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**Layered Cities, Shared Histories:
Migrants, Gold and Urban Imaginaries
in Dubai and Malabar**

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ABSTRACT

Arabia and the Persian Gulf have been part of the social and cultural imaginary of Malabar and vice-versa for centuries. As key regions in the westernmost circuit of the Asian maritime trade linking the Mediterranean in the west with as far as China in the east, they have had a shared history of urbanisation as much as of Islam and its tradition of the hajj since the 8th century. Cities such as Jeddah, Aden, Muscat, Quilon and Calicut rose and fell over the centuries that followed as trade routes and the mercantile networks defining them adapted and changed contours in the face of historical and political exigencies. Many of these mercantile and urban connections, however, began to suffer a setback by the 18th century, almost dying out completely from the historical consciousness of scholars and others alike. The paper investigating the trajectories of 21st century urbanisation in Dubai in the Persian Gulf, and Malabar, or more broadly Kerala in southwestern India, shows how the two regions on either side of the Arabian Sea continue to be implicated in many of the historic connections that shaped their societies as part of the Asian maritime trade network. It argues for urbanisation as a complementary and contiguous process across the two geographies and explains why it is impossible to think of Dubai as a global megalopolis without due consideration of how Malabar feeds into and draws from it. Gold, like pepper in ancient and medieval times, is the epic commodity that lies at the heart of this urbanisation and the social and cultural connective that defines its spatial imagination.

INTRODUCTION

Arabia and the Persian Gulf have been part of the social and cultural imaginary of Malabar and vice-versa for centuries. As key regions in the westernmost circuit of the Asian maritime trade linking the Mediterranean in the west with as far as China in the east, they have had a shared history of urbanisation as much as of Islam and its tradition of the hajj since the 8th century.¹ Cities such as Jeddah, Aden, Muscat, Quilon and Calicut rose and fell over the centuries that followed as trade routes and the mercantile networks defining them adapted and changed contours in the face of historical and political exigencies.² Many of these mercantile and urban connections, however, began to suffer a setback by the 18th century. Fierce competition among the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British for monopoly over the pepper trade supplanted production in favour of exports, diversifying and shifting economic activity away from the coast to the hinterlands.³ The rise of Travancore, a powerful territorial state in the south, added further impetus to these developments as it began to tax production, procure for the market and monopolise pepper exports through aggressive military campaigns with Europeans and others. By the end of the 18th century when the armies of Mysore invaded northern Malabar, a social and political milieu from which the 'medieval merchant' who for centuries had been the interface of trading societies and port cities was locked out by the state, had become prominent. The picture of Malabar receding from a key node in the Asian maritime trade into a backwater and a feudal society closing in around itself, whether under British colonialism or native rulers, was complete by the early 19th century. This society branching out and developing along two clearly marked geographical axes in the north and the south of contemporary Kerala has largely dominated scholarship on the region, including its present day connections with the Persian Gulf.

The paper investigating the trajectories of 21st century urbanisation in Dubai in the Persian Gulf, and Malabar, or more broadly Kerala in southwestern India, shows how the two regions on either side of the Arabian Sea continue to be implicated in many of the historic connections that shaped their societies as part of the Asian maritime trade network. It argues for urbanisation as a complementary and contiguous process across the two geographies and explains why it is impossible to think of Dubai as a global megalopolis without due consideration of how Malabar feeds into and draws from it. Gold, like pepper in ancient and medieval times, is the epic commodity that lies at the heart of this urbanisation and the social and cultural connective that defines its spatial imagination. The paper explores such spatial, social and cultural contiguity through the trade, smuggling and consumption of gold, and unpacks the ways in which the dynamics of these have played out in migration as well as practices of labour and entrepreneurship. Networks built through contemporary practices of migration, labour and entrepreneurship are in many ways, it illustrates, a resuscitation of the *longue durée* Asian maritime trade networks, drawing social, cultural and political meanings from the latter. It is this sense of networks as inflected in time and space and moving in and out of multiple temporalities and spatialities that is key to conceptualising this shared urbanisation and its layered histories in Dubai and Malabar.

¹ M. G. S. Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala: Political and Social Conditions of Kerala under the Cēra Perumals of Makotai (c. 800 A.D.-1124 A.D.)* (Xavier Press, 1996)

² Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (Oxford University Press, 1991).

³ Ashin Das Gupta, *Malabar in Asian Trade: 1740-1800* (Cambridge U.P., 1967).

The contemporary global economy, more than ever before, works through cities that are connected through increasingly proliferating circuits and networks of capital. With the highly volatile nature of finance capital and accelerating turnover time of profits propelling this economy, more and more cities with ambitions to dominate these networks vie with the others for greater competitive advantage. These 'linked cities' as Saskia Sassen the celebrated urban theorist of the millennium refers to them, become territorial nodes bridging national, regional and supranational activity through particular infrastructural, legal and political articulations in a distinct global urban hierarchy.⁴ Since the prospects for mobility and the risk of descent within this hierarchy are manifold, cities constantly strive to innovate and embrace newer strategies of capital accumulation, sometimes successfully and at other times not. As capital reinvents itself in cyclical patterns, so do cities, with some forming part of one or more cycles and others falling entirely out of the cyclical process of regeneration. Sociologists like Sassen have offered us deep and persuasive insights into the organisational form and architecture of the global economy that enables cities to insert themselves into these networks of capital as both equal and unequal players, including technical connectivity, digital communication, transport networks, global corporates and financial exchange firms.⁵ Urban geographers like David Harvey on the other hand, sketch out the significance of urban space to resolving the structural contradictions of capitalism and propelling the forces of creative destruction that 'recycle' capital or morph it into newer forms of mobility.⁶

