

Migration, Smuggling and a Transnational Economy in the Making:

Dubai's Indian Contexts of Urbanization

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On December 26, 1969, India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, addressing a convention organized by the women's wing of the Indian National Congress at Azadnagar in Bombay urged her women listeners to “refrain from using foreign-made goods,” and “to participate in the war against poverty by leading an austere life.”¹ The audience, a vast majority of which were men, also heard a plea by Mrs. Gandhi “not to spend money on gold ornaments.” The Prime Minister's statements were arguably made with a view to reinforcing India's socialist line, with its emphasis on agriculture, public sector, co-operatives and cottage industry, against rising conservative tendencies within the party.² However what was implicit in the appeal to women to exercise restraint on their part were signs of an impending political threat to the party, the state and the nation. This threat came in the form of smuggling and the loss to India of foreign exchange that she desperately needed to import fertilizers, raw materials, oil and machinery with which to produce for a domestic as well as an export economy.³

The trope of the woman as abetting smuggling, even legitimizing it, through her consumer appetite and her naivete was a dominant one in the Indian press during the major part of the 1960s and the 1970s. A commentary featured in *The Times of India* on January 7, 1968, that responds to state officials' portrayal of India as a “smugglers' paradise” makes this clear, “The affluent Indian housewife who pays through the nose for her favorite make of contraband lipstick, face cream or shampoo at the street corner kiosk usually concurs, cribs and goes on buying.”⁴ Although it was the rich and the upper crust of Indian society that had the means to purchase these consumer goods, the lower strata, the author was quick to add, were emulating

1 “PM asks women to avoid foreign goods,” *The Times of India*, December 27, 196, 9.

2 For details, see Sudipta Kaviraj, “Indira Gandhi and Indian Politics,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 21, no. 38/39 (September 1986), 1697-1708; Stanley A. Kochanek, “Briefcase Politics in India: The Congress Party and the Business Elite,” *Asian Survey* 27, no.12 (December 1987), 1278-1301; Sol W. Sanders, “India: Ending the Permit License Raj,” *Asian Affairs* 5, no.2 (1977): 88-96. Rajini Kothari. *Politics in India* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1970).

3 Walter Schwarz, “Running Fasters,” *The Guardian*, August 24, 1974, 11.

4 Khanna, “Smuggler's Paradise,” 8.

the elite in their materialistic instincts and fast acquiring what they could afford.

Smuggled goods, a vast majority of which were sourced from and brought into the country via Dubai were to be found literally everywhere in the country. Bombay with the greatest untaxed wealth in the country and large local markets set the precedent for both bootlegging as well as perfectly legitimate trades in smuggled goods that arrived at its ports or at other secure spots along its vast and serrated coastline.⁵ By the late 1970s, it was reported that even pavement vendors in the busy thoroughfares of such cities as Delhi and Calcutta, besides Bombay were openly selling smuggled radios, tape recorders, perfumes, “goggles” etc., thus giving us a fair sense of the scope of consumer demand for these foreign goods.⁶ In Kerala too, an informal trade and an economy of gifts in foreign goods including gold wafers and jewelry besides other consumer novelties as stereo sets, fabric, cigarettes and liquor was in vogue at least from the early 1970s when migration to Dubai and other parts of the Gulf was beginning to become a pronounced feature of social life in its many villages and towns.⁷

This paper analyses consumer desire for particular commodities, say, gold, consumer electronics, fabric and cosmetics, and the distinctive social meanings these held for Indians, particularly the Malayalis within the larger context of the migration of the 1970s and thereafter to Dubai. It maps the ways in which such desire converged with smuggling as well as legitimate forms of commerce to create a specific kind of mercantile economy driving the course of Dubai's urban development in the 1970s and the 1980s. The paper approaches 'smuggling' as it were from the vantage point of social relations and cultural practices within the Malayali community as against that of the political and legal imaginaries of the Indian state. The 1970s and the 1980s in the urban history of Dubai—sandwiched between its existence as an entrepôt and a re-export portal, and its rise to prominence as a global city—is vital to mapping Dubai's incipient phase of globalization and the uncharted course of its 21st century urban capital. This was the phase in which Dubai established itself as a place in the imagination of many different migrant communities of Indians, particularly those from Kerala which to this day constitute the largest ethnic majority of the Emirates' foreign population.⁸ It

5 “The anatomy of smuggling,” *The Times of India*, May 14, 1969, 5.

6 “Earmarking Zones for Hawkers Urged,” *The Times of India*, January 16, 1970, 10; Khanna K.C., “Coping with the Smuggler: Why the Law is still an Ass,” *The Times of India*, April 26, 1977, 8.

7 Insights on the trade in smuggled goods within migrant households were offered by several interlocutors, some of them migrants themselves, over several conversations held in small towns and villages in Calicut, Kerala and Dubai.

8 Vicky Kapur, “A Gulf without Keralites could soon be a reality,” *Emirates 24/7*, October 18, 2012 <http://www.emirates247.com/news/a-gulf-without-keralites-could-soon-be-a-reality-2012-10-18-1.479297> (accessed March 15, 2013), “UAE has 2.2 m Indians: 40% from Kerala,” *Emirates 24/7*, May 13, 2013 <http://www.emirates247.com/news/emirates/uae-has-2-2m-indians-40-from-kerala-2013-05-13-1.506273>

was a spatial entity that imbued many different kinds of commodities formally barred from sale and consumption in India with cultural meanings around the categories of class, individual success, family prestige etc., with these mapped back onto the urban landscape of Dubai in the form of a distinctive economy and culture of trade.

The paper takes off from Jeremy Prestholdt's argument that an analysis of consumer interests provides insights into "shifting social relationships" as well as "processes of global interrelation," using it to study the emergence of Dubai as a global market place and a land of opportunity for Indians during the period.⁹ Although, vantage points for an analysis of the logic and changing course of Dubai's urban development, consumer desire and demand are not approached in a typological fashion as culturally static or historically given features of Indian society.¹⁰ Instead they are engaged with, following Georg Simmel and Arjun Appadurai,¹¹ as shifting responses to value—economic, social and political—created in the act of exchange. Exchange is the key word here, exchange meaning the historical context and the social situation of migration and the concomitant influx of commodities, rather than exchange as pragmatic activity in its individual instances. This is not to say that exchange, or more specifically flows of people and transfer of commodities as they were negotiated by Dubai, is to be looked at as the sole basis of commoditization or as the only catalyst for consumer demand in India. I take recourse to Appadurai again and his reading of Marx and Mauss, as also the works of Keith Hart and James Ferguson, to incorporate culture into the commoditization argument, and inflect it as a temporal practice defining imaginaries and practices of consumption in relation to Dubai.¹² Consumption thus set within the interrelated frames of capital and culture helps address the ways in which the circulation of commodities and gifts and the hegemonies underwriting their presence in the social lives of communities laid the foundations for the city's emergence as an urban brand.

(accessed October 10, 2013).

9 Jeremy Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World: African Consumerism and the Genealogies of Globalization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 85.

10 For instance, a vast majority of commodities that were in huge demand in India were electronic goods, manufactured in industrial societies in the West and Japan and had no precedents in the Indian context. To attribute to them a blind consumer preference would be to drop one's analytical guard. A case must be made for gold too, which despite its religious and cultural uses dating back to antiquity, was, as the paper illustrates, no exception.

11 See Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, ed. David Frisby and trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (London: Routledge, 2004); Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

12 James Ferguson, "The Bovine Mystique: Power, Property and Livestock in Rural Lesotho," *Man, New Series* 20, no.4 (December 1985): 647-674; Keith Hart, "On Commoditization," in *From Craft to Industry: The Ethnography of Proto-Industrial Cloth Production*, ed. Esther Goody (London: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 38-49.

The paper complicates the notion of Dubai as an urban brand by foregrounding migrant understandings and experiences of the city refracted through commodities in transit on the one hand and its peculiar cultures of trade, capital and labour on the other. It problematizes brand building as a structural project and a marketing strategy undertaken by the *Maktoums* in the context of a ubiquitous globalization in the 1990s while introducing a social and cultural dimension to its trajectory beginning in the latter half of the 20th century. It is not, as it is argued here, in the tallest, the largest and the most exotic of thematic contradictions as indoor ski resorts, water theme parks and ice bars that we must locate the origins of brand Dubai, but in the social consciousness of communities defined by processes of migration, smuggling and the trade in specific commodities and consumer brands spurred by these. Brand Dubai may be projected in political and corporate discourse as an urban utopia with umpteen possibilities for investment, leisure and "supreme lifestyles," however, this remains an abstract notion, an image rather, of the city that we call Dubai. This image, the "deterritorialized logo" of the city as Andrew Harris, writing of Hoxton in post-industrial London, calls it,¹³ conceals the texture and character of the place it represents, more so and for obvious political reasons in Dubai. It is important therefore to unravel the much longer and rather complex history of social imaginaries and meanings attached to Dubai emerging out of migration, smuggling and other flows if we are to come to terms with Dubai as a place and a city grounded in life. The intent is not in the least to downplay the significance of the regime's urban ambition or efforts at the level both of urban infrastructure and symbolic discourse to elevate Dubai to the status of a global city. On the contrary it is to understand how such ambition and effort on the part of the *Maktoums* borrowed from and built on a popular base, a social premise and a genealogy in a distinct geography of commerce informed by a multiplicity of processes and flows, most importantly of cultural practices and signs around gold as also other manufactured commodities.

The paper begins with a discussion of the changing trajectory of migration in the 1970s to Dubai and the Persian Gulf using the particular case of Malayalis, the evolving structures of migration and the actual processes of movement of migrants and commodities between these locales. It then examines the emerging economy of trade in Dubai in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s through these structures of mobility and processes of movement as well as the transplantation of the cultural effects of the two onto the commercial landscape of the city.

