

ROUNDTABLE

Writing in Arabic in Gujarat and the Hijaz: Some Reflections from the Early Modern Period

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As a region with a long coastline by the Arabian Sea in northwestern India, Gujarat has historically been connected to the maritime rhythms of the Indian Ocean and inter-regional developments in north India and the Deccan. These connections—commercial, but also political, cultural, and intellectual—remain central to the history of Gujarat as an independent sultanate in the fifteenth century and during the time of Mughal control from the late sixteenth century.¹ The circulation of Muslim scholars and intellectuals between the urban centers of Gujarat and cities of the Hijaz, Hadramawt, and Egypt, shaped the intellectual enterprise of several prominent scholars in Gujarat (and more broadly South Asia) who wrote in Arabic—from al-Damamini (d. 1424) and ‘Ali Muttaqi (d. 1567) to Shah Wajih al-Din ‘Alawi (d. 1590) and ‘Abd al-Qadir al-‘Aydarus (d.1628). While these scholars’ works have received attention from modern scholars to varying degrees, this essay emphasizes the importance of foregrounding the early modern oceanic context in order to recover the transregional social and scholarly ties central to the lives and oeuvre of these intellectuals. Recovering transregional oceanic connections in turn calls for greater engagement with scholarly writings produced in Arabic, a language that has remained peripheral to South Asian historiography.

Indeed, our understanding of Sultanate and Mughal Gujarat has been defined almost exclusively by historical materials written in Persian, which served as the primary language of court and administration across the polities of the Indian subcontinent. And while there has been steadily increasing attention to contemporary texts written in vernacular languages, the place of Arabic language sources has continued to be uncertain in modern scholarship. Some of the long-term relegation of Arabic historical sources can be traced to how modern historiography, especially the “secular” strand of history writing, developed in the context of post-independent India. As scholars turned to Persian historical materials to recover political and economic histories of medieval and early modern India, Arabic materials were left to those interested in the subjects of *tafsīr*, *fiqh*, and *hadith*.² The emphasis on Persian as a secular language—as a language of statecraft and literature (and hence chosen as the language of court and administration over Arabic by Muslim rulers who claimed

¹ Thus, for instance, the production of Persian court-histories (*tawārīkh*) and sufi texts in the region in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries can be fully appreciated only in relation to the rise of urban Muslim communities and Persian narrative traditions in north India and the Deccan. See Jyoti Gulati Balachandran, *Narrative Pasts: The Making of a Muslim Community in Gujarat, c. 1400–1650* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2020).

² There were also several exceptions, including scholars working in western and southern India who continued to read both Persian and Arabic sources: S. H. Hodivala, S. Muhammad Husayn and Muhammad Yusuf Kukan, among others. I would like to thank Sanjay Subrahmanyam for engaging in this question of Arabic versus Persian with me in 2020.

authority over a religiously diverse population)—and Arabic as the language of Islamic thought and learning influenced the linguistic training of future generations of historians of pre-colonial South Asia.³ As Roy Bar Sadeh also points out in his essay, such exclusive mapping of Persian and Arabic as secular and religious languages respectively informs the interpretative framework for surveys that catalogue and organize extant manuscripts in Persian and Arabic from South Asia.⁴ However, as Hinesh Shah alerts us in the context of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb's letters, a neat separation of ideas encapsulated in Arabic and Persian intellectual traditions—both of which were accessible to rulers, courtiers, and scholars—runs the risk of undermining the complex intellectual inheritance that shaped personal piety, royal policy, and scholarly works. The separation forestalls exploration into the relationship between Arabic and Persian (or indeed an appreciation of Arabic's many registers, as highlighted by Michael O'Sullivan) while pigeon-holing historical materials in these languages to recover only certain kinds of histories. Thus, even with the more recent conceptual formulation of an "Arabic cosmopolis," which allows us to see southern India and Southeast Asia as part of the same geography connected through the transmission and reception of Arabic texts, the full extent of the use of the Arabic language in Gujarat (and other parts of the Indian subcontinent) and its relationship to the so-called "Persian cosmopolis" still requires fleshing out.⁵

