

## Earlier Sailing Boats Moved (*Pehla Vahano Halta*): Memories, Princely Ports and Routes of Sailing Boats along the Bhavnagar Coast, Gujarat, Western Indian Ocean

**ABSTRACT** Drawing upon archival research and nine months of fieldwork, this article collates divergent views of the maritime history of the former princely state of Bhavnagar in Gujarat, India. In doing so, it shows how this region appears through the academic lens of Indian Ocean history and how it is preserved in the archival records of the British Empire and the native princely state. These partial pictures are enriched with the local history of the littoral that is assembled from folklore and the lived memories of various peoples associated with sailing boats, smaller ports and the littoral's remote villages and islands. This micro history traces the sediments of sailing boats and the once active coastal trade routes that remain entrenched in the memories of the littoral's inhabitants. It highlights the connections of the littoral with the land and makes space for micro history of a maritime princely state.

**KEYWORDS** ethnography, historical anthropology, India, Indian Ocean, princely states

### Introduction

Indian Ocean history has long battled Eurocentrism. Scholars have detected and unpacked the bias in previous scholarship that conceived of the Indian Ocean as a static zone of limited interconnections that became active with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498. Ashin Das Gupta's pioneering work emphasized the importance and prominence of Indian merchants in the Gulf of Cambay in the early 1700s (Das Gupta 1979). Sources for highlighting a history of the Indigenous peoples who played important

roles in Indian Ocean history and trade (Palsetia 2008; Martin 2008; Ho 2006) outnumber those with a Eurocentric bias. Perhaps we can even say that there is now a new India-centric bias that excludes Africa and most of East Asia in the field of Indian Ocean history (Mukherjee 2013). Scholars have demonstrated that “there is no simple correlation between the rise of European powers and the decline of Asian trade in Indian Ocean history” (Ray 1995, 454). However, the activities of small-scale merchants, who did not always align with or circumvented the networks of empire and operated from the ports of princely states, remain to be told; and this paper takes a step in that direction. A prominent trend in scholarship that challenges the Eurocentric bias highlights that the people from the Gujarat region traded with and established themselves in the ports of Oman and Aden well before the Portuguese entered maritime trade in the Indian Ocean (and paved the way for European colonization) (Markovits 2008, 11). This article, which focuses on the Bhavnagar coast of Gujarat, is not free from the Indian bias as it looks at maritime Western India. However, it contributes to a postcolonial oceans perspective by emphasizing an aspect of the maritime history of a princely state in Western India that bordered the British Empire.

This article depicts the Bhavnagar littoral and the Gulf of Cambay in which it is situated through the lens of Indian Ocean history. This lens highlights transregional trade networks that often overlook the more regional connections of the littoral with both the land and the sea. The article reassembles a maritime history of the Bhavnagar coast from the grassroots level by drawing upon archival research and ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2014 and 2015 along the Gulf of Cambay. The fieldwork involved understanding changes in the maritime connectivity by examining the culture and lifestyles of the littoral peoples and tracing memories and histories of sailing boats. Interviews were conducted with members of various castes and occupational groups, including merchants, brokers, sailors, captains, insurance agents, stevedoring companies, port officers, salt pan workers, and residents of the Bhavnagar littorals’ port towns, harbours, and villages, including school principals, businessmen, tea sellers, and philanthropists. Most of the interlocutors who shared memories that enabled understanding local coastal trade were either directly involved in coastal trade or knew people who owned or operated sailing craft. The material remnants and ruins of sailing boats and sediments of memories of coastal trade helped to select the persons and villages to interview.

The first section of this article introduces the Gulf of Cambay in Gujarat, of which the former princely state of Bhavnagar was a part. It does so by culling out information on the port city of Bhavnagar and on the Gulf of

Cambay as it is presented in the field of Indian Ocean history. It draws upon existing research and publications of established Indian Ocean historians who have encountered Bhavnagar as a smaller port that fed the larger ports of the region that were in turn connected with other ports across the Indian Ocean world. The second section of the paper builds upon archival research and fieldwork and carves out a micro history of the two ports of Bhavnagar town that shows the importance of the port of Bhavnagar for the region. The third section traces the actual sediments of coastal trade and ruins of sailing craft along the coast of Bhavnagar. It presents folklore, oral history, and lived memories of coastal trade and the stories of the port towns and villages that thrived or subsisted on coastal routes of sailing boats from the perspective of the Bhavnagar coast's residents. The article presents data from archival research, references local scholars, and narrates the tales of littoral villages and occupational groups associated with coastal trade that remain unknown in a way to the discipline of Indian Ocean history. This micro history of the Bhavnagar coast suggests that the entire rim of the littoral is linked with the land as well as with the sea.

The princely states of India are often overlooked in mainstream histories of India and of the Indian Ocean. This gap is even more relevant for the history of the Western Indian Ocean, as there were over 200 territories of Indian princes and chiefs in the peninsula of the contemporary state of Gujarat and some of these were never directly under the rule of the British Empire. Overall, one third of the land of India was under princely states and only indirectly under British rule in India in 1947 at the time of independence (Roy, 2006). The ports of the princely states in maritime Gujarat comprised eight of the fourteen ports belonging to princely states at the time of the British Empire in India (McLeod 1999, 88–113). These princely ports were perceived as a threat to the British Indian ports because they could reach markets in North and Central India faster with the aid of railways and they were competitive (if small) as they charged lower customs duties on imported goods in comparison with British Indian ports (Ramusack 2004, 202–3). For example, Ushakant Mehta mentions how the Bhavnagar state supported the local mill by granting free use of water from a pond and exempting machinery imported for the mill from customs duties (Mehta 2013, 75–7).

Archival records of the European powers in the Western Indian Ocean document long-distance trade along the networks of the Empire. Scholars show how Indigenous Asian merchants also capitalized on these new networks of circulation and mobility, while their presence in the Indian Ocean predated the arrival of the Europeans (Ray 1995; Palsetia 2008). However, existing research overlooks the small-scale, regional, and coastal trading networks that, this article argues, were parallel to the networks of the Empire.

Many of these coastal trade routes were perhaps too regional, small-scale, and economically insignificant to invite the attention of influential people, states, and empires whose records are preserved in the archives.

