

## THEMATIC DOSSIER: HUMANITARIAN ASPECTS OF MODERN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

## ТЕМАТИЧЕСКОЕ ДОСЬЕ: ГУМАНИТАРНЫЕ АСПЕКТЫ СОВРЕМЕННЫХ МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ

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### Sultans, Merchants and Academicians: 'Maritime Gujarat' in Academic and Political Discourse

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**Abstract.** The article analyzes the contribution of the Indian academic community to the formation of the so-called 'Gujarat narrative', which is understood as the idea of the special role of Gujarat in the history of India, which is developed by political elites. The methodology includes elements of classical political economy, neo-Marxism and historical sociology. The author first provides a brief outline of the history of Gujarat, and then analyzes the role of intellectual elites in shaping the foundations of India's external policy. The author argues that a new type of intellectual has emerged at the top of the Indian intelligentsia: a historian and strategist who knows the past and can predict the future. This contributed to the establishment of complex relationships between the academic community and the ruling class, as well as the academic community acquiring a distinct role that transcends that of mere servants of the political elites, a position that has traditionally been occupied by experts. Academics lay the historical and philosophical foundation for building foreign policy. Using the example of 'maritime Gujarat,' the author illustrates the mechanism of interaction between politicians and academics. The author identifies several stages in the development of the 'Gujarat narrative,' linking them to the transformation of Indian external policy imperatives, and analyzes the role of individual scholars and schools. In conclusion, the author highlights the key features that characterize the relationship between the Indian academic and political elites, and suggests using the existing historical groundwork to include the topic of historical interaction between India and Russia within the 'Gujarat narrative' framework.

**Key words:** India, Gujarat, Indian Ocean, Narendra Modi, elite theory, political economy

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## Султаны, купцы и академики: «морской Гуджарат» в научном и политическом дискурсе

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**Аннотация.** Проанализирован вклад академического сообщества Индии в формирование так называемого «гуджаратского нарратива» — транслируемого политическими элитами Индии представления об особой роли, которую штат Гуджарат исторически играл в развитии экономических связей политий Индостана с остальным миром, и о специфическом месте Гуджарата в регионе Индийского океана в целом. На основе методологии, сочетающей в себе элементы классической политэкономии, неомарксизма и исторической социологии, приведен краткий очерк истории Гуджарата в контексте развития его бизнес-сообществ, выявлена роль индийских интеллектуальных элит в формировании основ внешней политики страны. Утверждается, что в силу особенностей генезиса индийского правящего слоя среди верхушки интеллигенции сложился тип «стратега-историка-интеллектуала», равно сведущего в проблемах прошлого и в прогнозировании будущего. Это, в свою очередь, привело к тесному вовлечению в деятельность правящего класса академического сообщества, которое не просто играет роль интеллектуальной службы политических элит, но формирует историко-философский фундамент, на котором выстраивается внешняя политика государства, реагируя на изменения в мировой политике и тенденции в общественных отношениях. При этом индийские академические элиты находятся в постоянном контакте со своими иностранными коллегами. На примере формирования одной из частей «гуджаратского нарратива», а именно концепции «морского Гуджарата», продемонстрировано, как именно происходит взаимодействие политических и академических элит. Выделено несколько этапов развития «гуджаратского нарратива» в контексте трансформации индийских внешнеполитических императивов, и показано, какую роль сыграли отдельные ученые и научные школы в создании исторического базиса для реализации внешней политики Индии. В заключении выявлены основные особенности, характеризующие отношения индийских академических и политических элит, и предложено использовать имеющийся исторический задел для того, чтобы включить тему исторического взаимодействия Индии и России в рамки «гуджаратского нарратива».

