New Lives in Anand
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Published by University of Washington Press

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CHAPTER 1

Regional Orientations

The Charotar Sunni Vohras

In a community hall on Anand’s 100 Feet Road, twelve marriages are taking place. This is a samuh lagna (group marriage) of the Charotar Sunni Vohra community. An estimated thousand guests are served lunch—halwa (sweets) and a meal of khichdi and dal (rice with lentils). Afterward, leaders give speeches and distribute gifts to the twelve married couples: a wardrobe, vessel, and pot each, and other kitchen utensils. These gifts have been donated by wealthy members of the community. This samuh lagna is organized by the Arsad marriage circle of the Vohra community.

At the front of the hall, a group of elderly men is seated at a table. They are the organizers of the event. They introduce themselves to me as board members of the Charotar Sunni Vohra Samaj. Within this community association they represent the Arsad marriage circle: a sub-set of intermarrying families considered to have originated from sixty-eight villages in the Charotar region (arsad is Gujarati for “sixty-eight”). Pointing at the guests, they say that many of them have traveled to Anand from the surrounding villages to be at this event today. They call Anand the headquarters of the Vohra community.

If Charotar Sunni Vohras articulate a regional identity, what are our resources for studying regional identities? People can construct regions in various ways: spatial, linguistic, economic, cultural, or historical (Cohn 1987). Regions have been thought of as collective mental maps, as geographical areas with social meanings that, depending on historical circumstances, differ between social groups and from issue to issue. There are official regions imagined by administrators and defined by clearly demarcated geographical boundaries, but here I am talking about another kind of region: a microregion (van Schendel 1982) imagined by ordinary people and unknown to outsiders. Charotar is a microregion that does not appear on official maps, but it has had a long existence in popular narratives. Studying such a locally recognized region requires unraveling how people
came to think of a set of seemingly unrelated places as an interconnected system. How do Vohras imagine this region and carve out a space for themselves within it?

**Charotar Sunni Vohras**

We are the Sunni Vohras from Gujarat. And in Gujarat there are two big rivers: one flows from Ahmedabad, the big city; one from Baroda. Between these two rivers there are 400 villages. These villages have very fertile land and most of our people of the community, those are the Muslims, Gujarati-speaking, they are Vohra—means business people. So, they used to do like farmers, they do breeding for the cattle and cows like that, and they were also doing some small businesses, like grocery stores and stuff like that. So those people, they were from these 400 villages, Charotar. People—Muslims—from that community are called Vohra (interview 2018, USA).

Vohras present themselves as a regional community based in Charotar, and these stories of regional connectivity are told in Gujarat as well as overseas. The fragment above, recorded on video in an interview with an elderly man during a community event of the Vohra Association of North America, in Delaware, is an example of this. The son of a Vohra family of cattle farmers and milk traders, he himself had been raised in Mumbai before he came to the United States; his wife had grown up in Karachi. He nevertheless told the story of his community as one that was located in the distinctive microregion of Charotar.

Charotar land is located between the two rivers of the Mahi and the Va-trak, along the main road and railway tracks that run between the two cities of Ahmedabad and Vadodara (Baroda), with the towns of Anand and Nadiad serving as regional centers. Geographically, it overlaps with the former administrative district of Kheda, which was divided into two separate districts—Anand and Kheda districts—in 1997. Charotar is understood to be a green and relatively affluent land, advantageous for agriculture because of the generous presence of river water. In written descriptions, the Charotar tract is described as a fertile and well-tilled soil, particularly suitable for the cash crops of tobacco and cotton (Rajyagor 1977, 1; Hardiman 1981, 263). Charo has been translated as “beautiful” or “pleasant,” and tar as “land.”

Charotar has a productive rural sector. The rural economy has been oriented to commerce since before the early nineteenth century, with tobacco and cotton as important crops, and, since the late nineteenth century, it has exported tobacco, cotton, and dairy products to markets far away (Rutten 1995, 73).
Before Independence, irrigation works and the development of small-scale agro-industry raised the productivity of the agricultural economy. After Independence, the government-supported industrialization of agriculture and mechanization of the agricultural process resulted in further increases in productivity. The region became a center of dairy production, engineering companies that manufacture and repair agricultural machinery, industries for irrigation works and the building industry, and mechanical and electrical engineering companies (Rutten 1995, 79–86). Contemporary descriptions of the region's economy suggest that most of the available land is cultivated, although agriculture is no longer considered as important as it once was, with off-farm work emerging in trade, industries, and white-collar jobs, as well as transnational migration (Gidwani 2008; Tilche and Simpson 2018).

Vohras have profiled themselves as a regional community based in this agricultural region of central Gujarat since at least the formation of the Charotar Sunni Vahora Anjuman (an assembly) in 1926 (Vahora n.d., 78–90). Since then, there have been recurrent attempts to organize a Vohra/Vahora community, and this community has been conceptualized as rooted in the Charotar region, as evident from the recurrent addition of the word “Charotar” to the name of the community. Attempts to organize the community included two mini-conferences (1926 and 1928) in Uttarsanda and Anand and two conferences (1938 and 1940) in Anand and Sarsa (Vahora n.d., 177–82). Among the issues discussed were the promotion of education in the community, the benefits of simple weddings and group marriages to counter “wasteful expenditure in the community’s weddings,” the “menace of divorce in the community,” and the “encouragement of community spirit” (Vahora n.d., 78–110). A Charotar Sunni Vahora Young Men’s Association was registered in 1936. Concrete results were the establishment, in the early 1940s, of an institute of higher education, the I./uni00A0J./uni00A0Kapurwala Commercial School in Anand, and two student hostels (one each in Vadodara and Anand).

