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Philippe Pétriat, Aurélie Varrel, Hasan T Alhasan

► **To cite this version:**

Philippe Pétriat, Aurélie Varrel, Hasan T Alhasan. Back to Asia? South Asia and the Arabian Peninsula. *Arabian Humanities*, 2023, Retour en Asie? L'Asie du Sud et la péninsule Arabique, 17, 10.4000/cy.9507 . halshs-04343564

HAL Id: halshs-04343564

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04343564>

Submitted on 12 Jan 2024

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Arabian Humanities

Revue internationale d'archéologie et de sciences sociales sur la péninsule Arabique/International
Journal of Archaeology and Social Sciences in the Arabian Peninsula

17 | 2023 :

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PHILIPPE PÉTRIAT, AURÉLIE VARREL ET HASAN T ALHASAN

<https://doi.org/10.4000/cy.9507>

Texte intégral

1 Let's start with a recent development: the famous yet old and small Shiva temple located next to Dubai creek that was the only official place of worship for Hindus in the UAE has finally been given company, with the opening in October 2022 in Jebel Ali Village's 'Corridor of Tolerance' of a grand new Hindu temple, near a complex of several Christian churches. Both temples (along with the about ten other similar places of worship located in colonial Aden) testify to the long presence of South Asians on the shores of the Arabian Peninsula as well as to the recent change in acknowledging this presence as a non-temporary one and accommodating non-Muslim religious practices, especially non-monotheistic ones. This inauguration goes further than a mere gesture towards the Indian community (although not all Indians are Hindus, most Hindus are Indian citizens) or fuelling a UAE-flavour of cosmopolitanism (Assaf & Pagès-El Karoui, 2021). It made it to the headlines in India and in the diasporic media, where it had a significant symbolic echo.

2 This event, among others, hints at what seems to be a new era in the millennia-long relationships between the shores of the Indian Ocean. These shores changed names many times: if one, on the western shores, keeps on talking casually about India until today, the eastern shores have indeed morphed since the independence of 1947 into a region known as South Asia, comprising a dozen of countries among which is India, although it is by far the largest and most populated one. They were born out of the end of the British Raj and its aftermath, since Pakistan was split in two in 1971 with the independence of its Eastern part that became Bangladesh. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh hold the three largest Muslim populations in the world after Indonesia, a fact that sheds light on the immense diversity of the South Asian countries, in terms of their respective size, demographic composition, political organization, and importance on the international scene. Conversely, the Arabian Peninsula is often labelled as « the Gulf » in South Asia, in a similar homogenizing manner that ignores the long process of nation-state building that has taken place in the region since the foundation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Iraq in 1932. It is striking that the last nations states were born on both sides in the year 1971: Bangladesh, Qatar, Bahrein and the United Arab



Emirates. These mutual misperceptions ignore the many subdivisions that have been entrenched since the time of independences to assert differences and new identities, and the enduring geopolitical tensions and rivalries (e.g., Pakistan-India), and subnational-level cracks in the nation-state building process. Not to mention the federal model in the UAE as well as in a part of South Asia, giving a large autonomy to subnational-level entities, to develop their own international strategies.

3 These mutual misconceptions at the same time rely on and produce dubious clichés. Seen from the seven countries of the Arabian Peninsula, South Asia is quite ambiguously seen as the provider of many highly educated and (much more numerous) low ranking workers hailing from a bunch of countries still developing and plagued by overwhelming poverty (emphasized by press coverage of COVID 19). Conversely, the Arabian Peninsula seen from South Asia is perceived both as an Eldorado of maddening wealth and overnight success stories as well as a repulsive black hole that sucks in corruption black money, mafia *goondas* and innocent villagers turned into slaves.

