



# **CONTOURS OF RELATIONSHIP**

**INDIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST**

Edited by  
Kingshuk Chatterjee



# CONTOURS OF RELATIONSHIP

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## *India and the Middle East*

India's relationship with the Middle East is a very good example of ties between people that are genuinely of historical. The peoples of the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East have down the ages been interacting with each other – travelling to each other's lands, engaging in trade and commerce, settling down, intermarrying and contributing in every way possible in each other's lives long before the political frontiers of the present emerged. It is difficult to readily comprehend that what appears today as the distinct regions of South Asia, Middle East and Central Asia were not readily comprehensible as distinct regions even a hundred years back. While the natural frontiers of the Hindu Kush, Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea divided the peoples into linguistic and cultural zones that were Indic, Arab, Persian and Turkic, (and a host of others) such cultural frontiers, despite being thick, were never quite hard. Thus while linguistic spaces were easily discernible (i.e. thick), people were always able to move (i.e. not hard) from one zone to the other, were at liberty to settle down and – according to the dynamics of immigration and settlement – be subsumed within the host population with a fair degree of ease. It is no wonder, therefore that Armenian, Iranian, Baghdadi Jewish, Sunni and Shi'i Arab, Kabuli, Multani, Shikarpuri, Parsi, Ismaili, Surti, Sikh/ Punjabi, Peshawari and many other such communities moved back and forth across the overland trading routes that connected what is today South Asia with the Middle East.

Essays in this volume come principally out of a conference held in March 2016 at the University of Calcutta, organized by the Centre for Pakistan and West Asian Studies and Institute of Foreign Policy Studies and fully funded by the Netaji Institute of Asian Studies. The primary objective of the volume is to examine the contours of relationship between the peoples of the two regions, before the political frontiers of the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East were fashioned in the middle of the twentieth century. Except for one, all the contributors have chosen to highlight the role played by individuals in the subcontinent or in the Middle East with supra-regional connections or interests, engaging with their own immediate settings, influenced by forces, ideas or people from emanating from outside the region – the underlying argument being relationships between the people of the subcontinent and the Middle East are not confined simply to commercial or cultural exchanges alone. The fact that all the protagonists dealt with here happened to operate in the colonial era serves to indicate the vitality of the relationship, which stood independent of the nature and impact of the political system that obtained then.

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KINGSHUK CHATTERJEE

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK



University of Calcutta

Centre for Pakistan and West Asian Studies (CPWAS)

Institute of Foreign Policy Studies (IFPS)

*in association with*



KW Publishers Pvt Ltd  
New Delhi

First published 2019  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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Print edition not for sale in South Asia (India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan or Bhutan)

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-0-367-34407-8 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-429-32570-0 (ebk)

Typeset in ITC Galliard  
by KW Publishers, New Delhi 110002



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# INTRODUCTION

It is virtually a routine in diplomatic events and official gatherings to refer to “long historical” or “deep cultural” ties between countries and peoples. Very often such “ties” do not stretch beyond a small trade mission or two in the hoary past. The Indian establishment is no exception to this tendency, claiming as it does “long historical” ties with nearly every part of the globe that it happens to have any interest in. Beyond the level of homilies, though, such ties actually do exist – not necessarily between official establishments (which are often quite new), but between the peoples of various regions who, for one reason or another, happened to have travelled to, and even settled down in, distant lands.

India’s relationship with the Middle East is a very good example of ties that are genuinely of “long historical” nature. The peoples of the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East have down the ages been interacting with each other – travelling to each other’s lands, engaging in trade and commerce, settling down, intermarrying and contributing in every way possible in each other’s lives long before the political frontiers of the present emerged. It is on account of such connections, brought about by people moving between regions, that it is possible to find a street in the Iranian capital city of Tehran to be colloquially called “Khiaban-e Hind”(India Avenue), or find a centuries old Jewish synagogue on the Konkan coast, or to see the use of blue tiles from the Esfahan region of Iran on the fortress walls of Gwalior, or to attend a musical festival in New Delhi funded by the Iranian Ministry of Culture celebrating the works of a poet writing in Persian in the court of a Turkic ruler who lies buried in India.

