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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3mw9g0sh>

### Journal

Comparative Studies of South Asia Africa and the Middle East, 25(3)

### ISSN

1089-201X

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### Publication Date

2005-12-01

### DOI

10.1215/1089201x-25-3-677

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# South Asians in the Indian Ocean World: Language, Policing, and Gender Practices in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates

Karen Leonard

Despite the striking similarities between the two Persian Gulf states of Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the similar positioning of South Asian expatriates in them, language, policing, and gender practices help produce significantly different expatriate experiences in these two Gulf settings. The cultural currents flow in different directions, pointing one society toward the Middle East and the other toward South Asia. These experiences are to some extent historically determined but depend also on contemporary policies and demographic configurations. While the economic forces of globalization strongly affect social and cultural domains, “anthropology has repeatedly focused not only on the pervasiveness of power, but on the power of culture.”<sup>1</sup>

## The Historical Context: South Asia and the Gulf

Historical ties between South Asia and some of the Gulf states, particularly Oman and the UAE, are long-standing. In the eighteenth century, British empire building led to efforts to protect the trade route to India, and that meant dealing with the maritime empire of the Omani sultanate and the Qawasim tribal confederacy, the latter based in Ash Shariqah and Ra’s al Khaymah. Nineteenth-century battles of the Qawasim confederacy with British forces led to the truce system, under which the small polities of the Gulf signed separate treaties or truces with the British government. This process began in 1820 and was sealed in 1853 with the Perpetual Maritime Truce signed by the present members of the UAE.<sup>2</sup>

British dominance in the Gulf continued to be oriented to India. British relationships with the Gulf polities were first directed by the provincial government of Bombay, then after 1873 by the colonial government of India, and after Indian and Pakistani independence in 1947 by the British Foreign Office. Britain conducted separate relations with each state, leading to separate flags, travel documents or passports, and ultimately national

This article is drawn from a longer work in preparation on emigrants from Hyderabad, India: *Locating Home in a Changing World: India’s Hyderabadis Abroad*. The first section delineates, in detail, the history of South Asian/Gulf relationships and the opportunities, constraints, and demographic patterns shaping the lives of South Asian expatriates in the Gulf; the second section draws on ethnographic work in 1995 that speaks to personal experiences. I thank the Coalition of American Overseas Research Centers for a research grant that funded the research.

1. Pnina Werbner, “Exoticising Citizenship: Anthropology and the New Citizenship Debate,” *Canberra Anthropology* 21 (1998): 1–27.

2. Rosemarie Said Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 5–9. Bahrain signed a separate treaty in 1861, and Kuwait and Qatar came under British influence in turn through treaties in 1899 and 1916.

Comparative Studies of  
South Asia, Africa and  
the Middle East  
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Vol. 25, No. 3, 2005

anthems.<sup>3</sup> Thus the states, whose boundaries and relations with each other had been historically fluid, developed distinct identities.

Yet British dominance also produced important commonalities. The Indian rupee was the principal currency in the Gulf, Indian stamps were used (overlaid with state names), political officers applied British Indian regulations, and Urdu (Hindustani) words infiltrated the Arabic coastal dialect.<sup>4</sup> Yemeni and other Gulf Arabs worked as soldiers in Indian native states, including Hyderabad.<sup>5</sup> Other links to India included those developed through the pearl-diving industry, the mainstay of most Gulf economies before the oil discoveries commenced in the 1930s. For example, Gulf merchants sent pearls to Hyderabad, India, for stringing and setting into jewelry. The 1929 Wall Street crash, the resultant world economic depression, and the Japanese introduction of cultured pearls brought about the collapse of the pearl industry, plunging the Gulf economies into crisis. But it was just at that time that foreign oil companies began arriving in search of concessions, and the oil concessions established a pattern of reliance on foreign expertise and manpower that has persisted beyond the termination of the foreign oil concessions in the late 1970s.<sup>6</sup>

Thus the Gulf states rely heavily on expatriates, including South Asians, for whom there are opportunities to use their skills for higher pay and in better working conditions than at home. Businessmen, professionals, ser-

vice workers, and laborers have left their home countries to become expatriate workers. But it is the Arab rulers who control these labor flows through laws that set a “steel frame” for work and family life.<sup>7</sup> In the Gulf,<sup>8</sup> we see a unique example, perhaps, of transnationalism as a deliberate strategy of economic and political governance.

The Gulf rulers launched their states into the modern world with the help of expatriates. The pearl industry, on which most Gulf states depended before the 1930s, was based on indigenous technology and expertise, but the oil concessions brought in expatriates, and as the Gulf states develop and diversify their economies, their small and relatively unskilled populations still need the help of expatriate managers and workers.<sup>9</sup> These Gulf oil-exporting states are exceptionally wealthy, and their citizens receive many economic benefits. Home ownership is nearly universal for citizens, and water, power, and telephones are heavily subsidized; sanitation services are free. Free education often includes education abroad, and free or nearly free health care can include care abroad. The expatriate workers also benefit from some state subsidies.

