fertile, populous space carved out between natural boundaries to facilitate trade and mobility between the Indian Ocean and the north of India, saw numerous merchants settling along its trade routes and urban settlements (Sheikh, 2010, pp. 27–32). While the merchant communities of Gujarat have been linked with religious sects, and merchants often acted as patrons to temples or shrines, the religious marketplace of Gujarat has been highly complex, with coexisting, competing and overlapping systems of practice, which allowed merchants to remain affiliated with a variety of sects or to modify their affiliations depending on circumstances (Sheikh, 2010, pp. 174–175).

How did such a dynamic, multi-layered and interconnected society become one that is sharply divided by religious identity and receptive to extreme forms of Hindutva ideology? This puzzle has been prominently on the research agenda in recent decades, especially after the 2002 pogrom-like violence against Muslims in the state, a dramatic episode marking a paradigm shift whereby the Gandhian 'land of non-violence' (Sud & Tambs-Lyche, 2011, pp. 320–321) became a 'laboratory' of the Hindu nation (Spodek, 2008), where the stereotyping of a familiar 'Other', the Muslim, is observed both in contemporary representations and quotidian practices (Ghassem-Fachandi, 2010). Many scholars have discussed the remaking of Gujarat into a 'Hindu' region and have tried to explain the changing cultural climate and communal violence in terms of underlying political and economic developments (Berenschot, 2009; Breman, 2002, 2004; Dhattiwala &

Biggs, 2012).<sup>2</sup> Several have drawn attention to the alternative narratives of the region that persist among 'minority' communities of different kinds, making visible experiences from the margins and thereby challenging the assumptions and elusions from which the idea of a 'majority' has been constructed (Simpson & Kapadia, 2010, p. 16; also Ibrahim, 2011).

The region of Charotar<sup>3</sup> (where the story of Idris is located), has prominently featured in discussions of Gujarat. It is part of the densely populated 'mainland' or 'inland' of Gujarat, considered distinct from the coastal regions of Saurashtra and Kutch in terms of its political, economic and social-cultural history, has been home to some of the richest and most powerful groups in Gujarat and has often attracted more government and private investments than other parts of the state (Spodek, 1972, p. 426). 'Charotar' is translated as a beautiful or pleasant land (Rajyagor, 1977, p. 1), known for its fertile and well-tilled soil and its productive agricultural development characterized by a long-term process of commercialization, industrialization and economic diversification (Rutten, 1995, pp. 70–86). The region has received ample academic attention from historians, who have highlighted the early involvement of its peasants in resistance movements against the colonial government (Bates, 1981; Hardiman, 1981), and from social scientists, who have studied processes of rural transformation (Gidwani, 2008; Rutten, 1995), caste dynamics (Pocock, 1972) and religious practices (Pocock, 1973). Due to the long history of international migration from the region, scholars have also taken a keen interest in the maintenance of caste and ethnic boundaries overseas (Tambs-Lyche, 1980), the transnational connections between migrants and their villages of origin (Rutten & Patel, 2003) and the relation between migration aspirations and marriage status calculations (Tilche, 2016).

Scholars of central Gujarat have been highly sensitive to how localized dynamics of caste and class are involved in the making of a regional identity. This has generated particularly rich accounts of the regionally dominant community of Patidars (or Patels), the main landowning caste (who are the 'dominant caste' in many villages although not all; Pocock, 1972, p. 26), who gained a favourable position in the region under colonial rule when they were assigned the task of collecting revenue in most of the Charotar tract (Bates, 1981, pp. 782–783; Hardiman, 1981, p. 38). The Patels also benefitted significantly from land reforms after Independence (Sud, 2010). As they turned to market-oriented agriculture and carved out a niche for themselves in trade and other forms of capitalist enterprise, Patidars transformed from a peasant caste into an entrepreneurial caste with a mercantile identity (Tambs-Lyche, 2011, pp. 345–347).

As a regionally dominant group which is also internationally mobile, with historical links to East Africa, the USA and the UK, Patidars have yielded considerable power over the way in which the Charotar region has been imagined and produced, both in popular and in scholarly representations. Several scholars have highlighted the Patidars' historical identification with 'their' villages, an identification affirmed through a complex marriage system that reproduced a strong ideological link between the village, landownership and the Patidar community. Hardiman argues that in the process of Patidar caste consolidation, the

village came to be seen as a collective of Patidar brothers, in which 'the Patidars of a village *were* the village', whereas the other castes were considered to be 'merely there to serve' (1981, p. 43). These links between village, land and caste persist even after migrating abroad: for instance, Patidar village associations are maintained in the UK (Rutten & Patel, 2003), and donations for the home village are collected during events such as an annual 'village day' where the overwhelming majority of participants tend to be from the Patel community (Dekkers & Rutten, 2011, p. 13). In such events and practices, a sense of nostalgia for one's 'roots' works as an ideology around which projects for the 'development' of the village are organized.<sup>4</sup>