What follows in this essay is a reflection on the important ways in which the integration of Arabic historical materials into South Asian historiography is critical to enriching our understanding of Gujarat's situatedness (alongside other parts of the Indian subcontinent) in the complex transregional historical processes of the early modern period. Ironically, the history of Arabic language and literature in Gujarat and the Indian subcontinent was an important question for several scholars in the early part of the twentieth century. For instance, scholars M.G. Zubaid Ahmad and B.M. Tirmizi were deeply invested in reconstructing the importance of Arabic learning and textual production in South Asia, often supplementing the limited attention Carl Brockelman gave to the Arabic written tradition in India in his catalogs.⁶ While Ahmad's work surveyed the Indian subcontinent and noted the contribution of many scholars writing in Arabic in multiple genres, Tirmizi's concern was primarily the contribution of Muslim scholars from the region of Gujarat.⁷ Considered lost for a long time, Tirmizi's 1947 Ph.D. thesis on the rise and development of Arabic language and literature in Gujarat has only recently become accessible through the efforts of the Pir Muhammad Shah Library in Ahmedabad. The over one hundred biographical notices in Tirmizi's book provide a broad survey of the cultivation of Arabic learning, particularly through the patronage of the Gujarat Sultans, in a variety of fields—from Qur'anic commentaries, Sufism, and Islamic law to history, biography, grammar, and rhetoric. Using textual references, Tirmizi further reconstructed the presence of Islamic centers

³ For an exploration of the rise of Persian as the language of the Mughal Empire, see Muzaffar Alam, "The Pursuit of Persian: Language in Mughal politics," *Modern Asian Studies* 32, no. 2 (1998): 317–49.

⁴ Tahera Qutbuddin, "Arabic in India: A Survey and Classification of Its Uses, Compared with Persian," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 127, no. 3 (2007): 315–38.

⁵ Ronit Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

⁶ The multi-volume German catalog by Carl Brockelman, *Geschichte der Arabischen Litteratur*, is now available online in English: Carl Brockelmann, *History of the Arabic Written Tradition*, trans. by Joep Lameer, *Handbook of Oriental Studies*, 5 vols in 6 (Leiden: Brill, 2016–19).

⁷ M.G. Zubaid Ahmad, *The Contribution of Indo-Pakistan to Arabic Literature, From Ancient Times to 1857* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1946, reprinted 1968); B.M. Tirmizi, *Rise and Development of Arabic Language and Literature in Gujarat*, eds. Mohaiuddin Bombaywala and Mehboobhusain Abbasi (Ahmedabad, India: Pir Mohammed Shah Library and Research Centre, 2011). See also M.I. Dar, "Cultural and Literary Activities under the Sultans of Gujarat," *Journal of the Gujarat Research Society* 10, no. 4 (1948): 240–57 and M.A. Quraishi, *Muslim Education and Learning in Gujarat, 1297–1758* (Baroda, India: M. S. University, 1972). For a similar work in another regional context, see Chinmoy Dutt, "Contribution of Bengal to Arabic and Persian Literature in the Turko-Afghan Period (A.D. 1203–1538)," *Iran Society Silver Jubilee Souvenir, 1944–1969* (Calcutta: Iran Society, 1970), 81–104.

of learning (“Arabic colleges and academies”) and Arabic library collections in different cities throughout Gujarat, i.e., in Ahmedabad, Broach, Champaner, Patan, and Surat. At the same time, it is also worth noting that considerable attention was paid, particularly under the supervision of Z.A. Desai, to documenting epigraphical material from Gujarat and western India, where Arabic was frequently used alongside Persian, Sanskrit, and Gujarati languages to mark religious and civic structures.⁸ Indeed, in addition to manuscripts, the bilingual Perso-Arabic/Arabic-Sanskrit/Arabic-Gujarati inscriptions constitute a significant area for investigating Arabic’s role in the multi-glossic literary and oral context of early modern Gujarat. Taken together, the groundwork done by these scholars makes it clear that a substantial corpus of Arabic language material exists, textual as well as inscrip-tional, awaiting its fuller integration into early modern South Asian historiography.

