

PROLOGUE

Ruined Histories

In 1896 the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) published two volumes, titled *On the Muhammadan Architecture in Gujarat*, to “present a pretty comprehensive view of the Muslim *remains* in the British districts of Gujarat.”¹ The two volumes, which covered the major Gujarati city of Ahmedabad as well as the coastal ports of Bharuch, Khambhat (Cambay), and several others, were chock full of grainy photographs and detailed architectural illustrations, with translations of various Arabic and Persian plaques.

In the port city of Khambhat, a team of archaeologists, enumerators, sketch artists, and photographers walked through the Jami Masjid, built 500 years earlier, in 1325. The photographs the team produced show snapshots of different architectural elements in the compound, zooming in on the carved pillars of the mosque, the domes, the courtyard, and various graves that dotted the mosque complex.

The photographs were framed to emphasize a mosque complex that had been retaken by nature. The tombs of Umar bin Ahmad Al Kazaruni (d. 1333), a major Persian merchant, and Bibi Fatima, his daughter (d. 1381),² and the mosque courtyard sat amid a thicket of shrubs and overgrown foliage. The pillars of the mosque look suspended in space, without any people in view to suggest proportion. “The trade is gone,” Jas Burgess, an architect employed by the ASI, wrote of Khambhat, noting that the Muslim population had dwindled and that commercial activities had traveled south to the ports of Surat and Bombay (Mumbai) (hereafter Bombay).³ The insinuation was that the mosques reflected a lost time, several hundred years before, when a community had thrived – a world

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that was long gone. The ghostly photographs of empty and spare mosque courtyards, gravestones, and Mughal-era customs houses that littered these pages are powerful illustrations of a British colonial view of Muslim Gujarat as a space of ruin.

The text that accompanied the images and architectural drawings framed the mosque complex within a linear story of Muslim arrival in India and in Gujarat. In a long historical introduction, Burgess centered the 1025 raid of Mahmud of Ghazni and included the rise and fall of various Muslim states in the region: Ghurid raids, the rise of the Muzaffarid sultans between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, and Mughal arrival.⁴ He lingered on the details of the splintering of Muslim power, ending his narrative with the 1780 arrival of a British force under one General Goddard in Ahmedabad and the dawn of British rule. The photographs of Khambhat and places like it represented material evidence of this narrative of arrival, war, and defeat. Unsaid but starkly present in these photographs was a lurid fascination with the ruins of Muslim life and empire.

The ASI volumes were part of a wider knowledge project in which the British colonial state enumerated, mapped, and historicized Gujarat's port cities.⁵ The forensic detail and the preoccupation with religious, ethnic, and linguistic categories on display were rooted in the cataclysmic rebellion that had sparked across the subcontinent in 1857. At the center of the rebellion was the Muslim king Bahadur Shah Zafar, who had proved to be a powerful symbolic challenger to British sovereignty. In the aftermath of 1857, the British felt deeply suspicious of Indians and threatened by Muslim power. The charged interest in photography and documentation reflected an interest in using visual and enumerative knowledge modalities to police people and define spaces.⁶ Representing Muslim spaces in Gujarat as ruins actively erased people who had come to be a deep source of anxiety for British rule.

Yet ruins, what Burgess called the "remains" of Muslim life, had a much more complex ontology than the ASI cared to recognize.⁷ By the late nineteenth century, British infrastructural projects like railways and fiscal policies aimed at creating new market institutions and commercial frameworks had altered the economic geography of Gujarat.⁸ Old port cities like Khambhat, Surat, and Rander were subordinated to British Bombay.⁹ Thus, while Gujarat and particularly the port of Bombay have occupied an important place in economic histories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, old ports in Gujarat have been presumed to be

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defunct, following the logic of Bombay-centric British bureaucratic records. Some of these ports, once central to Indian Ocean trade, had indeed silted over, their jetties and harbors no longer places of thriving interregional oceanic traffic. Yet out of the frame of the photographs of overgrown foliage and medieval architecture was a vibrancy – life – that had grown out of the economic ruination of old ports. While the ASI trained its lenses on old architecture using an archaeological framework, it failed to recognize the way the historicity of these places was fecund. These were not only sites on a declensionist, colonial timeline. Old ports also archived rich, open-ended temporalities or social experiences of time. These temporalities were shaped by oceanic histories that flowed through old ports even after they had been subordinated to Bombay.