**Ключевые слова:** Индия, Гуджарат, Индийский океан, Нарендра Моди, теория элит, политическая экономия

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## Introduction

Contemporary India is the world's fourth-largest country by gross domestic product (GDP),<sup>1</sup> possesses nuclear weapons, and aspires to great power status with all the attendant attributes, including permanent membership in the United Nations (UN) Security Council. It has risen from a British colony to a regional leader in 77 years, preserving not only its political system but also the social structure established by its first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and his associates, according to which a relatively narrow group of well-educated elites heads the state. This has had three main effects: firstly, it has strengthened the Indian ruling class and formed a broad political consensus on external policy, entrenching the notion of the immutability of its fundamental principles; secondly, it has developed a distinctive strategic culture; and thirdly, it has created an Indian national external political myth.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike the internal political myth, whose tenets are periodically revised after an opposition comes to power, the external political myth is more stable, but it is, nevertheless, subject to change. Depending on the foreign policy situation and domestic political considerations, some aspects are emphasized and others are downplayed, some characters are elevated to prominence while others are relegated to the background.

In recent decades, the history of the Indian state Gujarat has become a central issue in this mythology. Since the 1980s, this region has been a leader in industrial development and a national platform for the adoption of digital technologies.

At the beginning of the 21st century, when Narendra Modi became the state's chief minister, Gujarat gained a reputation for being the most business-friendly and dynamically developing region. This image was further reinforced after Modi took the helm of the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party and led it to victory in three consecutive general elections. Gujarat became the embodiment of the 'New India,' with key sites for high-tech manufacturing being established there, and the *Vibrant Gujarat* summit, invariably attended by the prime minister, is held biennially. Essentially, a local narrative is being created, embedded within the national myth of India.

The purpose of this study is to identify and analyze the role of the academic community in creating this narrative, as well as to describe how scholarly research is used to address the urgent needs of political elites and become part of political discourse. However, the present study does not aspire to provide a comprehensive examination of all aspects of the 'Gujarat narrative,' especially since some aspects, particularly those relating to domestic politics, have already been well researched (Guichard, 2010; Jaffrelot, 2024). It focuses on the creation and transformation of knowledge concerning Gujarat's historical role in underpinning India's key role in the Indian Ocean region.

Russian scholars have traditionally focused on either the history of Gujarat in the context of India's overall history, or the current political and economic processes there (Kashin, 2014; Spektor, 2023), or the development of the Indian Ocean region as a whole, focusing primarily

<sup>1</sup> India Becomes World's 4th Largest Economy, Surpasses Japan: NITI Aayog // News on Air. May 25, 2025. URL: <https://www.newsoneair.gov.in/india-becomes-worlds-4th-largest-economy-surpasses-japan-niti-aayog/> (accessed: 13.10.2025).

<sup>2</sup> In this case 'national myth' is understood within the categories defined by B. Anderson and H. Bhabha as "narration," which is an integral attribute of any nation as an imaginary community, a permanently unfinished, constantly transforming and explaining the reasons and meaning of the existence of the nation (internal political myth) and its place in the community of other nations (external political myth).

on security issues (Usov, 2003; Lebedeva, 2018). This article attempts to link all three areas of research.

The relevance of the topic is determined by India's growing role in regional and global processes and the need to understand the imperatives underlying India's national myth. Furthermore, the very mechanism of interaction between Indian intellectual and political elites and the role of the Indian academic community within Indian strategic culture are of interest.

The research's methodological framework incorporates methods from traditional political economy (the author believes that the production of new knowledge as part of culture directly depends on the mode of production and the demands of political and/or economic elites), poststructuralist analysis, and neo-Marxism in its Gramscian interpretation (knowledge obtained through scientific research is incorporated, often in distorted form, into general socio-political discourse and used by the authorities for their own purposes) (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), elite theory (Mills, 1956; Baru, 2021), and historical sociology.

## History of Gujarat

Gujarat is a state in north-western India, bordering Pakistan. Geographically, it is divided into two main parts: an agrarian continental region and a coastal region oriented towards maritime trade. The early emergence of cities led to the formation of urbanized regions in Gujarat, each with its own system of relationships, accelerating the formation of chiefdoms and states, and the migration of new social groups into the region. Historically, the continental part of Gujarat served as an *Umland* and *Hinterland* for coastal ports. The cultural and economic unity of the

region was maintained through the activities of merchant communities (Parsis, Banias, Bhatias, Sonis) and Brahmins (Joshi, Nagars, Srimali, and others).