The article differs from the established academic trends in Indian Ocean history, as it builds on extensive fieldwork, interviews, oral history, and memory that enable assembling histories and perspectives of peoples and places that are not adequately recorded in the colonial archives. Oral history technique enables documenting personal recollections, opinions, experiences, and memories of respondents. It facilitates accessing historically interesting data pertaining to individuals from their own perspective, including the emotions and meanings that they attribute to particular events, memories, thoughts, reflections, and affects associated with the past that would otherwise be missing from broader, more comprehensive histories that tend to focus on larger and more prominent groups of people. Nevertheless, the method does not inherently challenge existing power imbalances (Williams 2018, 787). In fact, by emphasizing the views of the specific interviewees, it might even contribute to accentuating existing micro hierarchies, such as views of men and certain caste groups that were significant for addressing the present research concern. Oral history interviews comprise the bulk of primary sources for this research, which complement information from the archives. This integral approach is required especially for understanding the princely states because the records in the colonial archives are both limited in quantity and adhere to a particular perspective. Records of maritime princely states of Gujarat are often incompletely preserved. In the case of the Bhavnagar princely state, the personal archives of the royal family are open only to the biographers of the royal family who belong to a particular caste and lineage according to local informants. This makes it pertinent to include the biographies and narratives by local historians and the legacies of the past in material culture, memories, and folklore. For example, the Gujarati book *Prajavatsal Rajvi* (2013) by Dr. Gambhir Singh Gohil is the only biography of Maharaja Sir Krishna Kumar Sinhji of Bhavnagar, the erstwhile princely state of Bhavnagar's last Maharaja. Sir Krishna Kumar Sinhji's photographs adorn the walls of offices, universities, photocopy shops in street corners, sweet shops, swanky modern offices of shipbuilders, NGOs, private hospitals, and homes of some residents of Bhavnagar town. The Maharaja reigned from 1919 until the independence of India from the British Empire in 1947, after which he served the South Indian region of Tamil Nadu as its governor for merely a token salary (Gohil 2013, 378–9). However, the photographs of the generous and benevolent ruler were ubiquitous in the Bhavnagar region even at the time the fieldwork took place in 2015. The flag of the

former princely state of Bhavnagar prominently features a sailing boat and eagles that were a symbol of the ruling Rajput clans.

Indian Ocean historians acknowledge that Gujarat region is “a land of the Indian Ocean as well as of India” (Machado 2009, 55), but most of the scholarship in Indian Ocean history focuses on the ocean and on long-distance trade. This article focuses on short- and medium-distance coastal trade that brings the littorals’ connections with the land into the picture. It demonstrates that coastal and transregional maritime routes were sometimes parallel to each other and not always connected. It argues that, contrary to the assumption of an integrated Indian Ocean world, the Bhavnagar coast and consequently the entire coastline of the Gulf of Cambay in Gujarat was not entirely oriented towards the Indian Ocean. Mapping the parallel small-scale routes of coastal trade and portraying the memories of people associated with this trade, the article documents the decline of maritime trade along the coast of the former princely state of Bhavnagar (1723–1948) in Western India between 1900 and 2015.

## Port Bhavnagar through the Lens of Indian Ocean History

This section draws upon existing published research and literature on the Indian Ocean and presents the view of the Gulf of Cambay as it emerges through this academic lens. This view from the field of Indian Ocean studies highlights transregional connections across the Western Indian Ocean and emphasizes the networked nature of this space. It also emphasizes the historical importance and geographical uniqueness of the region within the Indian Ocean world.

Ashin Das Gupta’s seminal work *Indian Merchants and the Decline of Surat c. 1700–1750* (Das Gupta 1979) paved the way for macro analysis of Western Indian Ocean’s ports. His path-breaking analysis chronicled the decline of Port Surat (located opposite to Bhavnagar on the other side of the Gulf of Cambay), which until 1750 was one of the most prominent ports of the Gulf of Cambay, located in the southwest part of the Gulf. He demonstrated that the reason for the decline of Port Surat was not competition from Port Bombay (which came up only later), nor siltation and political instability in Western India as was formerly believed. Instead, Port Surat fell into oblivion because the forelands and markets that the port’s history was deeply intertwined with suffered due to the decline of the Mughal, Saffavid, and the Ottoman Empires across the Western Indian Ocean (Das Gupta 1979) (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).