What does the relationship between global cities and networks as articulated by sociologists and urban geographers tell us about Dubai as a 21st global city and the trajectory that has driven it towards its superlative achievements as one? Do we understand Dubai's history as old only as globalisation itself and its practices of urban networking? The concept of networks that rendered urban Dubai visible to the academia overnight puts a premium on the structural forces of capitalism and the ways in which the state has for more than half a century programmatically responded to it. Accordingly, what enabled Dubai to tap into the urban networks of the 21st century global economy was its infrastructural preparedness to entrench itself within "a grid of very material, physical and strategic places" controlling and managing these networks.⁷ Such promptitude was achieved through the state's economic policies, its property regime and its absolute control over urban planning, all of which were set against a backdrop of oil revenues in the latter half of the 20th century. Thus the pathways to global urbanity in Dubai are on the one hand its sea and air ports, free zones, airline industry and highways, and on the other, its practices of land allocation and rights distribution, as well as innovative forms of partnership between state and private capital created through them. In laying out the chronology of infrastructural development and its politics as constitutive of Dubai's global city status, scholars have lodged it within the spatial and temporal frames of modern capitalism, thus denying it a past outside of these. History begins with infrastructural networks in such a scheme of things, going back only as far and deep as modern capitalism allows us to. In the particular case of Dubai, it goes only as far and deep only as oil in the 1960s. Stretch the canvas further back, think networks as social and communal rather than infrastructural and one is able to understand History and the nature of Dubai's urbanity differently to that put forth by sociologists, geographers and urban planners. What follows is an attempt to do so.

⁴ Saskia Sassen, *Global Networks, Linked Cities*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2002).

⁵ Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo.*, 2nd ed. (Princeton University Press, 2001); *A Sociology of Globalization*, 1st ed. (W. W. Norton & Company, 2007); *Cities in a World Economy*, 3rd ed. (Pine Forge Press, 2006).

⁶ David Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism: A Theory of Uneven Geographical Development*, 1st ed. (Verso, 2006); *The Enigma of Capital: And the Crises of Capitalism* (Oxford University Press, 2010); *The Limits to Capital* (Verso, 2007).

⁷ Sassen, *Global Networks*, 7-8.

MALABAR AND KERALA, NO PLACE FOR THE URBAN

As a historian of Dubai working with a notion of networks as social, cultural, communal and entrenched in histories deeper than those of capitalism, I return to Malabar. Locating the two as part of a historical geography of trade, religion and migration in the Indian Ocean, I analyse what such geographies mean for contemporary urbanisation and its shared practices across these connected spaces. Malabar's connections with the Persian Gulf going back to times even before Islam lays claim to multiple temporalities punctuated by watershed events in world history. The contemporary phase began in the late 1950s when the growing oil industry in parts of the Persian Gulf brought in substantial numbers of men and women from across the length and breadth of Malabar, or contemporary Kerala to its shores. This phase with Dubai itself becoming the preferred destination since the 1970s, has more or less continued uninterrupted for over more than half a century, feeding an urbanisation in the city that was to resonate with social and cultural processes in towns and villages back in Kerala. The term Malabar, literally meaning crossing over in Arabic, referred to for the longest period in history, the entire length of the coastline in southwestern India that is now part of contemporary Kerala. With the expansion of the state of Travancore, the administrative limits of which reached as far as Cranganore at its heights, and the annexation of the territories of the princes north of Cochin by the British in 1792, Malabar narrowed down to roughly correspond with the geographic area it signifies today. As an administrative and revenue unit within the Madras Presidency, Malabar trailed off on a different course of history to Travancore and Cochin—a history that was to usher in a communist movement bringing to power the first communist government in the world through the ballot in 1957. More importantly, it was to set off a trajectory of migration, viewed as illegal, to Dubai and other parts of the Gulf in the 1960s and 70s creating networks of labourers, traders, entrepreneurs and smugglers driving shared practices of urbanisation in Dubai, Malabar and other parts of Kerala.⁸

Mainstream historians periodising events and developments with the nation and its scaled down territorial units of region, state etc. as their organising principle, have marked these specificities of Malabar using the temporal qualifiers of pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial histories. With very little attention paid to precolonial history, Islam and its early relations with Malabar fundamental to the creation of many of these networks, have been largely ignored by historians.⁹ Histories of Malabar during colonial times have primarily addressed the region as a site of peasant rebellions and anti-colonial struggles beginning in the 19th century and gaining momentum through the early 20th century.¹⁰ In postcolonial times, when Malabar becomes a part of the new linguistic state of Kerala, many of these specificities constitutive of its society and culture become buried under the new social sciences obsessed with 'development' and its successes in the state. Developmental economists the world over were intrigued by the kind of poverty reduction, social progress and quality of life that

⁸ Many of the demographic pockets within the districts comprising contemporary Malabar including Calicut, Cananore, Thrissur, Kasargod, Wayanad, Palakkad and Malappuram are Muslim dominated with most families claiming sons, brothers, and more often than not, an entire branch or household somewhere in the Gulf. This was instrumental to the creation of social and cultural networks linking Malabar and other parts of Kerala with Dubai.