The period after Independence and Partition in the late 1940s and 1950s is described as the downfall of the Vohra community. The educational institutions set up by the Vohras were closed, and those in Anand who remember this say the closures were caused by a lack of funding following the migration of wealthy Vohras from Mumbai to Karachi in Pakistan. Other reasons for the decline included conflicts among the leaders, the death of some leaders, and a lack of enthusiasm among the next generation (Vahora n.d., 91–100). Nevertheless, some conferences continued to be organized to discuss community affairs. A Charotar Sunni Vohra Panchayat (village council) was established in Petlad.
in 1954, and a Charotar Sunni Vohra Tarahija Mandal (an association of the Tarahija subcommunity) was established in Chaklasi in 1979.

I draw these insights from a rare, unpublished, and undated book titled *Vahora Darshan (A Glimpse of Vohra)* by Haji Ismailbhai Sabanbhai Vahora, which describes the origins of the Charotar Sunni Vohra community. The author was a Vohra and writes that he lived in Mumbai, though the locations printed with his name (Borsadwala, Karanchi) indicate he may have moved to the city of Karachi from the town of Borsad in central Gujarat. The book is presented as a history of all Vohras in the world, but the history of the Vohras of Charotar is the most extensively covered, and the information provided in the book indicates that the author was well connected to, and informed by, the Vohra residents of central Gujarat and Mumbai. I stumbled upon the book in London in 2012, and later discovered that a school teacher in Anand also owned a copy.

The book suggests that it was Vohras in colonial Bombay—who started to organize themselves specifically as Muslims from Charotar. The Charotar Sunni Vahora Young Men’s Association was registered in Bombay in 1936. The events they organized took place mostly in Gujarat, but they appear to have been organized and sponsored from Bombay. Ten years after its registration, the association moved its office to Anand, and a bylaw was introduced in the governing body that “instead of only residents of Bombay, all Vohras from Baroda, Charotar region, Anand and Ahmedabad are permitted as office bearers of the association” (Vahora n.d., 100–10).

Such processes of caste and community formation were not unique at the time—people everywhere were organizing around such tropes in response to the colonial state’s politics of classification, description, and entitlement distribution (Pinney 1997, 62–63; Risley 1891; van der Veer 1994, 25–27). Colonial efforts to make Indian society governable included classifying India’s people, and the social categories of caste and community were studied, described, and then used by the colonial bureaucracy to distribute entitlements among its colonial subjects. In response, people organized themselves around community identities and then attempted to influence their categorization in colonial schemes. These processes have been described in detail for the Patidar caste (Pocock 1955). The name of the Patidars was first registered in the census of 1931, around the same period when Vohras started to organize. The previous name of this caste was Kanbis, an agricultural caste, but under the British colonial tax collecting regime, some of the Kanbis had acquired the honorary title of “Patel” (tax collector at the village level). The efforts of Kanbis to get registered as Patidars marked an effort to be recognized in a higher status (as merchants rather than farmers).
The Vohra community organization declined after the Partition of 1947, but the *samuh lagna* shows it has been reinvigorated. During an interview in 2011, two leaders said that there were sixty board members of the Charotar Sunni Vohra Samaj in the Charotar region at that time. They explained that the main purpose of the board members is to bring the community together, to encourage endogamous marriages, and to organize group weddings and social gatherings, such as singles events, to facilitate interaction between young unmarried men and women in the community. The interview took place in a small office in Anand where the association kept its files and had installed a computer. In the cupboard were copies of the community’s newspaper, *Vabora Sudharak* (Vohra Reformation), subtitled *Charotar Sunni Vabora Sudharak Mandalnu Mukapatr* (Pamphlet for the Reformation of the Charotar Sunni Vohra Community). In 2012, however, this office was raided and the computer was confiscated by one of the board members after a conflict over money, showing that the leadership of the association does not function as a coherent whole.

The circulation of different Vohra community books (at the village level and through the marriage circles) confirms that the Vohra community should not be understood as one integrated social unit, or as a political faction or sect following a single leader. I encountered four books (produced between 1986 and 2006) with detailed demographic information about Vohra families in the region; three other books were found earlier by Carolyn Heitmeyer (2009a). The main purpose of these books—which resemble telephone books, but include detailed information about the marital status of each member of a family, and further details that make it possible to assess a family’s socioeconomic position—is to facilitate marriage within the community. None of the books aspires to include all the Vohras in Charotar, however. Instead, they focus on a regional marriage circle within the Vohra community (listing all members in Gujarat of either the Makeriya marriage circle or the Dewataja marriage circle) or on town-specific Vohra groups (listing all Vohras in Mahemdabad in 1998, Thasra in 2000, or Ahmedabad in 2004; described in Heitmeyer 2009a, 211–12).

The idea of a regionally specific Vohra community has been institutionalized overseas in the various places where Vohras have migrated. There is a Mumbai Charotar Sunni Vohra Samaj in Mumbai, and a Charotar Muslim Anjuman (association of Charotar Muslims) with a Vohra community hall in Karachi. A UK Vohra Association was established in 1992. A Muslim Vohra Association was established in the United States in 2002, after having been informally organized since the 1990s, and was renamed as Vohra Association of North America in 2019 to signal the increasing membership of the association in Canada. These
associations are specifically aimed at Vohra families “who are originally from Kheda/Anand Dist[ric]t of Gujarat/India.” Each of these associations has organized social meetings and maintains an address list with details of known Vohra families in the respective regions. The associations are not united in a transnational umbrella association, and their level of activity and organization varies. Nevertheless, these attempts to institutionalize Vohras show that the idea of a regionally specific Vohra community has persisted and is actively reproduced in India and abroad.