While these considerations point to a strong and persisting link between (sections of) the Patel community and their home villages,<sup>5</sup> in fact, Patels are in a minority in many of 'their' villages. We know relatively little about how the 'region' is being imagined by others, however, a few scholars have sought to understand the perspectives or affiliations of other communities to the Charotar region. Chaturvedi's historical account of the peasant community known as the Dharalas provides such an alternative view on the Charotar region, exploring not only the Patidars' consolidation of power but also the silences within these narratives and highlighting the ways in which Dharalas felt exploited and tyrannized by their Patidar co-villagers and protested *against* the nationalist ideologies propagated by the Patidars during the colonial period (Chaturvedi, 2007, pp. 1–2). Another alternative vision is provided by Heitmeyer (2009a, 2009b), whose accounts of the relatively unknown Sunni Vohra community do not reveal protest or political conflict but rather the persistence of a shared regional identity between Hindu Patidars and Muslim Vohras, even after the 2002 violence in Gujarat. She found that Vohras in the town of Sultanpur<sup>6</sup> continue to cultivate a sense of regional belonging despite developments of communal violence and exclusion in the surrounding cities, and that they demonstrate a 'strong sense of identity within the local landscape' (Heitmeyer, 2009a, p. 32) as well as close ties to their Patidar neighbours through a shared mercantile ethos.

In what follows, I further examine the case of the Sunni Vohra merchants of Charotar by taking the ethnography out of the market town where Heitmeyer based her research, to venture overseas. This effort to study Vohras from a transnational perspective might shed light on how regional identities are currently being reworked not only in Gujarat but also within the Gujarati diaspora, and on how those reconfigurations are then reverberated back in the Charotar region. How have Sunni Vohras maintained or altered relations with and within the Charotar region in the process of migration and settlement? How have their alliances with Patidars as the 'dominant' caste of Charotar been revised in this process? By attempting to answer these questions, this article contributes to discussions on the region in Gujarat, which have paid careful ethnographic attention to various narratives and cultural notions in the making of a region, but which have not always incorporated the contemporary experiences of transnational migrants, whose sustained social–economic interconnectedness with the region provides rich ground for further ethnographic inquiry. Moreover, examining the transnational perspective of Sunni Vohras might be a valuable addition to existing



studies on migration from Gujarat, which have tended to focus almost entirely on the experiences of a dominant caste.<sup>7</sup>

## Remaking the Region in a Transnational Social Field

How do people come to think of a series of places as if they are somehow connected to each other, thereby forming an entity known as a 'region'? How do people come to identify with such an entity, as a site of belonging and community? This article draws on earlier and recent work on the region that puts migration and transnational linkages centre stage, to ask what we can learn about the making and unmaking of a 'region' through the lens of mobility and connectivity.

Scholars of transnational migration and diaspora have addressed the question of 'the region' through the notion of a 'homeland', following the recognition that a 'myth of the homeland' is often an important site of diasporic imagination and a binding force in processes of transnational community making (Axel, 2002; Clifford, 1994; Cohen, 1996, 2009; Safran, 1991). The homeland is understood here as located in the minds of the migrants rather than a geographical unit or an empirical 'fact'. Cohen writes about 'an idealization of the putative ancestral home' as a creative act (1996, p. 515), while Axel describes the homeland as something that exists 'within a community wherever it lives' (2002, p. 426; emphasis in original). An important insight that can be drawn from discussions of the 'homeland' is that multiple spatial affiliations interact in complex ways. In some cases, migrants' regional identifications have been replaced by national ones, for example among Polish migrants in the USA, who arrived with a sense of belonging that 'extended no further than the *okolica*, the local countryside' and who gradually replaced their localized affiliations with a national self-identification as 'Polish Americans' (Morawska, 2011, p. 1033). In other cases, regional or village/hometown affiliations remain relevant alongside national and religious identities (Upadhyya & Rutten, 2012). Studies on South Asian migrants have highlighted the enduring importance of community and caste-based identities in the diaspora (Ballard, 1990; Taylor, Singh, & Booth, 2007) and the immense diversity of migration trajectories, religion and destination contexts (Bal & Sinha-Kerkhoff, 2005; Oonk, 2007). In this article, I contribute to unravelling some of this complexity.

An older tradition of scholarship recognized 'the importance of the phenomena which belonged neither to the abstract "level" of the nation nor to the slightly more concrete and visible level of village' (van den Muijzenberg, Streefland, & Wolters, 1982, p. 1) and aimed to bridge the gap between anthropological micro-analysis and the national-level analysis typical of (political) economists and historians. In this earlier work, regions have been thought of as geographical areas imbued with social meanings that differ between social groups and from issue to issue, depending on historical circumstances (Bertocci, 1975; Skinner, 1964/1965; van Schendel, 1982). A shared scholarly concern has been how to move beyond an idea of the region as a geographic 'container' or territorial unit (Tambs-Lyche, 1994, pp. 731–732), to ask instead how regions are socially constructed or politically produced (Cohn, 1987).