⁹ In recent years, anthropologists have begun to engage with it while historians have continued to shy away from a study of Malabar in its relationship with Arabia and the Persian Gulf. For details see, Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) and "The Two Arms of Cambay: Diasporic Texts of Ecumenical Islam in the Indian Ocean," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 50, no. 2/3 (2007): 347–61.

¹⁰ For details see Stephen F. Dale, "The Mappila Outbreaks: Ideology and Social Conflict in Nineteenth Century Kerala," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 35, no.1 (1975): 85-97. Also see Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr. "The Mappila Rebellion, 1921: Peasant Revolt in Malabar," *Modern Asian Studies* 11, no.1 (1977): 57-99.

Kerala as a rather insignificant state in a developing country was able to achieve “without high economic growth and without consuming large quantities of energy and other natural resources.”¹¹ The ascendance of Kerala on the social indices scale and its emergence as a model to be emulated by developing countries not only evoked perceptions of it as a homogenous society, but also proffered an understanding of its diverse practices of migration to the Persian Gulf along the lines exclusively of labour migration. In other words, migration to the Gulf whether from Malabar or parts of southern and central Kerala, was brought under the purview of developmentalism and studied extensively using the economic lenses proffered by it.

Gulf migration and the changing dimensions of labour, family, remittances etc., have contributed significantly to critiques of the model of development pursued within Kerala. Much of this literature was produced by scholars from the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) under projects funded by the Government of Kerala, The Reserve Bank of India, The Planning Commission of India and the Indian Council of Social Science Research. Yet urbanisation triggered off particularly in the late nineties, remains conspicuous by its absence in literature on the Gulf migration from the state and not surprisingly so.¹² Considering that the urban in the postcolonial era raised uncomfortable questions of class inequality and poverty both as the legacy of an imperial industrial and commercial past and as the route to development in the future, it was largely ignored in scholarship pertaining to the nation.¹³ Kerala with no industrialisation of the sort witnessed in postcolonial metropolises like Bombay and Calcutta, and ranking high on public health, education and other indicators best suited the postcolonial rhetoric of national progress. In Malabar itself, with its unique colonial history of agrarian oppression, encounter with communism and the developmentalist bearings of governance as well as social attitudes these gave rise to, urbanisation in the postcolonial sense may have seemed like a paradox.¹⁴ However, that was not to mean that Malabar, and Kerala at large, was no place for the urban.

SHARED URBANISATION: LIBERALISATION IN INDIA, BRAND-BUILDING IN DUBAI

The nineties in India was a time of epochal transformation on the political as well as the economic front. With a policy of liberalisation bringing the curtain down on the ‘license raj’ of the Congress, the stage was set for the deregulation of markets, reduction of import tariffs and private foreign investment in key manufacturing and service sectors, all of which were conduits to high economic growth. It was in the arena of gold import, interestingly, that direct and immediate legislation was

¹¹ Govindan Parayil, “The ‘Kerala Model’ of Development: Development and Sustainability in the Third World”. *Third World Quarterly* 17, no. 5 (1996).

¹² Kerala’s Gulf Connection: CDS Studies on International Labour Migration from Kerala State in India (Centre for Development Studies, 2002) is a consolidated account of studies on Gulf migration by K.C Zachariah, K.P.Kannan and Sebastian Irudaya Rajan undertaken under the developmental economics framework. Also see K.C. Zachariah, E.T. Mathew and S. Irudaya Rajan, *Dynamics of Migration in Kerala: Dimensions, Differentials and Consequences* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2003); T.V. Sekher, *Migration and Social Change* (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 1997). For a discussion of female migration from Kerala, see Marie Percot and S Irudaya Rajan, “Female Emigration from India: Case Study of Nurses,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no.4 (January 27- February 2, 2007): 318-325. Other significant work on labour migration includes Ian J. Seccombe, “Labour Migration to the Arabian Gulf: Evolution and Characteristics 1920-1950,” *Bulletin (British Society for Middle Eastern Studies)* 10, no. 1 (1983): 3–20.

¹³ Bill Ashcroft, “Urbanism, Mobility and Bombay: Reading the Postcolonial City,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47, no. 5 (December 2011): 497-509.