The later part of the paper foregrounds gold and its changing commercial practices as markers

¹³ Andrew Harris, "Branding Hoxton: Cultural Landscapes of Post-Industrial London," in *Brands and Branding Geographies*, ed. Any Pike (Massachusetts: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2011), 187-199.

of the transitions defining Malayali society at large with these transitions resulting in the creation of global brands in gold and the evolution of a global city in Dubai.

Methods and Sources

The argument made in the paper rests on insights drawn from ethnographic research conducted in Dubai, Sharjah, Abu Dhabi and Fujairah in the Emirates and the towns of Thrissur, Calicut, Nadapuram, Vadamkara and Adoor in Kerala, India, between 2010 and 2012. The interviews were predominantly in Malayalam and conducted among Muslim, Hindu and Syrian Christian migrants and their families working and living in these spaces. Of the latter two communities, a good number are return migrants who have settled in their hometowns in Thrissur and Adoor in central and south Kerala respectively. Almost all of them were professionals migrating to Dubai in the late and early and mid 1970s to work in petroleum companies, telecommunications and other nascent government sectors, hospitals, banks and engineering firms. Their children, many of whom form part of my generation or slightly older, continue to live in the Emirates, or are now based in the US or UK as professionals, mostly software engineers and business analysts.

The Muslim community or Malabar Muslims contributed ethnographic subjects and life histories for the study extensively and at various levels. This was partly since unlike the other two communities where there was hardly more than one male or sometimes female (in the case of nurses) migrating from a household,¹⁴ the Muslims particularly those from Malabar, followed a pattern of migration in which all the males in a generation or two migrated during various periods. Interviews, therefore, were conducted among extended families of migrants in Malabar as well as their relatives and friends in Dubai and the other Emirates. The ability of Muslim men to permeate diverse realms of a mercantile economy in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, their more intimate connections with other trading communities, particularly Sindhis for whom they worked in diverse capacities and the extent to which they have become a structural aspect of trade and commerce not just in Dubai, but the whole of the Persian Gulf have been instrumental to reconstructing the social milieu in question. These peculiar traits of the group were also tapped into by officers of the Indian state with secret diplomatic missions in the Emirates and other parts of the Gulf who used them as informants on smuggling rings and projects in the 1970s and the 1980s. I had opportunities to interview some of the Dubai

¹⁴ 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.

based family members of these Indian diplomats whose personal memories of their parents' interactions with informants and the household repertoire of smuggling narratives have significantly shaped the argument of the paper. Customs officers who had worked at various airports in India offered insights on the actual processes of movement of migrants and couriers as well as transit of goods. These included the quotas permitted by the state and violated in acts of 'smuggling,' as well as strategies of negotiation and terms of the mutual consensus between migrants, couriers and agents of the state underlying such violations.

Other sources that have been used for the discussion in the paper, particularly for its sections on gold, are articles and features in newspapers published from India and advertisements of jewellery groups in the Malayalam media. The latter were sourced from private collections of video cassette recordings of Malayalam films in the 1980s and the 1990s; a few of these advertisements and publicity campaigns have been uploaded on YouTube. These cassettes are retained as personal archives and repositories of memories of life in Dubai in the drawing rooms of mostly Hindu and Syrian Christian return migrants in Thrissur and Adoor. I was given access to these during the course of my interviews conducted in their drawing rooms on the condition that I would return them undamaged after viewing them at my parents' house in Adoor. Interviews with shop assistants and senior executives in jewellery stores in Dubai have also been instrumental in terms of mapping the shifts in commercial practices around gold and the ways in which such shifts have contributed to the city's discursive formations as a global urban space.

Labour Migration in the 1970s and 80s: Malayali and the Mobility Complex

With the consolidation of the federation of the emirates in 1971 and the oil economy beginning to define the political and administrative spheres of the sheikhly regime, the terms of migration changed, and along with them, the scope and channels of commodity transfer. The fluid nature of the late 1940s' and 1950s' migration in which *Sonis* and *Sindhis* moved on a periodic basis between Dubai and Bombay or Daman etc., had by the mid-1970s given way to more regulated and tenured practices of what now became international migration facilitated by the acquisition of passports and the provision of employment and visitors' visas. It was at this juncture that men and some women from different parts of Kerala began to migrate in large numbers to Dubai and other parts of the Gulf,¹⁵ to take up employment in oil

¹⁵ State publications on migration data from Kerala are virtually non-existent. The number of passports issued by each of the regional passport offices in Kerala serves instead as a rough index. In 1977, two passport offices in Kerala issued 170,000 passports whereas the following year it doubled to almost 300,000. For details, see *The*

companies, hospitals, banks and private commercial enterprises, besides construction firms and as the personal staff of ruling and other elite families.¹⁶ Scholars have studied the phenomenon, a predominant feature of social life in Kerala primarily as economic migration, focusing on remittances and the ways in which the latter have altered the course of social development in the state.¹⁷ Changing identities, gender relations and family structures effected by the phenomenon have also been addressed in significant ways by anthropologists, as also cycles of consumption and social mobility among particular communities and castes.¹⁸ Migration in this study is not a master category under which can be made subsumed the flow of goods, consumption and other related social practices. The approach taken rather is one in which migration is embedded as part of a larger matrix of flows in which people, commodities, signs, discourses and practices merge creating specific kinds of urban practices and formations in Dubai. It is in that sense a reverse gaze on the phenomenon which focuses on the actual processes of mobility rather than on migration as a framework in itself.

The temporary and contractual nature of labour migration institutionalized in the visa regime and the financial success it brought the vast majority of migrants, produced, I argue, a cultural motif of relentless movement and a sense of disquiet around immobility in Malayali society, regardless of whatever may have contributed to such immobility. This obsession with movement and the anxiety provoked by the ever present reality of having to return for good at some time is nowhere more apparent than in the volume of remittances migrants have sent home to Kerala and the circuits and social networks of mobility they have managed to establish since the 1970s. This was a different order of mobility to the one that the *Sonis* and the *Sindhis* were implicated in. It not only encompassed men and a few women moving in search of work or entrepreneurial opportunities but inaugurated a regime of commodity circulation along the lines of a gift economy as against the commercial transactions of the *Sindhis*. I do not read these networks of people and circuits of commodity flows, oriented in reverse directions, as distinct realms of migrant activity. Instead, I take recourse to Mauss' theory of the gift to engage with these as part of complete system, a complex of social,

Hindu (Overseas Edition), February 9, 1980, 7.

16 Myron Weiner, "International Migration and Development: Indians in the Persian Gulf," *Population and Development Review* 8, no.1 (1982): 8-9.

17 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).

18 Fillippo Osella and Caroline Osella, *Social Mobility in Kerala: Modernity and Identity in Conflict* (London: Pluto Press, 2000); "Migration, Money and Masculinity in Kerala," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 6, no.1 (2000): 115-131; "From Transience to Immanence: Consumption, Life-Cycle and Social Mobility in Kerala, South India," *Modern Asian Studies* 33, no.4 (October 1999): 989-1020.

cultural and political practices, transactions and imaginaries defining the Malayali society at a distinctive phase of its developmental history.¹⁹ It was this complex system as the rest of the paper shows that was at the heart of a distinct social and cultural geography linking Kerala and Dubai in the 1970s and the 1980s with material and symbolic gains for the latter in its 'globalizing' phase in the 1990s.

An employment visa, said Mr. Vishwanathan, a fifty five year old gentleman, who has lived in Dubai for thirty years and works with *Etisalat*, the federal government owned telecommunications corporation in the UAE, meant that you had a job in Dubai or elsewhere in the emirates even before you left India while with the visitors' visa, you only had possibilities of finding a job on landing there. There were “Arab, Iranian and Indian traders who were waiting to grab any young man who could speak, write and keep accounts in English, especially in the 1970s,” he added.²⁰ With an employment visa or work permit, known as the *pataaka* in Arabic, you could stay on in the emirates for a term of three or five years—three if you were employed by a private firm and five, if you were with the Municipality, the Shaikh's personal office, the electricity board, the telecommunications board, government run hospitals and other state owned institutions. A visitor's visa on the other hand was, in principle, meant for businessmen visiting from different parts of the world and was a short-term permit not exceeding 90 days of residence. It may have meant in the institutional sense of the term in the Emirates, a means to facilitate the movement of businessmen. However, among Malayalis, and others, particularly Malabar Muslims, who took advantage of it to bring in their friends, relatives and acquaintances into the Emirates, the system worked as a conduit for linked or chain migration.

A Briefcase, A Deal, Vacationing and Gold

A salaried job in the Gulf in the 1970s and 1980s paying several times more than what one could expect out of any job in India, meant a switch to a new middle class particularly among the Malayalis. Referred to as *Gulfkkar* or *Persiakkkar*²¹ in Malayalam, this class was not so much an economic strata as an imagined social profile bracketing all those who migrated to Dubai and the Persian Gulf, regardless of the degree of financial success that ensued in the act

19 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Trans. W. D. Halls, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1990).

20 Interview with the author January 12, 2012.

21 *Gulfkkaran*, the plural form of which is *Gulfkkar* can be literally translated as someone who hails from the Gulf. The same is the case with *Persiakkaran*, its plural form being *Persiakkkar*. The former was used in Thrissur, Malabar and the other northern districts of Kerala whereas the latter was used in the southern parts.

of migration or even the lack of it. The fragility of the category that I, taking cues from my informants, term the "foreign made middle class", was evident in the fact that one could qualify for inclusion in it by playing on the aspiration, or more precisely the obsession rampant during the times, to dress, look, even smell "foreign." A number of early migrants in Nadapuram and Vadakara were quick to point out how it was not difficult to convince their families and others in the village that they were truly *Gulfkkar*, even when being in Dubai or anywhere else in the Gulf had actually not had any impact on their financial standing. What helped pull off the whole theatrics of the display of migratory success, many of them shyly confided, were a set of commodities and a package of consumerist practices and styles, if not money itself and the 'magnanimity'²² to gift these commodities and money to an entire circle of family, friends, distant relatives and remote acquaintances. The commodities that defined their status as middle class migrants were "foreign shirts," often tailored out of synthetic material, trousers or bell bottoms as they were popularly called, expensive gold or silver plated watches say for instance Rado, Seiko, Citizen etc., heavy bracelets and chains of gold, cigarettes, strong perfumes or "scents," Johnnie Walker whisky, heavy framed sunglasses and Japanese made plastic slippers. These were articles and brands, they reminded me, that the salaried class of Hindus and Christians hailing from the south of Kerala bought and set trends around on their flight back home, which was as often as once every two years.