4 Surprisingly enough, such contemporary clichés seem to ignore the strength and continuity of millennia-old connections and ties that appear to have loosened by the Interwar period, due to the cumulated effects of the Great Depression, the independences and the rise of new nation-states in the Middle East and in South Asia. In this introduction, we argue that from the Interwar period onwards, the 20th century seemingly witnessed a distancing in the relationship between the Arabian Peninsula and South Asia as they turned towards arguably culturally and economically diverging horizons. Since the turn of the 21st century, however, a “new” convergence of economic and political changes has led to renewed mutual interest. The literature has echoed this re-convergence with what several researchers have described as the “turning point of the Indian Ocean”. Not without drawing on the legacy of Braudel, this turn has led to a growing number of works focusing on a highly maritime geography at the expense of the old concept of the ‘Middle East’ and the anchoring of the Gulf countries in the Arab world (Chaudhuri 1985; Vink 2007; Bishara, Haykel, Hertog, Holes and Onley 2016; Green 2014 and 2016; Armitage, Bashford and Sivasundaram 2018).

5 This special issue reflects what we see as a new era, bringing together scholars from various disciplines and shores to highlight this longstanding web of connections and its multiple configurations. This special issue sheds light on various people and elements that contributed to the construction of this web of connections precisely as a heterogeneous, multi-layered and changing architecture. It is not only about digging up precedents, collecting appealing case studies and celebrating smooth narratives. We also aim at challenging official narratives and diplomatic accounts, in order to understand the full complexity and heritage of this rich relationship as it reaches a new phase.

6 This issue was produced thanks to the unusual collaboration of Middle East studies and South Asian studies scholars coming from various disciplinary backgrounds and academic traditions. Strikingly, some contributors go beyond these restrictive territorial delineations inherited from a Western worldview, but that remains a path less travelled. It is not a mere coincidence nor the effect of path-dependence that most papers come from historians, a discipline that has been marked over the last several decades by the emergence of the connected history approach and the blossoming of Indian Ocean studies. Yet there are some obvious features of differentiation between these two area studies communities, such as the influence of the scholarship in English, namely that of the postmodern turn on the domain of South Asian studies. Hence this special issue of *Arabian Humanities* hopes to be a steppingstone for a dialogue between different communities of knowledge with similar objects (Gelvin and Green, 2014; Mathew, 2016; Louer and Jaffrelot, 2017; Bose, 2020).

7 Approaching the vast web of connections between the Arabian Peninsula and South Asia needs going back to history to explore successive layers and transformations that have led to the current state of the relationship. In order to understand the full extent of current Arabian Peninsula-South Asia relationship, not only at the very official inter-state level but also at the level of ordinary citizens, we may need to approach both sides as constructing and mutually affecting spaces and societies in the *longue durée*.



8 This special issue foregrounds original historical and ethnographic material that reminds us to what extent the Indian Ocean has long been an integrated region travelled by merchants' ships and massive circulations of goods, animals, ideas, people, and even fashions, before the area categories that we are using did even exist (Beaujard, 2012; Bose, 2006; Machado, 2009; Pearson, 2005; Das Gupta, 2001; McPherson, 1993; Lombard and Aubin, 1988). The common world in which the countries of the Arabian Peninsula and South Asia have been co-constructed has been explored largely through the prism of the history of merchant diasporas. Since the work of Kirti N. Chaudhuri, Ashin Das Gupta and Claude Markovits, the expansion of Indian business networks in the Middle East has become a key to understanding the political economy in the colonial era. The sources left by merchants and their licit or illicit activities, the traces of their legal operations and surveillance in British archives have made them a privileged subject of history connecting the shores of the Indian Ocean and illuminating the constitution of contemporary global capitalism (Mathew, 2016; Bishara, 2017). Nevertheless, one should not overlook the presence and circulation of other highly mobile transoceanic categories such as religious practitioners, pilgrims, mercenaries, although they are not central in the articles brought together in this special issue. The contribution by Mansour Ashariedah on trade and traders between Qasim and India draws a history of circulation of a large variety of goods and of merchants connecting both sides of the Ocean. It portrays Arab merchants who spoke fluent Hindi, settled in Bombay with their families and handled massive export businesses with extensions until Africa and the Mediterranean, not only exporting towards the Arabian Peninsula but also importing dates or less licit items to India. Ashariedah uncovers through his careful reading of companies' commercial records (*daftar tijārī*) the ups and downs of trade activity, and its complex geography, with the attractivity of Bombay for Najdi traders declining even before the Second World War and the independence of India. The identification of these circuits and their dynamics over time hint at the need to cross check various types of sources (interviews, commercial records, travelogues, memoirs) and study the production and commercialization of daily albeit very iconic objects such as the '*shimagh al-Bassam*' (traditional headdress) named after the al-Bassam's family whose merchants and entrepreneurs were settled in India and the Gulf cities and had a big share in the trade of headdresses and other textile products.