¹⁴ T.T. Sreekumar, “Neither Rural nor Urban: Spatial Formation and Development Process,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 25, no. 35/36 (1990): 1981–90.

passed to this effect, ending decades of smuggling between India and the Persian Gulf, particularly Dubai. The Gold Control Act of 1968 which prohibited private ownership of bullion and imports of gold was revoked.¹⁵ An even more consequential measure was the regulation which enabled Non Resident Indians or NRIs to carry into the country for personal use or for sale in the domestic market up to 10 kilograms of gold every six months. Special import and open license schemes were introduced through the decade allowing jewellers and banks to import bullion in tonnes both for consumption at home and for export production of jewellery. The impact of many of these developments on Kerala have been significant, bringing new dimensions to migration as well as changing the very practices and dynamics constitutive of physical and social mobility among Malayalis. As for Dubai, whose economy since the 1950s revolved around the profits brought in by gold smuggling, these developments across the Arabian Sea raised new challenges as well as prospects.¹⁶ Smuggling may not have been a feasible option any more, given that gold prices in India were brought on par with prices elsewhere and restrictions on its import into the country lifted. Nonetheless, for gold in India to emerge out of the realm of the invisible and the illegal, Dubai could serve as a conduit. With a history spanning more than half a century of gold imports involving Indian merchants, and international banks and bullion dealers on the one hand and a logistics of transfer developed by traders, workers and smugglers on the other, perhaps Dubai alone had the potential to effect the implementation on the ground of the gold import liberalisation scheme in India. This potential Dubai set out to tap by working strategically on its migration and visa regimes as well as its urban and social spaces, thus effectively shaping them towards making the progressive visibility of gold and consumption in India, particularly Malabar, a reality.

Central to the new migration regime was the relaxation of visa regulations. Visas for transit, tourist and what have been called 'visits' were made more accessible and easily disburseable through a bureaucratic machinery of citizens as well as travel and ticketing agencies, many of which were owned and staffed by Indians. In 1993 alone, the number of people arriving at the Dubai International Airport was 426,723--of these 278,718 were on 96 hour transit visas and 148,005 on 90 day visit visas.¹⁷ Greater numbers of short-term visas issued meant an economy the wheels of which were well oiled to run with a circulating population of migrants that carried back home or elsewhere gold and other consumer goods purchased in Dubai. Besides, these entrants were also instrumental to absorbing the social and political pressure of a growing population of citizens who continued to demand welfare and social security from the state despite declining revenues from oil in Dubai. The bureaucracy built as a redistributive mechanism in the wake of oil had begun to come under strain by the 1990s everywhere in the Persian Gulf. This was more blatantly so in Dubai where oil concessions yielded far fewer returns as compared to its neighbouring states.¹⁸

By ceding a certain amount of control over the domain of migration and visas to the citizen-bureaucrats who worked in close cooperation with travel and visa agents as well as numerous others involved in formal and informal ways, the state ensured that *kafala* or sponsorship offered greater financial benefits and more importantly, a clearly defined political edge to citizenship status. This was because as *kafeels* or sponsors of migrants--a legal requirement for a migrant's presence

¹⁵ See the entry Gold under the section on India in International Monetary Fund Monetary and Capital Markets Department, Annual Report on Exchange Arrangements and Exchange Restrictions 1991 (International Monetary Fund, 1991).

¹⁶ For a brief overview of smuggling in Dubai see, H.R.Vohra, "Gold Flow Traced to Dubai," *The Times of India*, February 28, 1968.

¹⁷ See, "An Accessible Destination," *The Times of India* May 27, 1994.

¹⁸ Oil concessions began to yield returns only by the late 1960s. Dubai's neighbour, Abu Dhabi, had been exporting about 2.5 million tonnes of crude a year for close to six years by 1969.

regardless of whether it was short term or long term, on business, work or leisure--they could charge a certain 'market rate' for visas, depending on the type sought by the applicant.¹⁹ *Kafala* had been an established practice regulating, managing and controlling labour migration since the 1970s in the Persian Gulf. Anthropologists have studied its socio-cultural origins in the Bedouin custom of offering protection and tribal affiliation to strangers for mutual benefits in particular situations, while foregrounding its contemporary significance in shaping migration along ethnic lines.²⁰ Although *kafala* has had a legal basis for more than four decades, it is difficult to map its institutional contours or lay out its everyday practices, including the economic transactions underpinning it, from within the domain of law. Charging a fee for sponsorship may be illegal in discourse but with a tacit understanding shared by sponsors, migrants, visa and travel agents of its essentially lopsided risks and receipts, it has remained the defining principle of migration anywhere into the Gulf. In the Dubai of the 1990s where tourists, prospective investors and entrepreneurs from all across the world were headed, *kafala* took on a market dimension and a competitive edge on an unprecedented scale with visas being sold and traded at a premium. This dramatic development in the domain of migration and visas ensured that politics was deflected away from the state and mapped on to the market, creating new economic and social networks among citizens and migrants. These networks ironically were built and leveraged on the old ones as we shall soon see.

The gradual foray of politics into the realm of the market in Dubai was premised on and produced a certain kind of urban space within the emirate that resonated with social and cultural practices tied to the phenomenon of Gulf migration in Malabar and its unique relationship with gold. Gold from Dubai and to a lesser extent from other parts of the Persian Gulf was much sought after in Malabar and other regions in Kerala where it served a host of different social, cultural and economic purposes, primary among which was the institution of marriage. A vast portion of dowry given to the bride and groom by the bride's family at the time of the wedding as well as gifts from friends and relatives were in gold. The dowry given and taken was a signifier of family, class and caste prestige on both sides meaning that transactions in gold over a wedding was often a matter of great import within the community and beyond, and therefore public knowledge. Gold continued to make its inevitable presence felt in almost every ritual and event following the wedding and its concomitant formation of a new family unit including baby showers, christening, birthdays etc., all the way unto the wedding of the next generation and the beginning of a new cycle of social events and rituals. No anthropological treatise can account for this unless the economics of gold in the rather long and well defined context of Gulf migration in Malabar is factored in.²¹ The onset of this phenomenon in which gold takes centerstage in the social and cultural life of Malabar and other parts of Kerala began roughly in the 1970s with migration to the Gulf becoming more pronounced and newer categories of migrants emerging onto the scene.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with shipping between the Persian Gulf and the ports of western Indian Ocean, say Bombay, Kanara and Malabar becoming a regular feature, more and more Muslims began to undertake the Hajj or the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina. On their return they brought back zamzam (the holy water), gold, fabric, dates and stories of their travels as well as myths and legends from the Holy Land infusing Arabia and the Persian Gulf with a symbolic and