As part of his hand baggage on flight—this baggage, a Diplomat briefcase was a mark of his identity as a *Gulfkkaran*—could be carried a certain set of goods and in a certain quota as stipulated by import laws in independent India. James, a customs officer who had worked at the international airport in Trivandrum for a while recalled how prior to the 1990s, a passenger could only carry 2 litres of Johnnie Walker whisky, which he invariably bought at the Dubai Duty Free Shop.²³ With no technical gadgets to their aid, unlike their successors today who sit beside high resolution cameras and X-ray machines, customs officers of the day were required to physically check the contents of the briefcase, lest there be anything that the passenger evaded duties on.²⁴ The very first article one set eyes on as the treasure chest was opened, says James, was the whisky or what was popular in their lingo as foreign liquor, its

22 Magnanimity is the literal translation of the word *udaaramaskata* in Malayalam, a word that many of them used during the course of interviews.

23 James is a pseudonym. I met him at a family gathering in Cochin, Kerala in December 2012 when I was on my field trip. He insisted that he remained anonymous in the work with no details of his rank or the locations in which he was posted revealed other than those mentioned in the text.

24 It was only in the 1980s that the use of metal detectors, X-ray equipment and fluoroscopes became commonplace in airports in India. Even with those gadgets surveillance of passengers and random checking of baggage on suspicion that they could carry smuggled goods continued. For details see, N.B Sonawane, "Anti-Smuggling Steps," *The Times of India*, January 29, 1983, 3.

golden hues beckoning you from within the two mighty glass bottles. Underneath the bottles would be placed a set of shirts and trousers, inner wear, an Old Spice After Shave and a Brut Fragrance For Men. Everybody simulated everybody else and brought home the same kind of stuff in the same kind of briefcase so much so that an officer always knew what the contents of the briefcase inevitably were. Apart from the suitcase, there was a radio or a compact cassette player, lugged much like a laptop and without the case on. Forming part of their cargo or check-in baggage were bigger suitcases into which were crammed bundles of fine cotton cloth and suiting material exported from Bombay, an iron box, three or four pairs of socks and Japanese manufactured synthetic *sarees* that could drape an entire village of women. The cotton cloth was often a whole *taka* or two, *taka* being an Indian unit of measurement for broad cloth. A *taka* could have twenty or fifty yards of cloth that was primarily used for shirts, trousers and suits. Shirting often came in fifty yards and the others in twenty.²⁵ Other complementary goods were watches, often four or five, alarm clocks, flashlights, video cassette players and cassettes besides talcum powder, bathing bars, body cremes, deodorants and other forms of toiletries.

A whole set of stores specializing in these "vacationing" or status goods, as they were referred to in parts of Kerala, began to establish themselves on the urban stage of Dubai, contributing to the Gulf migrant's flight to the country a customary ritual and a public spectacle. Most of them were an extension of those that had been in existence from at least the mid 1960s as we are given to understand from advertisements and publicity campaigns figuring in trade directories of the times. The sale too continued to be around sarees, readymade and children's garments, and fabrics in silk, nylon and tissue besides such brands as Diplomat, Brut, Yardley, Ray Ban, Nivea, Sony, Sharp, National etc., that Dubai and the rest of the Arab Gulf became synonymous with. The rites of purchasing endemic to the trip to India in the 1970s and 1980s, as some of my Syrian Christian and Hindu informants humorously recollected them, were akin to bureaucratic procedures in India and were often a year long, depending on the money they could pool in and the variations in the price of particular commodities available in stores in Dubai. The compulsion to offer these articles packed into suitcases in a communal ceremony of sorts over a couple of weekends, they said, far outweighed all the struggles, financial and physical, they may have had to undergo in the process. When asked

²⁵ *Taka* is a term used among Indian traders in Dubai to this day. Irshad, a trader in a textile shop in Deira, Dasan a tailor specialized in shirts and employed in a readymade unit in the same area, Magabha and many others among my informants repeatedly used the term in their conversations and educated me on the measures in yards for different categories of fabric.

why they had to buy and carry so much as gifts, they attributed their 'magnanimity' again to a kind of moral obligation and social conscience on their part as financially successful individuals towards those less fortunate than they were at the time.

For the Indian diplomatic mission in Dubai though, practices of shopping and transfer that migrants seemed to have institutionalized around particular categories of goods and their stocks in the city's stores could only be made sense of against the insatiable consumer appetites for them in India. Much more significantly, these articles and their modes of transfer were indices of the new channels and paradigms of smuggling gold and currency into and from India. Store assistants selling to passengers and potential smugglers were the sources, and as Vaidya,²⁶ the son of a diplomat posted in Dubai in the early 1980s, points out, the only sources, of information for consignments of gold that made it to India, since it was through and around the goods they stocked that gold and currency could enter legal channels of transfer, if only to circumvent them. Further, the impeccable order as they lay stacked within the suitcase and the degree of familiarity customs officials in India had with the scripted situation (the genre of goods, the number, often multiples of two and the order in which they were often arranged) helped investors, agents and couriers identify loopholes within the law and customs procedures that made the passage of gold and currency an often undetected everyday affair at airports in the country. For instance, an individual would carry 6 litres of Johnnie Walker, that is to say, 6 bottles in his briefcase. He would buy off the customs officer with two bottles since not more than two bottles were permitted to be carried into country by an individual—the act seemingly being an attempt to evade duties on the two extra bottles. This negotiation entered into with the officer would put the latter at a disadvantage to probe further for gold bars that may have been concealed amidst the 'takas' or within the cavities of goods in the suitcases checked in at the airline counter or in layers beneath the false bottom of his briefcase. Using these socially sanctioned bargaining techniques, the passenger would often cart into the country 6 or even 12 bottles of whisky packed between his hand and checked-in baggage. The power of these so called luxury goods to set off a negotiation and clinch a deal between an officer of the state and a migrant in possession of these to the personal advantage of both parties, and in gross violation of the statutes of the state against the illegal transfer of gold cannot be overlooked if we are to make sense of Dubai's rise to prominence as an urban brand in itself.

The double deck audio cassette players particularly the National Panasonic ones had cavities

²⁶ Interview with the author in Dubai on December 22, 2011.

within them (the battery space for 8 AA batteries) that could easily hold and in a completely clandestine manner a kilo or more of gold ingots. Additionally, they were sturdy, heavy, yet compact and easily portable. The company's iron box, the first of its kind available in Dubai shared the very same features as the compact cassette player and to this day continues to be a preferred model among middle class Indians in Dubai, the rest of the Arab Gulf and the Indian subcontinent. Heavy as they were by themselves, 500 grams or more of gold stuffed into their cavity did not make a difference as to be taken note of. Sturdy as these two articles were, they could be reassembled with much the same ease as they were dismantled, to play music and press clothes with no impact whatsoever on their use and exchange values. An extra advantage with the two-in-ones was that they were hand baggage and would not generally draw the immediate attention of the officials who worked with the logic that passengers always concealed illegal commodities where they were least prone to frisking.

The association in Kerala, particularly in the Malabar region, between one's being based in Dubai and one's social standing was rather flawed, even lopsided. It thrust onto the shoulders of the migrant who could not make it big, the burden of having to live up to the image of a successful, even wealthy individual, who could afford to gift the range of goods that qualified the *Gulfkkaran*. The social, familial and self-induced pressures of having to perform one's identity as a *Gulfkkaran*²⁷ through marked goods and brands began to implicate them into networks and outfits of smuggling as couriers. Those men, most of them Muslims, that could not be employed in petroleum companies, banks and other nascent institutions in the Emirates for lack of accounting or technical skills or even the ability to read and write English on the lookout for other avenues to fund their flight as well as accumulate their gift reserves made the best choice as couriers. They began to carry briefcases packed in the formulaic pattern described earlier in return for airfares paid to see them through the flight to Bombay or in rather rare cases, Calicut.²⁸ The greater the risk incurred, or to be more precise, the larger the quantity of gold carried, the greater were the returns accruing to the courier. A briefcase or two with goods and gold carried in multiple proportions meant more money and a return ticket as well. Men willing to incur still greater risks put in an extra component, say an iron box with gold concealed in it and became little entrepreneurs in their own right.

27 *Gulfkkaran* has been referred to by Osella and Osella as the “gulfan” migrant in a reading of migration as linked to changing masculine identities in Kerala. Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, “Migration, Money and Masculinity in Kerala,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 6, no 1 (2000): 117-133.

28 Calicut International Airport started its flight services only in 1987. Until then, migrants mostly from Malabar flew to Dubai and the rest of the Persian Gulf from Bombay.