The centrality of the state in the economies and a dependence on multinational capital are features the Gulf states share with other oil exporters,<sup>10</sup> but there are sharp differences, most notably the combination of a homogeneous class of citizens with large numbers of heterogeneous noncitizens working within

3. *Ibid.*, 16. A British political resident (stationed in southern Iran to 1946 and thereafter in Bahrain) had several subordinate political agents posted in several Gulf locations, and these agents conducted all foreign relations for the Gulf states.

4. *Ibid.*, 10–13. Oman too was affected by this system. Even in the late 1920s mail for the west from Oman was routed through Bombay. The Omani sultanate ruled part of the Pakistani (Makran) coast until 1958 (W. D. Peyton, *Old Oman* [London: Stacey International, 1983], 24, 54), although it had lost its Zanzibari outpost through British arbitration in 1861. Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States*, 108.

5. Smuggling of all kinds also linked western India, East Africa, and the Gulf states.

6. The dependency of Gulf states on pearls ranged from 20 to 48 percent. Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States*, 22, 70.

7. Sara Suleri argues that lived experience for women can best be approached through the narratives provided by the law; this is true for all expatriates in the Gulf. Suleri, “Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1992): 756–69, 766.

8. When South Asians talk about the Gulf, they mean the six monarchies of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. These six belong to the Gulf Cooperation Council, or GCC, formed in 1981 primarily for security reasons. There are only two categories of residents in the Gulf states, citizens and noncitizens. The ruling families conceive of the states as theirs, of their fellow tribesmen as their subjects and citizens, and of the large numbers of expatriate workers of all classes and national origins as perpetual outsiders. People point to some exceptions to this, particularly in Dubai in earlier decades when some Iranians and Indians were given passports.

9. Yusif A. Sayigah, “Problems and Prospects of Development in the Arabian Peninsula” (286–309, 293), and Frank Stoakes, “Social and Political Change in the Third World: Some Peculiarities of Oil-Producing Principalities of the Persian Gulf” (189–215, 203), both in *The Arabian Peninsula: Society and Politics*, ed. Derek Hopwood (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1972); Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States*, 70–72.

10. About Southeast Asian states, see Aihwa Ong, “Globalization and Zones of New Sovereignty,” in *Globalization under Construction: Governmentality, Law, and Identity*, ed. Richard Perry and William Maurer (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); about Venezuela, see Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 6–7.

each state. Workers come to the Gulf from all over the world, providing its rulers with an international and flexible workforce. Of the total population of these six GCC countries in the 1990s, estimated at 23 million, some 10 million are foreigners, 1 million of them maids. The expatriates are the backbone of the working and professional classes.

At first, such expatriate workers were drawn from Persia and from neighboring Arab countries, but workers from Asia have steadily increased. Treating the six GCC countries as a unit, the general picture in 1985 (before the Gulf War) showed that 43 percent of the foreign workforce in the Gulf was from South Asia, 30 percent was from other Arab countries, and 20 percent was from Southeast Asia. Pakistanis moved into the Gulf countries in the early 1970s, followed and surpassed by Indians in the 1980s, with strong representation from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka by the 1990s. The Philippines, Thailand, and South Korea now send many workers to the Gulf.<sup>11</sup>

This globalization of the labor market does not erase difference, but “revalidates and reconstitutes place, locality, and difference.”<sup>12</sup> Foreign workers are ranked by places of origin, receiving differential payment and treatment. Most Gulf states do not release statistics about the expatriate workers’ origins, but they sometimes use “nationality” categories to produce crime and other statistics. In the UAE, these categories are UAE, Gulf (GCC), other Arab, and Asian, and GCC citizens can generally enter each other’s countries without visas, while other Arabs and Asians need visas.<sup>13</sup> The other Arabs of Lebanese, Palestinian, and Syrian ori-

gin command the highest wages and salaries, Egyptians and Sudanese receive half as much, and South and Southeast Asians receive one-third as much. Among laborers, Indians reportedly ranked above Pakistanis, who ranked above Bangladeshis and Chinese.

India and Pakistan are major suppliers of labor to the Gulf. The favored destinations for Indians have been Saudi Arabia, closely followed by Oman and the UAE, and then Kuwait and Bahrain.<sup>14</sup> For Pakistanis, the figures are harder to obtain (it is estimated that as many Pakistanis go to the Gulf illegally as legally), but there are more Pakistanis than Indians in Saudi Arabia. While the percentage of India’s export earnings from remittances is not very significant, remittances from abroad, 75 percent of them from the Middle East, constitute the single largest source of export earnings for Pakistan.<sup>15</sup> Thus the declining numbers of Indian and Pakistani workers in the Gulf in the late 1980s and especially after the Gulf War of 1990–91 have been disruptive. In 1995, Pakistan reported that its manpower exports to the Gulf had dropped by more than 50 percent since 1985 because of increased competition and a shift from unskilled to skilled workers and professionals. India has also seen a decrease in the annual outflow of manpower.<sup>16</sup>

South Asians are the largest expatriate group in Kuwait and the UAE. Indians are approximately double the number of Pakistanis in each place. The population of Kuwait is about two-thirds noncitizens, and most foreign workers in Kuwait are bachelors, with a sex ratio of 225 to 100 (males to females), or 31 percent female.<sup>17</sup> In the UAE, 75 percent of the

11. *Pakistan Link*, 16 September 1994; Hassan N. Gardezi, “Asian Workers in the Gulf States of the Middle East,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 21 (1991): 190–91.