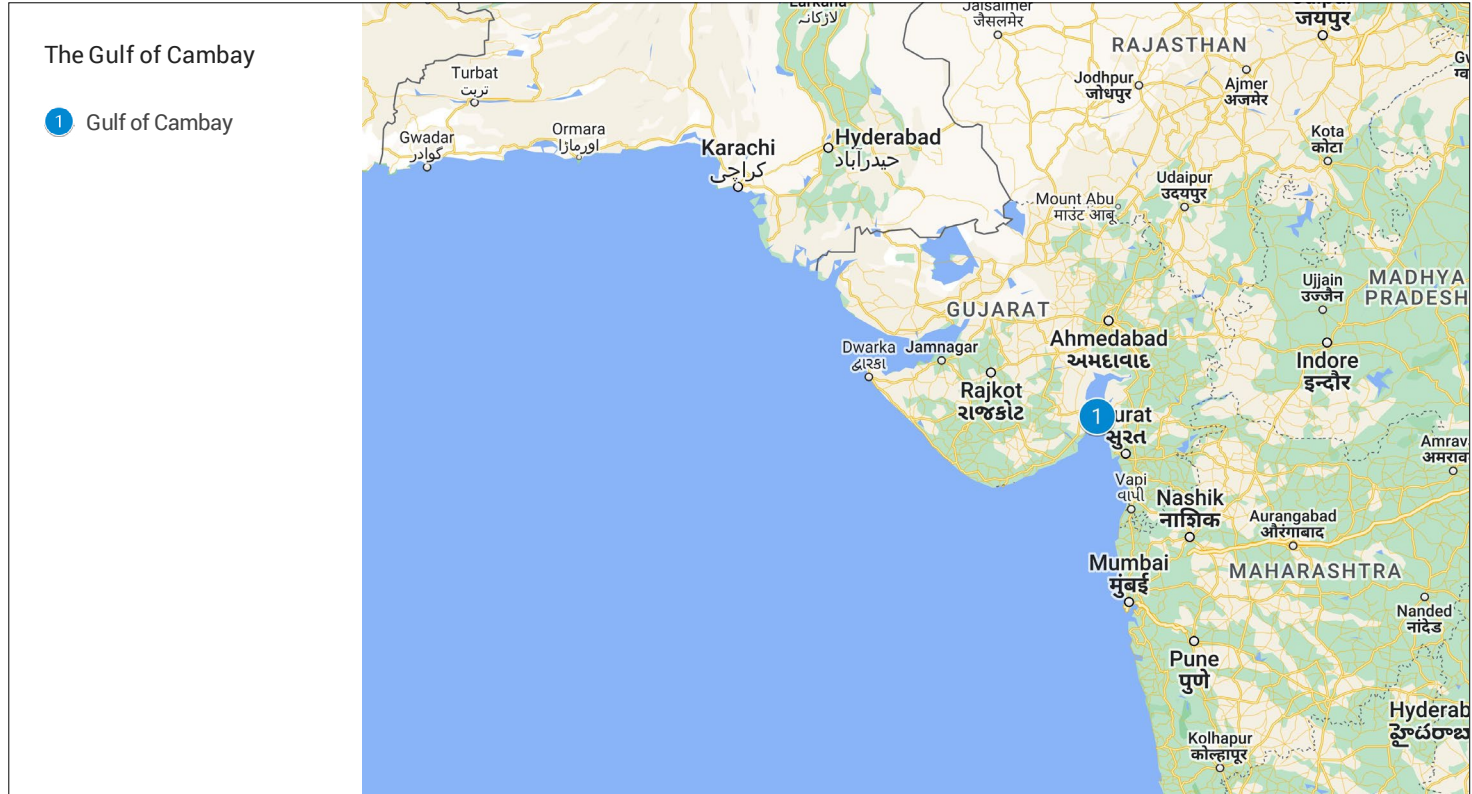


FIG 1. Map of Gulf of Cambay (2020), Gujarat, Western Indian Ocean. © Google

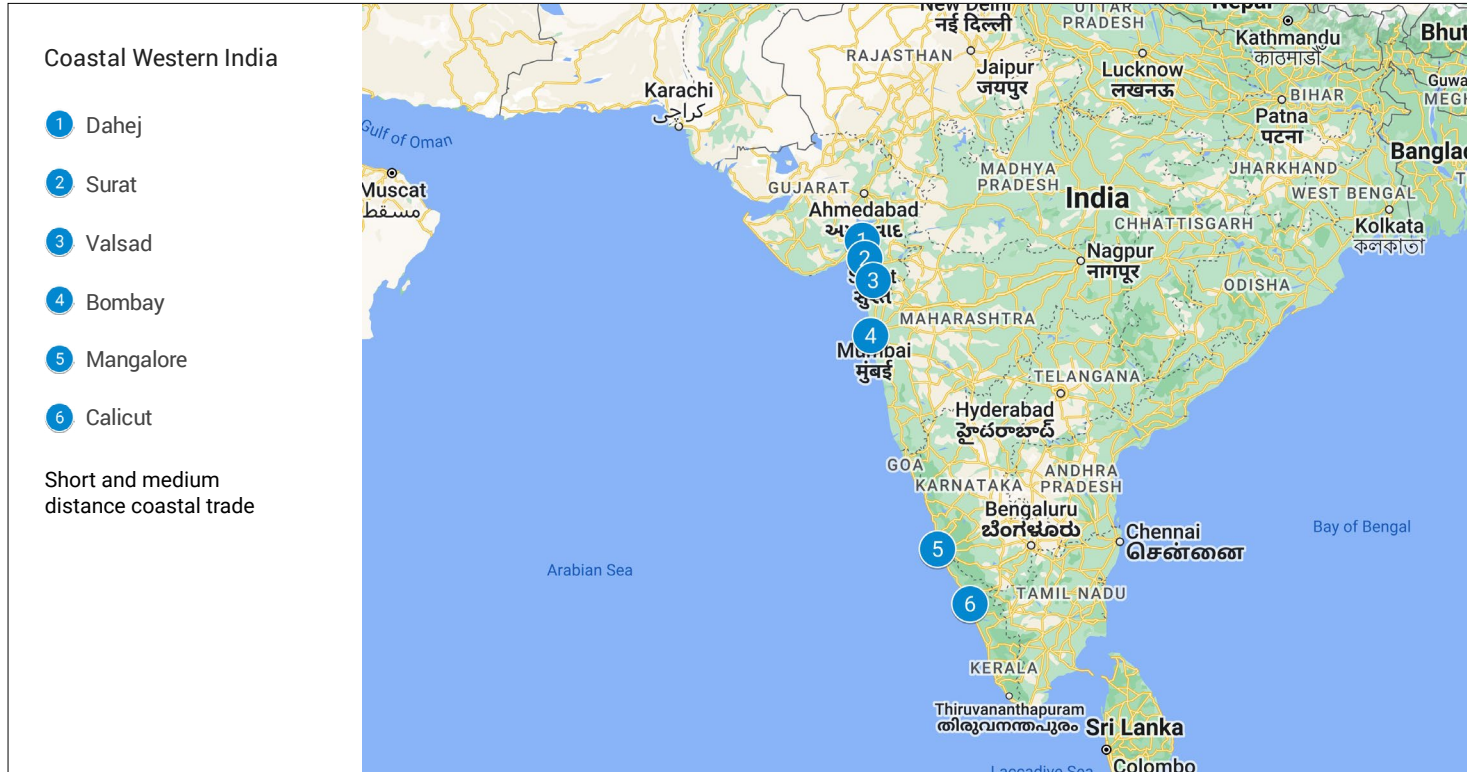


FIG 2. Map of ports connected with the Bhavnagar coast in the Gulf of Cambay (2020). © Google

Archaeological excavations in the Gulf of Cambay have revealed a “trapezoid, brick walled structure” in Lothal, Gujarat (c. 2350–c. 1800 BC) that was identified as a “dock” that might be one of the earliest tidal docks worldwide (Rao 1979, 22–3; Mehta 2009, 22). Geographically, the Gulf of Cambay in Gujarat has one of the highest tidal ranges (40 feet or 12 metres) in the world. It merges into the Arabian Sea. In the heart of the Gulf of Cambay, Port Cambay had carved out a special niche for itself by the tenth century, although “the reasons for the success of the ports of the Gulf of Cambay with its long-broken coastline, shoals, siltation, dangerous tides, numerous creeks have never been clear” (Sheikh 2014, 43). Gujarat’s ports became the hubs of Indian Ocean trade from the eighth century onwards, connecting East Africa, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Persian Gulf with East and Southeast Asia with its exports of “textiles, luxury fabrics, rugs, perfumes, jewellery” (Sheikh 2014, 44; Grancho 2015, 260).

The 200-kilometre-long coastline of the former princely state of Bhavnagar in Gujarat, which this article focuses on, comprises a portion of the northern side of the Gulf of Cambay. Most of the existing literature focuses exclusively on the central and the southern side of the Gulf of Cambay. Through the lens of Indian Ocean historians, the ports of Bhavnagar and Gogha served as feeder ports to Surat and formed “a port system or complex in which Surat was the most prominent” (Nadri 2015, 98–9). According to Nadri, the port complex of Surat includes the hinterland and smaller ports that send commodities to Surat that are destined for far-off places. The smaller ports complement, supplement, and at times compete with the larger port (Nadri 2015, 100). Rila Mukherjee also uses the terms “subsidiary” or “satellite ports” that get swallowed up into a hierarchy of ports as well as “port complex” or networked space that operates in combination. Samira Sheikh deploys the idea of an “auxiliary port” to argue that the ports of Gandhar and Gogha were loading points as well for Cambay in the tenth century, but they may also be seen as a network of smaller ports that revolve around a larger port (Mukherjee 2014, 11–42; Sheikh 2009, 44).

It is difficult to refute the idea that coastal trade connected the smaller, regional ports with the larger ports of the Indian Ocean. Nevertheless, Indian Ocean scholarship on coastal trade is sparse and Pearson’s *Coastal Western India* is an exception (Pearson 1981). It is possible to assume that the colonial administration considered the coastal and foreign trade as separate, since the closing of Indian coastal trade to foreign vessels and restricting the employment of Indian lascars (sailors) on such vessels was mentioned in 1919 (Shipping Control Branch, Department of Commerce and Industry 1919). It is known that coastal trade was undertaken on sailing craft called *vahano* in the Gujarati language. James Hornell, the director



of Fisheries of Madras in British India (1918–1930), who examined boat designs along the entire Indian coastline, describes the craft of South Kattiawar (Northern Gulf of Cambay) and the Gulf of Cambay and Bombay. They include the Arab *baggala*, the native craft of Kutchh (currently spelt as Kachchh) and Kattiawar built in India called *kotia*, and the Gujarati *machchwa* (Hornell 1920, 14–6).