9 Muslim merchant diasporic networks scattered all around the shores of the Indian Ocean connected spaces and societies through their back-and-forth circulations but also brought and disseminated ideas, and sometimes more material things too, in unexpected directions.

10 Akkerman's article in the issue sheds new light on the active role of South Asian Bohra merchants among the Isma'ili communities of Yemen, i.e. not only as students or passive devotees, but as benefactors, scholars, missionaries. They were instrumental in the shaping and upkeep of the networks that enabled Indian students and scholars to study, spread the Ismaili faith, and get the necessary manuscripts. As Akkerman shows by delving into two major operas from the Bohras' tradition and following the career and correspondences of the prominent merchant, political advisor and scholar Ḥasan al-Bharūchī (d. 939/1533), Indian Bohras have been vital supporters of Tayyibi Ismaili communities since the 16th century, as these communities were challenged by the Zaydi rule. The co-constitution of 'treasuries' (*khizānāt*) of books with a continuous circulation of manuscripts between Yemen and Gujarat is a by-product and an illuminating sign of the co-constitution of communities on both sides of the Ocean, even though the headquarters of the Tayyibi *da'wa* have been moved since 974/1566 from Yemen to Gujarat, that hosts nowadays the bulk of believers while hardly a few thousands remain in Yemen.

11 For his part, Zahir Bhalloo focuses on another such diasporic group in a lesser studied location, e.g., the Lawatiya Shi'i merchant community settled in Oman. He explores the origins and the complex *longue durée* dynamics that have shaped this affluent group that is one segment of the larger category of Khoja merchant diasporic communities. His analysis relies on linguistic practices, oral traditions, but also on a variety of material vestiges: graves with inscriptions, but also trading records and correspondence written in a very specific variant of Sindhi script until recently. He shows how they connect Oman to Sindh and Gujarat i.e., to Pakistan and the north-western part of India, but also to a variety of locations in the Gulf region and to other distinct diasporic groups in the same locations, testifying for the highly mobile and multilocal trajectory and complex formation of the community, as well as its porous and relatively recent delimitations. Such evidence comes at a time when the memory of this transoceanic heritage is fading away in the community itself, whose



younger members tend to be less mobile and turn towards the Middle East as their 'horizon,' resulting in or comforted by recent attempts at reconstructing supposedly Arab origins.

Back and forth flows and the co-construction approach of connected spaces

12 In the first decades of the 20th century that are also the very last ones of the existence of the British Raj, mutual influences arguably grew stronger. Relations intensified for technological reasons in the fields of material (e.g., steam and print) and immaterial infrastructures (e.g., the creation of a 'British Mediterranean Sea') supporting the circulations, as much as for more intellectual reasons (including religious) which encouraged the mobilities between the two shores (Green, 2011).

13 The article by Ikrame Ezzahoui on the famous scholar *cum* journalist Muhammad Rashid Rida documents his much less known journey to India, where he visited in 1912 three *hauts lieux* of reformist Islam: Aligarh, Lucknow and Deoband. He enthusiastically came on the invitation of the recently founded Indian Ulema Association, illustrating the major influence exerted by South Asian intellectual and political buoyant life, especially the *islahi* movement, on a certain fringe of the Arab intelligentsia at that time, but also the mutual knowledge that some Indian ulemas had of the *Al-Manar* founder's ideas. In Bombay he was introduced to Sheikh Qassim Muhammad al-Ibrahim, a prominent Kuwaiti trader and philanthropist, who organized for him an impromptu yet high-profile return journey through Kuwait, where Rida was welcomed and interacted with the Kuwaiti political and economic elites bridging the Gulf and South Asia. It is a salient reminder of the necessity to "look to the East" to correctly grasp the geographies of the religious and social history of the Muslim world during the interwar period.