Recently, geographers have been rethinking the region from a 'relational' perspective, viewing regions as created and recreated through networked social relationships, including those that extend beyond the geographical space of the region (Allen & Cochrane, 2007; Paasi, 2001; see also Introduction to this issue). This idea of the region as coming into being through various kinds of mobilities, pilgrimages, exchanges and interconnections has proved productive in scholarly work on Gujarat (Ibrahim, 2011, p. 441; Spodek, 1972, pp. 418–419; Tambs-Lyche, 1994) and elsewhere in South Asia (e.g., Feldhaus, 2003; Stein, 1977), as well as in my own research. Moreover, this approach offers opportunities to align scholarship of the region more closely with work on transnationalism (Glick Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992; Glick Schiller & Fouron, 2011), which has documented how local communities are reconstituted or mobilized in contexts of transnational migration (Sökefeld, 2006). These studies have described the emergence of 'transnational villages' (Levitt, 2001), 'hometown associations' (Caglar, 2006) and 'translocal villages' (Velayutham & Wise, 2005) as transnational social fields through which norms and values travel back and forth. While the 'village' and the national 'diaspora' have featured prominently in studies of transnationalism, the intermediate level of the region has remained somewhat invisible (Upadhyaya & Rutten, 2012). In Gujarat scholarship as well, studies of transnational migration have tended to privilege either the trajectories of specific castes, or village-based communities (Rutten & Patel, 2003; Tambs-Lyche, 1980) or the state ideologies of 'Gujarat' and the 'Gujarati diaspora' (Mehta, 2015).

A focus on relational dimensions of the region reveals how it is being reproduced through acts of social networking in an overseas context; however, social relations are not delinked from geography (Jones, 2009; Jones & Paasi, 2013) and such overseas processes should not be studied in isolation from developments in the region of origin. Scholars of transnationalism have recognized this point widely, for instance in studies of migrant visits to the region of origin (Bolognani, 2014; Ramji, 2006) and of the various ways in which remittances and migrant investments have become entangled with the politics of 'development' (Faist, Fauser, & Kivisto, 2011; Xavier, 2011) or 'ethnicity' (Kurien, 2002) in the migrant-sending regions. If social relations are regarded as emplaced rather than as disembedded from specific localities (Giddens, 1995 [1981]; Ina & Rosaldo, 2008, p. 8), we can better understand how the maintenance of a regional identity might be an important source of social capital for migrants. Other scholars have recognized that informal social networks of friends from 'home' remain a crucial channel to help migrants to 'get things done', not only during the process of migration and settlement but also in maintaining social-economic relations with the region of origin (Osella, 2014).

Scholars of the region have asked methodological questions about how to study phenomena that are spatially dispersed over different places. Travel within a region has been mentioned as a useful method, ideally positioned within 'strategic networks extending to different parts of the region', for example by following the links of a trading community (Tambs-Lyche, 1994, p. 739). This generates a methodological concern about finding a balance between depth and breadth, also reflected in discussions on 'multi-sited' (Marcus, 1995) and 'translocal'



ethnography (Falzon, 2004, pp. 9–28). If the core of ethnography remains to understand and reveal the perspectives of actors through ‘immersion’ in a particular social field, transnational or not, this requires the researcher to stay close to a small, selected group of people. I have done this by focusing on those who consider themselves Sunni Vohras and are loosely related to each other through regionally based social networks, and I have tried to connect the different nodes in their networks by travelling along with them as much as possible. My research was multi-sited in that it was conducted on two sides of the ocean, in India and in the UK, but more importantly it has been mobile in that it involved the trailing of people during their travels in Gujarat.<sup>8</sup>

Methodologically, the study has taken inspiration from recent experiments with mobile forms of ethnography, which demonstrate that people’s engagements with places can be productively studied by moving along with them or following them around (Moles, 2008; Pink, 2008; also de Certeau, 1984), so that new meanings can be uncovered. In most of these studies, conducted in urban neighbourhoods (Low, 2017, pp. 103–109) or among people who walk as part of their occupation (e.g., shepherds; Gray, 2003 [1999]), walking has been the mobile method of preference. However, for the transnational migrants in my study, it was not walking but petro-mobility that had become their access point to the region of central Gujarat. When migrants come back to Gujarat today, they travel from the airport directly to their villages of origin on a fast expressway, and, if they have the means, they roam around in comfortable air-conditioned cars throughout their stay. These car-based practices of travel signify their privileged position,<sup>9</sup> as many of their local relatives commute to work rather on two-wheelers or in public transport, and enable the migrants to travel wider and faster than they would have done before their migration.

While the current article is based on an individual case study and highlights a specific set of social relations that link central Gujarat with migrants in the UK, it is informed by analysis of a wider and evolving set of connections between these two sites. I conducted similar travel-along ethnography with other visiting migrants, as well as with local (non-migrant) businessmen in Gujarat, which has informed my understanding of Idris’ narratives and strategies. Travel-along ethnographic research has helped me to address ‘the critical ways in which places that may be separately named and recalled are connected to one another and form a unified whole’ (Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003, p. 18), and to explore regional networks of ‘coming and going’ (Ingold, 2005 [2000], p. 235) as they emerge alongside ‘paths of observation’ (Ingold, 2005 [2000], p. 229). In this case, travelling along has shed light on a set of practices and relations that are highly fluid and dynamic in character, and would otherwise remain largely invisible as they cannot (or only partially) be accessed through stationary interviews or analysis of resources.