The work of Pedro Machado also corroborates the idea of Bhavnagar as a feeder port when he mentions the competition that Bhavnagar’s merchants provided (albeit temporarily) for the Gujarati merchants based on the Portuguese island of Diu. Machado notes that Diu was served by many hinterlands (although Jambusar was by far the largest). According to him, the textile exports from Bhavnagar, which was foreign territory, threatened the business of the Vantias (merchants belonging to the business castes, families, and communities) from Diu in Mozambique so much that they asked the Portuguese to intervene (Machado 2009, 79). Machado shows that Jambusar to the southeast of Cambay served as an export hinterland for the Portuguese ports of Diu and, to a lesser extent, Daman, supplying these with piece goods and textiles that were tailored to cater to the tastes of remote African markets. Although the bulk of the trade from Gujarat was with West Asia and particularly the Persian Gulf, the linkages with Africa show the intricacies of the trade. Machado traces the shift in prominence of Gujarati merchants of Diu after whom the merchants of Kachchh became prominent later. Finally, the traders of textiles from the Americas took hold of the market and these textiles were circulated also in the interiors of Africa by the Gujarati firms (Ray 1995, 537).

In contrast to the depiction of the “small” port of Bhavnagar that fed into the networks of larger ports, the archival records of the Bhavnagar state throw light upon the importance of Port Bhavnagar for the maritime princely state, and they showcase the prominence and the “largeness” of this port in comparison with the other ports on the Bhavnagar coast.

Ghulam A. Nadri also mentions that the “regular flow of merchandise between the two ports of Mandvi (to the North of the Gulf of Cambay) and Surat (in the Southern portion of the Gulf of Cambay) was maintained by local merchants” (Nadri 2015, 98–9) that would have traversed the Gulf of Cambay and crossed to the Bhavnagar coast. However, who these merchants were can be speculated by drawing upon data from oral history and memories that the next section of this article outlines.

In contrast to the view from the outside and above, through the lens of established Indian Ocean historians that draws upon the colonial archive and positions Bhavnagar as a small feeder port, the next section presents a view from within the Bhavnagar littoral, drawing upon records of the

former Bhavnagar state and oral history and referring to the work of local researchers and writers. It points towards an intricate network of localized coastal trade that was oriented towards the coast of the Gulf of Cambay and in which Port Bhavnagar was the largest port.

## Local Histories of Port Bhavnagar

As said above, the Indian Ocean history lens provides a detailed account of how Bhavnagar was merely a feeder port that enriched the networks of larger Indian Ocean ports. Records from the local archives, however, highlight the localized importance of the port of Bhavnagar for the Bhavnagar coast. Port Bhavnagar was the largest port of the Bhavnagar coast and the only port of Bhavnagar state involved in long-distance Indian Ocean trade during the twentieth century. This section presents information on the infrastructure of Port Bhavnagar from the archival records of the former Bhavnagar state and concludes with an outline of contemporary Port Bhavnagar that continues to be celebrated as a site of modernity with its unique dock gate infrastructure.

Port Bhavnagar was established on a creek several miles away from the open waters of the Gulf of Cambay together with Bhavnagar town in 1723 (near the older port of Gogha) (Spodek 1974, 455). Port Bhavnagar had the status of a British port due to a special treaty of 1860–1864. Such “British ports” levied customs duty at British Indian rates and retained this revenue for their princely state (RISEC 1932, 98). The privileges of the ports of Bhavnagar state were curtailed by the British Empire and Bhavnagar’s rulers consistently defended their rights by requests for honouring the treaty of 1864 (Commerce and Industry Department 1908; RISEC 1932, 98). Bhavnagar state is remembered for embracing modern technology and innovations of its port are congruent with this trend. The Maharaja of Bhavnagar was the first to bring in the railways to princely Western India that was indirectly under the rule of the British Empire. The Bhavnagar started work on the Kundla-Mohwa section of the proposed Kundla-Bhavnagar railway in 1911 as part of famine-related works (Commerce and Industry Department 1911) and strengthened transport linkages across modes of communication for smoother trade.

Archival records of Bhavnagar state enable tracing the history of Port Bhavnagar’s infrastructure. As early as 1902–1903, a new dioptic light was provided in the Bhavnagar lighthouse (one of the five lighthouses maintained by the Bhavnagar state). The substitution of coconut oil by kerosene further resulted in “greater efficiency and economy” (Bhavnagar Darbar

1902, 1903). In 1903–1904, around 91,000 tons of mud was dredged until the average depth of fifteen to eighteen feet was reached in Bhavnagar harbour. In 1903 a 600-ton-steamer accidentally landed at Bhavnagar. Bhavnagar's entrepreneurs looked forward to the arrival of larger steamers during high tide which could then lie on the mud of the boat basin creek. The tidal range touched nearly 40 feet at Bhavnagar (RISEC 1932, 109). This process would save the lighterage cost and reduce the prices of imported goods. A temporary wharf was also built and about 45,000 square feet of land was reclaimed near the wharf (Bhavnagar Darbar 1903; 1904).

According to a newspaper clipping from May 30, 1906, the first ocean-going steamer entered the Bhavnagar creek with 3,500 tons of cargo coal and 500 tons of bunker coal. Demonstrating the appreciation of the Maharaja of Bhavnagar, the highest official of the state bureaucracy, the Dewan of Bhavnagar presented the captain and his officers each with purses of gold, welcoming direct trade with European ports in the future (*The Pioneer* 1906). In 1930–1931, fifty-nine ocean-going steamers and 3,710 coasting steamers and other craft called at Port Bhavnagar. In 1930–1931, the volume of imports was Rupees 239.99 lakhs (296,011 euros)<sup>1</sup> and the volume of exports was Rupees 147.61 lakhs (182,540 euros). The customs duties on imports in 1930–1931 were Rupees 51.05 lakhs (62,902 euros) (a steep rise from Rupees 9.18 lakhs [11,322 euros] in 1926–1927) (RISEC 1932, 110). This story of Port Bhavnagar is assembled through the traces it has left in the archival records and there are many missing pieces. The increments in port infrastructure and maintenance are documented in Bhavnagar's archive but little is known about the people whose lives were associated with the port infrastructure and trade. The following paragraphs outline a broad history of Bhavnagar town's two ports during the twentieth century. Long-distance trade received a further impetus in 1932 when the New Port of Bhavnagar was inaugurated with modern infrastructure, complete with a steel jetty, and long-distance maritime traffic was routed through this port. The leading salt merchants of Bhavnagar town mentioned how their families (fathers and grandfathers) sent consignments of salt to Japan on steam ships from the New Port of Bhavnagar in the early twentieth century. This trade soon dwindled due to several reasons, including siltation and policy constraints. This all-weather lighterage port is located ten kilometres away from Bhavnagar City and while it is still operational, its capacity and economic significance is limited, especially in comparison with the newer and larger container port of Pipavav (India's first private port, 20° 54' N 71° 30' E, located near the former Port Victor).