14 To build a bridge with the contribution on Rida and his role for the development of modern press in the Middle East, the special issue focuses on the development of modern mediascapes for the Arab audiences. Gabriel Lavin's article on the difficult beginnings of the BBC operations for the Middle East in the 1930s, as the British authorities engaged into a competition of influence with other radio services in Arabic, but in a somewhat slow and clumsy manner, sheds light on little known dynamics. The inadequate colonial conception of what local audiences would appreciate confronted the sociology and cosmopolitanism of Arab listeners who were eager for international news and modern music, and it took almost until the Second World War to establish an appropriate broadcasting service in Arabic. This article brings together a vast amount of elements and characters, such as Yunis Bahri, a Mosul-born journalist who literally circulated across the Indian Ocean and became a famous yet highly controversial radio speaker, known for his attacks against the British Empire and its allies in Indonesia, then in Baghdad, and finally from Germany during the Second World War.

15 The circulation of ideas even led to the co-constitution of political projects, as illustrated by the very original article by John M. Willis on the Khilafat movement. Launched in 1919 in Bombay, it gathered substantial support among the Indian Muslim elite for preserving the Ottoman Caliphate and the independence of the holy cities. John Willis illuminates the original and sometimes unexpected ideas of Indian activists like Mohamed Ali Jauhar (d. 1931) for the future of the Hijaz (the region of the Holy Places of Islam) and the importance of their plans for the design of a Muslim community after the demise of the Caliphate (1924). The intellectual history illuminated by John Willis' article is also a history of the destinies that were still possible for the Arabian Peninsula in general, and for Mecca and Medina in particular, before the assertion of contemporary states and nationalisms in the 1930s. The "heterotopia" that Mecca was then largely appears as the product of the debates between the activists of the Khilafat Movement and their opponents in India (the *Ahl-e Hadith*) and Arabia (the supporters of Saudi control).

 **The complex reshaping of power relations since the time of independences, and what we**

no longer see

- 16 Although it spans a long period (from 1947 for India and Pakistan to 1971 for the Gulf emirates under British protectorates and Bangladesh), the moment of independence appears to be a major turning point in the relations between South Asia and the Arabian Peninsula. On the one hand, the apparent unity of these two areas was divided into national entities whose political trajectories were no longer unified by the British imperial framework - or by the struggle against this framework. On the other hand, their economic development, especially with the boom in hydrocarbon exploitation, tended to reverse the balance of relations, although this shift has been studied mainly in the geopolitical and ideological relations of the Gulf countries with Pakistan -with Afghanistan- much less for their connections with India or for other types of connections (Louer and Jaffrelet 2017).
- 17 This reversal gave Gulf countries an unprecedented power of attraction, as manifested, for example, by the return of Arab entrepreneurs and a second boom in the migration of expatriate workers from South Asia. The literature of Indian Ocean studies validates the hypothesis of this uncoupling as the time boundaries usually prevailing in scholarship often stop in the middle of the twentieth century. The following period structures another set of scholarly works, of a different disciplinary and thematic flavour, mainly focusing on migrations, with analyses beginning from the last quarter of the century onwards. Available sources for this period are more fragmented and heterogeneous in nature, access to them is more difficult, and the historiographies of both shores of the Ocean diverge as each country entered into a period of deep transformations, accelerating processes of state building and of enduring political instability in some cases.
- 18 At first sight, the concept of mutual constitution – or the notion that the states of the Arabian Peninsula and South Asia did not interact simply as fully-formed entities but rather participated in one another’s state formation processes – may not initially appear to lend itself well to analysing the inter-state relations between the states of South Asia and the Arabian Peninsula during the second half of the 20th century. Historiographic accounts of the international relations of the Arabian Peninsula tend to emphasise the role of external Western powers, notably Britain until 1971 and from then of the United States, in the construction and protection of the nascent states of the Arabian Peninsula. This lack of attention is unwarranted, however. Under the British Empire and following partition, South Asia contributed to the state formation processes of most of the Arabian Peninsula states. Indian civil servants serving under the British Empire in the Arab Gulf protectorates played a role in constructing these states’ modern bureaucracies and state structures, though their role has largely been ignored (Bose, 2006; Onley, 2007). Even after all the Arabian Peninsula states gained independence in 1971, Pakistan was called upon by the newly independent states of the Arabian Peninsula – which regarded it as a Western-aligned, fellow Muslim nation that had already been involved in at least seven conflicts of various scales – to help establish and train their military and security forces (Racine, this volume). The use of Baluch soldiers in the formation of the Gulf armies is a continuation of the contribution of the Hyderabad princes (*nizams*) and their officers in the construction of the Arabian Peninsula states, from the Kathiris and Qu’aytis states of Hadhramaut in the 19th century to the contemporary Saudi armies (Freitag, 2003; Cronin, 2013; Barany, 2021). This reciprocal influence extended to the field of religious education (madrasas), in which the Gulf States invested heavily from the 1960s onwards. In Pakistan in particular, this funding supported the system of patronage developed by the Gulf countries, but it also encouraged the growth of movements inherited from the Ahl-e Hadith (Siddiqi 2017).
- 19 Whatever may be the extent of this decoupling or reversal of relationships, the articles collected in this issue and the co-construction approach that we adopt point to the continuation of connections, even though they may be more discreet and definitely less documented. These proved instrumental in this era of national constructions. People, commodities and ideas have kept moving and bridging the two shores of the Ocean, perhaps even more intensively, along military, academic, religious, commercial and even care networks.
- 20 In our special issue, a remarkable illustration of our hypothesis comes with the article by Mohamed Shafeeq Karinkurayil on Kerala, the Indian regional state that is well-known for providing a substantial part of the Indian workforce employed in the Arab Peninsula, especially in the UAE. He argues that the massive work migration flows that have been taking place unabatedly for nearly half a century have had multiple and massive influences on lifestyle, culture, set of values that are not necessarily acknowledged as such. In order to assess these subtle yet pervasive effects,