## **The ‘Art of Networking’**

That day in the car, Idris kept talking energetically while driving: ‘If you want to ask any questions, just interrupt me.’ But he doesn’t need questions. He had already made a plan before picking me up, after I had told him on the phone that

I would like to see what he is doing in Gujarat during his extended visits. He drives me from Anand to the nearby town of Nadiad and then back to Anand, stopping in several places along the way to point to places where land had been acquired or sold and businesses started or lost.

An important stop on our journey is the auction market in Nadiad, where fruits and vegetables from the surrounding farms are sold. Here, Idris explains about his family: 'This is where we have our traditional business. In the past, my great-grandfather started trading in fruit.... Later on, agriculture changed and we diversified our trade.' As the auction market evokes more narratives about the family's history in the fruit trade, Idris talks about 'we' as if he is still one of the traders. As a boy, from the age of 15, he used to work here to help his father in the trading business, travelling to Punjab in summers to negotiate with farmers to buy their produce to sell in Nadiad: 'In those periods I learned the art of networking.' He said that in those days, 30 per cent of the traders at the auction market were Muslim, while most of the food producers were Patel and Kshatriya. Good cross-community relations are important in this context: 'The farmers come to our shop, we sit with them, talk to them.... It is in our mutual interest to get a high price. It is a networking business.' Throughout the day, Idris repeats: 'I am good at networking. I can feel comfortable with anybody.'

He explains how his family moved to Anand when he was young, how he grew up in a Patel-dominated neighbourhood there and that he went to one of the most prestigious schools in town, where the majority of the students consisted of Patels: 'At that time it was really an elite school. All the elite families sent their children there. Now these children have become top doctors, top engineers and politicians. They are my friends. I have many Patel friends from childhood.' His brother also went to a Patel-dominated school, living in a Swaminarayan<sup>10</sup> hostel during his studies: 'Complete vegetarian and all, normally they wouldn't allow anybody who is non-veg. But the priest knew my father so he said: "Of course your son can come."' Enthusiastically, he adds: 'Our family has lived and worked with Hindus for four generations.' And: 'They have seen us in their colleges and in their villages, they (Patels) know us! They treat me like one of them. They even ask us for donations for their temples!' He remembers that his father used to give donations to temples to show his goodwill, 'a gesture, out of friendship', and sometimes offered his respects by participating in religious rituals.

Idris has not continued these practices of religious patronage in the UK, but he does cherish the social relations with Hindus he has acquired through his family history. 'Even in London, 97 per cent of my friends are Patels. So, they are very familiar with us. When we go into a Hindu area they know that "this family is clean". Then they realize that not all Muslims are bad.' These and other references to the perceived 'badness' and 'uncleanliness' of Muslims, made by Idris in a matter-of-fact way without lingering on the issue, illustrate the complexity of community relationships in the region—Idris is of course aware of the ways in which Muslims are negatively viewed and described in everyday parlance in contemporary Gujarat (Ghassem-Fachandi, 2010; Sud & Tambs-Lyche, 2011) as well as overseas, yet he also works to maintain relationships within these contradictions. Furthermore, his family background, class status and history of business

ties allow a space to negotiate these differences in a thread of commonality and shared memories of the region 'back home'.

While scholars of South Asia have increasingly paid close attention to the transnationalization of regionally embedded social relations, their emphasis has been mainly on networks of kinship (Charsley, 2013), religion (Levitt, 2007) or caste (Roohi, 2016). The case of Idris highlights a somewhat different kind of sociality that is being reworked in the diaspora, the kind referred to in this account as 'friendship'. Idris' story resonates with descriptions of the integrative role of merchants and patrons in the history of Gujarat, described earlier, shown for example in his account of his father donating money to a Hindu temple and receiving recognition in return. However, his narratives highlight exclusion as well. Being 'connected' is presented here as a privilege of a well-connected merchant family, seen as trustworthy and 'clean', distinct from 'all Muslims'. As my fieldwork reveals, the tension between the maintenance of Hindu–Muslim connections and the awareness of Muslim stigmatization in Gujarat is deeply felt among Sunni Vohras who have settled in the UK. Those settled in the UK mostly belong to a relatively privileged section of business families within the Vohra community (about which more below), whose sense of (class) privilege is further reinforced in the migration process. This history of business is remembered and helps to maintain transnational connections with Gujarat.

There are various communities of 'Vohras' and 'Bohras' discussed in the literature on Muslims in Gujarat (Engineer, 1989; Misra, 1964), such as Baruchi (Sunni) Vohras or Dawoodi (Shiah) Bohras; my work focused on a community of Sunni Vohras who consider themselves distinct from other Gujarati Vohras in terms of their regional origins, locating their 'homeland' in the Charotar tract in central Gujarat. In the UK, they have established a 'UK Vohra Association', which is specifically directed at Vohras who trace their origins to the Charotar tract in central Gujarat. Vohras from this region migrated to the UK through various routes: some arrived in the 1970s via East Africa where they had previously worked in British colonies, others arrived via Mumbai in India or from Karachi in Pakistan where some Vohras had settled during Partition and some migrated directly from the Charotar region in central Gujarat through marriage arrangements and more recently as students.<sup>11</sup>