12. Michael J. Watt, “Mapping Meaning, Denoting Difference, Imagining Identity: Dialectical Images and Postmodern Geographies,” *Geografiska Annaler B* 73 (1991): 7–16, 9, citing J. Henderson and M. Castels, “Introduction,” in *Global Restructuring and Territorial Development* (London: Sage, 1987), 1–17, 10.

13. Those holding residence visas of any GCC state, except menial laborers, are given visas on entry to the UAE, Oman, and Qatar. British citizens can obtain short-term visas upon arrival in the UAE, and Americans can be similarly favored in Kuwait, thanks

to historical ties between Britain and the emirates and the U.S. role in the Gulf War, respectively.

14. V. Chandra Mowli, *Bridging the “Gulf”: India’s Manpower Migrations to West Asia* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1992), 81, 83.

15. Gardezi, “Asian Workers,” 191–92, quoting the Government of Pakistan, *Economic Survey, 1987–88* (Islamabad, 1989), 159, and the World Bank, *World Development Report, 1989* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), respectively.

16. For Pakistan, see *Pakistan Link*, 17 February 1995. For India, see Mowli, *Bridging the “Gulf,”* 54, 81, 61. Consequences for the state of Kerala were particularly heavy, since it furnished almost 50 percent of India’s Gulf labor force.

17. A breakdown of the expatriate population in Kuwait in 1994 compiled from residency permits recorded from liberation in February 1991 to 1 January 1994 put Egyptians at 23 percent, Indians at 18 percent, Bangladeshis and Sri Lankans at 10 percent each, and Pakistanis at 8 percent of the total of 889,347. *Kuwait Pocket Guide, 1995* (Kuwait: Multimedia Publishing and Distribution, 1995), 116 (hereafter *KPG ’95*). The total below is that given for the citizen-noncitizen tabulation in the text, where the expatriates number 1,099,868, or 62 percent of the total population; *KPG ’95*, 20. The sex ratio figure is from *KPG ’95*, 21.

population is said to be expatriate, and in Dubai that proportion is higher, perhaps 80 percent. The sex ratio among expatriates in the UAE is 70 percent male and 30 percent female, almost identical to that in Kuwait.<sup>18</sup>

The Gulf state boundaries act as “sifters of labour rather than as barriers to its movement,”<sup>19</sup> but there are stiff requirements. Those who meet them—visa, sponsor, work permit, residence permit, and medical checkup requirements—gain access to economic opportunities. Recruitment starts in the home countries and involves brokers and manpower recruiting agencies at both ends; costs are high and some are unofficial.<sup>20</sup> The rules are detailed and quite similar in Kuwait and Dubai. Citizen sponsors are needed even for a visitor’s visas (save for GCC citizens), and residence visas are of three types: work, dependent, and servant. Expatriates, whether businessmen, professionals, or workers, over the age of sixty are not permitted. A noncitizen can do private business in Kuwait in several closely regulated ways, most of them involving a local agent, sponsor, or partner (in Kuwait this must be a man, but it can be a woman in the UAE). These working relationships are typically quite nominal, with sponsors taking commissions from many foreigners annually but not participating in the businesses. The laws governing expatriates in the UAE are slightly more flexible: visitors’ visas for tourists are easier to obtain, and, while the age limit of sixty pertains in theory, many older businessmen and major investors are allowed in.<sup>21</sup>

Family life for expatriates depends on their class. Once he has secured a residence visa, a man who makes a certain amount of

money monthly can sponsor his wife and children to live with him; the amount is high (very slightly less in the UAE than in Kuwait), to discourage workers from bringing their families. If both spouses are working, their salaries can be added together. Wives cannot sponsor husbands in Kuwait, but women doctors and teachers can sponsor husbands in the UAE. In both sites, adult (over age eighteen) and unmarried daughters can be sponsored but not adult sons, and no dependents can work without their own sponsors and work visas. Parents can visit for one to three months (since 1995 in Kuwait, they can stay longer for a high annual fee).<sup>22</sup> Foreigners (save GCC citizens) cannot own land or real estate and must rent accommodations, customarily unfurnished ones (this changed for the UAE in 2003, when South Asian expatriates were allowed to purchase property—no data are available yet on this).

Expatriates can and do employ other expatriates. They may sponsor one full-time household servant (again there is a minimum salary requirement).<sup>23</sup> If a man sponsors a female servant, he must be married and have his wife living with him. Maids must be between twenty and fifty years old, and family members cannot be brought as servants. Maids and other domestic workers live in their employers’ households, while male laborers and service workers usually group together in rooms or dormitories and contract for two or three meals a day at dining halls.<sup>24</sup>

South Asian expatriates benefit substantially from working in the Gulf. For unskilled and skilled workers, professionals, and businessmen, salaries are many times those at home,<sup>25</sup>

18. *Economist*, 20 September 1997, 52, gives a population figure for the UAE of 2,210,000 and asserts that over 80 percent are expatriates.