¹⁹ For a general overview of the sponsorship system or *kafala* prevalent all over the Persian Gulf, see Andrew M. Gardner, *City of Strangers: Gulf Migration and the Indian Community in Bahrain* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2010).

²⁰ Anh Nga Longva, *Walls Built on Sand: Migration, Exclusion and Society in Kuwait* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), 107-111.

²¹ Nilika Mehrotra, "Cultural value of Gold," *Eastern Anthropologist* 51, no.4 (1998): 333-349 and "Gold and Gender in India: Some Observations from South Orissa," *Indian Anthropologist* 34, no.1 (2004): 27-39.

aspirational value that was certainly much more than Islamic. During the early postcolonial times when the import of gold was prohibited into the country, dhows, launches and other native sailing craft plying these shorelines smuggled the metal into Calicut, Kasargod etc., either directly from the Gulf or from Bombay where smuggling was a lucrative activity, given its markets, steamer services, docks and a cosmopolitan demography. It was this historic route and traffic in the imperial western Indian Ocean that spurred many of the illegal migrations from Malabar to the Persian Gulf in the 1950s, 60s and the 70s. Many of the early smugglers have over the past thirty years or more settled down to 'respectable' lives and pursuits, say as owners of oil mills, real estate firms, gold shops etc., as I was given to understand by many of my informants in parts of Malabar. Many of these businesses have also established a strong foothold in Dubai, gaining greater commercial legitimacy and popular acceptance in a society that values mobility between the two regions over other virtues. In other parts of Kerala, mostly its central and southern regions, it was clearly a different approach to Gulf migration at least until the early years of the millennium. Unlike Malabar where most of the Gulf migrants were unskilled workers taking up employment with Indian and Arab merchants, including in smuggling outfits, or setting up small cafeterias and retail shops in readymade garments, watches etc., on their own, the migrants from central and southern Kerala moved as accountants, technicians, engineers, clerks, secretaries, nurses, surgery assistants and doctors employed by oil companies, banks and other newly established modern state institutions and services. Most of them used Dubai and the Gulf generally as a conduit to the West where they could settle down as citizens. It is this distinction in the trajectories of Gulf migration which has not completely collapsed even today that marks the difference between these regions of Kerala and Malabar.

Young men migrating and making a successful career as a professional or trader in the Gulf bringing back gold and other staple consumer goods as markers of their personal accomplishments and social mobility created a new economy of circulation in the metal as well as these goods centred primarily, but not exclusively around marriage.²² Not only were these 'successful' young men themselves greatly sought after as bridegrooms in a society where a marriage arranged by the family was the norm.²³ Their sisters, cousins, nieces etc., too were much desired as brides simply by virtue of their proximity with these men and the prospect of social mobility it brought along in the form of a visa to the Gulf for the prospective groom, apart from the dowry in gold, cash and household as well as personal goods. The liberalisation of gold import into India and the relaxed migration regime in Dubai clearly fed into and augmented these practices on a scale hitherto unimagined, with significant consequences for urbanisation in both.

To return to Dubai, with the relaxed visa regulations bringing in tourists, visitors and shoppers from across Asia and to a lesser extent other parts of the world into the city and the country at large, created new sites and events of consumption.²⁴ New shopping malls, hotels and housing projects were undertaken and completed in the nineties to expand the urban economy and shape the social

²² The goods that a Gulf migrant carried home to Kerala were staple goods that had over the course of years become familiar to almost everybody in Kerala. Some of these goods included cosmetic brands like Nivea, Brut, Yardley and Creme 21, Ray Ban sunglasses, Johnnie Walker Whisky, cotton cloth produced by textile mills in Bombay and exported to Dubai, Japanese synthetic saris, men's shirting and suiting exported from Bombay to Dubai etc.

²³ Many informants among the early migrants I interviewed told me very plainly how they were compelled to fake success for social acceptance in Malabar through displays of these goods branded as Dubai goods. A month or two of their stay in Kerala on leave and they would have incurred enough debt in Dubai.