Seen from the vantage point of early modern Gujarat, the biographical notices in the surveys by Tirmizi and Ahmad note the circulation of many scholars and Arabic texts between Gujarat and the Red Sea region, suggesting that the Arabic textual corpus is particularly critical to fully recovering Gujarat’s scholarly connections across the western Indian Ocean. To be sure, some more recent work with Arabic materials in the context of South Asia has already begun to add new dimensions to these cultural and intellectual connections. Thus, a focus on the large presence of Arabic texts that dealt with matters of religion and grammar offers a critical point of entry to recovering the transmission and reception of prominent texts and ideas that shaped and structured the lives of local Muslim communities in both coastal and mainland South Asia.⁹ Moreover, systematic attention to the codicological aspects of extant manuscripts has demonstrated the possibility of writing a broader social history of the scholarly and scribal communities involved in the transmission of Islamic knowledge production in South Asia.¹⁰ The study of the Arabic manuscript culture among the Bohra Isma’ili community in Gujarat has similarly brought new insights into the social lives of Arabic manuscripts between Yemen and Gujarat.¹¹ Recent work on epistolary writings has further helped reevaluate the place of the Arabic language in South Asia by demonstrating the use of Arabic in diplomatic correspondence between India and the Red Sea region.¹²

A relatively underexplored area of Arabic knowledge production in early modern Gujarat involves works of history and biography. While Tirmizi’s survey attests to the production of several works of history in Gujarat, the two most well-known early modern texts from the region are Ulughkhani’s *Zafar al-Walih bi Muzaffar wa Alihi* (The Excellent Victories of Muzaffar and his Descendants, usually referred to as the *Arabic History of Gujarat*) and ‘Abd al-Qadir al-‘Aydarus’s *Tarikh al-Nur al-Safir ‘an Akhbar al-Qarn al-‘Ashir* (The Traveling Light:

⁸ Z.A. Desai served as the Director of Epigraphy at the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) from 1977–83. He had previously held several roles at the ASI, including Assistant Superintendent for Epigraphy and Head of the Office for Arabic and Persian Inscriptions. While Desai published many articles on a variety of inscriptions, his most comprehensive survey is Z.A. Desai, *Arabic, Persian and Urdu Inscriptions of West India: A Topographical List* (New Delhi: Sundeep Prakashan, 1999). See also the two volumes of Desai’s articles compiled by the Pir Muhammad Shah Library: *A Quest for Truth: A Collection of Research Articles of Dr. Z. A. Desai* (Ahmedabad, India: Hazrat Pir Mohammed Shah Dargah Sharif Trust, 2004) and *Triumphal Sun* (Ahmedabad, India: Hazrat Pir Mohammed Shah Dargah Sharif Trust, 2014).

⁹ See, for instance, Scott Kugle, *Hajj to the Heart: Sufi Journeys across the Indian Ocean* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2021); Christopher Bahl, “Histories of Circulation – Sharing Arabic Manuscripts across the Western Indian Ocean, 1400–1700” (PhD dissertation, SOAS, University of London, 2018).

¹⁰ For an elaboration on the study of colophons and other scribal practices in this regard, see Christopher D. Bahl and Stephan Hanß, *Scribal Practice and the Global Cultures of Colophons, 1400–1800* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

¹¹ Olly Akkerman, *A Neo-Fatimid Treasury of Books: Arabic Manuscripts among the Alawi Bohras of South Asia* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

¹² Meia Walravens, “Arabic as a Language of the South Asian Chancery: Bahmani Communications to the Mamluk Sultanate,” *Arabica* 67 (2020): 409–35; Stephan Conermann and Anna Kollatz, “Some Remarks on the Diplomatic Relations between Cairo, Delhi/Dawlatābād, and Aḥmadābād during the Eighth/Fourteenth and Ninth/Fifteenth Centuries,” in *Mamluk Cairo, a Crossroads of Embassies: Studies on Diplomacy and Diplomatics*, eds. Frédéric Bauden and Malika Dekkiche (Leiden, Brill, 2019), 621–37.