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1 According to the current exchange rate in 2022.

In 1957, the construction of a dock gate complete with a tidal gate and permeable gravel flanking dams at the entrance channel of the new port of Bhavnagar was started at a cost of 720,000 pounds (833,832 euros) (Beckett, Oza, and Taylor 1964, 769). This unique machinery for reducing siltation within the dock basin was advanced for the region. The dock gate, locally called the lock gate (because it locks in water when the tide recedes, enabling the barges to keep floating) continues to be celebrated by the people of Bhavnagar, many of whom introduce it as a prominent tourist attraction. The people of Bhavnagar proudly continue to associate this infrastructure with the modern outlook of Bhavnagar town and the progressive rule of the Maharajas of Bhavnagar. While common people continue to perceive the dock gate infrastructure as another example of modernity in princely Bhavnagar, the younger brother of the former prince denied his family's association with the dock gate as it was planned long after the Bhavnagar state willingly merged with independent India in 1947. The territory of the former princely state of Bhavnagar is administratively in the Indian region of Gujarat that was previously within the regions of Saurashtra and Bombay.

Since 1932, the original and henceforth old port (*junu bandar*) of Bhavnagar took over all the medium- and short-distance coastal trade when the new port of Bhavnagar was inaugurated. The old port remained a central node in coastal trading networks until the 1960s, and according to the memories of some timber merchants in Bhavnagar even until the 1980s when the creek of the port nearly dried up and sailing craft became obsolete with the expansion of roads and the concurrent arrival of trucks (see Fig. 3). The land route connecting the old port with Bhavnagar City is still lined with timber shops (*lati*). Many families of timber merchants in Bhavnagar belong to the farmer castes, who continue to purchase timber from other sources and manufacture furniture today. Memories of timber merchants of Bhavnagar are presented in the next section of this article alongside the memories of timber merchants of other ports along the Bhavnagar coast.

Around the time of the decline of sailing boats and of the old port of Bhavnagar, a ship-breaking yard emerged in Alang Sosia village, around fifty kilometres away from Bhavnagar City and many maritime entrepreneurs reoriented their skills in accordance with the new opportunities that the ship-breaking industry provided. The media and Indian Ocean scholarship paint a gloomy picture of the Alang region and highlight the dangerous impacts of ship-breaking on the health and safety of workers and the environment (Rahman 2016). In contrast, Sumanben Chaudhary's PhD dissertation on Bhavnagar depicts an insider's viewpoint, highlighting



**FIG 3.** The creek at the old port of Bhavnagar in 2014. © Varsha Patel

the economic opportunities and development that have been possible because of the ship-breaking industry. A longstanding resident of Bhavnagar, Chaudhary is an academic of Bhavnagar City where she runs a charitable organization for underprivileged women and a girls' hostel.

Regional historians, scholars such as Sumanben Chaudhary, and Gujarati fiction writers (many of whom remain unknown to the wider world of Indian Ocean history) align closely with the local people and folklore. They corroborate the memories of local residents and help position as well as inform the oral history narratives of the region. Shivprasad Rajgor's famous book in Gujarati titled *Gujratna Bandaro: Ek Parichay* [*Ports of Gujarat: An Introduction*], which lists all the ports of Gujarat and notes down the unique features of each one, also mentions the smaller ports of Bhavnagar state. The information from interviews portrayed in this article is also congruent with the affect and the way of life of sailors as it is depicted in famous Gujarati language fiction. In this genre, Gunwant Rai Acharya's *Dariyalal* [*The Beloved Sea*] (1934), a novel based in the Gulf of Kachchh, and Dhruv Bhatt's work based on field visits, *Samudrantike* [*At the tip of the Ocean*] (1993), stand out as the most appreciated masterpieces. Although these books are not situated in Bhavnagar itself, they carry the flavour of the ocean-side lifestyles that Bhavnagar's residents echo, as they almost always mention these books. The protagonist of Dhruv Bhatt's novel is an outsider who sets out to survey the coast for setting up a chemical factory. He observes the culture of the coast, which is different from his own,

appreciating the idea of time and the vastness of the ocean that informs the worldview of the littoral peoples, as he gradually blends into their world and involves himself with village development work in the 1980s.

In contrast, Gunwant Rai Acharya's historical fiction puts the reader into the shoes of Gujarati seafarers in the nineteenth-century Western Indian Ocean. It mentions some important historical events since the sixteen century and famous sites for seafarers such as Mandvi. The work introduces the caste (community) based nature of Gujarati seafaring tasks, introducing merchants, owners of sailing boats, sailors, and servants, as well as Gujarati trade in East Africa. It shows the power, wealth, and high social standing of some prominent Gujarati merchant communities. It puts the spotlight on a Gujarati slave dealer called Ramjibha and mentions the dangers of rhinos in the forests of Africa and the violence meted out to slaves in East Africa who were under the Gujarati slave dealers. According to Riddhi Shah, while the novel displaces the Eurocentric history of slave trade in the Indian Ocean, it presents a Gujarati Hindu male version of the slave trade that omits the history of the Siddis (Africans in India) and keeps intact the stereotypes of both Gujarati women and black African slaves (Shah 2018, 234). Legacies of trade and business continue to shape the stereotypes of the Bhavnagari and Gujarati cultures.

This section reassembled a history of the Port Bhavnagar's infrastructure by piecing together available information from the archive of the former princely state and oral history. Drawing upon local folklore, oral history, and memories of residents of the various littoral towns and villages of the Bhavnagar coast, the next section aims to assemble a maritime history of the Bhavnagar littoral's tryst with sailing boats.