²⁴ The two major contingents who took advantage of the relaxed visa regimes were the suitcase traders or the Russian shuttle traders as they are popularly called, from Georgia, Kazhakstan, Azerbaijan etc., and job seekers as well as ambitious entrepreneurs from Malabar. The two were linked in a close relationship of trade for the whole of the 1990s after which the Russian shuttle trade in Dubai came to an abrupt end.

and cultural space required to sustain Dubai in expansionist mode in the long haul. The Gold Souk witnessed even more bustling shopper activity as visitors and tourists rushed towards its many retail outlets to buy gold in kilograms and carry it back to India in a smooth course of transfer at airport Customs in Bombay, Calicut and Trivandrum. Dubai's trade in gold received a new dynamism as more retail shops or branches of existing ones were opened, not just within the city but in other cities in the Persian Gulf and parts of Malabar as well. The pioneers of this nineties' phase of urbanisation linking Dubai and Malabar were gold merchants and retailers from Malabar setting up shop in Dubai, Kuwait and Abu Dhabi in the 1980s and extending their branches into small towns like Calicut, Kannur, Thrissur etc., in Malabar in the 1990s.²⁵ Prominent among them was the *Alukkas* group, now known as *Joyalukkas*, and *Malabar Gold* who unlike *Alukkas* was a new entrant into the business in the 1990s.

A significant dilemma Dubai faced was, as referred to earlier, its possibly being made redundant in the gold trade over time. If gold and designs made by the same jewellers were available in Malabar and increasingly in other parts of India, it was only natural not to think of Dubai as the place to buy gold. The focus had to be, if Dubai were to retain its place in the gold trade, on building it up and boosting it as a brand in itself. The context was right for this but the challenge lay in the act of balance. Brand building in Dubai was certainly a concerted project of the state, but the state's piecemeal investments and top down approach to policy making would have not made any impact, had they not been organically melded with its own historic practices of trade and commerce and its own equations with merchants, Arab, Indian and Persian in all of this. The political arrangement characteristic of an Indian Ocean city-state where sovereignty was shared in specific ways between rulers and merchants had evolved in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Dubai.²⁶ This arrangement took on its modern institutional contours in the 1950s when the ruler or the Sheikh began to grant monopolies in the form of commercial and import licenses to different ethnic groups of merchants who specialised in such trades as gold, electronics, automobiles etc.²⁷ A particular logic of governance developed to secure the economic privileges of merchants on the one hand and the political supremacy of the ruler and his dynasty on the other, it was instrumental to urban development as well as social mobility in Dubai through the 1960s, 70s and 80s. A tacit agreement hitherto between the sheikh and the Arab, the Iranian and the Indian merchants, it had to be expanded in the 1990s to include new and emerging groups, such as the gold retailers from Malabar who were proving to be promising partners in the state's new urban and global projects.

While the Al Futtaims and others built malls, towers, and other structures to boost the luxury and lifestyle quotient of the new urban Dubai, gold retail chains like *Joyalukkas* partnered with the state and its ministerial departments to establish the Dubai Gold and Jewellery Group (DGJG) in 1996 and launch the Dubai Shopping Festival or DSF as it is popularly called the very same year.²⁸ The Dubai

²⁵ The Sindhi and the Gujarati *Sonis* who were wholesalers however, were not quite visible as the retailers at least in the initial phase, although the capital and stocks of the metal held by the latter were no match to theirs. Part of the reason was the differences in market practices between these two groups, the ethnic principle of trust governing transactions and the cultural preferences in designs of consumers.

²⁶ Fatma Al-Sayegh, "Merchants' Role in a Changing Society: The Case of Dubai, 1900-90," *Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 1 (January 1, 1998): 87-102.

²⁷ Neha Vohra, "From Golden Frontier to Global City: Shifting Forms of Belonging, "Freedom" and Governance among Indian Businessmen in Dubai," *American Anthropologist* 113, no. 2 (2011): 306- 318.

²⁸ For a list of real estate and urban community projects in Dubai, the Emirates and overseas, go to the websites of the Al Futtaim group <http://www.afrealestate.com/content/residential.aspx>, the Emaar group <http://www.emaar.com/en/index.aspx>, and the Al Ghurair group http://www.alghurair.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=35&Itemid=213.

Gold and Jewellery Group which comprises besides the retailers, wholesalers and bullion dealers who are mostly Sindhi and Gujarati merchants based in Dubai, have for two decades now promoted the annual shopping festival and other commercial events through discounts, prizes and offers on gold purchases to consumers. The raffle draw organised as the major attraction of the first DSF when 50 kilograms of gold worth 2.5 million dirhams were given away as prizes to winners on a daily basis is a significant case in point.²⁹ This redefined state-merchant partnership symbolised by gold has added significant brand value to Dubai which has since then portrayed itself as the 'City of Gold.' A report in the Times of India published in 1998 on Dubai's status as the gold corridor of the world neatly sums it up for us:

Dubai's gold trade launched the slogan "Dubai City of Gold" during the first shopping festival. Today that slogan has become a branding message for the city. The first sign that one encounters on entering Dubai city from the airport is: Welcome to Dubai City of Gold. Car stickers with the slogan are popular and advertisements for anything from real estate to shopping malls describe Dubai as the City of Gold.