The kind of inter-regional connections that have historically existed between the peoples of the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East have occasionally been explained away in terms of political conquest – especially of parts of the Indian subcontinent by invading armies from outside the region. It is argued that many of the exchanges and movements between regions were made possible and were accelerated because of the political factor of domination and subjugation of the Indian subcontinent by people of Turkic and Mongol origin. However, quite apart from the technical point that none of the Turko-Mongol rulers came from the Middle East (they all came from Central Asia and its larger hinterland), it needs be emphasized that India's connections with the region had little or nothing to do with the Turko-Mongol rulers, except that the empires built by them created conditions for a large number of people to move into the Indian subcontinent, from the Middle East as much as Central Asia. In fact, any close study of this issue would probably bring out that the conquests happened in the wake of exchanges that were taking place for much longer, rather than the other way round.

It is difficult to readily comprehend that what appears today as the distinct regions of South Asia, Middle East and Central Asia were not readily comprehensible as distinct regions even a hundred years back. While the natural frontiers of the Hindu Kush, Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea divided the peoples into linguistic and cultural zones that were Indic, Arab, Persian and Turkic, (and a host of others) such cultural frontiers, despite being thick, were never quite hard. Thus while linguistic spaces were easily discernible (i.e. thick), people were always able to move (i.e. not hard) from one zone to the other, were at liberty to settle down and – according to the dynamics of immigration and settlement – be subsumed within the host population with a fair degree of ease. It is no wonder, therefore that Armenian, Iranian, Baghdadi Jewish, Sunni and Shi'i Arab, Kabuli, Multani, Shikarpuri, Parsi, Ismaili, Surti, Sikh/ Punjabi, Peshawari and many other such

communities moved back and forth across the overland trading routes that connected what is today South Asia with the Middle East. Nor is it a wonder that descendants of Zoroastrian families in India speak Gujarati (language of their domicile) rather than Farsi (language of their place of origin), that a separatist Kashmiri leader in India bears the name Gilani, (indicating that his family was at some point of time coming from northern Iran), or that the Bene-Israeli community from Bombay had to take recourse to the courts in Israel in order to be recognized as a Jewish community, having adopted so many of local Konkani traits as to not be accepted as Jewish at all.

Given the linguistic, cultural and other attributes of the people of the different regions, it is not altogether difficult any more to signify the differences with greater emphasis. However, for a historian, the various identities that a person might be tagged with do not all necessarily speak of a definitive regional connection that cuts across the barriers of time. A Jewish merchant from Yazd may have married into a Baghdadi family, and then happened to move out to Calcutta in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, whence its next generation left for, and settled down in, Rangoon on the one hand and Ceylone on the other – would such a family be a Middle Eastern family settled in South Asia, or a South Asian family with Middle Eastern roots? Such a family might be one thing in the nineteenth century, and quite another in the twentieth. Identity, after all, is fixed only within a definite context of space and time. That of a region is not different.

Essays in this volume come principally out of a conference held in March 2016 at the University of Calcutta, organized by the Centre for Pakistan and West Asian Studies and Institute of Foreign Policy Studies and fully funded by the Netaji Institute of Asian Studies. The primary objective of the volume is to examine the contours of relationship between the peoples of the two regions, before the political frontiers of the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East were fashioned in the middle of the twentieth century. The essays cover a time span stretching

from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century, which comes after the period of the Turko-Mongol (i.e. “Muslim”) domination of the subcontinent. And except for one, all the contributors have chosen to highlight the role played by individuals in the subcontinent or in the Middle East with supra-regional connections or interests, engaging with their own immediate settings, influenced by forces, ideas or people from emanating from outside the region – the underlying argument being relationships between the people of the subcontinent and the Middle East are not confined simply to commercial or cultural exchanges alone. The fact that all the protagonists dealt with here happened to operate in the colonial era serves to indicate the vitality of the relationship, which stood independent of the nature and impact of the political system that obtained then.

The short essay by Jael Silliman – the only one that is not centred on any individual protagonist – plots the story of the Baghdadi Jewish community in India, who came to the region from all over the Middle East much later than their fellow religionists did elsewhere in the subcontinent. Responding to economic impulses generated by the western colonial powers, this particular community of the Asiatic Jewry developed a vast commercial network stretching between Singapore to the East and London to the West, developing major presence in Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, Karachi and Rangoon. It begins by plotting the settlement of the early Baghdadi families in different parts of India. It then goes on to discuss how they flourished in various trades, developing fortunes and giving birth to the idea of “Jewish Asia.”