The origins of the community are not clearly described in available historical sources, but it has been suggested that the name 'Vohra' was adopted in Gujarat to signify conversion to Sunni Islam in rural areas during the rule of Sultan Muzfarshah I in the period 1377–1411 (Rajyagor, 1977, p. 185).<sup>12</sup> Sunni Muslims in mainland Gujarat include a variety of occupational groups, namely oil-pressers and whitewashers (Sheikh, 2010, p. 130), cultivators and traders (Misra, 1964, p. 122), peasants (Engineer, 1989, pp. 30–31) as well as those 'employed in Government or semi-Government services' (Rajyagor, 1977, p. 185). Heitmeyer (2009a, p. 32) describes the Vohras as a mercantile community with a 'strong sense of identity within the local landscape', who persist in cultivating a merchant culture shared by Hindu and Muslim traders. My own research in central Gujarat indicates a diverse occupational history and suggests that a further broadening of occupations has taken place in the recent scenario of increasing urbanization, the

spread of education and international migration. But despite this diversification, trading remains an important occupation for many Vohra men, as shown by the records kept by the Vohra organization in Anand.<sup>13</sup> Many Vohra families in Anand claim a mercantile identity, even when some of their members have entered professions as government bureaucrats, teachers or other occupations.

This is particularly the case for 14 subgroups within the Vohra community, which are seen as historically the most privileged sections of the community. These subgroups are referred to in Gujarati as the 'Chaud' ('14') community. They have been described as relatively wealthy merchant families, often owning land or other traditional capital in the region, and traditionally preferring endogamous marriage practices, maintaining various distinctions vis-à-vis other Sunni Vohras (Heitmeyer, 2009a, pp. 105–110). When I asked members of the UK Vohra Association about this history, some were embarrassed and referred to it as a survival of 'caste' within the Vohra community,<sup>14</sup> while others enjoyed the discussion and took the time to explain the complexity of the system. These conversations revealed that most of the Sunni Vohra families that had settled in the UK earlier were derived from this Chaud community of merchant families, while later migrants come from more diverse backgrounds as migration has become more broadly accessible in Gujarat. Idris' family too belongs to the Chaud community.

In Gujarat, Vohras represent themselves as a community that has been based in the 'Charotar' region for a long time.<sup>15</sup> The idea of being a regional community has been voiced both by Vohras themselves and in academic descriptions of the Vohra community (Heitmeyer, 2009a; Misra, 1964, p. 123). Vohra narrations of the community's history hint at a long-standing embeddedness in the agricultural economy as farmers, small-scale agro-industrialists, traders in agricultural products and as providers of a variety of services to Patidar and Kshatriya farmers. A key element in these self-descriptions are the endogamous marriage practices through which Vohras set their community boundary vis-à-vis other communities and which link the marriage status of groups of families to their ancestral villages, thereby confirming a strong connection between the community and the local landscape (Heitmeyer, 2009a, p. 5).

In the UK, these ideas of a regional community are maintained by the first generation. This was shown in interviews I conducted, which revealed detailed accounts of their relations with the Charotar region. Not everyone used the word 'Charotar': some referred instead to 'Anand district' or to the town of Anand and 'around there', or they used the old name 'Kheda zilla', while those belonging to the younger generation more often spoke in generic terms of a loosely defined 'back home'. The variety of labels given to the region of origin reflects a range of relationships with the region and with others who come from the same region, and each individual had their own specific experiences to share. While the narratives of women often focused on marriage practices or family relations, some men were keen on sharing their memories of economic practices and occupational histories in the Charotar region. This involved stories of trading and farming, of oil pressing and grass production for fodder, and of buffalo farms, milk stores and cold storages used to stock up on agricultural produce. Idris' narrative at the auction market exemplifies this type of story.

Patels were also a recurring feature in these stories. Patels figured as neighbours, classmates, co-workers and friends, and sometimes as supportive figures in the migration process, as several migrants had used their contacts with Patels in the process of transnational migration and settlement in the UK, in addition to contacts within their own family or community. Such contacts were useful in securing visas, housing or jobs. The connections forged during childhood thus constitute a viable social network that can facilitate the process of migration and settlement, as well as business transactions. This point is also made by Osella (2014) with regard to migrants from South India in the Gulf, who prefer to follow chains of relations, trusting in men whom they know from home rather than bureaucratic regulations or official organizations, even if such contacts do not provide stable arrangements and can turn out to be treacherous (Piliavsky, 2014, pp. 18, 24).

Another recurring theme in the stories about the region of origin is about the remaking of Gujarat into a 'Hindu' region. Migrants in the UK are well aware of the realities of violence and displacement in 2002: it was a time when Vohras from all corners of the UK gathered in Leicester to share information and pool resources to send donations to the riot affected and some of their relatives who were directly affected. Many migrants shared stories about discrimination in schools, at the workplace and on the housing market, or memories of being bullied or of fearing for the well-being of their children. Rather than idealizing their homeland, the Vohras have developed an ambivalent relationship with it. Their contrasting narratives of connection and disconnection, of friendship and violence, and of trust and distrust, translate into a complex field of contradictory pulls in the maintenance of relations with the region of origin and with other people who come from the same region.