Some of them used the payment for such assignments made by Hawala²⁹ agents in India, to settle debts they had incurred for their first voyage to Dubai, more often not by launches and dhows.³⁰ Some of the articles in the briefcase was sold to generate cash for their personal expenses and for the finances required to meet family obligations while at home. There were any number of men in the 1970s and 1980s, some of the now settled return migrants in Kerala recalled, who would have their debts paid off in Malabar by Hawala agents as remuneration for carrying the gold-stuffed briefcase safely to landing agents in Bombay. These Hawala agents would carry the cash in rupees to moneylenders and family members of the courier in Malabar before the latter himself often reached home. The return trip to Dubai with the profits made in the deal, was always by flight and with a valid visa stamped from India. The courier deal in smuggling was thus a means to legalizing the status of these individuals as legal migrants in Dubai and the other emirates.³¹

Others' Liberalization, Dubai's Urbanization

The cultural semiotics and the social sign-value of Dubai in relation to the commodities that were legitimately transferred or smuggled in by migrant groups cannot be grasped in their entirety unless, gold, the epic commodity defining economic life in the emirate is brought into the picture. Scholars have studied the very specific roles that gold as commodity has played in the social and cultural lives of specific communities in India, including its ritual uses, its aesthetic and symbolic values, and its status as forms of property that women possess within patriarchal regimes and dowry systems.³² Historians have also highlighted circuits in the Indian Ocean into which gold was inserted as a commodity at the centre of Europe's trade with Asia, particularly India, since the times of the Romans, thus giving us historical reasons with which to explain social and cultural attitudes around gold in Kerala.³³ Recent studies

29 The term *Hawala* in Arabic means transfer. It is the term used to refer to the informal funds transfer system between South Asia, the Middle East and South-East Asia. In India it is also called the *hundi* system and exists alongside the formal banking sector. For details refer Mohammed El Qorchi, Samuel Munzele Maimbo and John F Wilson, *Informal Funds Transfer System: An Analysis of the Informal Hawala System* (Washington DC: International Monetary Fund, 2003), 4-6.

30 The details on illegal modes of migration by launches and dhows have been provided in chapter 3, page 25 of my dissertation titled "Understanding Space, Politics and History in the Making of Dubai, a Global City".

31 As reported to the author by Vishwanathan and other informants who insisted that they remain anonymous in the work.

32 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.

33 Pius Malekandathil, *Maritime India: Trade, Religion and Polity in the Indian Ocean* (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2010). Also see, "Indian Ocean in the Shaping of Late Medieval India," (Presidential Address, 74th Session of Medieval Indian History, Indian History Congress, Cuttack, India, December 28-30, 2013. http://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/32696103/My_Presidential_Address_as_sectional_President_of_74th_Session_of_Medieval_Indian_History_of_Indian_History_Congress_Cuttack_Orissa_.docx?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAJ56TQJRTWSMTNPEA&Expires=1393610577&Signature=zMYxulV0XZih

like those of Varghese's have also analyzed gold trade in its complex trajectory in Kerala (among the four south Indian states remains the largest consumer) constituted by players across the spectrum including diplomats, priests, artists traveling from the Persian Gulf, and the impact of its structures and practices on artisanal communities in the state's globalization context.³⁴ While borrowing heavily from these writings, I have tried to understand the cultural, social and economic dimensions of gold in Kerala as they were redefined through migration and smuggling. I have also mapped out how these were re-inscribed onto the commercial landscape of Dubai with significant political and economic repercussions for its state-led project of globalization and urbanity in the twenty-first century.

The phenomenal increase in and the renewed structures of the trade in gold sparked off by India's liberalization policy in the early 1990s provided Dubai with the much needed discursive and symbolic ground that marked its foray into its contemporary phase of hyper-urbanity as among other things the "city of gold" and the "jewelry destination of the world."³⁵ Gold became global Dubai's legitimate signifier besides one of its fundamental economic constituencies,³⁶ reinforcing its existing geographies of commerce and re-inventing its social and financial relations with such geographies along new lines of cultural domination and commercial hegemony. Nowhere was it more apparent in the 1990s than perhaps in Kerala, the fledgling urban spaces of which began to nurture an imagination of Dubai as worthy of being emulated economically, spatially and culturally. This imagination was best reflected in what I call the dual base system of the trade in gold jewellery that came into being during the times—the dual base meant a financial base in Dubai and a control and managerial centre in Kerala, sourcing staff, managing public relations and facilitating brand campaigning. Gold jewellery stores like Alukkas, Chemmannur etc., that started on a rather modest scale in parts of Kerala and had established themselves as strong businesses in the 1980s in Dubai began to look back to Kerala and cities in other regions in India in the late 1990s as commercial sites. In less than two decades, some of them have to their credit, chain stores across the oceanic space of the Arabian Sea, even the Atlantic, more or less along the lines of department stores

[%2BUiEilDa8SWNrpU%3D](#). (accessed January 30, 2014)

34 George Varghese, K. "Skewed Trajectories: Gold and Globalization in Kerala," *Labour and Development* 9, no.1 (2003): 11-43 and "Globalization Traumas and New Social Imaginary: Vishwakarma Community of Kerala," *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, no.45 (2003): 4794-4802.

35 These two epithets of Dubai have been consistently used in official policy documents, advertisements, street hoardings and other forms of business correspondence since the mid-1990s within Dubai and abroad. I have taken the term from the web pages and press releases of the Dubai Gold and Jewelry Group. For details go to <http://www.dubaicityofgold.com/Facts-about-gold.pdf> (accessed May 5, 2012).

36 For details and figures on the place of gold in Dubai's economy go to <http://www.dubaicityofgold.com/amazing.htm>, (accessed May 5, 2012).

in the West, say for instance, Walmart and Tesco.

With the liberalization of India's gold import regime in the 1990s, an epoch in Dubai's economic history as the smuggling capital of the world came to an end. The decriminalizing of imports, the slashing of domestic rates to tally with the international price of gold and the issue of licenses more liberally to dealers of gold within India meant that smuggling was no longer a lucrative activity for the opportunistic. This however did not mean that Dubai lost its foothold in the global trade in gold. A set of schemes within the order of the gold import policy regime introduced specifically with the NRI or the Non-Resident Indian in view indeed worked to the commercial advantage of the city and helped it evolve a long-term strategy for urban growth on a global scale. The schemes in question launched in 1992 and revised once between 1992 and 1994 permitted NRIs returning to India every six months to bring in up to 10 kilograms of gold on payment of duties amounting to a meagre 220 rupees per 10 grams in foreign exchange.³⁷ Set forth as an immediate step to increase the flow of gold through official channels and to curb smuggling, these schemes only had to be juxtaposed alongside the revoked Gold Control Act, 1962³⁸ and the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act, 1973 (FERA)³⁹ to formulate a business recipe hinged on and navigating multiple spaces, polities, economies and legal regimes. Gold bullion, previously outlawed, could now be imported into India at a modest tariff of 6 per cent and as a substitute for private holdings in foreign currency meaning that a vast majority of the citizenry, including migrants preferred to store their private capital reserves in the form of gold.

The Non-Resident Indian as the new privileged agency in the 1990s' gold import scheme became a convenient category for the *Maktoums* and their policy advisors whose programmatic response to the whole political drama of liberalization in India as a blueprint for Dubai's urban growth, deserves some attention. Many of my informants including Vishwanathan were quick to draw my attention to the genesis overnight of a concept as the Dubai Shopping Festival, popularly known as the DSF and the politics of it as tied in unequivocal terms to the onset of liberalization and privatization policies in India. Vishwanathan in particular was quite articulate about the role of gold in all of the spaces and

37 For details see, MoonJoong Tcha, *Gold and the Modern World Economy* (London: Routledge, 2003), 84-85 and Himadri Bhattacharya, *Deregulation of Gold in India: A Case Study in Deregulation of the Gold Market* (World Gold Council, Research Study No. 27, 2003),

<http://www.thebulliondesk.com/content/reports/temp/india1.pdf> (accessed April 23, 2012).

38 The Gold Control Act was repealed in 1990, enabling the import of gold bullion into the country at a modest tariff of 6 per cent of the value of imports.

39 The repeal of the provisions of FERA, 1973 was a major policy reversal that was passed in 1993.

events that summarily defined it in 1996⁴⁰ when the event was first launched,

If there was any way smuggling could have continued, I am convinced, there would have been no DSF, in fact there would have been no need for it. DSF was not in the beginning what you see of it today. In those days, and you probably remember it yourself, you may have been thirteen then, the Gold Souk was the quarter where the intended effects of DSF were most visible. Come Thursday evenings, Indians, mostly Malayalis, flocked to the Gold Souk⁴¹ like bees to a flower. All of us did, none of us were exceptions. Wives bought gold while we husbands waited around with you children playing, called in to the counter only when it was time to pay, or if the women were undecided, to confirm their choice of designs. Those of us who were going home on vacation bought quite a bit of jewellery. In the beginning and up until 2000, it was mostly held at the end of March or beginning of April, just before summer vacations for schools started and when the weather was still tolerable. It was in June that schools were closed and most families travelled to India, either to come back by mid-August or to have their children admitted to high school in Kerala. DSF, whose biggest sponsors were Malayali jewellers was well timed for NRI purchases of gold in those days. There were very few malls then in Dubai, so the whole DSF hype that you see around shopping malls and department stores today was in fact non-existent then.

To be honest, I really don't think anything much has changed since then, and I am talking about what happens in terms of actual sales that the festival is intended to promote. You might see lots of foreigners, what I mean to say is whites, around, but it is still gold that sells like hot cakes with Indians, especially Malayalis continuing to be the biggest buyers.⁴²

To my question as to whether it was only the regime that benefitted from the category of the NRI and the privileges it entailed with respect to gold, apart from those individuals and groups that fell within it, his response was intriguing. For me, it put into perspective the Gulf War of 1991 which I had lived through as a child in the Emirates and its significance in altering the mindsets of Indian businessmen based in Dubai and the rest of the Gulf. That the liberalization schemes of the Indian state purpose-built for the NRI were a blessing in disguise for those Gulf-based traders affected by the post war state of economic insecurity and suspicion was not something I was ready to articulate until Vishwanathan affirmed it himself. An allowance of 10 kilograms of gold per passenger every six months not only meant that gold flowed liberally to Kerala on an everyday basis but that there were now more NRIs than ever before in the history of migration from the state. Additionally, an overwhelming majority of them were made so singularly in relationship to gold and the dynamics of its flow towards Kerala where a dual base jewellery trade was emerging and gaining ground by the mid-1990s. On the part of the administration and bureaucracy in Dubai, a relaxed visitor visa regime facilitating shopper tourism⁴³ ensured that such was the case.