he develops an original methodology to document the elusive yet obvious character of both material and immaterial remittances in Kerala. He explores visual archives, pop culture products (i.e., films, novels) and narratives collected among migrants of the 1970s and 1980s to unravel the multiple yet largely intangible traces hinting at the presence of “the Gulf” in everyday life through objects such as the iconic milk powder ‘Nido’ can that was once not for sale in South Asia but frequently brought back by migrants on their return visits. It allows him to render the ambiguities of the fascination-repulsion prevailing binary. Furthermore, while his article focuses on lower middle class, little skilled migrant workers, one should not overlook the massive presence in the Arabic Peninsula of highly skilled South Asians in many professions and decision-making positions, including at high levels in the economic and political spheres. This non neglectable and non-easily dispensable presence, that has even been comforted after 1991, does matter to a certain extent in some decisions made by the Arab countries. Such highly educated and wealthy diaspora members do have an influence also in their countries of origin, especially those countries that are highly dependent on remittances such as Pakistan.

21 Despite sharing a long history of human, cultural, and commercial exchange, however, the post-colonial states of South Asia and the Arabian Peninsula lived largely in a state of mutual neglect. Granted, India had been involved in Arab politics since its independence, inserting itself in UN discussions on the status of Palestine between 1947-1949, denouncing the tripartite aggression against Egypt and seeking to mediate the 1956 Suez Crisis, and advocating against US intervention in the 1958 Lebanese civil conflict at the UN (Alhasan 2022). Oil imports and food exports remained important drivers of the many and yet unremarked connections between the South Asian countries and the Arabian Peninsula. This period of distancing applied also to the Indian diaspora, that was treated with a studied indifference until the 1980s. Nevertheless, India’s Cold War-era proximity with the USSR and preference for engaging socialist Arab republics over the Western-aligned monarchies of the Gulf widened the chasm separating India from the Arabian Peninsula. Closer intellectual and political relations with progressive and socialist states probably led to a certain mistrust of countries deemed to be too closely aligned with British and American foreign policies, regarded as legacies of imperialism (Raja Mohan 2021).