I illustrate this tension with a comparison between two UK-based Vohra interlocutors, both of whom have participated in clubs for men from the Charotar region. Idris, who we already know, attends such club meetings every weekend, along with a group of men from different towns and villages of Gujarat who have (re)connected with each other since settling in the same town in the UK. Another man, whom I call Faizan,<sup>16</sup> lives in London and was also a member of a men's club that brought together people particularly from his village of origin in Gujarat. These kinds of regionally linked clubs, involving frequent meetings on weekends, have emerged amongst Gujarati migrants in various cities in the UK. Significantly, both Idris and Faizan were the only Muslims in their clubs, all the others being Patidars. However, the two men responded differently to the events of 2002 with regard to their participation in the clubs. While Idris remained a member of his club, Faizan left his. He explained:

'I was a member of the [village] club for many years. I was ... the only one.'

'The only Muslim?'

'Yeah. We used to have barbecues and social meetings. But after the riots in 2002, I stopped going there. I had heard that ... our relatives [in the village] had lunch in the afternoon with some of their neighbours, and in the evening these same people joined the group that came to attack their house. [...] After that, trust was completely broken. I didn't want to go to the club anymore.'

The story demonstrates the divisions that have been engendered amongst the regional diaspora by communal violence in Gujarat. Faizan's reaction contrasts

strongly with that of Idris, who claimed that the 2002 riots did not affect his relationship with his Patel friends in the UK, whom he still meets every weekend. Of course, a key difference lies in their experiences: Faizan's family was attacked in 2002 while Idris's was not. However, conversations that I had with other Vohra families in the UK show that exposure to violence is itself not a sufficient explanation for their decision whether or not to maintain cordial relationships with Hindus from Gujarat. Other men, whose families were directly affected by the riots, also chose to sustain their relationships with old Hindu friends both in the UK and in Gujarat, even if trust was partially broken.

To explain this would require a closer look at how social networks are being linked to migration histories and geography. Faizan had migrated to East Africa at a young age, and from there to the UK, and is now retired. While two of his children are married to people from Gujarat and one of his daughters and her Gujarati husband have bought land in central Gujarat for the purpose of investment, Faizan himself was no longer economically involved with property or investments in Gujarat. Having recently moved into a new house in London, which they were refurbishing at the time of my visit, he had not returned to the region in a long time and demonstrated no interest in visiting it.

Idris, in contrast, as he migrated to the UK only in 1999 and still travels back and forth frequently, has more reasons to keep his links with Gujarat as strong and diverse as possible. His wife explained this strategy as follows: 'People like us are only successful in Gujarat because we have good connections outside our own community.' To keep both his Patel friends and his extended Vohra family in the UK happy, Idris even organized two separate birthday parties for his daughter: one for his Patel friends from the men's club, where he served alcohol and vegetarian food, and one for his Vohra relatives, an alcohol-free chicken *biryani* party.<sup>17</sup> To understand better why he makes so much effort to sustain these relationships, and to show how his friendships have become pathways into the region – pathways paved by intimate relations maintained while living abroad – I follow him back to central Gujarat in the next section.

### *Pathways of Business*

'Whoever is in the system is our friend. Some of our lifelong family acquaintances are now high up in the BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party, the ruling political party in Gujarat]. ... This is why they support us when we want to get our work done.'

In the remainder of the day, we stop to view several different pieces of land that were once Idris' family property and have now been sold, taking a detour into villages along the road between Nadiad and Anand and ending our trip on the outskirts of Anand where his family owns land. At each stop, Idris explains to whom the land was sold, how and why, weighing the pros and cons of the deals that were made and reflecting on the community dynamics involved.

Back in Anand, Idris pulls the car off onto a mud road and stops at a barren stretch of land, to my ignorant mind lacking any sign of human activity. He tells me that he recently bought this plot. When I ask why, he explains: 'This place is the future bus stop of Anand. After 10 years, this small road will be a main road,



directly connected to the highway. After 10 years, it will be a big hub of transport there.’ The plan is to hold the land only a few years and then sell it at a profit when the road gets constructed. He again highlights the value of networking here: ‘Our main focus is on networking, so that we know all of this. We try to buy the land before town planning (TP) comes in.’ Networking is also crucial to handle the bureaucracy. The phrase, to get ‘our work done’, is repeated regularly. In the context of land deals, it indicates the need for help and contacts in getting the required paperwork completed in the relevant government departments, which invariably involves lengthy bureaucratic procedures and payments to officials.<sup>18</sup> Connections help to smooth such processes.

The largest plot we see that day is also located at the outskirts of Anand, in a developing ‘housing society’. Here we stop the car several times to explore various corners of the land. He explains that this land was bought from a farmer, a Patidar friend of his father. It was converted from agricultural to non-agricultural land (a required legal process), then divided into smaller house plots that were sold off to investors. Some of the buyers have already built houses on their plots, while others are holding on to their plots, waiting for the land prices to go up before they sell them at a profit. The venture is typical of developments that can be spotted everywhere around this area, adjoining the town, as agricultural land is rapidly being converted into urban real estate.<sup>19</sup> Figures 1 and 2 give a visual indication of a comparable housing society in Anand: familiar scenes in much of central Gujarat today.



**Figure 1.** Housing society under construction – some plots are waiting for development, some houses are already built.

**Source:** Author's own.



**Figure 2.** Housing society under construction - land converted from agricultural to non-agricultural land and divided into separate plots with low walls.