Due to its advantageous trading position, Gujarat has historically played an important role in shaping the trade system in the western Indian Ocean, linking the cultural and economic zone of Hindustan with the polities of the Middle East and East Africa. The Gujarati ports, primarily Bharuch and Surat, played a key role in trade, initially with Sumer and subsequently with the Hellenistic monarchies and the Roman Empire. Gujarati traders began establishing trading posts on the coasts of the Arabian Peninsula and East Africa relatively early. In this process, a distinctive business culture developed, allowing Gujarati merchants to maintain certain independence and enhance their prestige both within and beyond Hindustan, forming mahajans, which were a kind of loose analogue of European guilds.

The arrival and gradual establishment of the British in the region led to the partial migration of trading communities from Gujarat to Bombay, which was ceded by Portugal to Great Britain in 1661 and in a short time became the most important port on the Malabar Coast, where the headquarters of the British East India Company was moved from Surat in 1687. While the Parsis migrated to Bombay *en masse*, the Banias maintained an active presence in Gujarat, in the city of Ahmedabad, soon forming the Bombay-Ahmedabad axis, which also contributed to Gujarat's prosperity. Bombay became a springboard to a new life for many Gujaratis, a link between Gujarat and other territories in Western India and the British possessions and protectorates. Gujaratis constituted the bulk of the Indian traders, officials, and employees who supported the colonial economy of the British Empire in the Indian Ocean region.

While the social and political processes of the 19th and 20th centuries significantly altered the mentality of the Bombay portion of the Gujarati community, increasingly perceiving itself as part of the pan-Indian economic elite, the Gujarati business elite itself retained a sense of ‘individuality,’ continuing to develop their home state. This was facilitated by the specific experiences they had acquired during British rule. On the one hand, most of Gujarat (excluding Cambay) was not formally part of the British territories in India, enabling a relatively independent economic policy. On the other hand, as British business penetrated India, the local trading community had to undergo a major transformation. Initially, Gujarati merchants helped to export Indian goods to Britain, but the Industrial Revolution, coupled with restrictive measures by the British authorities, led to the mass import of British goods into Gujarat. This forced businessmen to reorient themselves toward the domestic market, further consolidating business communities and simultaneously engaging previously uninvolved social groups in economic activity — primarily the Brahmins, who possessed significant social capital and were less constrained by cultural and economic restrictions than the trading communities. They became pioneers in developing textile production in the region, contributing to Gujarat’s emergence as a major textile hub. Furthermore, the diaspora became an important part of the ‘Gujarati miracle’: many Gujaratis who had travelled to other parts of the empire chose to migrate to the former metropolis after decolonization, accounting for over half of the Indian diaspora in Britain (approximately 800,000 out of 1.3 million).<sup>3</sup> Some achieved significant political success, while others

focused primarily on business, helping to foster a strong economic relationship between Britain and Gujarat.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Gujarat experienced an economic boom. This was due to the ‘green’ and ‘white’ revolutions, which, by organizing Gujarat farmers into cooperatives, enabled them to capture a significant share of the Indian food market, accumulate additional capital, and expand production. Gujarat’s existing industrial base gradually developed a skilled labor force, enabling the state to emerge first as one of India’s industrial hubs and then as a key element of the ‘new economy’ during the digital revolution. Throughout India’s planned economy, the established business environment and high concentration of capital helped Gujarat maintain stable GDP growth.

The opening up of the Indian economy under Narasimha Rao’s reforms provided a new impetus for Gujarat’s businesses. Capitalizing on its accumulated advantages and connections abroad, Gujarat quickly became one of the leaders in economic growth. Narendra Modi, the Chief Minister of the state, set a course to attract large businesses to Gujarat that were facing restrictions in other states, earning him the reputation of being ‘India’s most business-friendly chief minister.’ Since Modi came to power, Gujarat has quickly emerged as a ‘model state,’ testing key strategic initiatives, attracting the largest volume of foreign direct investment (FDI), and launching cutting-edge projects such as semiconductor devices manufacturing. The Gujarat model, with all its advantages (rapid economic development, manufacturing, and openness to investment) and disadvantages (growing social inequality and the dominance of Hindu communities), is perceived as a model for the new India. Currently, Gujarat

<sup>3</sup> Gujaratis In Britain // National Congress of Gujarati Organisations (UK). URL: [https://web.archive.org/web/20150204230146/http://ukncgo.org/gujaratis\\_britain.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20150204230146/http://ukncgo.org/gujaratis_britain.html) (accessed: 03.10.2025).

accounts for 30.7 % of all Indian exports (USD 116.3 billion),<sup>4</sup> and its key trading partners are the United States, the People's Republic of China (PRC), and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Gujarat's special position as a link between India and the rest of the world requires reflection and justification. Fortunately for the authorities, this special position already existed by the time Gujarat was transformed into a 'model state,' thanks to years of research by Indian and international scholars.