Soumen Mukherjee’s essay deals with a figure from the Indian subcontinent who has remained an important focus on the religious map of Pakistan – Ghulam Ahmad Qadiani, the point of origin of the Ahmadiyya sect, which has been under attack from mainstream Sunni Islam as a deviant tendency. Instead of the usual approaches to Ghulam Ahmed however, Mukherjee tells us of a different dimension involving

his protagonist altogether. From around the late nineteenth century there emerged a line of interventions that claimed to have uncovered a ‘Buddhist’ narrative of Jesus the Christ’s sojourns in India. While the narrative gained some niche adherence, it also attracted criticism. It was soon labelled as spurious, and the ‘Buddhist’ text a forgery. By the early twentieth century, however, this account developed a number of variations, some of which tended to suggest an Indian origin of Christianity. While discredited in the academia, the larger cluster of Jesus-in-India narratives— despite fluctuations in its constituent accounts— has come to have some enduring contemporary relevance especially for the wave of ‘new religions’. Mukherjee dwells on the question of ‘historical veracity’ of such claims, or the lack of it. He seeks to understand this on the basis of a case study of one particular line of the Jesus-in-India account— viz. the variant propagated by Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian.

Seema Alavi’s paper looks at the career of Imdadullah Makki, a rebel who left India after 1857 and operated in the interstices of the British and the Ottoman empires, establishing his base at Mecca. Alavi gives an account of a kind of “engineered cosmopolitanism exemplified as virtuous public conduct.” He used his new location and tapped its long history of connections with South Asia to exploit the circumstances in fashioning his cosmopolitanism as an urbane civility based on universalist Muslim conduct. His cosmopolitanism derived from the Islamic scriptural tradition and was informed by the tradition of consensus. It was a form of trans-nationalism that nurtured global aspirations and aimed to tightly weld the Muslim community (*umma*). Imdadullah’s career offers a new perspective on the histories of cosmopolitanism, trans-nationalism and movement of Muslims of the subcontinent to multiple imperial centers across the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean world. His networks between empires, Alavi contends, offer fresh insights into Indian Muslim politics as it evolved outside the confines of the British political ambit.

Kingshuk Chatterjee's essay deals with the role the Calcutta-based weekly *Habl al-Matin* played in the shaping of the Constitutionalist cause in the run up to the Constitutional Revolution of Iran in 1906. While its significance was duly recognised by contemporaries as much as scholars, there is, ironically, very little that has been written of the venture of *Habl al-Matin* and even less about its elusive prime mover, Jalal al-din Kashani. The essay purports to be an exploratory foray, looking at the life of Jalal al-din Kashani and the role his *Habl al-Matin* played in shaping the political discourse of Persia during its heyday in the run-up to the *Mashruteh* revolution from the capital of British India. It tries to make the case that the Calcutta-based press and its progenitor contributed substantially in undermining the political legitimacy of the ruling dynasty in Iran.

The essay by Kashshaf Ghani by contrast looks at the role an event in the distant Ottoman Empire plays in the formulation and interrogation of the identity of an "Indian" "Muslim." The essay basically investigates the elements of either, and toys with the question at which point of time is one a "Muslim", and even when one is an "Indian" Muslim; whether the category of "India" is susceptible of breaking up further. In order to do this, Ghani compares the accounts of two members of the Indian Medical Mission to Ottoman Turkey – its leader Dr. Ansari and a Bengali Muslim delegate in the same mission, Ismail Hussain Siraji. He identifies the elements of, and reasons behind, the differences between the two accounts.

In the final essay of the volume, Safoora Razeq sets about the task of exploring the Middle Eastern roots of one of the most ardent Indian nationalists, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. Born in Hejaz of an Arab mother, Azad returned to India at a very young age, but continued to be educated by his father whose own training was of Hejazi vintage. His family connections allowed him to keep open a window towards the Middle East all the time through his early years, including (it would seem) a visit to the region, and a regular supply of political

and journalistic literature from the region. Azad's young mind was further heavily influenced by political personalities such as Jamal al-din al-Afghani, who served to galvanise political opinion of Muslims in a large number of countries. At an early age therefore he came to develop a fairly clear idea of the nature of colonial rule and its impact on the social and cultural life of Muslims, as much as other Asiatic peoples. It was largely on account of this predisposition of Azad that he was thrilled to learn of two of the most momentous developments in the region – the Young Turk revolution in Turkey and the Mashruteh revolution of Persia – and found in these, as much as other political developments in the rest of the Arab world, resonance of a political discourse that he found suited to the situation of Muslims in India, living under British yoke. This political flavour seeped into the publication – and the virtually instant popularity of – *al-Hilal*, and established for Azad his foothold in Indian politics. Razeq tries within the small compass of her essay the story of these fascinating and complicated influences on Maulana Azad's politics emanating from the Middle East.