In their accounts, the ethnographic army of artists, map makers, and surveyors papered over the lively quality of these places. The photographs of Muslim monuments fixed these sites as so many pinned dead butterflies.¹⁰ Strikingly absent in these photographs were *people*. The residents of these old port cities – especially merchant families and their descendants – understood and interacted with this historic terrain beyond the frames of colonial archaeology. They maintained homes in old ports.

These merchant houses, known as *havelis*, had been built on foundations that were several hundred years old.¹¹ That they were still home to generations of families in ports like Khambhat, Bharuch, and Rander suggests a chronology, a history, of Muslim belonging in Gujarat outside a colonial story of defeat and ruin. British colonial photographs of old ports elided the watery, oceanic, and otherwise fluid sense of ports and their continued orientation to places around the Indian Ocean rim. Though Burgess claimed that ports had dried up, other forms of mobility, including the ongoing projects of home making and belonging, continued to thrive.

This book challenges the lens of ruin that has formatively shaped understandings of Gujarat's history and the place of minoritized communities within it. It grows out of a long engagement with old port cities and descendants of merchant families who still live in the region today or who left their understandings of what it meant to be from these watery places in books. These books were eventually collected in libraries and archives. This book looks beyond the frame of the sepia-toned colonial photograph to document a history of inhabitation and belonging rooted in and routed through old places in Gujarat that continue to exist today and stand as archives of their own histories.

INTRODUCTION

Reimagining Gujarat

Ambient Ruin

Once a story is told, it ceases to be a story: it becomes a piece of history, an interpretive device.¹

Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*

In 2011, I found myself in Gujarat, traveling to the port city of Rander in the back of an autorickshaw, yellow and black, speeding improbably along the highway that now connects the city to the more famous port of Surat. Like Khambhat, Rander was a major port in the fourteenth century. I expected to find gravestones, the remnants of a city and its Indo-Arabian community long gone. It was not only Burgess who wrote of ruin in the Muslim ports of the region; an entire literature spoke of the demise of these cities starting around the sixteenth century, when a Portuguese armada sailed into Rander, the port that spread out in front of me, and burned it to the ground.² Successive European travel writers who arrived in the region described Rander in their tomes as a dwindled and ruined place where a thriving port of Indo-Arabian merchants once stood.³

Less than a decade before I arrived in Rander, in 2002, state-supported mobs of Hindus burned Muslim homes, murdered men, women, and children, and committed acts of sexual violence.⁴ These events, like the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in North India, recalled the Partition of 1947, when violence between Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims had

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rupted the meanings of home.⁵ Wealthier Hindu and Muslim families in Karachi and Bombay, in Lahore and Delhi, swapped homes, creating mirrored lives in cracked glass.⁶ In Gujarat, Hindu Sindhis flooded cities like Ahmedabad from Karachi, some 600 kilometers north, after it was drawn into the borders of Pakistan. Dalit Gujaratis, who in the colonial era had fled to Bombay and Karachi from drought and the rigid caste hierarchies of Gujarat, also returned, with caste violence very much ascendant. Altogether, 1.25 million relocated to Gujarat and adjacent regions of western India.⁷ The 2002 pogrom was a reminder of this unfinished history of Partition. The charred houses of Naroda Patiya and Gulbarg Society, two major neighborhoods in Ahmedabad, were citations to the houses looted, burned, and swapped in 1947. Therefore, in 2011, I was unprepared for the houses that stood before me. Given centuries of transformation and the more recent carnage in 2002, I assumed I would find ashes or a place gnarled beyond recognition. If homes remained, they appeared sutured only to the contemporary moment of violence, to Partition, to 2002.