### **The Role of Academic and Expert Communities in Shaping Historical and Political Discourse on Gujarat**

Among historians, it is widely accepted that historians (and scholars in general) study reality within the context of, and at the level of, the society to which they belong, and within the prevailing knowledge paradigm of that society. This can be explained by the fundamental distinction between the natural and exact sciences, on the one hand, and the humanities and social sciences, on the other. In the former, knowledge is gradually accumulated, and the researcher is almost always outside the domain of the phenomena being studied. In the latter, however, the researcher belongs to the domain being studied and, therefore, studies the subject not only from the current level of knowledge, but also by being immersed in the social environment.

The same applies to the relevance of the research topic: "He (the humanities scholar. — A.K.) perceives public interest in the past as a kind of mandate and strives to respond to the demands and needs of the time through his work... The influence of present time determines the choice of certain events and processes of the

past as the topic of individual historical research or the subject of study of a scientific school (movement) of historians" (Smolenskiy, 2008, pp. 18–19). This perception is not necessarily primitively opportunistic, and the relevance of a topic is not always dictated by demand from society or specific social groups. However, when a scientific school and an entire field of research are taking shape, the existence of this demand and, consequently, its relevance in a broad societal sense are most often obvious.

The role of academia in India is unique. In contrast to the United States, India from the 1950s to the 1980s lacked an expert community, with the exception of specialized think tanks operating under the auspices of and in the interests of specific government clients, such as the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA; affiliated with the Ministry of External Affairs) and the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA; affiliated with the Ministry of Defence). Consequently, the academic community played a significant role in providing analytical support to the executive branch, particularly at the strategic level. As a result of the unique genesis of the intelligentsia in India after independence, the image of the intellectual emerged as someone who combines knowledge of the history of his country and the world, an understanding of contemporary issues, and strategic thinking. He is well-connected with political elites who seek his advice, thereby influencing the country's policies (Baru, 2021). K. Subrahmanyam (1929–2011), the father of the current minister of external affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, and the author of several works considered classics of Indian historical scholarship, geopolitics, and strategy, serves as a model for this type of intellectual.

<sup>4</sup> Hariharan S., Soupramanien A. Data Focus. Telangana and Tamil Nadu clock highest growth in exports in FY25 // The Hindu Business Line. April 29, 2025. URL: <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/data-stories/data-focus/southern-states-grow-their-share-as-indias-export-basket-diversifies/article69503849.ece> (accessed: 29.05.2025).

In addition to developing a network of contacts with their country's political elites, Indian scholars actively interacted with their Western colleagues, taking advantage of the lack of linguistic and methodological gaps. These contacts were facilitated by the persistent interest in India, both academic and practical, within Western academic circles. The postcolonial shift in Western scholarship in the 1960s further stimulated historical, anthropological, and sociological research on former colonies. Along with grand narratives, attention increased in *subaltern studies*, i.e., the practices of colonized groups in the context of societal transformation, their relationships with the colonizers, and the formation of new identities. Western scholars critical of colonial practices thus became valuable allies of the Indian intellectual and political elites constructing a new national narrative. The established collaboration helped, on the one hand, to integrate the discoveries of Indian scholars into Western scholarly discourse, and, on the other, legitimized new directions in their research, thereby imbuing them with additional academic credibility, enriching and complementing them through research in Western archives.