Accounts of the Tenth Century).¹³ In addition, both Tirmizi and Ahmad counted among the works of history two texts written by Qutb al-Din Muhammad al-Nahrawali (d. 1582), a scholar from Gujarat who settled in and wrote from Mecca: *Kitab al-l'lam bi A'lam Bayt Allah wa-l-Haram* (The Book of Information about Characteristics of the Holy House of God, a history of Mecca) and *al-Barq al-Yamani fi-l-Fath al-'Uthmani* (Lightening over Yemen: Conquest by the Ottomans). While these authors have been the subject of some scholarly attention, they are seldom studied as part of the same intellectual context that connected cities in Gujarat to places like Cairo, Zabid, Tarim, Jeddah, and Mecca through commercial, political, scholarly, and pilgrimage networks. Al-Nahrawali's histories (along with some of his other works) have largely been employed by Ottoman historians for his insights into the Ottoman Empire's relationship with its distant Arab territories. He has largely remained on the margins in histories of Islamic South Asia, as he gained much of his prominence as a scholar and jurist in Mecca, his adopted home. Al-'Aydarus's *al-Nur al-Safir* (The Traveling Light), a biographical compendium of prominent Muslim individuals (and events) from the sixteenth century, appears in modern historiography prominently as an interlocutor of the Hadrami diaspora across South and Southeast Asia.¹⁴ And Ulughkhani has conventionally been used as a corroborative work on the political history of Gujarat, supplementing the more extensively used Persian history of the Gujarat Sultanate, the *Mir'at-i Sikandari* (The Mirror of Sikandar) of Sikandar Manjhu.¹⁵

What happens when we make these scholars from Gujarat who chose to record important individuals and events in Arabic in the well-developed genres of *tārīkh* (history) and *tarājīm* (biographies) face each other across the western Indian Ocean? As Engseng Ho has demonstrated in his work on the 'Alawi *sāda* (sing. sayyid) from Hadramawt, an inter-textual analysis of Arabic genealogical and biographical texts written by members of the Hadrami diaspora reveals new inter-connected spatial, temporal, and cultural geographies that extended from the Arabian Peninsula to the Swahili coast to western India and all the way to Southeast Asia.¹⁶ On an empirical level, putting our sixteenth-century scholars and their works of history in conversation with one another reveals their families' shared histories of circulation, settlement, and knowledge acquisition between Gujarat and the Red Sea region. Obscured in the catalogue listing of these individuals is the fact that they all knew each other and had many teachers and friends in common. The families of Ulughkhani and al-Nahrawali had long standing ties to Nahrawal-Patan, an important center of Islamic knowledge production in north Gujarat. The movement of several of their family members between Patan, Ahmedabad, and Mecca (along with other cities like Cairo and Zabid) locates these authors in a transregional context where the ties between Gujarat and the Hijaz grew closer, particularly during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The Gujarat sultans' patronage of scholars from across the western Indian Ocean contributed to these closer ties and brought al-'Aydarus's family from Hadramawt to Ahmedabad in the sixteenth century. As members of multigenerational scholarly families, all these authors benefited from their relationship to the sultans and other political elites, which resulted in official positions, stipends, and the delicate tasks of leading diplomatic missions to the Ottoman capital in Istanbul at times. Even as they wrote their Arabic histories from either side of the western Indian Ocean and different vantage points, their works reflected on the shared milieu of the sixteenth century, particularly as it concerned the changing political

¹³ I prefer Engseng Ho's translation of the Arabic title. As Ho notes, the title can also be translated as *The Light Unveiled*. Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility Across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 117.

¹⁴ Ho, *Graves of Tarim*.