**Source:** Author's own.

The land for the housing society under development was bought shortly after 2002 and was linked to the displacement of Muslims after the violence. Idris explains:

Nowadays, Anand has become the centre of Vohras in India. When I was three years old, there were about 70 Vohras in Anand! All our neighbours were Patels. During the riots in 2002, soooo many people came to Anand. Especially Vohras. At the time, my father and me thought we had to do something for these people. So, we started a housing society. It was his vision and I agreed with it. He wanted to do something for all the displaced people who came here.

Here again Idris presents his father as a patron who provides generous support to the local community. When I asked some Vohras residing in Anand town about this, it turned out that indeed many of them knew the family and cherished fond memories of his father and the donations he had made, which contributed to the foundation of several local projects in education and social welfare. With regard to the son, however, they did not think his efforts were directed at helping local people, but rather that he had been 'making business' out of Anand's rapid growth. Idris agrees that his actions are mostly strategic, but still feels that his real estate business has also contributed to a larger purpose. He claims that he has not made profits from this particular housing society, or perhaps not enough, and presents his efforts as

motivated by a larger goal. He further suggests that he mediates between Hindu farmers who sell their land and the internally displaced Vohras who are seeking a new place of residence, in the position of broker between communities, in which the connectivity of the family is not only practically valuable (by providing housing) but also reaffirming forms of sociality that others have lost or devalued.

Describing Vohras as a business community, Heitmeyer (2009b) has argued that economic practices and exchanges may contribute significantly to maintaining previously existing social relations between Hindu and Muslim merchants in small-town Gujarat, sustaining inter-community unity and cohesion. Her analysis is framed within a discussion of 'small towns', which in contrast to bigger cities in Gujarat make 'coexistence between different religious communities both more viable as well as more necessary' (2009b, p. 117), but I have found this analysis helpful in understanding the stretching of regionally based social and economic relations across a transnational social field spanning the UK and India.

The materials presented here suggest that migrants maintain various degrees of connections, and decisions about whether and how to retain ties with the regional homeland are deeply political as well as social and material, and so are fraught with tension and conflict. Such migrants may be negotiating the best possible position within a difficult situation, where various kinds of ideologies, memories, interests, as well as friendships might come into play. For those who stay connected with the home region, the maintenance of cordial relations in the overseas context requires considerable social labour, but also generates cherished social capital in terms of securing continued access to important economic and political resources in Gujarat. These relations are recognized as strategic and economically motivated, but can still be experienced by these actors as personally and socially fulfilling. Overall, the process of remaking these regionally based relationships can only be understood within a transnational framework that takes into account relations among migrants in the UK, their embedding in Gujarat, as well as the pathways that connect people and places.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have aimed to provide new material for thinking about the making and remaking of the 'region', by employing 'travel-along' ethnography and viewing region-making from a transnational perspective. The article contributes to ongoing scholarship that has critically interrogated the constitution of official discourses of 'Gujarat' and has documented different regional narratives and experiences (Simpson & Kapadia, 2010), not merely by adding another 'minority' perspective (of the Sunni Vohras of Charotar) to existing descriptions of Jatts of Kutch (Ibrahim, 2011) or Sindhis in Ahmedabad (Kothari, 2010), but by conceptualizing the region as emerging through mobility, as a set of transnational relations and practices. I have drawn on the case study of Sunni Vohras to explore their imaginations of the homeland, their experiences during return visits, their social and material ties to the region of origin and their relations with other migrants from the region.

I have also tried to make a methodological contribution to discussions on the region, by showing how travel-along ethnography can be a productive methodological tool to explore how a 'region' is produced through mobility and interconnections. By travelling along with Idris and other men like him, I have learned which regions they 'see', which locations and geographical features they think of as important and how distinct places are being strung together through mobility, usually petro-mobility. As each stop on the route provokes distinct memories, each place catalyzing narratives about aspects that would otherwise not have become visible, this method has also helped to understand better the way in which geographies are linked with occupational histories, social relations and political transformations. Thus, mobile ethnography can be a way to propel 'anthropology towards a pragmatic definition of the field' (Hastrup, 2013, p. 155) because 'the field is constituted through people's connections to each other within the region', and mapping these connections is a 'way of figuring out the field in the first place' (Hastrup, 2013, p. 157).

My main argument is that the unfolding politics of Hindu nationalism in post-2002 Gujarat have not entirely alienated Gujarati Muslims in the UK from their orientations towards their region of origin. I have shown how social relations rooted in 'home' are being reproduced in a transnational social field in the form of friendships across community boundaries, between Hindus and Muslims from the Charotar. However, these friendships are not delinked from the communal politics in India, making these interpersonal relations strained and unstable. In this context, migrants develop different strategies—attempting to strengthen their connections and remaining invested or in other cases cutting off ties to regional networks, at least partially.