The equation to gold is now being made not only from Dubai's affinity and historical ties with the precious metal but more metaphorically. Dubai offers the ultimate package in everything: lifestyle, leisure and business environment. What began as a simple headline to attract people to buy more gold during the shopping festival is now a brand statement for a city.³⁰

In fact, so successful has the DSF become that newer and smaller versions of the same like the Dubai Summer Surprises have been added to the city's list of annual events.³¹ Even during the crises years, Dubai continued to sell gold in quantities that broke its own yearly record. It was estimated that "four million more shoppers find their way to the retail and jewellery shops of Dubai in every edition of the DSF" and gold remains the commodity most sold every year.³² Commercial campaigning around gold through event sponsorships had preceded the launch of the DSF at least by a decade in Dubai. Cultural events and festivals nights sponsored by jewellery chains like *Joyalukkas* and others included celebrity evenings and star nights when popular actors, musicians, singers, theatre and folk artists were flown in from Kerala and other parts of India to perform for the several expatriate communities living and working in the Persian Gulf. The Gulf tours of celebrities also often involved transactions in gold and other consumer goods as gifts from different Dubai based sponsors, creating a popular imaginary and a social consciousness of Dubai as a brand back in Kerala and other parts of India among a cultural elite that on their own terms had very little to do with migration to these

²⁹ "Dubai gearing up for the gala mall," *The Times of India*, 19 October, 1995; "The Gold Corridor," *The Times of India*, March 14, 1998.

³⁰ "The Gold Corridor," *The Times of India*, March 14, 1998.

³¹ Summer Surprises is an annual shopping event more or less like the DSF but conducted on a much smaller scale during the summer months of June and July. For more details see <http://www.summerisdubai.com/en/festival/festivals/dubai-summer-surprises.html> (accessed January 2, 2013).

³² Lily B. Libo-on, "Gold is the most sold commodity during DSF," *Khaleej Times*, January 30, 2014, http://www.khaleejtimes.com/kt-article-display-1.asp?xfile=data/todayevent/2014/January/todayevent_January. (accessed January 31, 2014).

parts.³³ Thus what started as Indian, mostly celebrity evenings of stars from Kerala in the 1980s is now a major urban convention with the city becoming a venue for all kinds of international events from cultural performances and film award ceremonies to sporting and racing events some of which are staged as part of its festival and spectacle seasons. It was this consciousness that Dubai tapped into and built on during the early years of the millennium to launch itself as a global brand with its appeal spilling over its immediate context in the Persian Gulf and India, to other parts of Asia as well.

The DSF has inspired its own replica, although on a much smaller scale, in parts of Kerala too where it is called the Grand Kerala Shopping Festival or the GKSF. Just like the DSF, the GKSF has been held every year since 2007 in different parts of the state, from Trivandrum in the south to Kasargod in the north as part of the government's efforts to boost the tourism economy and stimulate consumer spending. The GKSF's mission has been to complement, by offering "an international shopping experience," the marvels of nature that the state has naturally been blessed with, including backwaters, paddy fields, beaches and exotic traditions of healing.³⁴ In addition to gold on which discounts are offered under various heads by many of the branches of Dubai-based retail chains, concentrated mostly in the Malabar region, the GKSF also promotes the sale of textiles, clothes, watches, accessories etc. that they have diversified into. Thus a supermarket and mall culture imported from Dubai but revolving around cultural institutions and life cycle rituals earlier alluded to, began to shape the emergence of a consumer urbanity in Calicut, Kannur, Thrissur etc., in Kerala. These two axes of a shared phenomenon of the urban—the one in Kerala and the other its referent in Dubai—and embodied in shopping malls and festivals betray these geographies on either side of the Arabian Sea as a contiguous social and cultural space the institutions of which map onto and mutually signify each other in interesting ways. In the new millennium, this contiguity becomes even more visible as Kerala stands transformed from 'God's own country' to 'Gold's own country' in advertising and publicity campaigns launched by the state as well as private players and investors.

Part of the story of the GKSF is that it was the jewellery retail chains and other businesses that were at the centre of its many investments. The new legal conduit opened for gold in India and the urbanisation projects in Dubai concurrently gave rise to a peculiar phenomenon where individuals, mostly men, travelled on tourist and visitor visas to Dubai exclusively for the purpose of transferring duty free gold into these ports, either for themselves and their families or on behalf of jewellery groups, trading companies and the like. While many established jewellery groups made use of the permits and open licenses to import gold directly into India, the excessive demand for bullion and jewellery and the relative ease this informal process of transfer through agents ensured, made it quite a popular activity among them.³⁵ As agents of capital and intermediaries between the two geographies they benefitted greatly from the patronage of state agencies in Kerala, using such

³³ It must however be noted that although these artists and actors were not migrants themselves, the Malayalam cinema industry that they worked as part of owed much of its financial base to Dubai and the Persian Gulf. Many producers of films in the 1980s and 1990s were Gulf based businessmen and traders. For more details see Ratheesh Radhakrishnan, "The Gulf in the Imagination: Migration, Malayalam Cinema and Regional Identity," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 43, no.2 (2009): 217-245. The Gulf was also a significant black market for Malayalam, Hindi, Tamil and other regional films the reels of which were smuggled from the ports of Bombay, Calicut, Magalore etc., by passengers, air crew and shipping staff to Dubai. The contents were then transferred to video cassettes for viewing at home in Dubai and other parts of the Persian Gulf. A reverse traffic also took place with families carrying these video cassettes back home on vacation.

³⁴ For more details see, <http://www.grandkeralashopping.com>.

³⁵ The range of individuals carrying gold on behalf of many of these jewellery groups varied from tourists, employment seekers, artists and performers to their own family members and staff—as reported by some of my informants.

patronage as a springboard to expand to other cities like Bangalore, Chennai and Hyderabad in South India where they became household brands within a rather short span of time. With a brand name made in Dubai and carried through circuits and practices of mobility into Malabar and other parts of India, some of these jewellers were able to also expand into places like Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, New York and London becoming in a clearly geographical sense too, global brands.