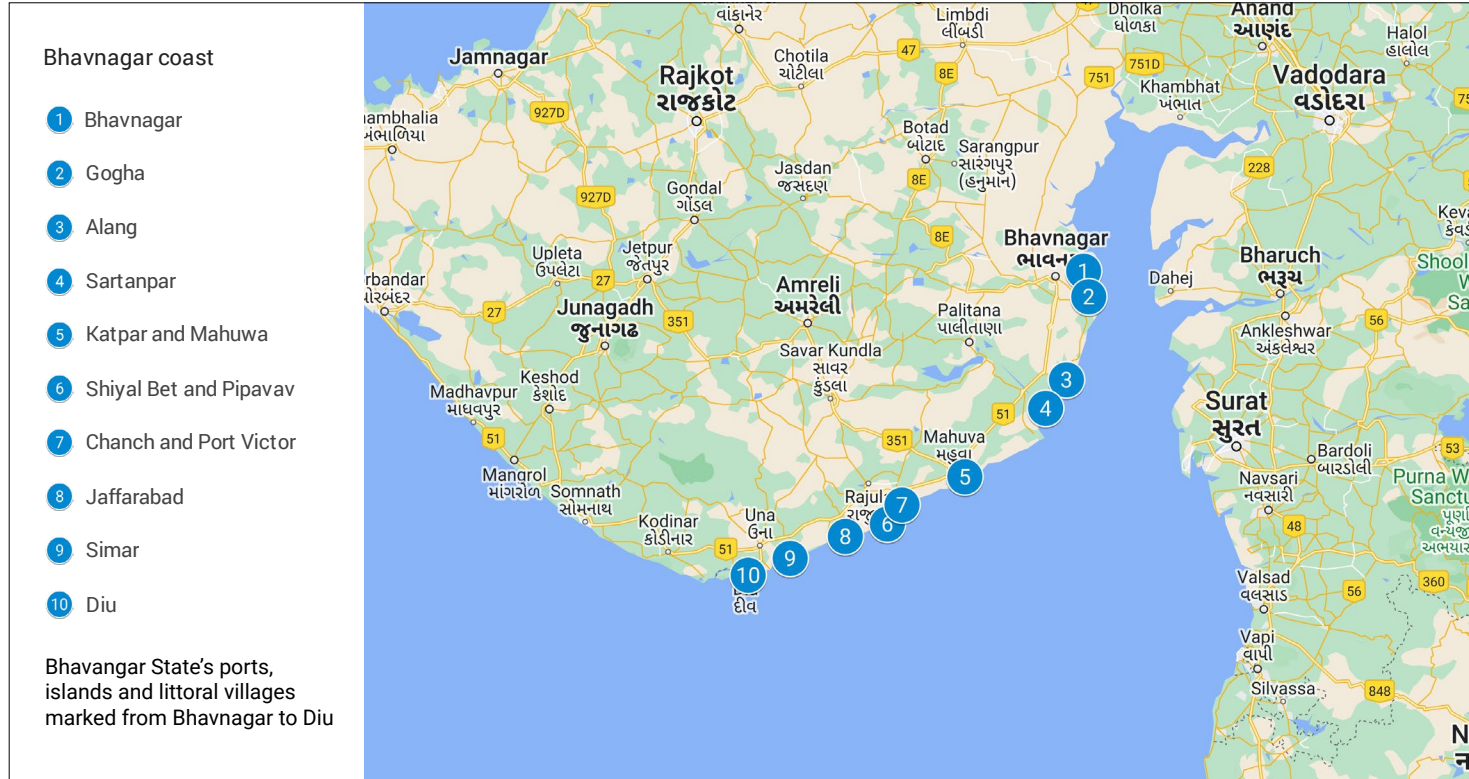
## **Small Ports, Coastal Routes and Sailing Boats along the Bhavnagar Coast**

Drawing upon oral history, memory, and folklore that revolve around coastal trade and its decline, this section reassembles a maritime history of the Bhavnagar littoral. It introduces the many ports along the Bhavnagar coast that harboured sailing boats loaded with timber, roof tiles, husks of peanuts, jiggery, salt, *ghee* (clarified butter), and goats. The routes of sailing boats brought together the merchants, brokers of prosperous port towns, and skilled sailors and crew from remote impoverished villages and pirate islands. Memories of sailing craft along the Bhavnagar coast show specific and intricate networks of coastal trade which drew upon the specialized occupational skills of workers from specific villages and

towns. These lived memories often coalesce with what came after the sailing boats. Different families, occupational groups, and villages adopted diverse trajectories as they coped with the decline of maritime trade. These variations depict the social, economic, and cultural fabric and carry the flavour of the Bhavnagar coast.

The prominent ports that are mentioned in the administrative records of the Bhavnagar state and in Shivprasad Rajgor's *Gujratna Bandaro: Ek Parichay* [*Ports of Gujarat: An Introduction*] are in ruins with silted channels, except for the new port of Bhavnagar (established in 1932 and refurbished in the 1960s). The other two currently operational hubs along the Bhavnagar coast are the Alang beach, which took shape as a ship-breaking yard in the 1980s, and Port Pipavav, which was founded as India's first private port in 1996 (see Fig. 4). The ports of the Bhavnagar coast from east to west along the northern coast of the Gulf of Cambay are: 1) the formerly famous Gogha and Talaja, which were the first competition of Bhavnagar; 2) the ports of Bhavnagar City; 3) the ship-breaking beach of Alang; 4) the remote and difficult-to-reach impoverished village of Sartanpar, which has the only three remaining ruins of sailing boats (Sartanpar near the former port of Talaja specialized exclusively in supplying skilled sailors who knew how to navigate the difficult waters of the Gulf of Cambay; see Fig. 5); 5) the remote rural region and port of Katpar, dotted with home-based rope-making initiatives that once supplied sailors and crew for Port Mahuwa; and 6) the prosperous town of Mahuwa, lined with coconut trees and famous for peanuts, red onions, and children's toys. Around 1950 there were around forty-eight to fifty sailing boats in Mahuwa and while some families owned one or two only, others owned around seven. Most of Mahuwa's merchants have adapted their livelihoods, and families that owned many sailing craft are now making peanut butter and processing onions for export. There are ruins of stone warehouses at the port that once stored a variety of commodities for exports (see Fig. 6). The Bhavnagar state spent considerable sums on the improvement of Port Mahuwa in the early 1900s (Bhavnagar Darbar 1904) and elderly residents of the town remember the transition from coconut oil to kerosene for lighting the lamp at the picturesque lighthouse, which is a tourist attraction. The creek where boats were once anchored in 2015 was a mere trail of water with a few small fishing boats tied to wooden logs.

Furthermore, there is 7) Port Victor, the village with no farming land that is an urban area with a silted port surrounded by vast expanses of salt pans belonging to the islanders of Chanch in 2015. Port Kathiwadar was renamed Victor after Prince Albert Victor. Here the marble grave of Sir Proctor Sims (the state engineer of Bhavnagar) is located inside a private



**FIG 4.** Map of Bhavnagar coast (2020). Port Pipavav and the neighbouring island of Shiyal Bet are marked as one point on the map as they are next to each other. © Google





FIG 5. Ruins of sailing craft in Sartanpar village in 2014. © Varsha Patel



FIG 6. A view of warehouses in Mahuwa in 2015. © Varsha Patel

courtyard and some people revere it as the grave of a British prince. 8) Next to Victor is the adjoining pirate island of Chanch (named after the Gujarati word for pirate—*chanchiya*), where the former Maharaja of Bhavnagar's summer palace is located near the site where the Bhavnagar state was planning to set up a larger port (the elderly members of the royal family remember visiting the island on helicopters in their childhood). According to folklore, a seven-foot-tall pirate ancestor from Chanch once broke the prison bars of Bhavnagar with his bare hands and when the Maharaja of Bhavnagar finally convinced him to forego piracy in exchange for an alternative livelihood, the villagers of Chanch chose to practice agriculture and later to make salt but they still refuse to fish as it is inconsistent with their caste identity. 9) Next to Chanch is the small island of Shiyal Bet, which currently thrives on fishing. The entrance of Shiyal Bet Island off the coast of Bhavnagar is from inside the present Port Pipavav.