The *rickshawalla* dropped me off on the side of the highway. I was surprised to find a busy *chaar rasta* (intersection) crowded with plastic chairs and food stalls. Making my way to one of the narrow roads that led into town, I found myself in a city of houses. In pastel shades of pink, blue, mint green, and yellow, old *havelis* built in a Neo-Palladian style, with stucco ornament and name plates reading Yousef Mansion, Fatima Manzil, and Ahmed Mansion, crowded the narrow streets.⁸ Peeking up from behind the two-story houses in Rander were several mosques that looked like they had been recently renovated, indexing the city as a thriving Muslim place. Quwwat-i Islam, the green-turreted mosque with ornamented domes, was familiarly named, like other South Asian mosques proclaiming the “power of Islam.” Nayatwada ni Masjid, the light blue mosque in the old town square, archived in its name the original itinerant merchants, the Nayatas, who had settled the port from Basra (Figure 0.1).⁹

As I walked in wonder down the streets, I noticed that many of the houses in the city were locked up. I would later learn that these were the homes of families who also lived in cities around the Indian Ocean rim – in Port Louis in the island nation of Mauritius, in Durban in South Africa, and in Rangoon (Yangon), Burma (Myanmar) – old places that the port had been and continued to be connected to. Other homes were opened during summer visits by families who had migrated west in the

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Figure 0.1 Nayatwada ni Masjid, Rander, Gujarat. Photograph by author.

twentieth century, to London, Paris, and even as far as the United States. Many of the currently inhabited homes, like Yousef Mansion, were the residences of families who had left Burma (Myanmar) and returned to Rander in the 1960s.

The old port had a literary center and library called Anjuman-i Islam, a large white building that stood in one of the town's two old squares. This center, I would learn, was endowed by merchants in the late nineteenth century. Its shining teak cabinets were filled with old books. Its large tables, and the many old men and young schoolchildren reading under the fans, suggested a place pulsing with life. Standing in the Anjuman, I was surprised to arrive in a place so bustling with life when it had been deemed a ruin and slipped out of the historical record. It felt equally like an anachronism – a place out of time – and a ghost.

The gleaming and well-painted houses of Rander interrupted the landscape and narratives of national capitalism and religious violence that dominated Gujarat. By 2011, when I walked down Rander's streets, the term "Gujarat" had a very specific political meaning: the regional state formed in 1960 that was part of the patchwork of states that comprised the postcolonial nation-state of India.¹⁰ Gujarat also

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had a very specific economic narrative associated with it. From the 1990s, the government of Gujarat had aggressively granted sweeping tax concessions to industrial capitalists, created numerous Special Economic Zones (SEZs), dismantled labor activism in the region, and courted the electoral votes of dominant business communities in post-colonial India.¹¹ The new industrial projects that mushroomed across the region as a result of economic liberalization were rooted in a Hindu nationalist political agenda (*Hindutva*) associated with violence against Muslims. These economic and political policies were also accompanied by a broader historiographical agenda – enacted through re-writing school textbooks – that erased a plural past and asserted an “original” homogenous Hindu population who had been “invaded” by Muslims.¹² By putting forth an amorphous “ancient” India, this discourse also collapsed time, disappearing the long and well-documented history of itinerant Muslims, Zoroastrians (Parsis), Jews, Arabs, Armenians, Europeans, and others who had been central to Gujarat’s port cities and economic markets into a flattened present.¹³ And it was easy to believe that this erasure had come to pass, that over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries all vestiges of this past world had been destroyed.¹⁴

But the *havelis* of Rander shimmered in view. Their physical presence asserted the experience of minoritized Gujarati mercantile communities within these national events. Across Gujarat, houses like the ones I encountered in Rander were home to Muslims – Sunni Voras, Shia Ismailis, Shia Bohras – and Parsis, Zoroastrians from Persia who settled Gujarat between the eighth and tenth centuries. Gujarati Muslims and Parsis, rarely framed in relation to each other, share a history of building homes in Gujarat’s old ports. Both communities were minoritized by the colonial state before 1947 but their experiences in postcolonial India have diverged. Yet their homes hint at shared histories that transgressed Gujarat’s land borders and traversed the ocean. The shimmering homes held the tension between groundedness and pulsing oceanic worlds out of view.