BRAND DUBAI AND THE TRANSNATIONAL ROUTE TO URBAN LIVING IN KERALA: SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

The culture of urban branding imported into Kerala through a set of practices institutionalised by the association of gold with Dubai, making the one synonymous with the other, soon began to define other emerging urban activities at multiple scales in Malabar and to a lesser extent in other parts of Kerala too. A contiguous social and cultural space across two geographies and territorial formations, it must be remembered, implies a shared social formation of capital inhabited by groups and classes of people that define and shape each others' contours. At the helm of this social formation in the 1990s, as we have seen, were the jewellery retail chains and other businesses who as intermediaries between the two geographies powered its class dynamics and hierarchies in interesting ways. However, this does not mean that we perceive urbanity in Kerala, particularly in the 21st century, in one dimensional mode and along a trajectory singularly defined in relation to Gulf migration, for that would go against what as a historian I set about to achieve at the beginning of the paper. The theoretical awareness that social life is not lived in neatly defined phases slotted within a linear temporality or a teleology of progress begins to weigh down on the historian all the more while addressing the question of contemporary urbanity in Kerala. Having taken the line pursued here, and in the disciplinary interests of History, it is easy to get stuck at this juncture leaving the way ahead for sociologists, anthropologists and urban studies scholars to track. This is perhaps the ideal state of affairs in the interdisciplinary world of humanities and social sciences that we inhabit, but then the risk of giving into the temptation to look at contemporary urbanity in Kerala as a chapter within the history of capitalism and its 21st century avatar is something that remains.

Let me explain. Since the closing years of the previous decade, Kerala, particularly Cochin, a district in the central region of the state has witnessed much mega scale urban activity including building, construction, housing and the setting up of IT parks, global firms and satellite cities as the SmartCity Cochin. In many ways, Cochin has, in less than a decade, risen to the status of the state's financial and business capital. In an urban capacity, it has now begun to compete with the other metropolises in the south like Bangalore, Chennai and Hyderabad for capital investment in the IT sector, real estate and the financial sector, although on a much smaller scale. The first phase of the project which was completed in 2015, amidst much protest and political controversy was conceived of as a joint venture by the state government of Kerala and TECOM Dubai to build what the latter have called "knowledge industry townships," modelled not surprisingly on the Dubai Internet City.³⁶ Scholars of Kerala are yet to study this urban economy, partly because the ecology of knowledge within which Kerala remains entrenched has always been resistant to conceptualising the urban within the state. However, it must be said that Cochin itself has in recent years generated a great deal of interest among Cultural Studies and Cinema Studies scholars,³⁷ who address changing relations of gender and sexuality in Kerala as a whole through the urban experiences offered by this 'new city.' Cochin, according to many of them, is a city that reflects urban Bombay in the 1980s and 1990s.

³⁶ For details on TECOM, go to <http://smartcity.ae/Html.php?MenuID=215>.

³⁷ Much of this work has been presented at regional and national conferences in the past 3 or 4 years and are yet to be published.

The underlying tendency then has been to segregate Cochin from its equations with the Gulf, and reaffirm it as part of a larger national cultural space—this is to a certain extent easily done because unlike Malabar the immediate connections with the Gulf in everyday life are much less visible here. The supermarket, department stores and jewellery retail chains that we found in Dubai and other cities in India have a remarkable presence here, commercially and politically. Many of these are at the core of Cochin’s new urbanisation projects, including the SmartCity, having initiated and mediated the formal connections of capital through their role as intermediaries between the two domains of political sovereignty in Dubai and Kerala.³⁸ Closely following in their steps were real estate firms and property builders like *Confidence*, *Sobha* etc., who used Brand Dubai to launch themselves in Cochin and other cities in South India.³⁹ Yet Brand Dubai is far less visible here than in parts of Malabar. Cochin, evidently, resonates in the epistemic and popular imagination with a different space and time than Malabar where it is possible to conceive of some kind of a linear sort of a relationship with Dubai and the Gulf, since the practices associated with the phenomenon of migration described earlier in the paper are still very vibrant in the region. What is missed is the story of Cochin as a site of concentration of multiple spatial and temporal synergies and the ways in which Brand Dubai became the transnational route to Cochin’s new alliances with the national and the global. The production and punctuation of a national and global temporality by a transnational one in rapidly urbanising spaces as Dubai and Cochin may perhaps be the contribution a historian of the city can best make.

³⁸ Various builders’ groups emerging in the early years of the millennium used the same logic of a headquarters, a dominant client base and property expo seasons in Dubai to find a footing in Cochin and other cities in South India where most of their clients aspired to buy homes. Just as the jewellery groups established global chains to tap into particular kinds of migrant and consumer geographies, these builders relied on property expo seasons that were held as sequences to each other in different parts of the Persian Gulf, Cochin, Malabar and south Indian cities like Bangalore and Chennai to address an increasingly circular mode of migration linking these spaces.

³⁹ For details on the builders’ groups *Confidence* and *Sobha*, go to <https://www.confident-group.com>, and http://www.sobha-me.com/landing_page.php.