19. Terence Ranger, “Studying Repatriation as Part of African Social History,” in *When Refugees Go Home*, ed. Tim Allen and Hubert Morsink (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1994), 279–95, 287, quoted by David Hughes, “Reinventing Vulnerability in a Bordered World” (paper presented at the New World Order Conference, University of California–Irvine, 18 January 1998). Ranger was referring to colonial powers drawing the borders within Africa.

20. *India Today*, 15 February 1997, gave a smuggling fee of 1.5–2.0 lakhs of rupees (US\$4,280–\$5,700), paid to brokers and agencies in India for sea passage to the

Gulf countries. I found women agents recruiting men in India and Pakistan in the 1990s.

21. *India-West*, 16 January 1996.

22. The fee for parents is 200 Kuwaiti dinars (\$690) a year; the dinar has been a very stable currency, 1 KD equaling \$3.30. *KPG '95*, 38.

23. In Dubai, one must draw 7,000 dirhams, about \$1,900, per month to sponsor a maid, higher than for a dependent, and the government collects an annual tax equal to her salary, which should be not less than 400 dirhams (\$108) per month. Thus one pays about 800 dirhams a month, or 9,600 dirhams (\$2,400) a year for a maid. *Pakistan Link*, 16 September 1994. The dirham has been stable at 3.67 to the dollar since 1980.

24. Men who are bus drivers or air conditioner repairmen in Kuwait earn from 90 to 120 KD (\$297–\$396) per month, and they typically spend about 45 KD (\$148.50) for accommodation and food. Meals at a contract dining hall range from 18 KD (\$59.40) per month for three meals a day to 20 KD (\$66) a month for two (better-quality) meals a day. Laborers can earn as little as 20 KD (\$66) a month, the wage allegedly paid to workers from China. Mirza Shamsher Ali Beg, interview with author, 2 August 1995, Kuwait. In the UAE, laborers’ wages range between \$250 to \$500 per month, \$115 being at the low end, with food costs about \$100–\$110 per month. *Pakistan Link*, 27 September 1996.

25. Interviews with Indians and Pakistanis brought estimates of five to ten times as much.

and one's income is tax free. Working conditions are excellent, with modern facilities and technology, and living conditions are also good, with cheap and dependable water, electricity, air conditioning, and other amenities. In Kuwait, expatriates and their dependents received free health care until 1994, when (low) fees began to be set for them for nonemergency procedures. Maternity care is still almost entirely free there, although marriage certificates must be shown at all hospitals, and husbands cannot be in the delivery room at the state hospitals. Food in both places is government subsidized. Because of the extremely hot summer, government workers receive one month's leave and private workers at least that every year, plenty of time to holiday in Europe, have a long visit home, or drop in on relatives elsewhere. Although residences have to be rented, leases can be arranged for five-year stretches.

An important reason professional and business people gave for working in the Gulf was that they were still in an Asian context—the Gulf is also called West Asia, in South Asia. The Gulf cities compare very favorably to cities in the Western world, and yet they are culturally non-Western, an important consideration for those who view Western culture as threatening to personal safety or to family and religious values. Law and order are strictly maintained, and in Kuwait and Dubai (not Saudi Arabia) one can freely practice one's religion. Those who work in Dubai have additional incentives. Dubai is fun, although people save less because enjoyable diversions are plentiful and it is easier to bring families (thus increasing costs).

The one certainty is that expatriates cannot stay in the Gulf permanently. At some point, they must leave, and they are psychologically prepared for this. They retain strongly positive relationships with India or Pakistan, seeing themselves as overseas citizens of, and eventual returnees to, those states. South Asians working in the Gulf invest in consumer durables, house building and repair, family celebrations, and schooling for their children back in the home countries. Furthermore, middle-class expatri-

ates have begun to hold multiple citizenships or immigration rights. Along with Indian citizenship, a person might secure a U.S. and/or Canadian green card, and Pakistanis can actually hold dual citizenships with the United Kingdom or Canada, since those countries allow it. The laborers typically have fewer options but are just as prepared to return home or go elsewhere to work.

### Language, Gender, and Policing in Kuwait and the UAE

In these important domains of contemporary policy, the "cultural currents," the directions of cultural flows in the Indian Ocean world, are different despite strong similarities among the Gulf states. Kuwait and the UAE, at the northwestern and southwestern ends of the Persian Gulf, share many characteristics. Each has a population of about 2 million (Kuwait is just under that, the UAE just over); expatriates constitute some 70–75 percent of both the total and working-age populations in both states; and the sex ratio among expatriates is almost identical, heavily male. South Asians are the largest expatriate group in both places, about 40–43 percent of the population, but of course they play no role in the politics of the host countries—the Arab rulers of Kuwait and the seven emirates that make up the federation of the UAE<sup>26</sup> delegate few political rights even to their own citizens. South Asian expatriate workers and professionals were positioned in strikingly similar ways in the two countries.

