Mobility and the region: A multi-scalar ethnography of the Vohra Gujarati community, in India and abroad
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SUMMARY

Mobility and the region: a multi-scalar ethnography of the Vohra Gujarati community, in India and abroad

This thesis is a case study of the Charotar Sunni Vohra community, a regional community based in the Charotar region in central Gujarat, India. Based on ten months of research in Gujarat and two months amongst migrants from the region in the UK, with additional research in the USA, it argues that trajectories of mobility are key to the regional experience, and contributes to three discussions in the social sciences: on ‘ghettoisation’, the region, and migrant transnationalism.

The first discussion, about ‘ghettoisation’, arises from Muslims in India having been politically, socially, economically, and spatially marginalised. This has led to academic research on the ‘ghettoisation’ of Indian cities, a process by which cities become divided into ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ areas so that Muslims experience increasing isolation and estrangement from the rest of the city. This thesis contributes to this discussion by shifting attention from the larger cities to a town
in a rural area, where spatial shifts are also emerging in response to large-scale violence against Muslims in 2002 in Gujarat and the subsequent displacements and residential segregation. To address the methodological limitations of much scholarship on ghettoisation, which generates a rather isolated view of Muslims in Indian cities, this thesis has taken, instead, a regional approach, positioning the urban neighbourhood within wider networks of mobility and exchange in the Charotar region. This approach is particularly suited to this case study of Charotar Sunni Vohras, many of whom shifted residence to a ‘Muslim area’ of Anand town after 2002, but who also strongly identify as a regional community through narratives of regional ancestry and continued rural-urban exchanges. I argue that rural-urban connections and regional networks provide pathways out of the enclave and shape the urban experience.

The ‘ghettoisation’ perspective is also limited in that it has paid little attention to the involvement of transnational actors with the spatial shifts associated with ‘ghettoisation’, thus unwittingly supporting a view in which Muslims are treated as a separate subject and excluded from wider discussions of the ‘Indian diaspora’. Through its case study of Vohras in the UK and USA, this thesis shows that overseas Indian Muslims also nurture intimate connections with people and places in India, and that some act as ‘agents of development’ in their region of origin. This process is clearly visible in the ‘Muslim area’ of Anand town.

Second, in terms of the region: this thesis draws significantly on anthropological discussions on place and the region to study a regional community in relation to the region/homeland. The field research was based in the pathways of travel that connect the neighbourhood to what lies beyond, drawing on a notion of the region as narrated and as emerging along pathways of travel, and on an understanding of movement and exchange as ‘place-making practices’. Equal attention was paid to the regional orientation of urban residents and of transnational migrants visiting the town. The resulting contribution of this thesis is that it positions the anthropology of the region within a transnational framework. Studying regions/homelands as emerging along local and transnational pathways is shown to be useful in the study of migrant-sending regions in South Asia, and also of towns, which have been described as key nodal points within regional networks but should be understood as hubs in regional and transnational networks – as ‘global towns’.

The third contribution is to the ‘placial turn’ in studies of transnational migration and to the broader project of furthering academic understanding of the ‘stretching’ of social life across space. While Vohras find a sense of home and belonging in Charotar, their putative region of origin, their orientation cannot be
explained by looking only at how they ‘imagine’ the region from afar. Being fully aware of the discrimination and marginalisation of Muslims in India, their ideas of the ‘homeland’ do not conform to the ideas of nostalgia, idealisation and the dreams of return that have been described in earlier studies of diaspora homelands. Instead, the country of arrival is idealised in their narratives, as much more hospitable to religious minorities than India has been. To understand why and how Vohras then continue engage with the ‘homeland’, this thesis looks at their place-making practices, because it is through intimate kinship ties, visits, remittances, and investments that their engagements with the region take shape. These engagements are increasingly located in Anand as an emerging regional centre of the Vohra community, even when it is not the migrants’ town of origin, showing that Vohra homeland engagements are adapting to the spatial shifts in the region and rely on the localised pathways of travel of their personal relations in Gujarat.

In summary, by following people along their pathways of travel, in this thesis, I show that rather than being isolated, the ‘Muslim area’ of Anand town is embedded in wider regional and transnational networks. Further multi-sited fieldwork at different ‘scales’ can help uncover the orientations, practices, and social networks that enable these pathways to exist.