I have paid particular attention to how these social and political dynamics are linked with economic practices, through a case study of a migrant who pursues business activities in the region. Idris travels frequently to the region to maintain and expand his family's investments, attempting to adjust to changing circumstances as best as he can. Trying to make the best of both worlds, he is holding on to older privileges inherited from his family in Gujarat, such as landownership and political contacts, and simultaneously drawing on new relations and resources acquired by moving abroad to enhance his success in trade and 'networking'. Due to the powerful position of Patidars in the Charotar tract, connections with this community are a significant and probably indispensable resource to pursue economic activities in the villages and towns in the region of origin. According to him, it is his friendship with Patidars that provides him with pathways into the region.

## Notes

1. Research for this article was carried out as a doctoral project under the 'Provincial Globalisation' programme, directed by Professor Mario Rutten and Professor Carol Upadhyaya, a collaborative international research programme of the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (AISSR), University of Amsterdam, and the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bengaluru, India, funded by the Integrated Programme of WOTRO Science for Global Development, the Netherlands (NWO).

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2. Among the human rights reports that testify to the atrocities are Human Rights Watch (2002a, 2002b).
3. In terms of administrative boundaries, the region roughly corresponds to the two districts of Anand and Kheda. But having no official existence, 'Charotar' is not marked on maps as a distinct region, although it is popularly recognized as distinct. The Charotar region is located roughly in the area surrounding the towns of Anand and Nadiad, on either side of the main highway and railway track that connect the cities of Ahmedabad and Baroda.
4. An example is shown in the documentary film *Transnational Village Day* by Dakxin Bajrange, Mario Rutten and Sanderien Verstappen (Noman Movies/University of Amsterdam, 2015), where one of the organizers states that 'non-resident' villagers return because they '...feel strongly about India. They always remembered Dharmaj [their village]. How they studied and played here. Their memories bind them to the village. And it's in their genes. Even those not born in Dharmaj but in London or America, even they want to see Dharmaj, because it was the village of their forefathers'. <https://vimeo.com/152026257> (minute 9.20 to minute 9.45).
5. A counter-image to recurrent representations of the Patidars as an upwardly mobile and successful group is provided by Tilche (2016, pp. 22–23), who describes the discontent of educated Patidars who failed to migrate abroad and struggle to acquire non-agricultural jobs.
6. The name of the town where the research was conducted was changed to maintain the anonymity of informants.
7. Including some of my own work; see Rutten and Verstappen (2014, p. 1223).
8. The article is based on research in Anand town and in the surrounding region of central Gujarat in the period 2011–2012, with a brief follow-up visit in 2014, and on research among Sunni Vohras from central Gujarat in the UK in 2012, with a brief follow-up visit in 2016. Earlier, during 2008–2011, I conducted research and directed a documentary film on young (Hindu) migrants in London and their parents in central Gujarat (Rutten & Verstappen, 2014).
9. For an example of how experiences of car driving and petro-mobility might relate to social–economic mobility, inequality and status, see Notar (2012). For wider discussions on the relation between privilege and mobility, see Amit (2011).
10. The link between Swaminarayan Hinduism and the Patidar caste has been studied by Tambs-Lyche (2011).
11. In 2012, the UK Vohra Association estimated that 110 to 120 households of Vohra families from the Charotar tract had settled in the UK with British passports, in addition to approximately 60 young Vohra migrants recently arrived on student visa or other temporary visas. These numbers are based on an address list compiled by the association and on their experiences with organizing events for the Vohra community in the UK.
12. In contrast, Shia Islam is thought to have been more concentrated in the cities of Gujarat (Engineer, 1989, pp. 30–31).
13. The Vohra Community Association, based in Anand town in central Gujarat, has kept detailed records of the occupations of Vohras in the past and present. From the handbook of the Charotar Sunni Vohra Makeriya Samaj (2006, pp. 1–26), I took a sample from the listing of occupations among Makeriya men in Anand in the age group 25–50. Of the



- 193 men, 85 are listed as being in 'business', 47 are listed as having a 'job' or being in 'service', while 61 men have mentioned various other occupations.
14. The Vohra and Patidar marriage system have been compared by Heitmeyer (2009a, pp. 105–110), drawing on Pocock's (1972) analysis of the Patidars in central Gujarat, and on Parry (1979), to highlight some striking similarities between Vohras and Patidars in terms of the tension between preserving caste endogamy and, on the other hand, individual efforts at social mobility through hypergamous marriages.
  15. A history of the community is described in Haji Ismailbhai Sabanbhai Vahora (Borsadwala) Karanchi (n.d.). For the purpose of this research, the book was translated from Gujarati to English, partly by Rashid Vohra in London and partly by Mayur Macwan and Monica Macwan in Anand.
  16. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the anonymity and privacy of all informants.
  17. For an analysis of vegetarianism among Patidars in the context of the history of the Swaminarayan sect in Gujarat, see Tambs-Lyche (2011). For a discussion of representations of vegetarianism and the consumption and production of meat in concrete quotidian practices, and how this reflects on perceptions of 'the Muslim' (who is allowed to eat meat, in contrast to Hindus practicing vegetarianism), see Ghassem-Fachandi (2010).
  18. For quantitative data on bribes paid by rural households in India to officials in order 'to get work done', see Borooah (2016).
  19. Investors and land brokers often contribute to spreading urbanization by seeking out stretches of land that are administratively defined as 'rural' but are getting linked to growing urban centres and then go through a process of legal 'conversion' which allows the land to be sold as urban real estate.

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