

Conference report

From 23rd to 24th May 2008 the conference „Identities: Reflections on Global Gujarati Communities“ was held at the University of Toronto. It was organized by the Gujarati Studies Association, which was founded in 2005. For further details see www.gujaratstudies.org. There were about 60 participants coming from all over the world. About 2/3 could be denominated as Gujaratis themselves. (?)

The conference included a wide range of topics from literature, political science, anthropology, pedagogies, history, linguistics, media sciences, and social work. The complete programme can be seen at http://www.gujaratstudies.org/index_files/page0012.htm. Due to the fragmentation of the conference in panels I was not able to listen to all the presentations.

Here I will focus on the most exciting ones – from my very subjective account and in relation to my own work about Gujarati Bohras in India and South Africa, who denominate themselves as Muslim.

First day's keynote speaker was **Prof. Radhika Desai** from the University of Manitoba. She presented a very lucid analysis of the Hindutva politics in Gujarat ('Hindutva geography') as a messenger for the whole of India, thereby questioning the social sciences' general acknowledged drift to the right. What is to study in Gujarat and what can be connected to the anti-Muslim pogroms – the last was in 2002 - are the emotions moving the people in this region. With an Marxian inspired perspective and regional numbers from the Lok Sabha elections of the last 40 years she argued that the Hindutva movement is a coalition of the propertied classes, that means the upper castes (~ 15 % in Gujarat) and the middle castes' landowning employers and exploiters from the countryside. In her conclusion she remarked that secularism cannot be saved without addressing socio-economic inequalities.

During the following discussion the problem of the secular scientist in an increasingly right-winged environment was touched – these lines have to be drawn clearly. Another important point to mention was the diaspora question: what role does the argued 'mindless Hindu identity' of the migrants play for the developments in Gujarat?

Professor Sheena Raja and Nina Raja presented to the whole auditorium their findings about "South Asian Stereotypes in American Entertainment Television" focussing on the absence of them, respectively on the only one popular and, by definition comical figure, who is Apu Nahasapeemapetilon from the 'Simpsons'. The fact that jocular broadcastings always rely on stereotyping their characters was discussed afterwards as well as the 2005-2007 attempt of MTV to establish and broadcast a special Desi section, that aimed/s per definition at people of South Asian origin.

Dr. Riho Isakas gave an interesting analysis of K.M. Munshi's literature and especially on his non-fictional writings from the 1930s and 1940s where he developed a regionalist-nationalist contra-position to Gandhis ideas. She traced his way as an advocate and activist and Prof. Desai asked for his relation to the Hindu Right during the discussion.

Ramnik Shah, publisher of the Journal of Immigration, Asylum and National Law spoke about Gujaratis who migrated from India or Zansibar to East Africa in the 19th and early 20th century, stating that the contract workers among them, who constructed the railway, often returned afterwards. The travel to East Africa was not so systematically regulated as it was to the West Indies, so the sources are rather scarce. Shah proposed that the sense of nationality among these Gujaratis, resp. Indians in general was not developed (yet), for in their perspective they moved just from one part of the British Empire to another. This idea is to keep in mind for comparative matters from my own project.¹

The 2nd days keynote presented by Theologian **Professor Raymond B. Williams** from Wabash College gave interesting information about US immigration politics and so-called 'push- & pull factors' of migration. He left the question unanswered why the Gujaratis, compared to Bengalis or Maharashtrians, focus in the Diaspora so strongly on religious forms of organization. The answer was, that ritualization of identity through rhetorical & religious means serves to "stand somewhere", to link the community to transcendental grounds. Another comment remarked the marginalization of non-Hindu Gujaratis in the foreign countries – discriminated or marginalized by the Hindu majority.²

"An Ahmedabad 'Slum': Between the Rural and the Urban and its Implications for Women" was the title of **Dr. Laila Halani's** presentation. She belongs to the staff of the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London and wrote her fieldwork based Ph.D. thesis about that not named district. Although the auditorium was rather shrunked during her presentation – due to the two parallel panels – she gave an excellent report on the social relations and symbolically communicated values articulated and bargained in an environment usually described as chaotic or even anomic. She focused on the agency of the people instead of following stringent patterns of interpretation and explored the concepts of 'extension of the villages' versus the 'urban space'. The values of heterogeneous Muslim social lifes, who account for 20% of the population, as those of Hindus and OBCs (Other Backward Communities – that's the language used officially) were examined through the different and changing use of purdah & slippers by women, marriage customs, and generally the peoples' attitudes towards city life. Although the

¹ For further information see e.g. <http://www.asiansinafrica.com/>

² Here I would like to add that during the visit of the newly built Shri Swaminarayan Mandir I had to recognize, that the museum / exhibition about India attached to the temple totally downplayed or rather ignored the Muslim population of India, which makes up about 13 % after all.

setting was in the midst of Ahmedabad, the ‘urban life’ was assigned rather to the Muslims, the middle class, respectively the upper castes and not to the majority of Hindus, whom she worked with and who composed for themselves a rather rural identity. In this respect Dr. Halani mentioned briefly the processes of Ashrafization / Sanskritization taking place in the communities.

Katherine Twamley (Supervisorors **Anthony Pryce** and **Karina Kielmann**) talked about courtship and marriage practices in Baroda/India, where she had conducted fieldwork. She stated a middle-class self-image of young urban couples in which self-reliance, equality and happiness in the partnership are important values.³ The local idea of ‘cheap’ or ‘foolish’ relations was contrasted with the serious ones, which aim per definition at marriage. Twamley argued that the young urban Indian couples look modern but don’t behave so.

A rather theory focussed presentation was given by **Dr. John Mattausch** from the Royal Holloway College, UK. He questioned the ontological (?) concept of identity which wasn’t made explicit until then and related rather ‘character’ to the sum of experiences people made during their lifetimes. The strictly constructivist approach aimed at the notions of coincidence and chance forming / determining characters. That was discussed vividly afterwards leading to the questions I had waited for. The detailed account can be found in his newly published book “*Chance, Character & Change*” (2008).

It was Professor Abdulaziz Lodhi’s presentation of the *Cutchi-Speaking Communities in Eastern Africa* which evoked another vivid discussion about the key concepts of the conference. That was surely due to the advanced stage of the conference but also to the pivot of his argumentation for the Cutchi migrants were mostly Sunni Muslims. For them the language was a strong identification mark. This led again to the question what it is to be defined as ‘Gujaratiness’ if there is something like that at all. Just to sum up a couple of indicators is not fruitful because Gujaratis can be Hindus as well as Muslims and Gujarati-speakers as well as Cutchi-speakers. And Cutchi is NOT a dialect of Gujarati, that’s was Prof. Lodhi argued convincingly. The further diversification within the ‘imagined community’ as I would like to call it here through such factors as generation, migrant situation, gender, rural/urban lifestyles etc. leads to a plural, in my eyes positively connoted fracture of the sometimes homogenously stated ‘being Gujarati’.

During the conference breaks and particularly with the conjoint visit of the mandir there were lots of ‘networking-activities’ which I could use to make my own work and concepts

³ The framework was based on Hirsch (2006): *Modern loves: the anthropology of romantic courtship & compassionate marriage* as well as on Padilla (2007): *Love and Globalization. Transformations of intimacy in the contemporary world*.

known. It was a very friendly atmosphere with vivid discussions even after the conference officially ended.

I want to thank the EC for the given support and Prof. Helene Basu for her constant encouragement to go there.