

## INAUGURAL WIOS CONFERENCE REPORT

*Florida International University*

The inaugural western Indian Ocean studies conference entitled ‘Rāhē najāt (The path of salvation): Religious and social dynamics amongst mercantile communities of the western Indian Ocean’ was hosted by the department of religious studies from 12-13 November 2015 at the main Modesto Madique campus of Florida International University in Miami. The conference was organized by Iqbal Akhtar and Steve Vose to theorize the development of Indic religious identities and cosmologies in the western Indian Ocean littoral as these communities traversed land and the ocean for economic opportunities through changing political regimes. The conference was an international gathering of scholars from the United States, Canada, Denmark, Singapore, Chile, Pakistan, and India. The intent of the organizers was to assemble an interdisciplinary group of scholars to examine larger historical questions and (dis)continuities in conversation with the communities they study.

In the morning, Rick Asher began the conference with the first presentation that framed the conference. His presentation explored the Indian Ocean as a continuum with India as a fulcrum and posited theories based on archaeological and epigraphical evidence as to why Indic culture and religion thrived in the east and hardly made an impact on the societies of the western littoral. Shandip Saha followed trying to understand how the Vallabha Sampradāya became so influential in Gujarat through the *vārtā* literature, theorizing socio-economic change as a possible explanation for the community’s historical expansion and success. Sebastian Prange highlighted the multi-spatiality of a mosque as indicator of Muslim presence in the maritime history of the Malabar coast. Alia Paroo’s ground-breaking research examines the relationship of Aga Khan III to the British and the Ismaili community’s positioning vis-à-vis the colonial government in Tanganyika as a political strategy that promoted communalism. Amit Ranjan presented on the 19<sup>th</sup> century science of phenology and the economy of racial classifications in the British Empire.

In the afternoon, Amal Sachedina presented the first chapter of her monograph manuscript presenting the question of Lawati Khōjā in Oman as shifting postcolonial identities as a strategy for political enfranchisement. Cecil Pallesen’s ethnographic research was located in Arusha Tanzania and is theorizing the ‘two foot’ approach of African Asians to maintaining transnational networks and identities between Tanzania and the United Kingdom. Sarah Kazmi provided a comprehensive account of the Khōjā community in Karachi through a postcolonial reading of their history. Khatija Khader examined the Hadrami and Sidi diasporas in India through ethnographic work on how postmodern identity discourses are racialized through globalization. Juan Bruce’s was the last presentation and thought graphically about the Khōjā script as glyphs and apparent discrepancy in narratives regarding the Husseini and Devraj presses in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Liyakat Takim and Hasnain Walji concluded the conference with a roundtable discussion on the tension of Khōjā communities between the demands of Near Eastern Islamic authorities and communal desire for institutional independence in the preservation of identity.

The conference is the first step in building an interdisciplinary cadre of scholars from the social sciences and humanities that have an interest Indic mercantile cultures and religious identities in

the western Indian Ocean littoral. The conversation can perhaps lead to collaboration and also open academic discourses to the communities studied to promote academic access to and preservation of historical materials. The papers presented the conference are envisioned to be published by Ohio University Press. This conference will be followed up in the autumn of 2016 with a proposed expansion of delegates in conversation with South Asian academics to be held in Pakistan. Additionally, a listserv will be created to share ideas, announcements, and vacancies in this field of study.

We are grateful to our FIU, academic, and community sponsors for supporting the conference participants. Our donors included the American Institute of Pakistan Studies, the World Federation of Khōjā communities, the Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs, the Department of Religious Studies, the Center for the Humanities in an Urban Environment, the Jain Studies programme, the Fauzia and Mohsin Jaffer Fund, and the Ahmadiyya Muslim community.



Rear left to right: *Munawwar Chaudhry, Christian Prange, Liyakat Takim, Steven Vose, Iqbal Akhtar, Frederick Asher, Juan Bruce, Amal Sachedina, Sarah Kazmi, Cecil Pallesen, Khatija Khader, Alia Paroo, and Hasnain Walji*

Front left to right: *Amit Ranjan and Shandip Saha*