Given the nearly identical sets of circumstances, one might think that South Asian expatriates in the two sites would have similar experiences. Instead, their experiences in the two environments were significantly different. While many aspects of public and private life can be examined to explain the contrasts I found in my ethnographic work in 1995, I emphasize here some general demographic contrasts between the two South Asian populations with respect to class and religion and then relate these to the different language, gender, and policing practices in the two environments.

26. Since the eighteenth century the emir of Kuwait has been from the Al-Sabah family. The UAE was formed in 1971 from the seven emirates of Abu Dhabi, 'Ajman, Al Fujayrah, Ash Shariqah, Dubai, Ra's al

Khaymah, and Umm al Qaywayn. The president of the federation is the sheikh of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Zayed, and the vice president is the sheikh of Dubai, Sheikh Maktum.

With respect to class and religious composition of the South Asian expatriate populations in the two sites, Kuwait is more polarized in class terms, with a small elite class and a large, primarily bachelor, working class, while the UAE has South Asians distributed across the class spectrum. The two-tier class structure so strong among expatriates in Kuwait is more muted in the UAE, with more families present and greater mixing across class lines.<sup>27</sup> South Asians of lower class origins who are upwardly mobile in the Gulf, “people with no manners,” may be part of the everyday social worlds of those from “noble clans,” crossing a gulf in the UAE that is harder to cross in Kuwait and with more mixing across national boundaries as well. Big businessmen are important in Dubai as in Kuwait, but there seem to be more middle-level businessmen moving in and out of the UAE, rather than a few big men settling in for years, and lower-middle-class professionals do most of their business with other expatriates.

Kuwait has more Muslims and the UAE more Hindus among the South Asian expatriates. In the UAE, Sindis (from Sind) dominate the business classes, especially in the gold and jewelry bazaars, and Keralites (from Kerala) dominate the service classes. In fact, Keralites were said to be the main group from India, and local sayings about them abounded, for example, “Even a Sheikh cannot survive without a Kerala man.” People argued about whether Sindis or Hyderabadis were the second largest group from India, but everyone knew that the late Sheikh Rashid (1958–86), the ruler of Dubai credited with its innovative development, had had a Hyderabad Indian driver of whom he

was very fond.<sup>28</sup> All the shopkeepers in the UAE from the 1950s and 1960s were from Kerala or Barkas, the latter an Arab locality in Hyderabad city. There have been many marriages between local Arabs and young women from Barkas or other parts of Hyderabad State, so South Asian culture was part of the home life as well as the work life of many UAE Arabs.

But historical differences in the two environments shape the social worlds of these expatriates even more significantly than differences of their own internal composition, I think, and I would single out language usage as the most significant indicator of these differences. Arabic is not only the language of government in Kuwait but that of the street, of public spaces. The relatively small state, some 6,880 square miles at the southern end of Iraq, is strongly oriented toward the Arab world, toward the Middle East. Palestinians, before the Gulf War, were dominant in official positions, and expatriates employed them and other non-Gulf Arabs as intermediaries with the state partly because of their competence in Arabic. Kuwait’s treaty with the British came almost fifty years later than the treaties of the UAE states with the British, and historical relationships with South Asia and Britain’s empire there were not very strong.

While the seven emirates that formed the United Arab Emirates in 1971 differ from each other,<sup>29</sup> they have much in common, and the UAE social landscape differs sharply from that of Kuwait although Arabic is also the language of government in the UAE. In these Gulf states, on the periphery of the Arab world and of Britain’s South Asian empire, Urdu or Hindustani is readily spoken and understood by many

27. The relatively liberal attitudes of Dubai encourage South Asian expatriate families more than elsewhere. In Dubai, vital statistics show noncitizens (80 percent of the population) with double the number of births of citizens; they also have double the number of deaths but only about half the numbers of marriages and 55 percent of the divorces per year (*Dubai Facts and Figures 1994* [Dubai: Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 1994], 2).

28. For the saying, Ramachandran, interview with author, 20 August 1995, Ash Shariqah; for the driver, Mir Miraj Ali, with Anees and Maqsood Ali, interview, 18 August 1995, Dubai. Ali said the sheikh supported the driver in his old age, and “people knew him; he used to go for a beer.” Here are two more of the many jokes

about Keralites in the UAE: What do you call a successful Keralite? Pheno Menon. What do you call a dangerous Keralite? Dober Menon. The main group from Pakistan were Pathans, driving taxis and doing manual labor, and there were sayings and jokes about them, too.

29. The federation is almost five times larger than Kuwait and consists of seven historically distinct emirates (three of them larger than Kuwait). Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Ash Shariqah are the leading ones. Abu Dhabi is the dominant partner in the UAE, and that city is the political capital of the federation; it has the largest area, some twenty-six thousand square miles, and the largest oil reserves. Abu Dhabi also has

the two greenest, or garden, cities in the UAE, El Ain, a small city, and Abu Dhabi itself; Dubai comes third. Dubai, once a dependency of Abu Dhabi and only fifteen hundred square miles, is the commercial and tourist capital of the UAE. Abu Dhabi and Dubai pursue complementary strategies for development, with Abu Dhabi improving the efficiency of its oil operations and balancing finances on education, training, and health. Dubai’s *laissez-faire* style of government and economy depends on the private sector, especially the facilitation of trade. Ash Shariqah, very powerful before 1920, included the smaller emirates of Ra’s al Khaymah and Al Fujayrah, but the British recognized these two as independent in 1921 and 1952, respectively.