Rural Histories

What is this Charotar Sunni Vohra community, then? Four independent regional sections of Sunni Vohra communities are described in the literature: the Charotar Vohras, the Patani Vohras, the Kadiwal Vohras, and the Surati Vohras (Misra 1964, 122–23). The name “Vohra” translates as “trader,” and many Vohras self-identify as traders, but trade is only one of the occupations among Vohras. Asghar Ali Engineer (1989, 30–31) calls Vohras “peasants” and “tillers of the soil”; Carolyn Heitmeyer describes Vohras as a “business community” (2009a, 32), and S. B. Rajyagor (1977, 185) describes them as “engaged in business or employed in Government or semi-Government services,” with some of them working as lawyers, doctors, and engineers. Satish Misra (1964, 122) says that “the majority of the Sunni Vohras of all regions are cultivators but an increasing proportion is taking to trade for its livelihood.”

Despite the diversity observed by these scholars, they seem to agree broadly on the idea that Sunni Vohras are rural or small-town communities. Their residential concentration in towns and villages, as well as cities, distinguishes them from the Shia Daudi Bohras, who mostly live in cities (Heitmeyer 2009a, 75; Engineer 1989, 30–31). In rural areas of Gujarat, conversion to Sunni Islam is said to have taken place during the rule of Sultan Muzfarshah I in the period 1377–1411 (Rajyagor 1977, 185)—one interpretation is that rural converts took on the name Vohra to signify their conversion to Islam.

Community leaders of the Charotar Sunni Vohras in Anand, and other narrators who took upon themselves the task of explaining the history of their community to me, reinforce that it is a regional and distinctively rural community that has long been embedded in the agricultural economy of the Charotar microregion. The community narratives that were recounted to me construct a regional community through three recurrent themes: a) the indigeneity of the community, as shown in narratives that describe the Vohras as the descendants
Regional Orientations

of local Hindus who converted to Islam, b) links to the land and villages of the region, as shown in narratives of their long embeddedness as farmers, traders, and small-scale industrialists playing a distinctive role in the agricultural economy, and c) a distinctive marriage system of regional marriage circles linked to ancestral villages, which not only marks the Vohras as a distinct (endogamous) community but also reaffirms the importance of the villages and their similarities with local Hindus.

The first theme is conversion, and this narrative presents the claim that the community also belongs to the region—just as local Hindus do—through its affirmation of local ancestry. Vohras are presented as the descendants of local Hindus who converted to Islam. This claim constitutes an important distinction, as it sets Vohras apart from other local Muslims, who trace their lineage to Muslim saints, Saiyeds, believed to be descendants of the Prophet who came to Gujarat from outside the subcontinent. A distinction often referred to in the literature on caste among Muslims is between Ashraf groups (or nobles) and non-Ashraf groups (or commoners): Ashraf communities are regarded as the descendants of immigrants—Arab traders and saints—while non-Ashraf families are seen as people with an Indian origin, who have turned to Islam through conversion (Dumont 1980, 207). In central Gujarat, these differences are recognized although there is no clear hierarchy among these groups (see chapter 4).

The Vohra narrative of conversion distinguishes them from Ashraf Muslims and aligns them with local Hindus. There are various theories about the specifics of this Hindu ancestry. One theory is that the Vohras from Charotar are Brahmins who migrated south from north Gujarat and converted to Islam in Mahemdbad under the reign of Mahmud Begada (1458–1511), a story told to me in the United States by an overseas Vohra from Mahemdbad. If some think that Vohras are former Brahmins, others suspect that Vohras are converts from lower-caste Hindus, and that their conversion was motivated by a desire to escape caste oppression. A third option some of my interlocutors considered is that Vohras had been Patels. This diversity of ideas of origin is a reflection, possibly, of the status differences that exist within the Vohra community at present. The group marriage I described above, for example, was organized by the Arsad marriage circle of the Vohra community. This Arsad marriage circle is considered lower in status than the Chaud (“fourteen”) marriage circle. It can be assumed that the members of the higher-status group came from families of a higher socioeconomic background, and were derived from different castes prior to conversion (Heitmeyer 2009a, 107–8; following Enthoven 1920, 206).
The second theme in the Vohra community narratives is economic: it concerns the Vohras’ involvement in the long-term development of the agricultural economy, through trade and various kinds of agro-industrial endeavors, and in some cases through farming. These narratives of trade and agro-industrial activities present Vohras as an economic link between the agricultural sector and the cities, selling imported products such as textiles and consumption items to farmers, and buying produce from farms to sell in Mumbai. Some Vohras were small-scale traders either in shops or door-to-door on feri (foot carts) in the villages. These small-scale traders would have sold clothes and textiles, either as ready-made garments or tailor-made to suit specific customers, as many Vohra traders still do today. Others were wholesale traders. During a visit to the auction market of Nadiad with a member of a locally well-known trading family, the man who accompanied me explained how he had been groomed as a child in the family business of trading vegetables. At that time, he claimed, 30 percent of the wholesale traders at the auction market were Muslims. These traders bought the produce of the local farmers (mainly of the Patel and Kshatriya communities), and sent it to Mumbai or elsewhere to sell at a profit. The link with agriculture is reflected in the surnames of some of these Vohra business families, including Limbuwallah (from being in the lemon wholesale business), Chanawallah (processing and trading chickpeas), Dudhwala (in dairy), and Fruitwala. Some of these traders still own the cold-storage facilities that they use to store fruit and vegetables until the prices go up, while others own factories for the industrial production and packaging of agricultural products.

These names, occupations, and narratives link Vohras with the rural economy. Sometimes the link is established through farming or land ownership, as in the example of cattle farming and milk production; in other cases, through commercial and industrial endeavors, as in stories of how the Vohras of their village used to press ganchi (oilseed) and process cotton in small-scale workshops. For a community narrative rooted in an agricultural economy, however, it is striking that the question of land ownership is not necessarily a central element in these stories of the past. Once I had started wondering about the question of land, I asked about this repeatedly yet received different answers. This happened, for example, during conversations with two friends, Ganibhai and Gulamnabi—elderly men in Anand who had volunteered to tell me the Vohra community’s history. Ganibhai, who came from a relatively privileged landowning family, replied that there have been “many landowners” in the Vohra community. Gulamnabi, however, replied that the Vohras have relatively poor and humble origins; their ancestors were hawkers and small-scale traders
without land or property. Among them, he believed, those who became successful merchants or government employees have more recently become landowners because they were able to invest their profits or pensions in land.