40 Noor Nazzal, "19 Years of DSF through the Eyes of an Employee," *Gulf News*, January 22, 2014, <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/uae/tourism/19-years-of-dsf-through-the-eyes-of-an-employee-1.1280559> (accessed January 16, 2014).

41 For a detailed description of Gold Souk, go to the next section.

42 Interview with the author on 26 January, 2012 at Al Shaab in Deira.

43 The reference here is to the Russian shuttle trade that dominated the trade in Dubai in the 1990s.

Global Dubai, A View from the Gold Souk



Figure 4.1. Baniyas Road leading to the Gold Souk, Deira Dubai.

The first of my efforts to trace the marginal pasts and other histories of the globalization project in Dubai took me to the Gold Souk, a retail quarter dedicated in principle to the sale and exchange of gold, and located in Deira just across the Creek at Bani Yas Road. The site where the Gold Souk stands today was in many ways where the commercial history of modern Dubai began in the 1950s and the 1960s. The Gold Souk is in fact, part of an earlier spatial and temporal order of urban Dubai, the median site of which was the Creek, arterially splitting the city's trade into wholesale and retail quarters or a Sindhi Bur Dubai and an ethnically assorted Deira. The division, quite stark and graphic in the accounts of my Bhatia informants seemed to me, an outsider to the spatial politics of trade in Dubai, quite arbitrary, if not far-fetched. For one, the temporal sense of a city that the Bhatias had was lacking in my case. My view of Dubai, on the contrary, was sifted through the perceptions of various other categories of traders and social groups of migrants, including Malayalis and North Indians who worked with very different sets of criteria for the given division of the city into Bur Dubai and Deira. The invisibility of a scalar difference that the Bhatias were so vocal about, in a commercial landscape where wholesale trades often overlapped with retailing, signposted

more the claims that the community made to history and space in Dubai than to the actual commercial geography of the city.⁴⁴

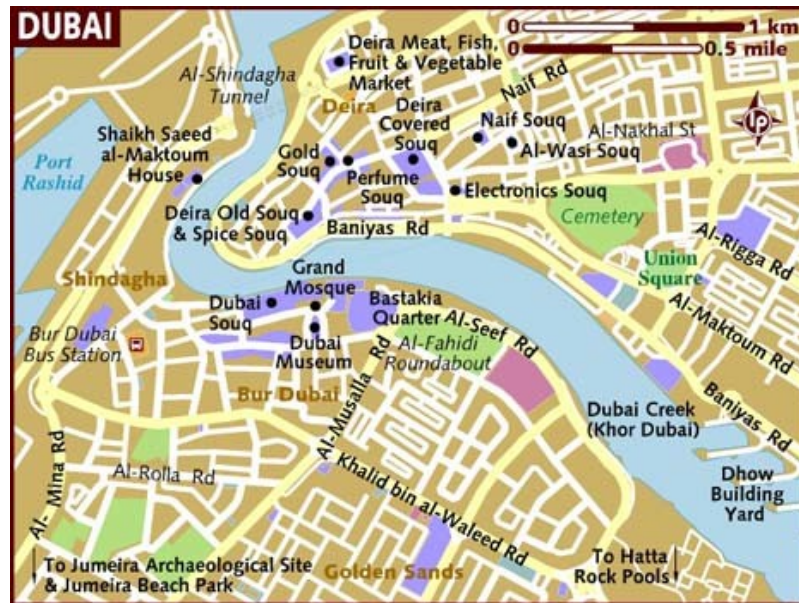


Figure 4.2. Map of the City of Dubai, UAE

The Bhatias were some of those "foreigners" first offered land for commercial and residential purposes by Shaikh Rashid in Bur Dubai in the 1950s and 60s and perhaps, according to many of them, the only ones to have acquired such privilege at his royal pleasure. Today many of them own private buildings and apartments in Bur Dubai, just across the creek and in the Meena Bazaar quarters as well as in the *Bur Juman* and *Oud Mehta* areas. A vast majority of these properties have been leased out to "newcomers" as they refer to traders and merchants who came in to Dubai much later than they did, while the community itself lives in *Jumeirah* and other high end areas of New Dubai. Bur Dubai is also the site of many of their community institutions including the Indian Association, the India Club, the Indian High School and the Hindu Temple that the Bhatias refer to as the *Shrinathji Haveli*. Looked at from this perspective, one can only interpret the Bhatia definition of a wholesale Bur Dubai as one belonging to an earlier social order in which the distinction between residential and commercial properties and the terms of their ownership and use were rather blurred.

The distinction between wholesale and retail trades in gold however, seems relatively more apparent to the lay person or a novice in Dubai. The dynamics of space, scale and visibility were rather different with gold and remain tied to a distinct history and the social and spatial

⁴⁴ It remains to be said that wholesale trade even in the case of Bhatias did not mean more than offices of trading establishments and licensed dealers in Bur Dubai where deals were made and contracts signed, a case in point being Magabha's Arabian Agency.

hierarchies of smuggling in the city. The present site in Deira where the Gold souk stands was where a distinct strand in Dubai's urban history, manifest in dhows laden with gold and sailing out to the west coast of India from the waters of the Creek, began. It was yet again where Sonis sat at their little shops with minimal displays of jewellery waiting for orders for bangles, chains, necklaces and bracelets, from Arab businessmen and rulers in the 1960s and Indian families traveling home on vacation in the 1970s and 1980s. The Gold Souk is important, not merely for these historical reasons, but because the contemporary geography of gold retailing in Dubai has not in any real sense extended beyond the borders of the Gold Souk.⁴⁵ To be sure, there are branded jewellery outlets in malls and kiosks in supermarkets and department stores, nevertheless they do not serve except as marketing niches and advertisement tableaux for many of the chains stores and dual base jewellery systems referred to in the preceding section.

I took a public bus one evening in December that took me on a 45 minute drive in a southern and later a southwestern direction from the Abu Hail metro station in Al Shabab to the Gold Souk. What I witnessed as I got off at the Gold Souk Bus station was a long corridor lined on the two sides by gold stores that could be readily distinguished in terms of the ethnicity of their owners and customers by the jewelry designs displayed on their windows and the scripts in which the names of the stores were embellished. The shops I saw in my immediate vicinity did not seem to greet me except as a tourist who should be looking at the exotic ethnic designs displayed in shop windows, feeling at one with the many white, Russian, Indian, Chinese and African tourists taking a stroll of the street at dusk. Nevertheless, tourist as I was, I was Indian, a woman and all by myself. “You could have been Indian from India, from the UK, the USA, Australia or even Singapore, but your merely being Indian and moving about the Gold Souk at seven on a December night could only have meant that you were on a buying spree preceding a vacation in India or elsewhere,” said Joseph George, a senior reporter at Emirates 24/7 and who covers the themes that constituted the India-Dubai mediascape, ranging from law and diplomacy to commerce and entertainment⁴⁶. Joseph has had a serious interest in gold smuggling and the changing legal practices informing the transfer of the metal via the NRI channel into India ever since he moved to Dubai which was not longer than five years ago.⁴⁷ The topography of Dubai's gold retailing instantly placed me within its contours

45 There are gold retailing stores in Bur Dubai too; nonetheless, most of my informants were convinced that they are actually wholesalers and used to be once active in the smuggling trade.

46 Interview with the author in Dubai, November 30, 2011.

47 Two of Joseph's recent articles include “NRIs facing special gold scans at major Indian airports,” *Emirates 24/7*, May 02, 2012, <http://www.emirates247.com/news/emirates/nris-facing-special-gold-scans-at-major-indian->

along ethnic lines which apparently translated into my personal choice and social propensities of consumption of the metal for those around me. The absolute resistance of the social and ethnic landscape of Dubai's retail trade to incorporate me as anybody but a researcher and an Indian researcher, meant that even nascent ethnographic advances at the site were out of the question.



Figure 4.3. The Alley within the Gold Souk

“If you want to buy gold, go to the furthest end of the street,” advised a Hindi speaking cart puller and a Bangladeshi citizen who noticed the perplexed look on my face and my very contemporary Indian combination of a *kurta*⁴⁸ paired with jeans. Now that he was convinced of my Indian-ness and therefore my status exclusively as a buyer what he presumed I should be doing was heading towards the latter end of the corridor where was based the Indian or more precisely the Sindhi/Gujarati contingent of jewelers. With my addressing him as “bhaiya” which literally means brother and thanking him in a Hindi that could only have been

[airports-2012-05-02-1.456769](#), and “Rising gold prices reopen India smuggling route,” *Emirates* 24/7, October 19, 2011., <http://www.emirates247.com/crime/local/rising-gold-prices-reopen-india-smuggling-route-2011-10-19-1.424205> (accessed October 23, 2012).