The author has previously addressed the role of the academic community in shaping Indian political discourse (Kupriyanov, 2019; 2022; 2023). For example, the works of K.M. Panikkar laid the foundation for the idea of India's need to secure control over the Indian Ocean region. Indian scholars have played (and continue to play) a significant role in shaping and supporting the concept of the Indo-Pacific as a 'natural space' for trade and cultural interaction, justifying Delhi's policy of strengthening ties with Indo-Pacific countries and affirming India's historically decisive role in the Indo-Pacific. In response to demands from political elites, scholars of the

Aligarh School (Habib, 1963; Athar Ali, 1966; Chandra, 1986) conducted an in-depth study of the Mughal period, ultimately changing the prevailing global historical narrative. They found that the Mughal Empire was a complex bureaucratic mechanism with a fairly advanced technology, thereby confirming that India had been a great power long before the European conquest.

In the 1990s, the expert landscape began to change. The liberalization of the Indian economy after Narasimha Rao's reforms, the emergence and development of new economic fields, the rapid growth of Indian business elites' wealth, and the gradual cultural reorientation of Indian elites towards American social practices led to the emergence of a professional expert community in India. Its hierarchization rapidly took shape, with specific characteristics emerging: multiple affiliations, the recruitment of retired diplomats and military personnel, the gradual transition of the most promising centers to the covert or direct control of political elites, and the development of a system of business elites sponsoring the work of think tanks, formally independent but closely aligned with executive authorities or ruling political parties, in exchange for political perks. At the same time, a mutually beneficial process of academic scholars' infiltration into the expert community took place. The scholars gained considerable political influence and a new tool for interacting with political and economic elites, while the think tanks gained status.

The expert community took its place within the structure of Indian society, claiming, as opposed to the image of the academic intellectual, inclined to seek answers in the past, the role of generator of tactical ideas and solutions, and simultaneously a mediator between the political elite and the increasingly politically empowered urban middle class.

## The Gujarati Narrative

The development of a narrative about the history of Gujarat has evolved along several lines: religious history, the role of business elites, the genesis of regional business ethics and entrepreneurial spirit, etc. One of these lines has become the narrative of ‘maritime Gujarat’ (hereinafter referred to as the ‘Gujarati narrative’). Its formation began over half a century ago. To date, three bibliographic studies have been published that trace the stages of the creation of the ‘Gujarati narrative’ in a broad sense (Chavda, 1972; Satyaprakash, 1976; Simpson, 2011), as well as an extremely useful essay by Edward Alpers (2019) specifically devoted to the formation of the narrative of “maritime Gujarat.” The purpose of this study is to demonstrate how scholars responded to public demand and, in part, shaped it, rather than to provide a complete bibliography of works on this topic.

The writer Gunvantrai Popatbhai Acharya stands at the origins of the ‘Gujarati narrative.’ A prolific author who produced 169 works during his lifetime, he wrote in Gujarati. In a number of his works, primarily his most famous novels ‘Darialal’ (literally “Beloved Sea”), published in 1934, ‘Sarfarosh,’ ‘Sarkkarbar,’ and others, he celebrated Gujarati maritime culture and identity, the connection of the Gujarat population with the sea and overseas territories (primarily the Swahili Coast). “For a thousand years the Darialal has played a fundamental role in the history of Gujarat; and therefore the sea is indeed worthy of study and thought ... Those who ignore the sea will never completely understand our region or country’s history” (Alpers & Goswami, 2019, p. 1). G.P. Acharya’s books, popular among the local intelligentsia, laid the foundation on which the identity of a new generation of Gujaratis was built.

The pioneers of the academic study of “maritime Gujarat” were Edward Alpers and Charles Pearson. While Alpers initially focused on the connections between Gujarat and the Swahili Coast, the interactions of Gujarati merchants with local traders and other inhabitants (Alpers, 1976), Pearson proposed a theoretical concept for the formation and development of Gujarati maritime culture (Pearson, 1976). A key element of Pearson’s concept was the idea that this culture existed separately from political culture: Gujarati rulers showed little interest in the affairs of maritime traders, considering the occupation unworthy of a ruler, and viewing land rent as the basis for prosperity. This thesis quickly gained popularity among Indian intellectuals, because it explained why Indian states, with their large numbers of experienced sailors, an established maritime culture, and significant resources, were unable to resist European maritime expansion; and it emphasized the danger of political leadership underestimating maritime power, which was an issue actively debated at the time in intellectual and military circles.