This pronounced difference in perspective between the two friends—the first belonging to a landowning family and maintaining a productive farm in his natal village of Napad, the other coming from more humble roots and having moved up in life through education and employment—is another indication of the economic differences that exist in the community. This became clearer when Gulammabi, the second speaker, showed me the house in the village of Chikhodra that he had lived in as a child. It consisted of one small room without windows and one door. It seemed impossible to me that it had been the home of an entire family. Gulammabi explained that his parents had rented that house, that they had owned no land, and that his father had merely done some “small business.” In his youth, Gulammabi had walked the ten kilometers to the college where he studied in Anand every day. Later on, he became a school teacher and eventually the headmaster of a government school, working himself up the ladder and now enjoying a government pension in his old age.

These narratives of conversion and economic participation in the regional economy are also narratives of the past that are told in a present of rural–urban relocation. We were traveling to the village of Chikodra from Anand (where Ganibhai, Gulammabi, and I lived) by rickshaw, and they took the occasion of the journey to clarify some of the matters they had explained to me earlier, during an interview in Anand. As we walked through the village, Gulammabi estimated that approximately 50 percent of the villagers were Patels. While he estimated that 400 Muslims still remained in the village—working as hawkers, rickshaw drivers, or day laborers—most of the Muslim population had moved to Anand, like him.

Village-Based Marriage Circles

Coming back to Anand after such travels, in the evening, I would normally go home to hang out on the couch of my landlady, Shahinben. At such times, I would be writing out my notes on my laptop. Shahinben herself would be found seated on a sheet on the floor in the company of her niece, reading a book or preparing vegetables for the next day while watching television. One evening, as I put my notebooks aside and tried to assist them, Shahinben turned to me and asked pointedly, “Would you like to do an interview tomorrow? I can come along to introduce you.” She had a family in mind that could be interesting for
my research, she said. Always willing to get to know new people in the neighborhood, I happily agreed.

The next morning, as we walked over to a nearby housing society where this family lived, she advised me to direct my questions to the son of the family. I could ask him, for example, about his education, his current job, and his future ambitions. I understood she wanted to get to know his credentials and followed her advice, chatting with the young man while Shahinben observed our conversation closely. On the way back, she told me she had been observing his behavior while we talked. She had found him well-mannered and his English was good. I then understood what her purpose had been. Shahinben, who was a teacher with many connections in the neighborhood, had been approached by an acquaintance with a matchmaking request. Her friend had a daughter who could be a potential match for the young man we had just spoken to, and had asked Shahinben for her opinion. As it was considered impolite for the parents of the young woman to approach a young man directly, Shahinben took it upon herself to check him out informally, using my research project as an inoffensive way of approaching an unknown family. She liked the young man and recommended him to her friend.

Interracial marriage between members of different Muslim communities is not uncommon in India. Vohras, however, maintain an endogamous marriage system. There is a broad consensus among Vohras that they must marry within the community, and in this way they maintain their separation from other local Muslim groups as well as Hindus, with whom there is no intermarriage. I found only few deviations from this norm (similar to Heitmeyer 2009a, 103). Vohra women play an important role in marriage arrangements (Heitmeyer 2009a, 107–8).

As I spent more time with Shahinben, it became increasingly evident that many of the conversations she had with her female neighbors, friends, and relatives concerned marriage. It was obviously a topic of great difficulty because of the many variables to be considered. When I witnessed her exchange details with other women about a certain young man or woman for matchmaking purposes, they would discuss the education level, religious affiliation, and moral character of the potential spouse, the wealth of their family, and whether it was a “business family” or one with the benefit of a “government job.” They would also consider their position within the Vohra marriage system. To this end, they used the terms “Chaud” and “Arsad”—words used routinely as signifiers to demarcate the two main marriage circles in the community. The terms are said to refer, respectively, to fourteen (Chaud) and sixty-eight (Arsad) villages of the Charotar region to which Vohra families trace their origins. While the names of the
fourteen subgroups are known (table 1.01), a complete list of the sixty-eight subgroups does not exist, and some of the group names reflect occupations rather than villages (e.g., Dudhwala).

This distinctive marriage system has been described in detail by Carolyn Heitmeyer (2009a, 97–132), and I follow her analysis here, with some small adjustments that stem from my observations in Anand. Heitmeyer’s analysis of the Vohra marriage system is concerned with its emphasis on endogamy (marriage within the community). Her observations in Sultanpur, where many Vohras self-identify as traders, suggest this might be because the Vohras are a business community, and their endogamous marriage practices function to keep resources within the community. My focus here is on how the Vohra marriage system establishes a concept of the region—how the marriage practices are “central to encouraging unity within the wider Sunni Vohra regional network and are closely linked to the samaj’s strong sense of identity within the local landscape” (Heitmeyer 2009a, 32). Marriage alliances contribute to region-making through three elements of the practice: villages, status negotiations, and patrilocality.

A quote from a banker in Anand town is illustrative of the significance of villages within the Vohra marriage system: “All our forefathers were given a name at that time by the mollah. Our forefathers were given the names of the village where they happened to live at that time. I am Dewataja, so my forefather probably lived in the small village of Dewataj at the time.” This statement suggests that he remembers his forefathers’ village, but simultaneously that it has become an abstract code, a memory. He remembers this because of its significance in the making of marriage alliances. Even when families have moved into the town in a previous generation, the village of origin continues to be considered in contemporary marriage negotiations. A young man can live in Anand but be “Nepada” (from the village of Nepad, in Chaud) or “Umretha” (from Umreth town, in Arsad). Even if he has never lived in the named town or village in his life, his ancestry can make a difference in the assessment of his suitability during marriage arrangements.