Arabs as well as by the large numbers of Indian and Pakistani expatriates. Urdu and English, rather than Arabic, are the languages one hears on the streets of Dubai and Ash Shariqah; Arabic does prevail in Abu Dhabi. The most important expatriate groups, the “other Arabs,” in Kuwait, and the British in the UAE, reinforce these language orientations.<sup>30</sup> Urdu is Pakistan’s national language, Hindi is India’s, so expatriates from Pakistan and India have shared in and helped to constitute popular culture in the UAE. Many South Asians took personal pride in the UAE’s achievements, particularly those of Dubai,<sup>31</sup> while South Asians in Kuwait rarely expressed such feelings of identification to me.

In the UAE, the South Asians feel closer to the Arabs than in Kuwait,<sup>32</sup> calling the indigenous Arabs “locals” rather than “nationals” as in Kuwait, and the “locals” are generally liked rather than disliked. As one man said,

We do socialize with the locals, we meet on Id and other occasions; with the men only of course, that reservation is always there. This is better than Kuwait, and these locals have been educated in Karachi or Bombay often, they are much exposed to South Asians. . . . Who has built the UAE, running the banks and everything? And now a generation [of locals] is coming up, and we say, don’t make life miserable for those who built it up.<sup>33</sup>

South Asians also mix more with other expatriates in the UAE, as the quote below from an encyclopedia salesman illustrates. With no salary, he is dependent on his 10 percent commission on sales. He spoke vividly of his struggles:

In the Gulf, one has to deal with illiterate people, people with no manners; people who started as tea boys become receptionists, and higher. Receptionists say “No” to us, a hundred times over, and we cannot sell costly encyclopaedia sets to people who have come here to earn, not spend. . . . Taxis are a big expense, we try to share them; the Company takes four of us sales-

men to Abu Dhabi with a car and driver, and then I walk in the sun for hours, taking Electrolyte and trying to make a sale. . . . There are so many different nationalities here, and they talk funny in Urdu, the Filipinos, Thais, Egyptians, Palestinians, and Iranis. The Filipinos buy best, almost 100 percent of my business is with them, for their kids and the kids’ education, and some schools give encyclopaedias as rewards. Those Egyptians, Palestinians, Jordanians, and Lebanese, they never buy, they just waste your time.<sup>34</sup>

Note that he was dealing with other expatriates (at least with the Filipinos, Thais, Egyptians, Palestinians, and Iranis, above) in Urdu.

The second important difference between Kuwait and the UAE, particularly Dubai, concerns governmental, particularly policing, practices that have influenced South Asian movement in public places. The agents of authority, the officials and particularly the police, came from different places and, again, use languages differently. Kuwaiti agents of the state are chiefly drawn from the non-Gulf Arab category—before the Gulf War, these were primarily Palestinians; now they are Lebanese, Syrian, Egyptian, and Sudanese. Arabic-speaking *mandoubas* must be employed by most workers to fill in forms and represent them. These authorities strongly intimidate the poorer South Asian workers there, who express helplessness in the face of the bureaucracy and are even more at a disadvantage when confronting the police. On Fridays, workers gathered in various sites in the city to enjoy their day off, and police watched the crowds closely. If a worker was arrested and accused of drunkenness or fighting, for example, his fellow workers had to desert him for fear of arrest and deportation themselves.

In the UAE, the emirates vary in the impact of state authorities on workers’ lives. Abu Dhabi, the capital of the federation, is more like Kuwait, where government institutions and

30. The UAE business environment is as competitive as Kuwait’s, and more outward looking because of vigorous efforts to diversify the economy and attract foreign investors.

31. My conclusion from interviews, July and August 1995. I want to thank especially my greatest helpers, in Kuwait, Mirza Shamsheer Ali Beg, and, in Dubai, Anees and Maqsood Ali.

32. But this closeness is declining, partly because of diverging educational orientations: while the locals used to go to India or Pakistan for education, now they are going to the United Kingdom, and while people from South Asia used to go to the United Kingdom for education, now they are going to the United States.

33. Hasan Bozai, interview with author, 20 August 1995, Dubai.

34. Vinaya Shekhar, interview with author, 19 August 1995, Dubai.



officials play the major roles in public life. In the other emirates, business and businessmen are the leading players. Even more important is the constitution of the police forces. As in Kuwait, there are mainly non-Gulf Arabs on the Abu Dhabi police force. In Dubai, the chief is Yemeni, while the force consists of locals, Sudanese, Barkas men (Arabs from Hyderabad), Iranis, and Baluchis. As one man explained, "In Abu Dhabi, the police speak Arabic only (although of course they know Urdu) and are out to get you. Here in Dubai, they speak Urdu, they have 'cordiality lessons,' they will listen to your explanation and often let you go. One stopped me and told me, *meherbani-see* [please], to put on my seat belt."<sup>35</sup>

There are also strong differences in gendered experience, again despite apparent similarities in the two sites: in both, what little political participation has been extended to citizens has gone only to males, and while expatriate male laborers are covered by state labor codes, domestic workers (predominantly female) are not.<sup>36</sup> Expatriate women come as maids, but also as doctors, teachers, nurses, and wives.<sup>37</sup> As I mentioned, the South Asian populations in Kuwait and the UAE have somewhat different profiles with respect to class and religion, and these dimensions strongly affect gender practices, discouraging or encouraging working women and women's movement more generally in public spaces.