Three years later, E. Alpers and C. Pearson were joined by the Indian-born scholar, Ashin Das Gupta (1979). Unlike his predecessors, he focused on materials from the English and Dutch East India Companies. His methodology was also distinctive: instead of analyzing fundamental social processes, he focused primarily on facts, personalities, and the specifics of social communities, which allowed him to bridge the gap between the events of bygone days and the present. Almost all the communities Das Gupta wrote about were present in the social life of independent India. He also narrowed the scope of his research, focusing primarily on Surat as one of the key regional ports of the 17th century.

Subsequent generations of researchers followed in the footsteps of the ‘three greats.’

The ‘Surat prism’ started by A. Das Gupta largely determined the geographical scope of their research: thus, Makrand Mehta focused on the formation of urban trading culture and the Surat-Ahmedabad trade axis (Mehta, 1988; 1991), Ruby Maloni studied the documents of the Surat trading post of the English East India Company (Maloni, 1992; 2003). P.K. Mitra devoted one of the monographs in the series on Indian ports to Surat (Mitra, 1995), and Dilip Chakrabarti published a work on the historical archaeology of the European presence in Gujarat, paying primary attention to Surat (Chakrabarti, 2003). In parallel, the so-called “Cambay prism” was developed. Thus, A. Ray, S. Arasaratnam (Arasaratnam & Ray, 1994) and V.A. Janaki (1980), examining the causes of Cambay’s decline, refuted the generally accepted view that it was due to the silting of the river mouth, a technical issue then solvable. They found that the decline became the result of a complex set of factors, including, in particular, the general decline of the Mughal Empire and the British desire to establish monopolistic control over Indian merchandise exports.

The early works of this period focused primarily on the causes of the decline of Gujarati trade and the inability of Gujarati rulers to repel the British at sea. The new set of studies, however, was published after the end of the Cold War, at a time when India faced the need to find a new place in a changing world. Globalization, a sharp increase in trade turnover, the emerging decline of the role of states, and the transformation of the world into a ‘global village’ contributed to a shift in focus to the activities of trading communities and the formation of multi-ethnic and multi-religious trade networks aimed at maximizing profits for all participants. The lion’s share of works

published between 1987 and 2003 focused specifically on the activities of individual trading communities and their interactions with local and European trading structures, as well as the role played by subaltern communities. The work of Lakshmi Subramanian is typical of this period: examining the role of the Gujarati Banias, she demonstrated that they, as intermediaries and financiers, collaborated closely with the British, thereby contributing to the impoverishment of Muslim communities specializing in manufacturing (Subramanian, 1987; 1996). Subramanian coined the term *‘Anglo-Bania Order’*: this ‘order’ was based on interaction within the Ahmedabad — Bombay — Cambay — Surat quadrangle and served as the foundation for the subsequent prosperity of the Gujarati Banias.

However, at the very height of the ‘unipolar moment,’ the first signs of an alternative paradigm emerging emerged, pioneered by Sanjay Subrahmanyam. Having published a number of works and earned a reputation as a promising and talented researcher, in 1995 he published an article refuting the previous findings of Charles Pearson and A. Das Gupta regarding the complete lack of connection between trading communities and political elites in Gujarat (Subrahmanyam, 1995). Subrahmanyam advanced the thesis that, in the absence of a developed and well-functioning bureaucracy, Gujarat’s political elites, who effectively pursued a mercantilist foreign policy, relied on alliances with one or more trading groups. These groups, in turn, well aware of their advantages, used alternative means of influencing the political elites, achieving their desired actions.

Subrahmanyam’s concept was further developed by Farhat Hasan, who expanded the framework of his analysis and demonstrated that even after the fall of the Gujarati polities

and the establishment of Mughal rule in the region, political elites in Delhi exercised control over Gujarat primarily through interactions with local business communities and the gentry. As a result, de facto power in Gujarat quickly passed into the hands of the merchant communities, whose representatives occupied key positions in the Mughal administrative apparatus (Hasan, 2004). This conclusion was confirmed by Jorge Flores, who proved the inevitability of the fusion of the political and economic elites, creating a ‘merchant-official’ type (Flores, 2011). Ghulam A. Nadri demonstrated the importance of the Mughals’ direct involvement in developing maritime trade and shipping in general, as they often owned the ships on which pilgrims traveled to the Hajj. He also explored the role played by Ottoman merchants, who actively invested in the purchase of ships and shares in shipping (Nadri, 2009).