22 In addition to strategic choices, Islam played an important role in shaping inter-state relations between South Asia and the Arabian Peninsula, in ways that were sometimes contradictory. Pakistan is an Islamic republic, but Bangladesh is not; in both cases, Muslims account for about 90% of their respective populations. India’s constitution promotes secularism but its large Muslim population, the fourth largest in the world, accounts for merely 14% of its 1.4 billion inhabitants. In this new chapter of South Asia’s longstanding ties with the Arabian Peninsula, moreover, the formative effect of China’s global ascendancy, manifest in the expansive reach of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. Divergent attitudes towards China’s rise and differences in views over whether the transition away from a US-dominated, unipolar international system to a more multipolar, fragmented, or disordered world is a threat, an opportunity, or both are already colouring the strategic imaginations of states in South Asia and the Arabian Peninsula, including their perceptions of one another.

23 The mutual political neglect or relative indifference that had long weighed down relations between South Asia and the Arabian Peninsula has gradually given way to mutual rediscovery, however. Jean-Luc Racine’s article describes the geopolitical dynamics by which states in South Asia and the Gulf have grown to think of each other as being part of their own strategic space. His article documents the shift in the Gulf states from an ideologically driven foreign policy, which privileged Pakistan on the basis of a shared religious identity, to an emphasis on *realpolitik*, which favours India due to its rising international status and economic heft. He argues that Saudi Arabia’s advocacy for pan-Islamic ideology during the second half of the twentieth century, which scaled new heights under King Faisal bin Abdulaziz, constituted the ideational basis for closer Saudi-Pakistani ties, highlighting their joint support for the Afghan jihad against the USSR (1979-1989) and the role of Saudi petrodollars in bankrolling General Zia-ul Haq’s Islamisation of Pakistani society. Racine notes that since the early 2000s, however, religious ideology has receded to the background, ceding its place to *realpolitik* as the primary driver of foreign policy in the Gulf region. The immense growth in economic, political, and defence cooperation agreements between the Gulf states and India, a G20 member state, especially during Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s term, is illustrative of these shifting dynamics. Racine suggests that the Gulf states’ ambivalence on Kashmir



in the aftermath of the Indian government's decision to alter the disputed territory's special status in the Indian constitution in 2019 exemplifies their reluctance to side automatically and unambiguously with Pakistan against India, including at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, simply on grounds of religious solidarity. The outcome of these dynamics has been a strategic reversal: India has displaced Pakistan to semi-peripheral status, replacing it as the focal point of the Gulf states' strategic engagement in South Asia.

24 In this complex and unstable geopolitical context, the article by Antía Mato Bouzas draws a vivid portrait of the relations of Pakistani Gilgit Baltistan with Kuwait. Baltistan is a landlocked territory in the north-eastern extremity of Pakistan, next to China and to the Line of Control that has divided Kashmir for decades between India and Pakistan. Bouzas explores the crucial role of remittances and foreign philanthropy for this territory that is marginalized if not abandoned in many regards. It highlights the importance of private actors and transnational communities in the making of international lasting connections that contribute to shape translocal power relations and political scenes. She addresses the issue of international philanthropy along religious channels that is a salient feature of the engagement of the Middle East with the rest of the world, and of its relevance for such peripheral territories. This text again unravels assemblages of religious networks, Middle Eastern merchant classes and the flows of persons and capital that circulate through these transnational configurations, with a multi-level and multi-local approach that brings together distant territories across the Indian Ocean.

25 In an effort to draw a conclusion for this special issue, the articles brought together emphasize the need for historicizing the recent comeback of India on the Arabian map, for approaches that think also in terms of continuities and that try to embrace the whole range of material and immaterial, human and non-human circulations.

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DOI : 10.1017/S1740022807002033

Pour citer cet article

Référence électronique

Philippe Pétriat, Aurélie Varrel et Hasan T Alhasan, « Back to Asia? South Asia and the Arabian Peninsula », *Arabian Humanities* [En ligne], 17 | 2023, mis en ligne le 01 juillet 2023, consulté le 10 janvier 2024. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/cy/9507> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/cy.9507>

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Philippe Pétriat

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Aurélie Varrel

Hasan T Alhasan

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