

Everyday Afterlives

Tracing Diasporic Lives through India's Imperial Archives

Julia Stephens

“Everyday Afterlives” traces the global networks of diasporic Indian families through British imperial inheritance records. Britain developed an elaborate bureaucracy for managing the estates of merchants, pilgrims, seamen, and laborers who died abroad. Unfolding at the intersection of the colonial state’s concern with property and its global territorial aspirations, the records of these estates provide a glimpse into the intimate lives of subjects who otherwise rarely appear in archives. Today these records offer unique insight into how Indian families maintained and forged new connections as they migrated across Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. When itinerant Indians died, they left behind diasporic legacies, with treasured possessions and beloved (or not so beloved) relatives spread across the globe. Family members and government officials struggled for control over these legacies, which ranged from princely fortunes to a few personal effects, including letters, jewelry, or a pocketful of receipts for small debts owed by fellow travelers. The virtually unexplored archive these struggles left in their wake points to how imperial control over labor and capital was deeply entangled with family networks. Both diasporic families and colonial bureaucracies were mutually shaped by these interactions, evolving new methods of exercising control across vast and variegated landscapes. These histories challenge conventional accounts of the development of the modern state, which have emphasized the increasing territorialization and depersonalization of sovereignty and governance. Instead struggles for control over diasporic legacies suggest that personal networks and affective bonds proved crucial as states attempted to control people and assets that moved across national and imperial borders.

As part of this larger project, Stephens is researching inheritance cases involving Khoja and Memon merchants who maintained family and trading networks spread across Gujarat, Bombay, and Zanzibar. The Khojas and Memons, two sects of Indian Muslims, forged hugely successful trading diasporas. During the course of the nineteenth century, Khoja and Memon merchants skyrocketed from humble origins to amass fortunes trading between India and East Africa. The

Khojas and Memons were also known for their idiosyncratic inheritance practices, which combined elements of Hindu and Muslim practices. Inheritance cases involving Khoja and Memon families in India and East Africa helped spur the development of new bodies of colonial law that recognized the validity of regional customs. As Khoja and Memon merchants migrated, however, the very concept of custom was increasingly called into question. When dividing their estates, they incorporated different local practices while using wills, gifts, and charitable endowments to manage families and finances spread across vast distances. Drawing on probate records and court cases, the project traces how Khojas and Memons merchants divided their estates to accommodate myriad different circumstances, ranging from estranged relatives and illegitimate offspring to conflicting interpretations of religious tenants. While colonial law defined religious communities based on the longevity and rigidity of their customary practices, diasporic families used the very flexibility of their customs to maintain connections in varied settings. As colonial courts in different places encountered conflicting interpretations of custom, they were forced to rethink the very concept of custom, and with it, the relationship between community, tradition, and space.