One person said, about the intersections of class, religion, and gender in Kuwait (with its more Muslim and working-class profile): "Many people here are clawing their way up, they are from the old city [of Hyderabad], from humble backgrounds, and they are going right back, trying to make a place for themselves back there.

But there are others, more educated, more supportive of working wives. The class structure determines the options and the restrictions here." Views about women were closely connected to religion as well, with the "decadent, dangerous West" standing in implicit contrast to the safe, Islamic environment of Kuwait. Women generally took up wearing the *hijab* in Kuwait, even women who did not wear it elsewhere. They adopted it for reasons of fitting in and protection in an environment where few women moved about alone or uncovered.<sup>38</sup> In Kuwait, women's associations<sup>39</sup> did not exist and were not thought possible or desirable,<sup>40</sup> so women's lives were quite restricted.

One man vividly portrayed the situation for Indian and Pakistani women in Kuwait:

My wife wore a *burqah* years ago at home (before it went out of fashion), but here she put on the *abayah*, like other highly educated women, and my daughter donned the *hijab* at age ten or eleven. *Purdah*, in fact, is observed more in Kuwait than in India, because the country is a more religious one. Everything is more religious, from prayers at work to family activities. Here, my wife and children are more dependent on me, I must do everything for them, drop them and pick them up in groups of women and children. If it is just my own wife and children who want to go somewhere, I must accompany them, it does not look good for them to go on their own. There is no danger to them in Kuwait, this is just for appearances. Kuwaiti women are different from the Indian women, the Kuwaiti women work, they leave their houses and children, they depend totally on servants. But Indian women do not work, they stay in the home, taking care of the children. They may have maids but they also like housework. Just a few Indian women work, like [X's] wife

35. Junaid Adil, Ali Ishrati, and Mirza Arsalan, interviews with author, 21 August 1995, Dubai.

36. Most literature on the Gulf reads as though expatriates were not there, and when they are included they are talked about as men. Gardezi, "Asian Workers," 179–94, in an otherwise informative article, remarks only that female domestics from the Philippines and prostitutes from Pakistan are often smuggled in illegally, 192. See Karen Leonard, "South Asian Women in the Gulf: Families and Futures Reconfigured," in *Trans-Status Subjects: Gender in the Globalization of South and Southeast Asia*, ed. Esha De and Sonita Sarker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 213–31.

37. In Kuwait most maids are from the Philippines; in the UAE most are from Sri Lanka. Other maids come from Bangladesh, India, and Indonesia. *Pakistan Link*, 16 September 1994.

38. In some circles, however, there was distinct pressure to wear the *hijab*. One woman told me, "There is pressure to wear it, in that [businessman Hoshdar Khan's] group, even his own wife didn't wear it before. I do generally wear it when moving about, but at the cricket match . . . I went without it, I didn't want to be grouped with those others."

39. Social life for South Asian men and women in Kuwait and also in the UAE was overwhelmingly with fellow country people (the governments allow only "nationalities," country-based categories, to form associations, although the UAE is far more flexible). Activities that drew South Asians together centered on "national" events, sports (cricket), poetry (*mushairas*), and religion (prayer or educational groups).

40. Mohammed Hoshdar Khan and Mir Ibrahim Ali Khan, interviews with author, 7 August 1995, Kuwait.

(but don't tell him I said so). When I alone can support my family, why should my wife be burdened? But my daughter wants to go for an MBA, she wants to go for a Pilot Training Course in the U.S.; she goes to the American School.<sup>41</sup>

He emphasized the widely shared preference in Kuwait that women not work outside the home (but his views about traditional gender roles did not seem to extend to his daughter).

For South Asian women, life in the UAE was qualitatively quite different than that in Kuwait.<sup>42</sup> The majority of South Asian wives in the Gulf seemed to be working, in need of household help and child care. Some had brought family retainers from home, especially cooks and *ayahs*. They seemed to see the UAE as a middle ground for cultural observances, a kind of comfortable halfway house that required neither rigid preservation nor drastic alteration of family and community traditions.