The overwhelming majority of these works were written during the decade of Gujarat’s rapid rise as a business hub under the leadership of Narendra Modi. Rather than focusing on the interactions between trading communities outside state control within trade networks, they focus on the interactions between these communities and the state. Given that modern institutions in India often coexist with pre-modern practices, these seemingly historical works have acquired unexpected relevance.

Since 2014, a number of new books, monograph chapters, and articles, primarily devoted to Gujarat’s role as an Indian Ocean hub, have been published (Alpers & Goswami, 2019; Yazdani, 2017; Keller & Pearson, 2015). Increasing attention is being

paid to Gujarat’s ports other than Surat and Cambay, to its trade links with the Near and Far East (Goswami, 2016; Seshan & Shimada, 2023; Fromherz, 2018; Keller, 2019), and new studies are appearing on the activities of Gujarati trading communities on the Swahili Coast (Machado, 2014). The image of a ‘maritime India’ is increasingly being developed (Malekandathil, 2014; 2017), postulating that interaction with the Indian Ocean played a key role in the processes of modernization that began in India in the 16th century and were interrupted by European conquest. The contemporary relevance of these themes is underscored by a wide range of symbolic gestures, from the construction of a large-scale tourist complex in Gujarat dedicated to the country’s maritime past<sup>5</sup> to Narendra Modi’s scuba diving to pray in a sunken city off the coast of Gujarat.<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

The process of shifting scientific paradigms and the periods of mainstreaming of various research areas, roughly coinciding with shifts in the political and economic priorities of the state and society, allows to draw a number of conclusions.

1. The academic community in India plays an important role in forming state narratives, providing a historical foundation to substantiate current public policy. The more deeply rooted this foundation is, the more reliable it becomes: recently, there has been a growing interest in ‘deep history,’ which enables historical processes to be analyzed within Fernand Braudel’s *longue durée*. This is extremely relevant for the Indian Ocean region. In recent decades, a number of works have been

<sup>5</sup> National Maritime Heritage Complex, Lothal, India. URL: <https://nmhc.in/> (accessed: 10.04.2025).

<sup>6</sup> Modi in Gujarat: PM Dives Into Sea to Perform Underwater Puja off Dwarka // Hindustan Times. February 25, 2024. URL: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/pm-modi-goes-underwater-in-deep-sea-prays-at-site-where-dwarka-city-submerged-101708848674804.html> (accessed: 10.04.2025).

published employing this approach, including those related to Gujarat.

2. The academic community's position in Indian policymaking is unique; it cannot be replaced by think tanks, which typically focus on contemporary processes, or by corresponding analytical units established within executive bodies.

3. Due to its specific nature, historical research does not allow for a rapid response to social and political demands. However, researchers often anticipate these demands, laying the groundwork 5–7 years in advance.

4. The expansion of research areas has a multiplier effect, accelerating the formation of academic schools and ensuring continuity within them, and, consequently, the continuation of research on a topic that can transform and acquire new relevance. An example is India's interaction with East African countries, a topic that initially interested Indian political elites

in the context of Delhi's strengthening ties within the Non-Aligned Movement, then as an example of regional globalization, and has finally gained relevance in the context of the declared Indo-Chinese rivalry in the region.

These characteristics, coupled with the Indian government's obvious interest in developing a distinct 'Gujarati narrative,' can be used to strengthen Russian-Indian cultural, scientific, political, and economic ties. A poorly explored topic in both Russian and Indian historiography concerns the activities of the Indian trading community in Astrakhan from the 15th to the 18th centuries and the formation of trade networks spanning India, Iran, and Central Russia. Punjabi and Gujarati merchants played a key role in this process. Given Russian society's growing interest in this period of history, it seems highly promising to expand the geographic scope of the 'Gujarati narrative' by encouraging Russian historians to participate in its development.

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