

Gujarati Diaspora As One Of The Oldest, Most Prosperous And Flourishing Business Community In Oman

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Abstract

In the global studies of present times the most important and useful topic of discussion in literary context is Diaspora, as there is an ongoing process of migration very common these days among people all over the globe. This paper presents here not about the present day migration, but it speaks about those who had migrated three centuries before. Though their migration wasn't well managed yet these migrants have managed it so well and are flourishing in all walks of life. This is what my paper speaks about my native brethrens, yes the Gujarati's who migrated to a country which is dominated by Muslims and how they settled and became the most prominent influential business class. This is not enough there are also people who have acquired the title of Sheiks and are a part and partial in the ruling affairs. They are just not doing business in Oman but are very well settled in all walks of life they have influenced them, in culture, food, dressing, etc. This shall be discussed here in detail in the paper. Thus the Gujarati Diaspora has lot to say in this matter in a Muslim country.

Introduction:

As far as we speak about Diaspora which means scattering away from homeland and settling in a distant land, when it come to Indian Diaspora which is as old as 7th century. Indians have always remained at the fore front in all walks of life, may it be trade, business, education, culture, religion, etc... As per Wikipedia data it says that Indian migration to Sultanate of Oman, has apparently been for the purpose of spreading their commercial activities and mutual sharing of profits. These relations developed in the 7th century but later in the 15th century, when the Indian merchants had started undertaking commercial activities in Muscat they performed them in a very systematic manner. Muscat is a very important port town in

the Gulf of Oman then, which had an attraction for the foreign traders and settlers, such as the Persians, the Bloch's and the Gujarati's.

The Indian community who travelled to Oman mainly consisted of traders and financiers from Kutch and Sind. Among these the early immigrants were the Kutch Bhatia's of Gujarat, who settled there was in late 16th century. They were very powerful in all aspects to impress the ruler of Oman. It is said that once around the year 1650 a Portuguese commander is said to have asked the hand of a daughter of a Gujarati baniya trader, in the erstwhile kingdom of Oman this trader in anger went to the ruling family, the Ya'ribahs and with their help eventually was able to expel the Portuguese from the kingdom of Muscat. This incident had also brought a relief to the rulers, who were also finding ways to expel them from the external threat. This incident has been narrated by Allen in his book exploration of the Indian trading community in Oman. This shows how powerful bonding was there between the Indians and Omanis in those times also, the next important thing to say is even in those times the Gujarati's had such a daring act that they would travel along with their families. They had created such great ties with the rulers that the great Jaziyah tax, which was very common in those days the trading tax which they had got it exempted from paying. Later it is also said even during the times of First World War they continued to live in various parts of Oman. It is said that by beginning of the Second World War the number increased, as the Kutch merchants seeing good prospects and more business resettled in Oman along with their families.

As we go to the depth about the settlements of Gujarati's mentioned by Allen in his book, he says how in the early 17th century from 1785-1914 under the rule of Al Bu-Said how the Sayyids, Shets and Sultan Politics and trade of Bhatia's flourished. This family originated in Kutch in the vicinity of the Rann of Kutch and moved to Mandvi, once they settled in Mandvi then flourished in trade and one of them named Aranji sailed to Muscat to do business. In later years he was followed by his son and then after period of ten years, followed by his grandson and established a business house in Muscat. Allen has also described about other three families who together formed the four pillars of the Gujarati business people as well as the Diaspora society. The four main families were the Bhimanis, Ratansi Purushottam, and Virji Ratansi including Aranji. This is from the research on the Gujarati traders they were

mainly from the coastal part of Gujarat also settled on the coastal area of Muscat in the vicinity of the port called by the name of Sidab.

Along with trade they influenced the Omani people lot in all walks of life, as politics and economy; it is clear from research that one Arvind Toprani's father Virji Toprani currently 90 years old speaks about how they had to struggle, as the Japanese navy bombed their ships and how they survived. This is portrayed through photographs, trading records, passports and customs stamps. This information which I have received is all through oral narratives and the prevailing conditions of the Gujaratis present in Oman no doubt they have reached to such a position in terms of economy and business no one can compete them today. One another important anecdote to be narrated which makes it very authentic about the Gujarati Diaspora is from the presence of the shrine of Sri Govindraj Ji, a version of the Hindu deity Krishna in the temple situated in the old town of present day Muscat. It is said that, the shrine of Krishna was brought from Basra in modern Iraq. Also there is significance about it through Calvin Allen speaking to the oldies that the idol was found in a temple draped in typical kingly robes of western India but was also embellished with a Khanjar an Omani sword typical of the national dress of Oman even today. This typical way of dressing could be viewed as Indian-Omani relation who further says it could be due to the cross-cultural influences.

The idol that represents the shrine of the deity Govindraj was brought to Muscat from Basra with the Hindu community who had moved from there facing a lot of difficulties. Once established in Muscat the idol had included an Omani dagger in its vestments, an indication of the strong ties felt by the Bania merchants in their adopted homeland. This manner of adoption with a Hindu deity in an Islamic country shows true significance and importance given to the Gujarati community and creates a real diasporic community in Oman. This shows that the Omanis had great tie with the Gujarati Hindu community, it is also seen that the Hindus also had such bonding with the Omanis. Besides this the Sultan has also allotted them space for cremation in Oman if any Hindu dies and if he wishes his last rights to be performed in his birth place or where he has spent his living he is free to do that, there is no need to fly the body to his native land. The ruling family of Muscat in the 19th and early 20th centuries had close connections with the Hindu community; this doesn't occupy the public sphere in the changed circumstances of gulf realities in contemporary times.