¹⁵ Sikandar ibn Muhammad alias Manjhu ibn Akbar, *Mir'at-i-Sikandari*, edited with introduction and notes by S.C. Misra and M.L. Rahma (Baroda, India: Maharaja Sayajirao University, 1961). For an attempt to place Ulughkhani's text in the wider Indian Ocean context, see Jyoti Gulati Balachandran, "Counterpoint: Re-assessing Ulughkhani's History of Gujarat," *Asiatische Studien -Études Asiatiques* 74, no.1 (2020): 137–61.

¹⁶ Ho, *Graves of Tarim*.

alignments with the increasing presence of the Portuguese and Ottoman Empire in the affairs of the Indian Ocean. Reading these Indian and Red Sea region contemporaries within the same framework is critical to our ability to write transregional histories that move beyond the Area Studies model.

Such empirical connections are essential building blocks to further refining our conceptual understanding of transregional networks based on the use of specific languages and literary traditions. They compel us to further explore and explain the contemporaneous development of an Arabic historiography in South Asia and the Red Sea region and its relationship to the much better understood Persian historiographical traditions in the Indian subcontinent. Scholars like al-Nahrawali and Ulughkhani were often versed in both Persian and Arabic historiographies and, apart from the more apparent connections with the Arabic historiographical traditions developed in places like Mecca and Cairo, they exhibited their familiarity with the former by incorporating Persian histories of the Indian subcontinent into their works (Ulughkhani) and/or composing poetry in Persian (al-Nahrawali). At the same time, the fact that considerable interest in Arabic history writing from the Hijaz and Red Sea region existed among learned communities in South Asia is further reflected by the surviving copies of multiple Arabic works in various libraries across the Indian subcontinent.¹⁷ Indeed, as Mohsin Ali demonstrates in his essay in this roundtable, the importance of Arabic biographical writing in envisioning an alternate vision of the history of a Muslim community continued well into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The compilation of biographies of the ‘ulama’ and their intellectual genealogies in particular allowed Muslim scholars in South Asia to embed themselves in a transregional scholarly community that extended to either side of the Indian Ocean.

A systematic exploration of the breadth of Arabic textual production in Gujarat and other regions of South Asia thus encourages us to rethink the hitherto peripheral role given to Arabic as a prominent mode of learning outside the “central Islamic lands.” Beyond a serious consideration of Arabic historical works that challenges the notion that the Arabic language was reserved for matters of scripture and law, a broader appreciation of the use of Arabic among scholarly and scribal communities in Gujarat and South Asia further allows us to put places like Patan and Ahmedabad more prominently on the map of early modern global intellectual networks.¹⁸

Moreover, growing scholarly recognition of the importance of Arabic learning in South Asia has implications for how we envision the region’s participation in what has previously been seen as a largely Persianate world. It would certainly lead us to complicate the disconnected spatial geographies of the Persian and Arabic cosmopolises in favor of interactions and intersections between them, including a reassessment of the scope of Persian usage in South Asia itself—as a language of jurisprudence as much as administration and elite literary cultures.¹⁹

A thorough reevaluation of the historical scope of Arabic language usage in the multilingual environment of South Asia would require us to build on the surveys of the earlier generation of scholars through an archival mapping in South Asia and beyond. Only then would we be able to see clearer patterns in the transregional circulation of Arabic texts and learning among scholarly communities in Gujarat and the Hijaz in the early modern period.

¹⁷ For a recent intervention on the rise of an Arabic historiographical tradition that also includes Arabic works produced in the Deccan and southwestern Malabar coast in the sixteenth century, see Christopher Bahl, “Transoceanic Arabic historiography: sharing the past of the sixteenth-century western Indian Ocean,” *Journal of Global History* 15, no. 2 (2020): 203–23.

¹⁸ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Beyond the Usual Suspects: On Intellectual Networks in the Early Modern World,” *Global Intellectual History* 2, no. 1 (2017): 30–48.

¹⁹ Naveen Kanalu, “Prefatory Notes on Persian Idioms of Islamic Jurisprudence: Reasoning and Procedures of Law-Making in Premodern Islamicate India,” *Manuscript Studies* 4, no. 1 (2019): 93–111.

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