The Vohra marriage system projects a region through the arrangement of related ataks (subgroups, or clans) into a hierarchical system, described in table 1.01. The village-based marriage circles provide the basis for an exchange system of hypergamy (in which a lower-status female is married to a higher-status male). Members of the high-status Chaud marriage circle are known to prefer marriage among themselves, and are seen as ekla kutumb (a single family), having established ongoing relations and mutual trust over several generations (Heitmeyer
TABLE 1.1. Marriage circles of the Charotar Sunni Vohra marriage system (names in italics indicate marriage circles that refer to villages and cities in central Gujarat)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups in Chaud circle (14)</th>
<th>Groups in Arsad circle (68)</th>
<th>Groups in Makeriya circle</th>
<th>Groups in Dewataja circle</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Audya</td>
<td>Malavadiya</td>
<td>Makeriya</td>
<td>Dewataja</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Nepada</td>
<td>Mahemadbadi</td>
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<td>3 Pinjara</td>
<td>Amodiya</td>
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<td>4 Mogriya</td>
<td>Vasoya</td>
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<td>5 Metrala</td>
<td>Anandiya</td>
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<td>6 Piyeja</td>
<td>Khadola</td>
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<td>7 Bharja</td>
<td>Munshi</td>
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<td>8 Ahmadavadi</td>
<td>Sinhuiya</td>
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<td>9 Musela</td>
<td>Dudhwala</td>
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<td>10 Tarajiya</td>
<td>Nariya</td>
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<tr>
<td>11 Dabhaniya</td>
<td>Sunijya</td>
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<tr>
<td>12 Tarapuri</td>
<td>Kahra</td>
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<tr>
<td>13 Vasaniya</td>
<td>Umretha</td>
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<tr>
<td>14 Kanjeriya</td>
<td>Aslaliya</td>
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<td>15 Mankdiya</td>
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</tbody>
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source: This schematic representation of the Vohra marriage system, drawn from Carolyn Heitmeyer (2009a, 106), was modified after consultation with interlocutors of Anand. Names in italics refer to place names. Some names are not included in Heitmeyer’s list, but were mentioned by my interlocutors. Those who self-identified as Makeriya, Dewataja, or Kanjeriya disagreed with Heitmeyer on their position in the system—I have followed their suggestions in producing this table.

Members are seen as relatively powerful, owning land and property, and engaged in relatively capital-intensive businesses. The lower-status Arsad marriage circle members often marry among themselves or may attempt to “marry up”—in the customary system, women of the Arsad family circle may enter into marriage with men of the Chaud family circle, but not vice versa.

A similar village-based marriage system exists among the Patidars. In both the Vohra and Patidar communities an intricate system of village-based marriage circles regulates and promotes marriages within the caste, by outlining groups
of villages of similar status and encouraging them to intermarry. Similar to the Vohra marriage circles of “fourteen” and “sixty-eight,” Patidars also use numbers to name their marriage circles. For example, in the 1950s a middle-ranking group of seven villages was referred to as simply “the Seven” (Pocock 1972), and since 1968 this circle had developed into the “twenty-two,” although it was in fact made up of a total of forty villages (Tilche and Simpson 2018, 1524). Another similarity between the communities is the hierarchical relation that exists between the different circles. For both Vohras and Patidars, a family’s status on the marriage market is measured by its village of origin, because each marriage circle stands in a hierarchical relation to the other marriage circles.

The ongoing efforts of families in the lower-ranked circles to marry their daughters up into families of the higher-ranked circles (hypergamy) causes tension in the system. For Patidars, according to David Pocock’s description (1972, 66–67; 1973, 1), hierarchy is an ideal, to the extent that the Patidars insist on inequality to be able to appear superior to other caste members. For Vohras, according to Carolyn Heitmeyer’s description (2009a, 110), social hierarchies exist, but hierarchical marriage practices of hypergamy and dowry are very strongly discouraged by community leaders. Vohras in Anand confirmed this emphasis on equality and described it as a core value of Islam, projecting themselves as upholders of Islamic values of equality in a caste-based society and in some cases displaying embarrassment about the system. While practices of hypergamy are critiqued among Vohras in Anand, the association of families with hierarchically arranged marriage circles is broadly maintained. For example, Chaud families I saw navigating the marriage market first looked around their own circle, and hesitantly extended their search to Arsad families if no desirable match could be found. The status hierarchies between the Chaud and Arsad families are under negotiation in Anand, and some families of the Arsad group are said to surpass Chaud families in status, wealth, and educational level.

Two groups (Makeriya and Dewataja) claim a separate status within the system, neither Arsad nor Chaud. While Vohras in Sultanpur position the Makeriya in the Arsad marriage circle (Heitmeyer 2009a, 105–6), in Anand the Makeriya regard themselves as a separate group. Through a strong emphasis on education and urbanization, they have carved out a new position, in an attempt to liberate themselves from a former low-status position. During a Makeriya community meeting I attended in Anand, their emphasis on education was very striking, with awards being granted to all the young people who had recently received a degree.

The distinctiveness of the Makeriya as a more educated group was also emphasized during the group wedding described at the beginning of this chapter.
Shahinben had taken me there alongside her uncle, who was visiting Anand from the United States. She and her uncle belong to the Makeriya group, whereas the wedding was organized for the Arsad marriage circle. In the midst of the event, Shahinben suddenly left, whispering that she wished me a nice remainder of the day, but had to leave at once because “there are too many uneducated people here.” Afterward, she clarified the event had been a bit noisy and overcrowded for her and linked this experience to the differences in education level between the Makeriya and the Arsad (in her view). These moments show how the Makeriya claim a subtly different (educated) position within the community, and indicate the dynamism as well as the continued significance of these demarcations for those involved.