Finally, 10) further westwards along the coast, after passing the former Portuguese island of Diu and the fishing and boatbuilding port of Jafrabad, which previously came under the princely state of Janjira, is the once-prosperous port town of Simar, which was ruled by Bhavnagar state. Residents of Jafrabad recall a time when a steam ferry transported people from Jafrabad to Bombay across the Gulf of Cambay. The village of Simar has empty, locked homes since most residents migrated to the active port towns such as Bombay. The nearly deserted village is located outside the Gulf of Cambay, near the open waters of the Arabian Sea.

Which kinds of boats sailed the coastal waters? The larger Arab *dhow*s could not enter the rough waters of the Gulf of Cambay where the Gujarati sailing boats called *vahan* moved. The average tonnage of a Gujarati sailing craft was around 100–200 tons, and these boats were specially made in the Gujarati towns of Billimora, Valsad, Veraval, and Porbandar (on both sides of the Gulf of Cambay). The routes of sailing boats covered medium distances (along western coastal India, a maximum of ten days on the sea) and short distances (local, under forty-eight hours on the sea). Most of the sailing craft became obsolete by the 1980s. Residents of Port Victor remember the last journey of a sailing boat with a cargo of salt (made in local salt pans) from Port Victor (along the Bhavnagar coast, near Pipavav) to Bombay (in the southerly direction, across the Gulf of Cambay) in 2003. Other brokers who were formerly active in Port Victor suggest that country craft completely declined by 2007.

“Earlier sailing craft moved” (*pehla vahano halta*) was a common phrase all along the Bhavnagar coast. Nearly all the elderly residents of the Bhavnagar region saw boats with sails (*shad wada vahn*) in their childhood at a time when the ports of the Bhavnagar princely state and especially

the ports of Bhavnagar, Mahuwa (97 kilometres from Bhavnagar), Victor (near the port of Pipavav), and Simar along the Arabian Sea were active, loud, and vibrant ports (*dham dhamata bandar*) that were operational day and night. The specialized occupational skills of workers from specific villages and towns contributed to these active ports. Merchant families who financed the coastal trade often owned or sometimes rented sailing craft through brokers. These merchants liaised with moneylenders and insurance agents stationed in the port towns of Mahuwa, Bhavnagar, Simar, and Victor. Some merchants found alternative sources for commodities that they continue to trade in (especially timber), while most others ventured into other businesses as coastal trade declined, often migrating to Bombay. Sailors and crew (including captains, skippers, crew, and cooks) from the remote littoral villages of Sartanpar, Talaja, and Katpar learned how to navigate the difficult waters of the Gulf of Cambay. Nearly all the men from these villages worked as crew on sailing boats; and according to insights from a group discussion at the village of Sartanpar, the villagers operated as many as 111 sailing boats in the past that were owned by a few villagers and mostly by the wealthy merchants of different port towns. For example, almost all the men of Shiyal Bet Island worked as crew on around 150 boats that operated from the neighbourhood of Port Victor. Most of these sailing craft were owned by outsiders and only two to three families from Shiyal Bet owned sailing boats, while no family from Chanch owned boats. The pirates of Chanch still sometimes operated on tiny boats (*hodkas*) which their ancestors used for migrating from Port Simar. Sartanpar and Shiyal Bet's sailors turned towards fishing and agricultural labour, migrating across Gujarat to survive the decline of coastal trade. The islanders of the Shiyal Bet Island, who eked out a living by working as crew on the sailing craft and who sometimes worked as pirates, share that in the past there were material hardships. They mention how their ancestors, who did not have fish or vegetables to eat, prepared vegetable curry (*shak*) with pebbles instead, eating the curry and throwing out the stones after the dish was cooked. Such memories passed down by grandparents demonstrate the stark differences in economic strength and food baskets of different families and villages along the Bhavnagar coast.

Local memories of sailing boats along the Bhavnagar coast enable piecing together intricate networks of coastal trade routes. Salient amongst these are the routes of timber and salt as they depict the extent of specialization, division of work, and organization. Timber was imported by specific merchants in Bhavnagar and Mahuwa either from Valsad in South Gujarat (a short distance across the Gulf of Cambay and south of the famous Indian Ocean port of Surat) or from Calicut (a medium distance,

further south along the coast of Western India). Elderly merchants in Bhavnagar and Mahuwa confirmed that specific families who sourced timber from the forests of Valsad imported timber only from these forests and not from any other source. The merchants who sourced timber from Calicut simultaneously imported roof tiles (*nadiya*), as did the families who imported timber from Calicut. The coastal trading networks did not overlap. The timber merchants of Bhavnagar, whose shops line the old port area, belong to the farmer caste. In Mahuwa, the former timber merchants, whose shops line the Katpar port area, also belong to the Vania caste of merchants. Bhavnagar's elderly timber merchants shared experiences of a few adventures in the thick forests of Valsad. They explained in detail how they delegated work to different employees, such as managers to oversee the trade and coordinate with bullock cart owners, labourers for loading and unloading vessels, *dalals* or contractors and brokers for insurance and liaising with owners and crew of sailing craft. The merchants seldom travelled on the sailing craft themselves. A former timber merchant of Mahuwa explained how the two to three sailing craft that he owned were filled with mud before the journey to Calicut to bring back goods, to prevent the boats from toppling over. An elderly merchant of Mahuwa, who took over the business of importing timber from his father, once accompanied the crew on a few adventurous journeys on his own boat. He describes how timber logs were tied and made to float on rivers for easy transportation, taking care that the wood did not rot. An elderly lady whose father and brother owned sailing boats remembers that they looked forward to the boats returning from Calicut as they would bring back a few jars of pepper for home consumption for their families and not for sale. Timber was also imported at Port Simar in the past and the former residents of its carved wooden houses would have enriched the narratives of timber trade. Unfortunately, the village was almost completely deserted in 2015 (see Fig. 7).

Various commodities were exported from the Bhavnagar coast. These included the husks of groundnuts (with the oil taken out), vegetable oil, agricultural produce including red onions, cotton, cereals, and clarified butter. A middle-aged man from the village of Pati, which bordered the territory of the princely states of Baroda and Bhavnagar, shared that his great-grandfather had a clarified butter (*ghee*) making company that employed around twenty to thirty men belonging mostly to the agrarian castes of Ahir, Bharwar, and the Brahmin priests. During this time, neighbouring villages used to send *ghee* to his village and daily around twenty bullock carts went with *ghee* to the village of Bherai near Port Victor. Around two to three horsemen accompanied these bullock carts



FIG 7. A locked house in Simar in 2015. © Varsha Patel

for security. From Port Victor the *ghee* was taken by sea to the larger port of Jafrabad (northwest into the Arabian Sea further along the coast of the peninsula of Gujarat) that belonged to the princely state of Janjira, which was ruled by a Siddi ruler of African descent. An elderly man in Jafrabad pointed out a certain place in Jafrabad town that he called the *ghee chowk*. According to him, *ghee* was collected on that spot and then transported on sailing craft to Bombay and Surat in his great-grandfather's time. Such isolated memories of *ghee* were immediately pointed out by two more persons when the topic of sailing craft came up during conversation; the other residents of Jafrabad and Bherai village did not recall the tale of Pati village's *ghee*, nor did they remember or introduce the *ghee chowk*. Another anecdote points towards the route taken by pastoralists and their goats and sheep from Bhavnagar coast to the port of Dahej in South Gujarat (opposite the Bhavnagar coast) on the other side of the Gulf of Cambay. A middle-aged informant whose father unloaded products at Port Dahej remembers the infrequent groups of nomadic shepherds with their sheep and goats.