48 A *kurta* is a long stitched garment worn like a shirt and over leggings, jeans or the traditional *shalwars*.

learnt in a classroom somewhere in South India, he reconsidered his suggestion for a moment adding “Madam, you must check out the Gold Centre too, you have Alukkas and Malabar Gold there. Lots of Indians buy gold there.” We parted after he gave me directions to turn back, keep to my left and to enter a large four storied mall of gold leading to the main road, paying no heed to my curious query on his whereabouts in the Indian subcontinent, the nature of his work in Dubai, what he carried in his cart and the like. The smiles he flashed as I walked alongside him and the probing looks of other Bangladeshi, and Pakistani cart pullers, easily distinguished by their *lungis* and their *shalwar khameez*⁴⁹ respectively, and the hushed whispers of young Indian men with cell phones in their hands vanishing into dark alleys joining the street as they discreetly chanted “Want ladies bags, watches, perfumes? Duplicates available of all brands,” warned me against getting too far with my curiosity. It was not a woman's fear of strange working class South Asian men bundled in ethnic bands with each conversing in their own dialects, mostly making stray comments at their own, that stopped me from asking questions to people I reckoned would have the answers. Everybody, whether cart puller, fake dealer or shop assistant seemed to be harboring a certain anxiety, a fear that pulsed through the entire space. It was a fear, I had seen and felt elsewhere in the city⁵⁰ and corners in highly vibrant commercial streets in *Meena Bazaar* where dealers in fake goods had stakes in. My very 'innocuous' attempts at friendly chats with the young Malayali boys who walked about eyeing potential customers and chanting the same lines as those in the Gold Souk convinced them that I was a reporter for some regional news channel and on a mission of espionage. I could, if not a tourist or a buyer, have only been a journalist or an agent for the Dubai government who could report on dealers in fake goods and the nature of their stocks which could result in a big haul of illegal stuff for the Police. My supposed identity as a journalist was precarious not only for these fake dealers but also for the state that could only interpret my interest in the activities of the Souk as part of the conspiracy of international media to tarnish Dubai's otherwise enviable image of success. It was evident in the two hours I spent in the Gold Souk that everybody perceived everybody else through lenses colored in terms of ethnicity, professional identity, gender, whether one travelled as an individual or as part of a family with children etc., and built up an atmosphere charged with suspicion operating at multiple levels. The refusal of the gold quarter of the city to accord any kind of

49 A *lungi* is a piece of cloth draped around the lower part of the body with a twist or a knot at the waist. Sometimes it is also sewn into the shape of a skirt. It is a piece of clothing popular among both men and women in Bangladesh.

50 The “elsewhere” I am referring to here is the Meena Bazaar in Bur Dubai which was where I had my first encounter with a transnational racket dealing in fake goods, mostly leather goods, perfumes and watches.

legitimate identity to an individual except that of a consumer, I argue, is symptomatic of other quarters within the city and of the urban entity that Dubai is at large.

I left the Bangladeshi man besides whom I was walking and his cart behind me at the beginning of the Indian segment which housed shops with Sindhi/Gujarati names. They were shops with very little display of jewelry, old and unattractive signboards and had names that gave one little sense of them as brands quite unlike the groups that my cart puller acquaintance had referred to. I was not very welcome even as the men in these shops saw me peering intently at their windows from outside. My cultural sense of traditional business spaces, communities and practices in India, particularly of jewelers instantly told me that they were the Sonis and their descendants.⁵¹ With not many customers in them, their contrast to the gold brand shops and their indifference to any kind of marketing it was difficult to understand their current position in the commercial map of Dubai's many retail trades. Walking back from where the gold street branched into a readymade and accessories street I entered the Gold Centre, stopping at the entrance to most shops but refusing to make my way into them through the thronging crowds of mostly Indian shoppers. A vast majority of the shops in Gold Centre were retail units owned by businessmen from Kerala. Some of them, say Atlas and Malabar Gold were not more than twenty years old,⁵² while others like Alukkas had established themselves in Dubai in the mid-1980s.

The quest for the history of Dubai's gold trade in occasional visits to the Gold Souk gave me a vague and punctuated sense of its ethnic and social dimensions. Nonetheless it was easier to lose focus than to gain it with a bazaar⁵³ like environment closing in on you, with your ethnicity slotting and overshadowing your personal interest in gold and with policemen hovering around you in civilian clothes, just in case your curiosity for fake stuff and your entering into a bargain with dealers in them led these officers of the state on to an exercise in busting these illegal rackets. It was necessary to have a more precise temporal sense of gold in Dubai's history and the shifts in its commercial practices over the decades. Conversations with acquaintances and friends in the media on the nature and objectives of my research on Dubai helped me surmount quite a few hurdles in my path.

51 Sonis are goldsmiths from Gujarat and Sind. They migrated to parts of India and Dubai from Sind following partition.

52 The group Atlas, located on the second story, moved to Dubai from Kuwait after the war (1991) while Malabar Gold is a quite recent entrant and does not have a base older than 4 years in Dubai.

53 I have used the term bazaar here quite loosely to indicate the physical organization of different retail units within the quarter of Deira dedicated to the trade in gold.



Figure 4.4. A Gujarati owned jewelry store in the Gold Souk.

The barriers that my ethnicity posed to any such endeavor at the sites of history could now, I began to believe, possibly be tapped to actually break ground with potential informants outside them.

Commodity, Gift, Brand: Gold and a Society in Transition

Suggestions, recommendations and a couple of phone calls later, I was at the marketing and corporate headquarters of the Joyalukkas Group⁵⁴ and in conversation with its Chairman and Managing Director Joy Alukka. Joyalukkas, which calls itself the "*world's favourite jeweller*," had its humble beginnings in an umbrella mart and a jewellery store in Thrissur, Kerala, more than sixty years ago. It is now an international retail chain of gold and diamond jewellery with more than 80 outlets and showrooms in cities in India, the Middle East, USA, UK and the Far East and has collections and designs in jewellery from across the world. Alukka had a casual air about him as he began talking about himself, rather the entrepreneur in him and the commercial empire that he helped build in less than three decades, demystifying Joyalukkas as a brand, and in the process, the very concept of brands itself. "Joyalukkas is no big or global brand as you may take it to be, nor am I a big business

⁵⁴ Joyalukkas Group of establishments are broadly grouped under two major holdings—Joyalukkas India Limited and Joyalukkas LLC, Dubai.

magnate. This is all plain marketing, a strategy to survive, you see, in a highly competitive global marketplace,” were the words with which Alukka opened the first of the two conversations I had with him in January, 2011 in Dubai.

I was introduced to Alukka by Albert Alex, a senior media professional based in Dubai and an alumnus of the college I went to in Kerala in the late 1990s. Mar Ivanios, a Syrian Catholic arts and sciences college based in Trivandrum, Kerala, with its alumni chapters across the globe has a noted presence among the Malayali professional and business elite in Dubai. The remarkable inroads that the alumni community called *Amicos* had made into the public domains of Dubai's social and cultural life translated into access for me as a researcher into some of the exemplary realms of Malayali diasporic life and activity in Dubai. The story of my meeting with Joy Alukkas was no different. With Alex having put me through to him, Alukka was evidently expecting a routine set of very formal questions and a very different tone to the interview than the one I had taken on with him in his office chamber. It was evident that he was quite unprepared to meet a young scholar who had gone all the way from Mar Ivanios to a university in Johannesburg and was stopping by in Dubai to study the life histories of Malayali capitalists like him. However, having narrated my own Syrian Christian background and revealing my academic interest in Dubai as having evolved from a personal history of migration, he seemed more at ease and suggested we continue the conversation in the drawing room of his house in Karama,⁵⁵ where I could meet his family and where there would be no calls from his secretary or clients. At the Alukkases' home, I set the context for the rest of the evening's conversation by mapping the trajectory of gold trade in the two and a half decades of Malayalee involvement in Dubai's retail history, duly emphasizing the transition from the traditional artisanal shop to the jewelry store, the gold supermarket, and mall to an international brand store and showroom, and the part played by Joyalukkas in all of these.

My decision to start off on the gold trek with the Joyalukkas group was not in the least bit arbitrary. It was its pioneer status in many aspects of gold retailing and branding and the role played by Dubai in according it such status that was of interest to the researcher in me. For instance, it was the first jewellery group in Kerala that based itself on the principle of economies of scale as a factor of growth setting up multiple jewellery stores in Thrissur,

⁵⁵ Karama is a part of Bur Dubai where the richer South Asians and other foreign migrants have lived for the major part of Dubai's urban history. It is home to many South Asian businesses and commercial enterprises as well as social clubs and community institutions.

Calicut, Abu Dhabi and Dubai. It was called Alukkas Jewellery then. It was also the group, according to Alukka himself, that first used the family name of Alukkas as a marketing strategy and as a cultural signifier of gold jewellery in Kerala and Dubai. This he reminded me, was a Syrian Christian tradition of doing business and in vogue in Thrissur and other parts of the Christian dominated pockets in Central Kerala at least from the early 20th century and that they had only exported it to Dubai like Chemmanur for instance. A range of advertisements in the late 1980s and early 1990s of Alukkas Jewellery appearing in video cassette recordings of Malayalam films exported to markets in Dubai and the Persian Gulf—these catering to a Malayali viewership based in the region, Kerala or other parts of India—were what translated Alukkas into a distinct cultural signifier of gold among Malayalis.⁵⁶ These advertisements projected gold as a commodity central to defining Malayali social identity or more precisely Malayali femininity by virtue of the wedding ceremony and the institution of marriage. They depicted the bride, the bridesmaids and the women attending the wedding as decked up in gold and sharing moments of playfulness thus circumscribing the limits of social performance of their femininity around the jewellery collection. Men were present only as fathers, uncles or the groom. Their relationship with and affection for the bride were defined by the act of gifting her with a gold bangle or chain, which was an auspicious act, a blessing and in the case of the groom, a vow symbolizing protection, honor and commitment to his wife to be.⁵⁷

Joyalukkas became the brand that it is today, in 2001 when Alukkas Jewellery, the store established by Alukka. J. Varghese in 1956 in Thrissur, the commercial capital of Kerala and the district with the third largest number of Gulf migrants,⁵⁸ split into 4 business groups with each group carrying the name of the sibling that owned it.⁵⁹ Alukkas Jewelry was one among

56 These video cassettes which can hardly be found outside the private collections of mostly Gulf returnees now living in Kerala, have formed a valuable source for the work. Access to this category of sources has been restricted not merely by their being held as private possessions and the difficulty of procuring them. The technology of the video cassette has long become part of history and interests in its continuity as a medium of home entertainment are practically non-existent. What this means is that most of the video collections held by individuals in the 1980s and the 1990s have now degenerated through lack of usage and services and the digitization of cinema. My access to these video cassettes were mediated by my informal contacts with the family of Gulf returnees and my own social location as a Malayalee growing up in Dubai in the 1980s.

57 Go to http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p8s_XaAzkF8&feature=related, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uVm9FdmRC6k&feature=related>, (accessed July 22, 2011) to watch some of these advertisements that I have used to make the argument. Advertisements in the wedding genre were a significant break from those in the mid 1980s of jewelers like Atlas and Elite which portrayed ornaments and designs that formed part of their collections or included moving images of the display of jewelry in their shop windows.