Finally, to clarify how marriage practices contribute to a regional orientation, it is necessary to clarify how marriage systems in South Asia shape the distinctive, short-distance relocation of women between villages and towns. In central Gujarat, as in other western and northern regions of India (Karve 1994), it is common for a woman to move into her husband’s house after marriage (patrilocality). When marriages are forged between villages rather than within a village (a common pattern of village exogamy), this means that women spend the most of their lives in villages in which they did not grow up. These short-distance relocations of women, while grossly overlooked in the migration literature, are significant (Alexander, Chatterji, and Jalais 2016, 128–39), and this significance is evident in the case of Vohras: these women become crucial arbiters in cross-village relations between their own and their husbands’ families, and thus become central to the imagination of a regional kinship geography.

All the families I knew in Anand included one or more women who had moved into her husband’s household after marriage. These married young women had arrived from nearby villages, and sometimes from within Anand itself, or from Ahmedabad. Of the young married couples, none had formed their own independent household; instead, the women moved in with their husbands’ families, where they became responsible for a range of household tasks, including the care of his aging parents. This pattern of patrilocality prevails largely undebated, although the young couples may move out eventually to establish an independent household.

Vohras have no strict rules with regard to village exogamy (Heitmeyer 2009a, 102–3). Vohras in Anand have different opinions on this matter. Some families stated that they preferred their daughters to marry within Anand itself, so that they remain close to home after marriage. The women themselves seemed to have different thoughts on this. On the one hand, there are advantages to having
your own family close by; on the other hand, some said, a marriage outside one's own town had the advantage of turning their brother's household into a “holiday” destination, where they could take a break from their responsibilities in their husband's household.

Visiting one's brother's village is indeed a common way in which married women in Anand can take socially accepted breaks, particularly during pregnancy, illness, or summer vacations. They return to their own families for a few weeks or just for a day, and their mothers or sisters-in-law take care of them. I regularly saw a married woman put pressure on her husband to visit her kin, telling him to accompany her there. Some used the occasion of my research to this end, telling their husbands that they should not miss the occasion to introduce the foreign visitor to her family—a strategy that was sometimes successful. Married women simultaneously maintain relations with selected women in their husband's extended family network, and encourage their children to spend time with relatives from both sides. In this way, married women play a key role in the (re)production of the regional community: by maintaining and further developing dispersed kinship networks, encouraging visits to and fro, and passing on knowledge about these different geographical locations and their interconnections to their children.

If the Vohras' marriage practices connect urban residents to the Charotar region in an abstract way, through the names of hierarchically related ancestral villages, they also, in concrete ways, bring about the lived experience of a regional kinship geography, in which the short-distance relocation of married women is valued and functions as a binding force.

**Gujarati Muslims**

Charotar Sunni Vohras thus imagine a region and carve out a space for themselves within it through their narratives, rural-urban networks, and various kinds of economic and social practices. These descriptions of a regionally embedded Gujarati Muslim community provide a corrective to the ways in which Muslims have predominantly been viewed in India, especially in Gujarat. The significance of the Vohras’ challenge to prevalent conceptions becomes clear when we consider the dominant idea of Gujarat that is captured in the notion of *Gujaratni asmita*: Gujarati pride or glory.

Scholars of Gujarat have understood *Gujaratni asmita* as a core concept that underpins the contemporary imagination of Gujarati identity as a regional formulation of Hindu nationalism, which projects the picture of Gujarat and
Gujaratis as being synonymous with Hindus and antithetical to Muslims. The growing currency of the notion of *asmita* in the popular media, in election campaigns, and in the everyday narratives of urban middle-class Hindus has been widely discussed (Chandrani 2013; Ghassem-Fachandi 2012; Ibrahim 2008). Its mobilization seems to have been key to the electoral success of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Gujarat since the late 1980s (G. Shah 1998).

This idea of *asmita* has been articulated in novels and poems written in the Gujarati language in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as discussed by anthropologists Farhana Ibrahim and Yogesh Rasiklal Chandrani. Different interpretations of *asmita* are possible. The present-day interpretation of *asmita*, promoted in election campaigns, is of a more exclusively Hindu identity than some of the earlier articulations of this notion, as formulated, for example, by the Gujarati poet Narmad in the mid-nineteenth century (Ibrahim 2008, 22–25). In his poem “Gujarat Koni?,” Narmad asks, “to whom does Gujarat belong?” In his answer, he includes people of all castes and creed as legitimate members of the social fabric of Gujarat, but he also states that those who follow “other religions” are included only under the condition that they express their love of Gujarat. Due to this ambivalence, the poem has formed a basis of both Hindu nationalist interpretations and more inclusive interpretations that are associated with secular versions of nationalism (Chandrani 2013, 178–79). While these nineteenth-century iterations of *asmita* made the concept available to two different political projects, however, even the secularist interpretation of the poem privileges Hindus as more naturally Gujarati than others, and so “the difference between these two projects of Gujarat should . . . not be overstated” (Chandrani 2013, 178–79).

These readings of a nineteenth-century poem underscore a wider argument about the normalization and sedimentation of Gujarati-ness as identical with Hindu-ness. These discourses that reiterate the Hindu-Muslim binary have become so normalized in India that it is almost impossible, even for those who critique them, to think outside them (Chandrani 2013, 199–201). This was one of the conditions that made the 2002 anti-Muslim pogroms possible. During the pogroms, *Gujaratni asmita* became a legitimizing notion (Ibrahim 2008, 15), which justified the idea that Gujarat needed to be cleansed of Muslims.