The availability of expatriate South Asian women for all kinds of work in the UAE underlines their participation in changing gender roles there. Two young Anglo-Indian women followed their brothers to the Gulf, and one had a career in the UAE that would not have been possible in Kuwait.<sup>43</sup> Elizabeth Ellis had been a sports person back in Hyderabad, "not too good at school," and a swimming coach at the Secunderabad Club. In Dubai, she held a man's job: she supervised construction workers, most of them Pathans from Pakistan. "I wish my teachers could see me now," she said. "I can shout at the Pathans, I really get respect. . . . I

owe this country a lot, from nothing I became something, I can afford it all here, and I've seen other parts of the world. Dad had a personal audience with the Pope in 1988."<sup>44</sup>

In Kuwait and the UAE, women can own and drive cars, and in Dubai the growing numbers of women car owners and drivers led to an innovation in 1996: female attendants at petrol pumps, "smiling Filipina, Nepalese, and Indian women pumping petrol." Emarat, the company initiating this, explained that many drivers in Dubai are women, and its goal was to reflect its customers and create loyalty. Basic English and a willingness to pick up Arabic or Hindi were said to be desirable for the new attendants (again, note the language usages).<sup>45</sup>

Finally, large numbers of Indian Muslim women have been brought to the UAE over at least the past half century as the wives of Arabs.<sup>46</sup> Most of these wives are from a specific Hyderabad old city locality, Barkas, and are descended from Yemeni and Saudi Arabs long settled there. They speak some Arabic, and their parents are willing to give them in marriage to a Gulf Arab for much less than a Gulf bride would cost.<sup>47</sup> Typically, the women are second, third, or fourth wives of much older husbands. A Hyderabad bride could be had for some 10,000 rupees (\$286) plus twenty to thirty grams of gold (\$500–\$700), whereas a Dubai bride cost 200,000–300,000 dirhams (\$54,500–\$81,745), a driver told me. He knew an eighty-five-year-old man in Ra's al Khaymah with a twenty-year-old Hyderabad bride, but that young woman had

41. Akbar Khan, interview with author, 6 August 1997, Kuwait.

42. They moved about freely and met women from many other countries on the job and in everyday life, especially in Dubai. One example of such interactions comes from a visit to a beauty salon, *Zenana*. The owner was a Kenyan woman; the hair cutters, colorists, and threaders came from Goa, Bombay, and Delhi; and the manicurist was a Filipina. A Sudanese woman customer bargained vigorously for a special beauty package (wedding services for a bride), and most of the women in the salon knew each other well from many previous visits. Observation, with Anees Ali (a twelve-year-old customer), 14 August 1995, Dubai.

43. Fred Ellis was in banking back in Hyderabad, and three of his sons followed suit. The first Ellis to go to the Gulf was Eugene, second son of Fred and Mavis

Ellis, in 1975. Another son, Ambrose, soon followed, and then the fourth child, Elizabeth, in 1982; her mother and then her father joined Elizabeth. The youngest of the six Ellis children, Joan, also worked in the Gulf. Only one cousin is left in Hyderabad. Sydney, Australia, is the family's eventual destination; Philip and Eugene are settled there, Joan has applied, and Ambrose works for an Australian company. Elizabeth will settle her parents there and finally shift herself. Elizabeth, Mavis, and Fred Ellis, interviews with author, 26 August 1995, Dubai. I found the family through Laura and Feroze Khan of Irving, Texas.

44. Her parents came to the Gulf to live with her, and her mother keeps house for her, as Elizabeth always comes late and the job is stressful; her father, although over sixty, is still working part-time there. Elizabeth, Mavis, and Fred Ellis, interviews with author, 26 August 1995, Dubai.

45. *India-West*, 26 July 1996. The law in Dubai requires women's cars to have one-way tinted windows that obscure the view from outside.

46. Estimates ranged between 10 and 20 percent for the wives of older Arab men in Kuwait and the UAE generally, and much higher, 50–70 percent, in certain UAE locations. Centers for these wives in the UAE are 'Ajman, Umm al Qaywayn, Khor Fakkan (in Ash Shariqah), and Abu Dhabi. Razia and Ashfaq Khan, interview, 21 August 1995, Umm al Qaywayn; Ahmed Hassan, interview with author, 24 August 1995, Abu Dhabi.

47. In Dubai and Kuwait, there are apparent crises in the marriage systems. Bridegrooms in the Gulf have traditionally paid high bride-prices and provided the wedding jewelry and a fully equipped household, and nonlocal brides (Indian Muslims, maids of various nationalities) are much less expensive. See Leonard, "South Asian Women in the Gulf," for more details.

no education and five sisters at home; she might not be happy but she was well settled. Despite the age differences, such marriages do provide economic security not only for the wife but for her family back in India, a doctor who treated many such women assured me. These women and their children blend into the “ordinary” indigenous population, and when they become widows, they can inherit real estate and businesses and stand as sponsors to nonlocals.<sup>48</sup> This presence of Indian Muslim wives in the general population of the UAE encourages, again, South Asians to feel a stronger sense of participation in the local culture, a weaker sense of alienation from it.

Despite their strikingly similar positioning in Kuwait and the UAE, then, language, policing, and gender practices have helped produce significantly different South Asian expatriate experiences in the two Gulf settings. The cultural currents flowed and continue to flow in different directions, pointing one society toward the Middle East and the other toward South Asia. §

48. The driver was Aijaz, interview, 15 August 1995, Dubai; the doctor was Ashfaq Khan, interview with author, 21 August 1995, Umm al Qaywayn. The marriages do produce some tragedies. A twenty-three-year-old Indian woman was executed for murdering her seventy-year-old UAE husband because he refused to return her passport so she could travel to see her family in India. *India Journal*, 28 March 1997.