58 K.C.Zachariah, E.T. Mathew and S. Irudaya Rajan, "Impact of Migration on Kerala's Economy and Society," Working paper No. 297, Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram. <http://www.cds.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/wp297.pdf>, (accessed January 11, 2011).

59 The other three groups are Jos Alukkas, Paul Alukkas and Francis Alukkas. They have their own jewelry stores in Kerala and have expanded into other states in India but still lack a global presence and a brand name

many jewelry stores in Thrissur that helped mould the cultural imaginary of a people around the yellow metal in the 1960s and the 1970s, when the increased availability of 22 carat gold and the increasing number of Gulf migrants within the state began to endow gold with newer and more intense social values and meanings. With *Gulfkkar*, most of them unmarried and in their twenties coming home in considerable numbers after a 'successful' stint in Dubai, a gift economy based on the institution and set of rites constitutive of marriage and defined predominantly in terms of the exchange of gold began to evolve. Alukkas recalls his days as a young lad in his father's shop in Thrissur in the late 1970s when he witnessed the sharp rise in the number of customers all of whom were Gulf based, Gulf bound or both.

I have a shop now in every GCC country, in Qatar, I have three, in Muscat 5, in Saudi 3 and a shop or more in every emirate. When we had a shop in Thrissur, we had lots of customers from the Gulf coming over. The *Gulfkkar* in those days, were men who would come to Kerala to get married, after which they would go back. It was contact with them that gave me an opportunity to come to the Gulf. That's how I got to see lots of these things. These Gulf men would come to our shop to sell gold—I was witness to this at least from 1979 on. I only got a chance to come here in 1986. These men would come and exchange gold in our shops. People who would come to get married, eh, the groom who was a Gulf-man wearing bell bottom trousers and sunglasses would come to the shop, to do this.

Even as Alukka talked about *Gulfkkar* buying up gold on the occasion of their wedding, the hints at their doing so for that of their sisters, cousins and nieces were rather glaring. These were in fact cues that could have easily been lost had not a shared background in culture and social history annotated his unwitting silence on such practices and impelled me to look 'elsewhere' for affirmation. I had been told of practices of exchange and consumption of gold, cash, *sarees* and other articles centered around marrying off the women these men had blood and kinship ties with during the first round of my fieldwork in Malabar which preceded the ethnographic research in Dubai itself. The standard conversation in the village around a marital alliance with a *Gulfkkaran*, his sister, niece, or even a cousin for that matter were primarily appraisals of the volume of gold that would be exchanged, which depended on the prospective bride's proximity by blood to the *Gulfkkaran* himself. For instance, in the late 1970s the sister's dowry could go up to 35 sovereigns⁶⁰ or more while he was often expected to give a cousin at least 10 sovereigns depending upon the class and caste they hailed from and the worth of the assets back home the migrant himself could lay claim to. In return he could claim from the family of his bride an equal or even greater number of sovereigns as part of the many exchanges and transfers constituting the marriage. Today the "going rate" as they

unlike Joy Alukkas. The Alukkases have diversified into many other businesses, including currency exchange and real estate over the last decade and are a visible force to reckon with in Kerala and the Middle East.

⁶⁰ A sovereign weighs 8 grammes and is a standard measure used in gold stores and other informal transactions in India. It does not actually relate to the purity of gold although in principle it ought to be 22 carats.

call it is a hundred and ten sovereigns besides cash and other gifts which could include a car or a flat as well.

The moral obligation and social practice of gifting gold insofar as it applied to the migrant did not end with the wedding. An entire series of life-cycle rituals continuing through baby showers, christening, ear piercing, baptism, bangles and house warming ceremonies and carried it through to the betrothal and marriage of the next generation. It was a lifetime of giving away, as the wives of many of these men recalled, and the burdensome obligations borne by their husbands towards many of their extended families that badly affected their financial situation as a nuclear unit, no matter whether they lived in Dubai or Kerala. The force of these obligations and exchanges around gold, cash and other commodities, they pointed out to me, was so intense that weddings in many villages had been strategically timed in those days to coincide with the arrival of the brother, cousin or uncle from the Gulf.

What we see emerge in the course of the discussion is in fact a whole system of contractual exchanges involving men, women, gold and cash that defined a Malayali society hinged largely on Gulf migration in the 1970s and 1980s. This regime of gifting and exchange resembles in many ways that of Mauss' Polynesian societies except that it was characteristic not of a 'primitive' society but one that development theorists in the 1970s including Amartya Sen had termed "modern."⁶¹ The gift economy must not be construed as an anomaly in an otherwise "modern" society remarkable for its performance in education, health and other aspects of social life and for its phenomenal political consciousness (including high rates of participation in public life as citizens) owing to which Kerala was hailed as a model of development.⁶² On the contrary, it must be perceived as a fallout and a significant facet of the very modernity that made public individuals and in many ways suitable citizens of Malayalis in the wake of such developments as Colonialism, Christianity and Communism in the late 19th and early part of the 20th centuries in Kerala.⁶³ I do not wish to elaborate on these intertwined pathways to modernity in Kerala which scholars have addressed at some length.

61 See Amartya Sen, *Economic Development and Social Change: India and China in Comparative Perspectives* (London: London School of Economics, 1995).

62 Robin Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-being: How Kerala became a 'Model'* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993); Govindan Parayil and T.T. Sreekumar, "Kerala's Experience of Development and Social Change," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 33, no.4 (2003): 465-492; Gemma Cairo, "State and Society Relationships in India: Explaining the Kerala Experience," *Asian Survey* 41, no.4 (2001): 669-692.

63 Historians and critics have offered modernity and its multiple facets in Kerala genealogies in colonialism, the onslaught of Christianity and the birth of Communism. Dilip M. Menon, "Religion and Colonial Modernity: Rethinking Belief and Identity," *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no.17 (2002): 1662-1667; J. Devika, "Egalitarian Developmentalism, Communist Mobilization and the Question of Caste in Kerala State, India," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no.3 (2010): 799-820.

However what I do wish to accentuate here is the project of the formation and casting of the self in modernity, the incorporation of the individual self into a secular order of society and politics and the significance that both individuals and societies attached to its possible conduits in everyday living. The "reciprocal conception" of the individual and society that Norbert Elias⁶⁴ calls for and the "needing to become what one is" that Zygmunt Bauman reminds us of,⁶⁵ are the foundations on which the gift economy in question can be argued for. The greater the public visibility of the individual, the more intense had to be his/her investment in the private self. This was enabled by among other things, say the political and religious discourses of reform, commodities and their consumption. The gift economy, reviled by the developmental state as rooted in undesirable practices in a modern nation is, I argue, modernity's most palpable material form.

Gold, Commercial Modernity and the Route to Global Urbanity

The notion of the modern in the latter decades of 20th century in Kerala, had as Prestholdt writing about consumer imports and cultural domestication in 19th century Zanzibar asserts, "was no longer simply temporal but had become comparative, cultural and exclusive."⁶⁶ The temporal, comparative, cultural and exclusive dimensions of the modern as it was mediated by Gulf migration and its practices of social mobility, commodity circulation and gift transactions in Kerala was nowhere more institutionalized for Malayalis than in the Dubai of the 1980s and the 1990s. To understand Dubai and its commercial arena in gold as the site of such institutionalization, I turn to the personal memories of Joy Alukka who had pioneered its many concepts and strategies as well as some of his staff in Dubai who through their own interactions with customers implement and sustain them on a daily basis.

Alukka's account of Dubai's gold trade prior to his entry into it in the latter half of the 1980s is marked by a sense of a long and stretched out temporality (although the period he alludes to is not longer than three decades) in the course of which nothing as it pertained to commercial practices changed. His repeated use of the term "unprofessional" to qualify pre-Alukkasian practices in the retailing of gold in Dubai and parts of India through the conversation testifies to his understanding of them as situated within the institution of the bazaar, although he does

64 The reciprocal conception of society and individual is a perspective that foregrounds society as shaping individuals even as individuals constitute societies through their everyday actions the contours and limits of which are determined by the interlocking of the two. For details refer, *The Society of Individuals*, ed. Michael Schröter and trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Continuum, 2001).

65 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 32.

66 Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World*, 89.

not explicitly use the term bazaar. The bazaar, as I deploy it here and to qualify the milieu prior to the Alukkases is premised on Geertz's concept of it—a "distinctive system of social relationships" the specificities of which include poor, scarce and unevenly distributed information on pricing and quality of goods, the trader's monopoly over information as the basis of his profit and the success of business, the physical agglomeration of the trading houses within a quarter of the city and the heterogenous and non-standardized nature of the commodities of trade and signals an epoch that underscored Dubai as not yet within the fold of modernity.⁶⁷ What Alukka's intervention meant for Dubai's gold trade in the 1990s and for the global trade of the metal in the post-1990s can only be made sense of against this backdrop of a commercial past ascribed to it.

I came here, introduced a billing system and came up with what was called a gold price, making charges, stone charges etc. That helped me quite a bit. It was during that times that Chemmannur jewelry, Vijaya jewelry and the likes of them were started. I opened a shop in Dubai in 1987. They had only started but began following the billing and pricing systems I set up. I was the one who first introduced the concept of the uniform, both in Dubai and India. There were no uniforms before that. The salespeople wore different colored shirts then, plus in my shop nobody could have a mustache. That is part of Joy Alukkas' identity.

When I started with uniforms, some seemingly big gold businesses and shops ridiculed me, "why, are they cabbies?" I brought in a certain discipline within the entire business. The practice of setting up a 100 sq ft shop gave way to big shops. All the shops I started were big shops. Many people began to follow my example. A big shop in India, when we were still undivided, we started in Thrissur. People were taken aback, because they had not seen such a thing before and so they nicknamed it the gold supermarket. I brought about a change in gold business that way.