Scholars of Gujarat have not stopped there. There has been a keen interest among anthropologists of the region to discover and describe possible alternatives to dominant ideas of Gujarat that continue to be articulated by different groups (Simpson and Kapadia 2010). This work demonstrates that the “idea of Gujarat” has been received in varying ways, not always with enthusiasm, and
that different interpretations of this idea are still possible. First, even if the idea of Gujarat has existed for a long time in written poetry and novels, many people were confronted with it only in 1960, when the current state of Gujarat came into existence after a political campaign to divide Bombay State in Gujarat and Maharashtra. In Kutch, a former princely state, the incorporation of Kutch into Gujarat was resisted because local elites would lose their influence with the advance of the Gujarati state over local affairs. Historians in Kutch have resisted the idea that their region is “Gujarati” (Simpson 2010a, 12); local groups instead recount their regional history as one of kingdoms and goddesses that are linked specifically to the lands and seas of Kutch and Sindh (Simpson 2010b, 76–77; see also Ibrahim 2008).

The contemporary conceptions of who are the legitimate citizens of Gujarat through the lens of asmita have been challenged by both Hindus and Muslims of Kutch. Among the Muslim groups of Kutch, the pastoralist Daneta Jatts and the agricultural Garasia Jatts (Ibrahim 2008) can be compared with the Charotar Sunni Vohras. The Daneta Jatts’ critique of the contemporary notion of Gujarat is expressed indirectly through a narrative of a changed ecology, which endows the past with plentiful grasslands, benevolent rulers, and profitable trade routes between Kutch and Sindh. This mythical past is compared with present experiences of scarcity and destruction (Ibrahim 2008, 51–76), which are attributed to contemporary state interference that has marginalized the pastoralists and censured their cross-border trade with Sindh (now in Pakistan). Farhana Ibrahim regards these community narratives as a “discourse of defiance” (following Abu-Lughod 1986, 185) that contradicts the system from below. These internal narratives are not brought up on a wider political stage but are meaningful in that they allow members of the community to express ideas that cannot be expressed in the dominant system (Ibrahim 2008, 75).

Garasia Jatts in Kutch, a former community of pastoralists that has moved into agriculture, also critique the present state of Gujarat through an internal community narrative contrasting a good past with a problematic present. In the nostalgic past, rulers were benevolent, and the Jatts played a central role in state proceedings, while the present state sees the Jatts as “Muslims,” and thus as untrustworthy. Nevertheless, the Garasia Jatts, unlike the pastoralist Jatts, continue to seek proximity to the state and to the idea of Gujarati asmita. Having settled into an agrarian lifestyle, they have developed distinctive symbols, shrines, and practices that mark them as different from other Muslims and as culturally close to Hindus. These symbols allow them to carve out a space on the inside, even within state-sanctioned Hindu rituals that celebrate Gujarati pride,
by presenting themselves as different from the recurrent representations of the Muslim “outsider” (Ibrahim 2008, 94–99).

Like the narratives of the Jatts in Kutch, Vohra stories conjure a somewhat nostalgic past of agricultural embedding and Hindu-Muslim similarities, which are told in a present of rural-urban relocation and Hindu-Muslim segregation. Instead of criticizing the logic of the prevalent discourse directly, as the pastoralist Daneta Jatts do, Vohras’ self-representations are closer to those of the agricultural Garasia Jatts, who seek to carve out a space within the dominant framework of Gujarati identity. Their self-representations suggest that Vohras also belong.

Vohras and Patidars of Charotar

The Vohra community narrative anchors an idea of “Gujarat” to the microregion of the Charotar. The dense literature about this region has rarely included the perspectives of Muslims; nevertheless, scattered traces of the Vohras can be found in it. This repertoire of regional representations broadly confirms the Vohra story of a rural past shared with the Patidars and reveals several similarities between the two communities, as well as some significant differences.

The similarities between Patidars and Vohras were described in a 1954 history book on the Charotar region. According to this source, Vohra marriage customs were like those of the Patidars, and their clothing was also similar (Mahammad 1954, 8–13). In this period, the anthropologist David Pocock conducted research in Sundarana, a small village with a population of 2,290. His work focused on the Patidars, with only brief descriptions of other groups. Pocock has little to say about Hindu-Muslim relations in the village, which is remarkable because he conducted his research shortly after Partition, and his research assistant, Momad, was a Muslim (Simpson et al. 2018). Nevertheless, this work gives several indications of Vohras’ relations with the local Hindus. Pocock observed that the Muslims “were treated much as a Hindu caste by the Patidar,” and that a Muslim boy was a keen participant in a Hindu hymn-singing association. He even suggests that the Muslims of the village were ignorant of the basic tenets of Islam (Pocock 1972, 44). These descriptions suggest that Hindu-Muslim identities were considered almost irrelevant at the time.

There are, broadly, two views on how this situation of similarity and alliance developed after the 1950s. When the anthropologist Alice Tilche studied Sundarana in 2013 to revisit David Pocock’s research findings from the 1950s, she found that the relationship between Hindus and Muslims had changed. In
2013, as a result of the advance of Hindu nationalist discourses, the figure of the Muslim had become a recurrent topic of conversation among the Patidars. In 2002, the minaret of Sundarana’s mosque had been destroyed, and it was never rebuilt. By 2013, suspicion had hardened, and the Muslims of Sundarana and other villages had moved to Anand (Tilche and Simpson 2017). Interest in Islam had also grown among Muslims themselves, partly as a result of Islamic institutions undertaking missionary activities (Simpson et al. 2018). Overall, separate Hindu and Muslim identities had become more important.

Another description of Vohras in the nearby town of Sultanpur, however, offers a different analysis. Based on research in the period 2005–2006, Carolyn Heitmeyer writes that in Sultanpur, Vohras continue to live close to Hindus in and around the markets of the town, even if other Muslims live in separate parts of the town. Not only do Vohras share business alliances with Hindus, they also align themselves as culturally close with local Hindus (2009a, 84), cultivate amicable relations and socialize with the Patidars and other local Hindus, and are seen (by other Muslims) as remaining aloof from other local Muslim groups (Heitmeyer 2009a, 92). This is reflected in clothing styles, referencing Hindu businesses in Vohra publications, and the shared use of the Gujarati language (a regional language Vohras share with Gujarati Hindus, Christians, and other Gujarati-speaking Muslim groups, which is different from the use of Hindi in many other Muslim households).