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# THE BAGHDADI JEWS

## *An Economic Force Across Asia* (1790-1950s)

JAEEL SILLIMAN

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### I

An ancient trading connection between Western Asia and the Indian sub-continent can be traced back to the Biblical times of King Solomon.<sup>1</sup> As a function of these trading links, two communities of Jews came to settle in India – the Cochin and the Bene Israel Jews. Both communities have lived in India for many centuries, though the dates of their arrival are shrouded in myth.<sup>2</sup> This paper examines the most recent arrival of a Jewish community to the Indian subcontinent, that of the Baghdadi Jews in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Jews from the Middle East responded to new economic impulses generated by colonialism. Originally from Syria and Iraq, they extended and elaborated the ancient and medieval mercantile routes of which they were an integral part.<sup>3</sup> From the 18<sup>th</sup> to the mid-twentieth century they set up business enterprises across a vast geographic space – from Bagdad to Shanghai in the East and to London in the West. Their trading networks connected ports on different continents and oceans, producing distinct cultures along the routes that interacted and related to one another. “Jewish Asia”, which these traders navigated and welded together, became culturally much like the “Black Atlantic” and the “medieval Jewish Mediterranean.” During this period, small communities of Middle Eastern Jews carried out their business ventures and community life in the port cities of Bombay, Karachi, Calcutta, Rangoon, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Shanghai.

While this group of Jews is called Baghdadi, the community includes Jews from Baghdad, Damascus, Aleppo, Yemen, Persia, Afghanistan, Kurdistan, Bukhara, and Tunisia. These seasoned traders took advantage of the British presence to establish themselves in Calcutta - then the second City of Empire - and in Bombay. Having pre-capitalist networks already in place, they were poised to succeed in the mercantile phase of capitalism. British imperialism provided the conditions for the expansion of their trading networks to new areas of the world, particularly the Far East. Thomas Tinberg has noted that these networks operated as ancillary to British trading networks from at least the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onward and played an important role in India's economy.<sup>4</sup>

Calcutta and Bombay were the key points from which they extended their trading links across port cities from Baghdad to Shanghai in the East.<sup>5</sup> These traders played a critical role in the mercantile development of both Imperial cities and were also very influential in the other port cities of South and South East Asia. The departure of the British from India was a turning point for the Baghdadi Jews, whose fortunes were tied to British colonialism. Uncertain of their economic future, they looked elsewhere for economic opportunities. Yet, their sojourn in Calcutta and Bombay from 1790 to the late 1950s, when they were still an economic force to be reckoned with, marks another important chapter in the regular movement of people and trade between West Asia and South Asia. Whereas the older Bene Israel and Cochin Jewish communities illustrate the substantial trading ties that existed between West Asia and the Western coast of India (Maharashtra and Kerala), the Baghdadi Jews underline the role that traditional networks of commerce played during the Raj era, bringing Western Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia into dynamic trading relationships.

## II

The first of the Baghdadi Jews to come to Surat in search of economic opportunities was Shalome Obadiah Ha Cohen, a trader from Aleppo, Syria who traded in many precious commodities, including gemstones.<sup>6</sup> A seasoned businessman, he made his way to Calcutta to take advantage of the trading opportunities he thought British rule afforded. He traveled to other princely states for his business in precious stones. Cohen also traded in rosewater, the import of Arabian horses, spices, silks, and indigo. He sent for his son-in-law, Moses Duek Cohen, to join him to extend his economic enterprises. The family quickly became very prosperous and others from the Middle East joined them over the next century. The economic and bureaucratic structures established by the British facilitated trade and their military provided political protection and security in their business ventures.

The majority of those Jews who came to India were from Baghdad where they were an influential community in business, trade, professions, and the arts. Jews made up a third of Baghdad's population. Baghdad was the center of Jewish learning across the world and was most noted for its great religious scholars. The Middle Eastern Jews in India followed its religious liturgy. It was to Baghdad that they looked to for spiritual guidance and for clarification of Jewish law.

The Jews coming to India from Baghdad soon outnumbered others of their faith in the Calcutta community. This was especially so as the Jews in Baghdad faced pogroms under Daud Pasha who ruled from 1817 to 1831, making India a safe refuge. Jews in Baghdad were being accused of blasphemy and apostasy and there were numerous anti-Christian and anti-Jewish riots. Among those who fled to India was the Sassoon family. From around this time, presumably, owing to Baghdad's spiritual authority and the large number of Jews coming from Baghdad that the Jews from the Middle East in India and the rest of Asia called themselves Baghdadi Jews.