In Rander, homes were built in a Neo-Palladian style dating to the nineteenth century; they were not hundreds of years old. But they sat on plots of land that were. The families who lived in them had generations-long ties to the port, even as their businesses and stories morphed over time. What shimmered were not the physical structures themselves but rather a defamiliarized sense of a familiar space: the

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haveli. What shimmered was that an old port had been imagined by its residents who had departed, arrived, relocated, returned, and otherwise expressed their sense of belonging, in spatial terms. And that the grounds of Gujarat were deeply marked not only by past buildings but by ongoing relations to that past. Gujarat's ports were sites of capacious histories, most dramatically conveyed by Rander, the city of houses that stood before me, putting pressure on the predominance of more familiar narratives of Partition and the ethnonationalist state.

Between the ruined histories of the British colonial record and the ambient ruin of the postcolonial state then is a different history of place and belonging, one anchored in ports like Rander and its homes. When merchants built *havelis* in old ports, they spatially captured an understanding of belonging that straddled the terraqueous zone between land and sea. Turning to their efforts not as footnotes in a larger story but as the center of the story itself, this book locates itself at the juncture of histories of the Indian Ocean and colonial South Asia to understand how people who lived in these fluid domestic geographies understood their place in the world.

Homes of Capital

This book shows that merchant homes in Gujarat – tangible spaces of teak and brick – are not the background of history but charged sites where social life and capital intersect. They are archives of history. In Gujarat, the building, inhabitation, mourning, and memorialization of old *havelis* was the result of and response to at least two centuries of opposition to and collusion with British colonial occupation of the region's ports. As primary and intimate sites of human dwelling, homes are places where social and economic frames of meaning intersect. They reveal the impact of colonial economic systems – the way capital was politically organized – on the way merchant communities understood who they were in social terms. Homes mark the conversion of economic capital into space in old ports, demonstrating that social identities shaped and in turn were shaped through place or physical environment.¹⁵ Yet homes also reveal that capital's transformation into space in Gujarat was marked by erasures, hierarchies, and other forms of violence that were central to the experience of colonialism in Gujarat and across the world.

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In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, colonial anthropologists studied the homes of societies in Africa and Asia – and across the global South – who they termed “primitive.” In the absence of developed economic systems, they argued, homes were sites where economic and social forms of value intersected.¹⁶ We now know that colonial anthropologists were wrong – that so-called primitive societies were submerged in colonial capitalism and, ironically, could only be studied because of the tentacles of capitalist markets that brought ethnographers to their shores.¹⁷ Yet the insight that homes were charged spaces of social and economic relations remains a valuable one – flipped on its head – to understand capitalist communities like Gujarat’s merchants. Much of what we know about the Indian Ocean world as a capitalist space has been through expert studies of economic networks, legal infrastructures, markets, and other public arenas of capital.¹⁸ This book turns this map of the Indian Ocean world inside out, orienting a view of capitalist churn from the vantage of merchant homes in Gujarat.

British occupation of old ports in Gujarat like Rander, Bharuch, and Surat was part of an Indian Ocean-wide campaign to co-opt and transform merchant networks, which had existed for centuries prior, in service of British commerce. The restructuring of space was a key element of British policy. Through reorganizing its colonized territories across the Indian Ocean and the wider world, the British cleared vast tracts of previously inhabited land for the mass cultivation of commodities like cotton, sugar, tea, and opium, which fetched high prices on the global market.¹⁹ As Map 0.1 illustrates, ports in Gujarat were located at a strategic nexus – at the continental intersection of Africa and Asia. Prior to the advent of steam shipping in the nineteenth century, Gujarat’s ports had been natural docking points for ships waiting out the monsoons as they traveled between East Africa, southern Arabia, and Southeast Asia.²⁰ This geographical location gave merchants from Khambhat, Surat, and Rander a strategic advantage: They used ports as launching points to travel to markets in southern Arabia and Southeast Asia where they traded goods from Gujarat (like cloth) and those from Southeast Asia and Arabia that passed through their ports.²¹ The British annexation of Gujarati ports starting in the late eighteenth century was an attempt to restructure major trade routes across the Indian Ocean. The creation of the port of Bombay south of Gujarat’s historic ports was a further attempt to influence this geography.²²