Diasporic studies from the Indian context have focused its attention on the historical and economical effects. Studies ranging from Emmanuel Nelson, Vijay Mishra and Gijbert Oonk have all dwelt from the complex nature of Indian Diaspora, which mainly focuses on the travels, assimilation and identity. Allen has also presented the tree of these Banias starting from Aranjji-Ramdas-Umarsji-Valabdas-Damodar-Purushotam-Virji. Allen also adds the Premji Jamnadas Bhimani and of Vimal Purecha. This detailed account of Gujarati traders settled on the coastal part of Oman is unique in the way in which it sheds light on one of the least explored areas not only in the Omani history but also in the Indian Diaspora. While exploring further through interviews with the females by Sandya Rao in her paper on “Gendering the Gujarati Diaspora Oral Narratives” she has very well written through interviews how the Gujarati women travelled and settled in Oman in the 1940’s, their experiences about missing the homeland and creating a new home away from homeland and to remain in the margins of the narratives, supporting their husbands in economic development and retaining the symbolic representation of home. She has very well painted the picture of the life of Toprani family in her words through the mouth of Shanti Behn who was 85 yrs then, who all lived as a joint family mostly. She speaks about her niece Bhanu Behn and her daughter-in-law Neeru who also has given vignettes of life in the small suburban walled city of Muscat around the period of First World War. It speaks about how they had Omani servants in their homes, and the scarcity of water which they had during those times and how they had to go about 30 kms. away at Seeb to wash their clothes at a laundry near the sea as well as to have a picnic out for a day on the only Land rover a 4-wheel in the city at that time. These details shows how affluent were the traders in those days also, besides it can also be concluded that without the liberal behaviour of the Omanis this would not have been possible for the Gujarati’s to prosper in the Gulf of Oman. Oman is the only gulf country having liberal policies and granting citizenship to foreign nationals. With this policy of theirs they alone have just not been beneficial, but it has been proved enormously beneficial to them also. It has remained possible for any person irrespective of caste, creed, and religion if a person has stayed in Oman for a period of twenty years he can apply for the citizenship. This is how thousands of Indians have achieved citizenship in Oman specially the Gujaratis. At present Indians constitute 20% of Oman’s population that is 2.3 million as per 2010 census.

Among the affluent people of Oman there is a Gujarati who has been the first to embrace Omanisation and take an initiative to train and empower Omani professionals. He is almost 80 years now by the name Kanaksi Khimji, he says “We see achievements as milestones in the quest of excellence. We just want to be the best.” According to him the most important measures of success for his family business is how far it has helped advanced the national development plans laid out by Oman’s Sultan Qaboos bin Said. This nature of his has given him importance in the political matters and he has also been granted the honour of ‘Sheikh’ he has also been given a portfolio in the ruling council. Such is the Gujarati Diaspora.

Coming to business the Gujarati’s have a strong hold on all sectors of main business’s starting from food industry to clothing, utensils, transportation, education, hotel industry, and hospitals. In food industry they rule by being the biggest food suppliers to local people as well as in the far away desert oil field sites, coming to clothing there are local show rooms owned by Gujarati’s, they even have shops in Malls. Then they are also suppliers of utensils and furniture, they have also opened schools affiliated to Indian government having CBSE style syllabus and also now owning higher education colleges. Besides this they have hotels and restaurants as well as amusement parks created for recreation in the vicinity. This show how well the Gujarati business men have flourished in far away land making it a homeland far away from home.

As per my being a Gujarati and having stayed in Oman for a period of ten years and having come in contact with many of the Gujarati’s, those having Omani citizenship I have a say for them how much ever rich they are but they never have shown their richness. They are very down to earth though owning big bungalows’ and many cars but yet they live a very simple living with their own traditional dress of ‘dhoti and kurta and females in their traditional Gujarati sari, and still speaking their Kutchi language. They haven’t changed themselves; still some of them have traditional old small shops as the baniyas have in villages. If we go to the old city of Muttra souk where most of the Gujarati’s live we find them having old shop and even their houses have those old Indian style doors, and we find them all living in close-knit in one household with joint family system and women running the large household. There are three generations living in the same household. They do come to their homeland only to

attend far away relatives' weddings or some other functions but as such they have made Oman their homeland.

Conclusion:

To conclude about Gujarati Diaspora the most prosperous business community in the Gulf of Oman, it has its roots in the history of the country framing it a study in the Indian Diaspora. As and when we speak about these Gujarati people we need to remember how difficult it would have been for them to settle in far of land, how much they would have struggled and then established which has created a Diaspora studies through them. It shows the sincerity about the Gujarati's and hard work done by them to have a name in a Muslim country, just not name but they have also achieved a prestige for themselves and are capable of having a position in political affairs in spite of it being a kingdom ruled by Sultan. This shows the sincerity about Gujarati's due to which I am feeling proud to be a Gujarati.

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