When I introduced uniforms my brothers in India were against it. Then I went to India and started a shop there in 2002. Now in all shops in Kerala and India you find men and women in uniforms. The practice of shop owners sitting at the cash counter does not exist anymore. Earlier, it was the owner of the shop who was the cashier. I started an office for my shop in India and got my eldest brother to inaugurate it. My brother kept telling others "look at the *Gulkkaran*, the *parishkaari*,"⁶⁸ he is sitting in an office. The jewelry was where the owner sits and at the cash counter, receiving customers. But today in Kerala, I have showed others, my competitors how one can have multiple shops. Otherwise, it was a single shop, with the owner. In Kerala, South India, and to some extent even in India, I showed people how they can have multiple shops. I started a textiles shop, and followed it up with 4 or 5 shops. So even textile shops that talk about a 100 years of commercial history have only now begun to acquire the techniques and technology required for multiple businesses. That's a big change. That's a different history altogether.

The history in Dubai is different. Here, I paid attention to the interior of the shop, developed new designs, many people followed it, implemented new patterns in jewelry, came up with new brands. I conducted many experiments. All these have yielded results. After partition, I changed the name to *Joyalukkas*, I have managed to make it a household name. It was Dubai that helped me do all this,

67 Clifford Geertz, *Peddlers and Princes: Social Change and Economic Modernization in Two Indonesian Towns* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 28; "Suq: The Bazaar Economy in Seffrou," in *Meaning and Order in Moroccan Society: Three Essays in Cultural Analysis*, ed. Clifford Geertz, Hildred Geertz and Lawrence Rosen (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 214. Also see Rajat Kanta Ray, "Asian Capital in the Age of European Domination: the Rise of the Bazaar, 1800-1914," *Modern Asian Studies* 29, no.3 (1995): 449-554.

68 *Parishkari* is a word in Malayalam the literal meaning of which is reformer.

the growth I achieved here has been huge. Even though I do not have an MBA, I spotted the good things here, adapted and implemented them. That's an achievement.

The shift in commercial practices Alukka effected around gold in Dubai gave way to a larger transition that was both structural and perceptual—structural because these changing practices extricated gold from the bazaar economy and implanted it within a modern economic system of standardized commodity markets; perceptual because, gold was now a commodity entering and shaping the realm of consumption via new experiences and constituencies of the phenomenon. The modernization of retailing consisted of a series of steps, primary among which was the standardization and break up of prices. Alukka's efforts at standardizing the price of gold culminated in a uniform gold rate per gram of the metal across the UAE. The gold rate which was calibrated on a daily basis reflected in *Dirhams*, the *Emirati* currency, the international market price of gold as declared by the open market in London.

The gold rate began to be displayed in jewelry shops for the benefit of the customers. The price of jewelry was obviously more than the standard market price of gold and included labour or making charges as it was called and other hidden costs. Labour charges were contingent on a number of factors including the design, wastage and the mode of manufacture of the ornament and varied from jeweler to jeweler. For instance, a piece of jewelry carved out and worked on by an artisan was often valued at a higher price than that cut by machines resulting in higher making charges for it. These began to be listed alongside the price of the metal thereby giving the customer the option to make purchases of the metal on the basis of price differentials in different stores and redefining him or her as a standalone entity rescued from the predatory instincts of pre-modern traders.

Redefining the customer also called for the transformation of the experience of buying which now happened in well managed and comfortable shops. Paul Manjila, the Area Manager of *Joyalukkas* for the Emirates emphasized the premium that their brand placed on service and communication which boosted customer confidence in the quality and purity of the gold that they offered as well as their sales practices and pricing. The informality involved in pricing and the casual offer of discounts in earlier times now gave way to other kinds of informality around the actual process of sale. Abin,⁶⁹ a 23 year old salesperson at one of the *Joyalukkas* stores in Gold Land, who was quite amused by my interest in his tactics at selling, quickly gave away the secrets.

⁶⁹ Abin is a pseudonym for the person.



Figure 4.5. A salesperson at the Joyalukkas outlet in the Gold centre.

He said that it was well-dressed executives, mostly men, who could talk people, particularly older women into buying, drop a hint or two of higher prices charged in other stores and subsequently maneuver the husband's decision to buy from them and distract the children with jokes that constituted what is called service and communication in businesses like theirs.

Having captured a customer base in business, the next level was commercial campaigning around gold through advertisements and event sponsorships, and gearing it to become a part of Dubai's official brand image and urban identity. Cultural events and festivals sponsored by *Joyalukkas* and other jewellery groups included celebrity evenings and star nights in which popular actors were flown in from India to perform for the several expatriate communities living in the Arab Gulf. What began as Indian, mostly Hindi and Malayali celebrity evenings in the late 1980s, is now a major urban convention with the city becoming a venue for all kinds of international events from cultural performances to award ceremonies and sporting events, some of which are staged as part of its larger festival and spectacle seasons, say the Dubai Shopping Festival, Sumer Surprises⁷⁰ etc.

⁷⁰ 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).

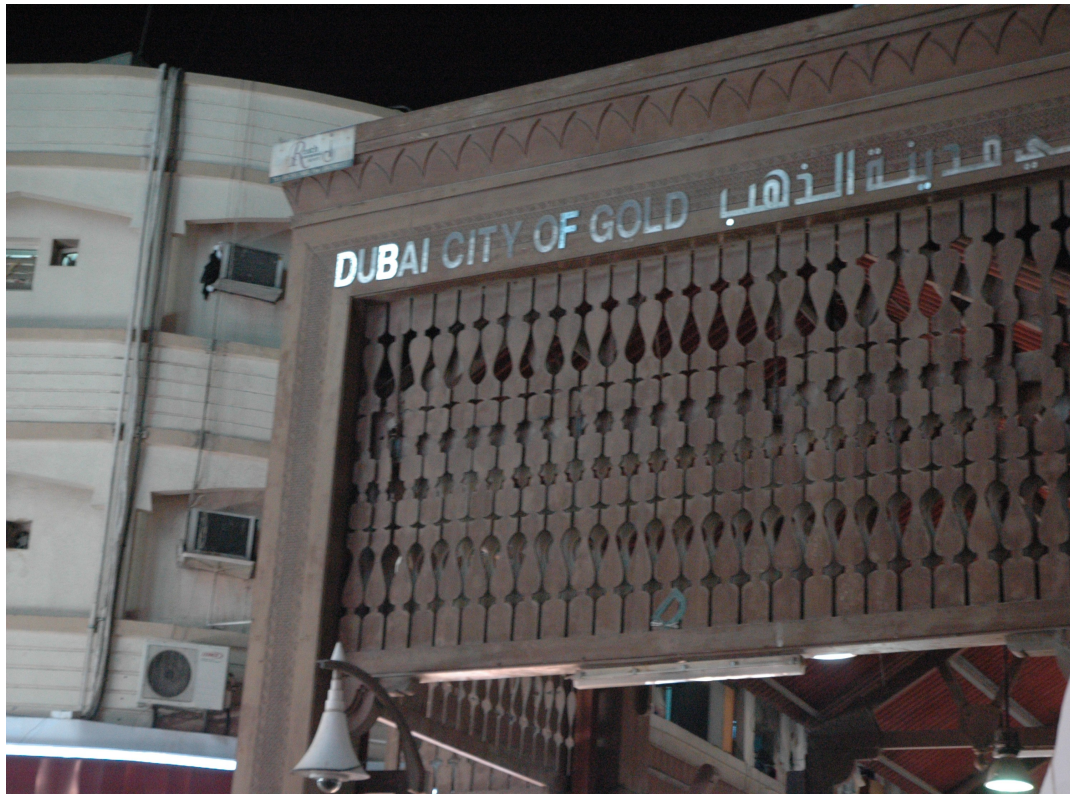


Figure 4.6. The entrance leading to the Gold Souk.

Partnering with the state and its ministerial departments, Alukka joined other retailers, wholesalers and bullion dealers to establish the Dubai Gold and Jewellery Group (DGJG) in 1996, the year that the Dubai Shopping festival (DSF) was launched for the first time. The state-private partnership in the marketing of gold and Dubai, increasingly becoming synonymous with each other, was institutionalized in the raffle draw organized as part of the 1996 DSF when 50 kilograms of gold worth 2.5 million dirhams were given away as prizes to winners on a daily basis. A report in the *Times of India* published in 1998 on Dubai's status as the gold corridor of the world and the correlation between the metal and the city neatly sums it up for us:⁷¹

Dubai's gold trade launched the slogan of “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.⁷²

71 “Dubai gearing up for the gala mall,” in *The Times of India*, 19 October, 1995.

72 “The Gold Corridor,” *The Times of India*, March 14, 1998.

Today nineteen years into the launch of the DSF, the practice of giving away gold as prizes continues and is a huge factor in pulling shoppers from all parts of the world. It has been estimated that “four million more shoppers find their way to the retail and jewellery shops of Dubai in every edition of the DSF” and is the most sold commodity during the festival.⁷³ Joyalukkas' strategy of marketing itself as a global brand by acquiring a stake in the urban project called Dubai and through the cultural dividends and symbolic gains accruing to the city has taken both Dubai and the group a long way in their trajectories as commercial entities in the 21st century.

Conclusion

Dubai's beginnings as an urban brand, the paper illustrates, goes back to the Malayali migration of the 1970s when the city became associated in the popular imagination of the community among others in India, with gold, electronics, textiles and other consumer goods. The implications of these social imaginaries for the urban history of the city have included the development of a commercial economy specialized in particular kinds of commodities, sometimes legitimately transferred and otherwise smuggled to India. The transitions at a structural and perceptual level in the commercial domain of gold that we have seen in the paper, I argue, stand as metaphors for the transition of the city in and of Dubai. They were the fledgling signs of Dubai's mutation from a city predominantly defined by the incessant circulation of commodities, money and people to one in which these began to permeate in the form of establishments that looked to it for commercial legitimacy as much as for brand identities.

73 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).