Patidars and Muslims in Sundarana have been torn apart, while alliances continue to exist in Sultanpur; in the case of Anand, themes of rupture and alliance both exist. Ruptures resulted from the 2002 anti-Muslim violence and the displacement of Muslims from the villages. Yet stories of continuity are also articulated within the town, even if they are expressed from a tenuous position.

In the regional stories Vohras in Anand told me, several interlocutors drew explicit comparisons between the Vohras and the Patidars—for example, explaining that both are merchants (bania) or that they are “the two dominant communities” in the region. The Patidars appeared in the Vohra stories as business partners, neighbors, and friends, and as role models whose success the Vohras would like to emulate, especially in the field of overseas migration. Their regional narratives highlight the centrality of the Patidar caste to the Charotar region, and delineate the Patidars as the most successful and influential community in the region. For example, a Vohra resident of Anand, an older man, said:

See, all the development that you see here in Charotar is because of the Patels. They are getting lots of donations. They have many NRIs
[nonresident Indians]. If it was not for Patels, Charotar would still be like Saurasthra . . . where dust goes on in the sky . . . [He continued the conversation by explaining how Muslims are “lagging behind.”]

If the Vohras tell stories about the Charotar region, and if the Patidars frequently appear in these stories, how, then, do Vohra and Patidar conceptions of the region compare? The differences in their spatial conceptions, I suggest, reflect their position in the region as either a dominant Hindu caste or a displaced Muslim community.

Books, oral histories, and websites of Patidar communities establish ideological links between villages, land ownership, and the Patidar community (Hardiman 1981, 43). Despite the increasing importance of overseas migration and a devaluation of agriculture, the village continues to hold importance for both local and transnational members of the Patidar caste. Even after migrating abroad, Patidars maintain village associations and support the development of their home village financially (Rutten and Patel 2004; Dekkers and Rutten 2018). These initiatives are supported in the village by political and cultural institutions that are also dominated by local Patidars. These village-based transnational caste bonds result, for example, in events such as an annual Village Day, during which donations are gathered for the development of the village, and in which the participants tend to be almost entirely from the Patidar community (Dekkers and Rutten 2018, 13). Such transnational caste claims over village spaces are not unique to the Patidars; comparable trends have been described in the coastal villages of Andhra Pradesh, where highly educated transnational migrants belonging to the agrarian landowning elite accumulate economic and cultural capital through migration to the United States, and cultivate philanthropic relations with the home region through diasporic associations, in which caste becomes a principle axis of community formation and assertion (Roohi 2016).

The central point in the Patidars’ spatial imagination is the village, and its global caste networks have become the platforms on which internal caste hierarchies are enacted and renegotiated. The remittances and investments in village development sustain the Patidars’ economic and political power in the village, and reinforce a symbolic link between a specific subsection of the Patidar community and its home village. In the Patidars’ regional imagination, the village is central, while the links with the broader region beyond the village appear natural. This reflects the Patidars’ position as the dominant Hindu community in the region.
For Vohras, on the other hand, as a displaced Muslim community in Gujarat their relation with the villages and the region does not appear as natural, and has to be narrated in order to be remembered. The dominance of Patidars in many of the Vohras’ villages of origin makes it unlikely that Vohras have ever claimed these village spaces as their own in the same way that Patidars could. Following the displacement of Muslims over the last decades, Hindu claims over village spaces have been reinforced. In Anand, Vohra families continue to cultivate economic and social ties with these villages, yet in many families the village is decreasing in relevance, and for some, it has become an abstract code to assess the suitability of a spouse during marriage arrangements.

Online representations illustrate these different ways of imagining the region. On websites representing sections of the Patidar community, village names are usually specified, and sometimes further highlighted in illustrated maps. On websites and Facebook pages created by members of the Charotar Vohra community, villages names are usually not specified, or not as prominently, yet the community is projected a regional one—for example, through the inclusion of a generic state map of Gujarat.

Besides villages of origin, Anand town has acquired a special position in the Vohras’ regional imagination as an arrival point that has also become a meeting point for the dispersed community members. During the group wedding in Anand, a man, a big smile on his face, declared good-humoredly that “Anand is the Makka of the Vohras!” At my puzzlement, he got serious and explained: “Previously, Vohras were happy in their villages. They had some small business there. But since the riots in 2002, Vohras want to be in Anand.”

**Conclusion**

To the question “Can a Gujarati be Muslim?” (Chandrani 2013, 193), the Vohras’ answer is clearly “Yes.” Vohra affirmations of regional belonging call into question the dominant view that Muslims are outsiders in Gujarat. This is a subtle yet substantial inversion of prevalent discourses. Their affirmations do not fundamentally attack the logic of local ancestry and belonging utilized by exclusivist Hindu political discourses, but redress this logic with the claim that Vohras also belong.

Vohras’ positioning in the Charotar microregion is highlighted in their consistent inclusion of the word “Charotar” when they name and describe their community and community associations. It is also narrated through histories of local ancestry and village-based marriage circles, and in stories of a longstanding
social and economic embeddedness in the Charotar’s fertile agricultural economy. Mobility and exchange between geographically dispersed households in the region is shaped by patrilocal joint-family living arrangements, and married women play a key role in smoothing kinship linkages between Vohras in different villages and towns.

A recurrent theme in the narratives of Charotar Sunni Vohras is their similarities to the local Hindus, especially the Patidars. The regional articulations of Vohras are similar to those of the Patidars, but the differences between them are also telling. While both communities arrange their marriages through distinctive village-based marriage circles, the relations they maintain with the designated villages have nevertheless evolved differently: while Patels can claim dominance in “their” villages, for Vohras the link with the village is less self-evident after the expulsion of Muslims from these villages. While continuities exist between past and present, village and town, Hindu and Muslim, they are explic- cated from a position of rupture.