Residents of the Bhavnagar coast shared that in the past when various commodities were exported there were no salt pans near Port Victor. As the sailing craft dwindled over time, salt pans expanded such as the business of Madhwani (Madhwani, 2009). Salt became the primary commodity

that was ferried from Port Victor to Bombay. Towards the end of coastal trade in 2003, only around 40,000 tons of cargo (mostly salt) was traded, unlike the 70,000–80,000 tons of cargo that used to go previously from Port Victor to various ports in coastal Western India. The composition of commodities and routes of trade changed over time, but the people of coastal Bhavnagar fondly remember the benevolent and generous rule of the Maharaja of Bhavnagar.

Folklore blends with popular history and the affect and pride of celebrating the benevolent and efficient rule of the Bhavnagar state that was generous and protective towards the people of the Bhavnagar coast. Elderly residents of Bhavnagar and Chanch share that, according to regional history in the Gujarati language, the British wanted to take over Port Victor when the astute bureaucrats of the Bhavnagar state acted in the interests of the local people by giving a *bandar* (monkey) to the British instead of the *bandar* (port), as the Gujarati word *bandar* has two meanings—port and monkey. While the good governance of the Bhavnagar state is remembered, residents of other coastal towns along the Bhavnagar coast continue to avoid going past Victor to keep away from the notorious island of Chanch.

The residents of Chanch and Shiyal Bet proudly remember and share that their ancestors' lives revolved around piracy. Bhavnagar's scholars contribute to and align with popular versions of local tales of the past. For example, during an interview in November 2014, Prof. P. G. Korat's views concurred with the representation of Vir Mokhdaji in contemporary popular culture. Prof. Korat is a well-known academic and he has edited a history of the Bhavnagar region in Gujarati language (Korat, Jani, and Bhal 1995). His PhD dissertation details the life story of a former Dewan of Bhavnagar state (Shri Gaurishankar Oza, who lived from 1805 to 1892). Unfortunately, Korat's publication does not mention Mokhdaji Gohil, who was being commemorated in 2014. In 2015 some of Bhavnagar's residents held celebrations in honour of the victorious Mokhdaji Gohil, who in the 1750s lived on the island of Piram Bet, just off the coast of Bhavnagar, close to the port of Gogha in Bhavnagar state. According to contemporary popular culture, Vir Mokhdaji was not just a simple pirate but one of the first Indian freedom fighters who resisted British rule. These local narratives throw light upon the fuzzy identity of pirates, who are pirates or heroes, thieves or protectors, depending upon one's perspective. A similar point is argued by Jatin Dua, who writes about piracy as protection in Somalia in the Western Indian Ocean (Dua 2013). Pirates, which are an integral part of ocean cultures, blend with the narratives that highlight similarities across the Indian Ocean.

The regional ports of the Bhavnagar coast and the people associated with them did not directly link up with the larger Indian Ocean routes,

and interlocutors reveal that the networks of coastal trade were separate and parallel to the routes of long-distance Indian Ocean trade. However, one exception shows the intersection and connection of the Bhavnagar littoral with the wider world of the Indian Ocean. A sailor from Katpar village, who was first sent as a cook on sailing boats by his father (who also operated sailing boats), ventured to work for a merchant in the Gulf of Kachchh whose large sailing craft were active in transregional Indian Ocean trade. This middle-aged sailor returned to Katpar after many adventures in Western Asia and Africa and he currently recruits local sailors who want to participate in long-distance trade. Therefore, the connection between the persons and commodities associated with local coastal trade that supported the majority of the peoples of the Bhavnagar coast and the larger ports that weave together the Indian Ocean world is rather weak. A micro history of the Bhavnagar coast challenges the view from the Indian Ocean history lens of small feeder ports that cater to the port cities of the Indian Ocean world, and emphasizes instead the unique local history of the coastal region that was perhaps more in tune with coastal Western India than with the Indian Ocean world.

## Conclusion

The examination of the Bhavnagar coast, which was governed by a maritime princely state and only indirectly ruled by the British Empire, reveals the past of a portion of the Indian Ocean rim that is not adequately documented in historical records but that has lived on in the memories of the littoral peoples and places. This article contributes to a postcolonial oceans perspective and suggests that alternative sources for assembling histories and memories of the past, such as oral history, interviews, life stories, and folklore contribute to a more comprehensive Indian Ocean history. Archival records of improvements in port infrastructure, oral history, and memory enable picturing the ports of Bhavnagar in a different light—as modern places with innovative infrastructure and proud residents with a rich maritime history. Oral history also facilitates reassembling the past of remote villages and islands that subsisted on, and of the prominent port towns of Bhavnagar coast that thrived on, local coastal trade. The lives of various peoples and entire villages are not documented otherwise; thus, a study like this supports the writing of a rather neglected local history.

Ruins of sailing boats and memories of littoral people, merchants, and sailors of the coastal villages of the former princely state of Bhavnagar reveal intricate networks of coastal trade that were both separate from and



parallel to the long-distance trade. This paper traced the sailing routes of prominent commodities along the Bhavnagar coast—imports of timber from Valsad and from Calicut (the latter with roof tiles) to the Bhavnagar coast (at the ports of Bhavnagar, Mahuwa, Simar), export of salt to Bombay (from Port Victor) and to Japan (from the new port of Bhavnagar), *ghee* to Jafrabad, and goats and nomadic herders to Dahej in South Gujarat across the Gulf of Cambay. Merchant families specialized in specific commodities traded over specific coastal routes and they did not usually venture beyond. These local coastal trade routes sustained the local people, who did not usually go outside the hereditary occupations of their families for their livelihoods. The boats were largely owned and commissioned by merchants of Bhavnagar's prominent port towns who operated through brokers and contractors. Almost all the men of remote villages and islands (Sartanpar, Chanch, Shiyal Bet) specialized as sailors or as pirates who operated the sailing boats of the Bhavnagar coast.


These findings enable challenging the assumption that the entire Indian Ocean rim is oriented towards the ocean, forming an interconnected zone. Scholars highlight the need for studying the land, which has taken a backseat with Indian Ocean studies' focus on the water (Pearson 1981, xi; Simpson 2015, 115). Examining smaller distances of maritime routes and coastal trade brings this focus back onto the littoral space and enables understanding a coastal society in relation to both the land and the sea.

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The images of maps are from google maps.

**ORCID**<sup>®</sup>

Varsha Patel  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0160-7974>



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