

The Worldmaking of Mobile Vernacular Capitalists: Tracing Entanglements Between Race, Caste and Capital

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Shikha Dilawri 

SOAS, University of London, UK

Abstract

This article traces the colonially inscribed spread of global capitalism through the lives and legacies of mobile vernacular capitalists in the Indian Ocean during the early-to-mid 20th century, centring the merchant-turned-industrialist-and-philanthropist Nanji Kalidas Mehta. Turning to a figure that shaped and challenged the infrastructures and outcomes of empire, but advanced forms of hierarchical differentiation – between capital and labour, and across race and caste – this article makes two interventions. First, it complicates literature on worldmaking by highlighting a figure in a register distinctive from the ‘progressive’ internationalisms associated with Bandung. Second, it reveals entanglements between race, caste and capital, illuminating how local hierarchies have been incorporated into differentiating logics of colonial capitalism. Considering sites, subjects and categories beyond an Atlantic frame lends to more capacious understandings of racial capitalism while challenging readings of caste as a subcontinent-bounded, feudal residue. This ultimately presents a more complex picture of global hierarchies shaping the (post)colonial present.

Keywords

race, caste, capitalism

Introduction

Scholarship from its ‘margins’ has long taken aim at the standard stories that configure and cohere under the disciplinary banner of International Relations (IR). This includes historical and theoretical reappraisals of the dominant historical script of decolonization.¹ Complicating the tale of tidy transition from a world of empires to one

1. For example, Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

Corresponding author:

Shikha Dilawri, SOAS, University of London, 10 Thornhaugh Street, London WC1H 0XG, UK.

Email: 574814@soas.ac.uk

of sovereign nation-states and its normative, spatial and temporal assumptions, critical literature – often informed by postcolonial and decolonial approaches – has instead illuminated the unfinished business of decolonization.² Yet while upending the emplotments of the standard story, reconsidering and reframing the actors and axes of anti-colonial struggle and its aftermath, and interrogating the multiple manifestations of coloniality in the present, this literature often leaves intact binaries between global North and South and is less attentive to forms of internal and hierarchical differentiation and struggle beneath the banners of the ‘Third World’ or ‘subaltern’.³ This article builds on work that has diagnosed and addressed the neglect of empire and its afterlives in IR, but seeks to stretch beyond a now more familiar set of preoccupations and protagonists.

In this article, I take up the call of this special issue to revisit colonial legacies and historical disjunctures by recuperating a more fractured picture of decolonization, its antecedents, and legacies. This is done by homing in on a figure that, in contrast to the more ‘straightforwardly’ radical, subaltern or elite actors that tend to dominate discussion in postcolonial IR, is more difficult to pin down geographically and politically: the Indian merchant operating in the Indian Ocean in the early-to-mid 20th century. What can be gleaned about the ‘problem space’⁴ of the postcolonial present, and the hierarchies that shape it, by dwelling on this figure?

To address this line of inquiry, this article centres the life and contested legacy of the Gujarati merchant-turned-industrialist-and-philanthropist, Nanji Kalidas Mehta (1888–1969), anchored by his autobiography *Dream Half-Expressed* (1966), first released as *Mara Jivanani Anubhavakatha* in Gujarati in 1955.⁵ Written on the cusp of formal decolonization in East Africa, Mehta’s is a rare autobiographical account charting Indian trade and commerce in East Africa during the first half of the 20th century,⁶ a period which saw shifts from barter to monetary exchange, from dhow to steamship travel, and the spread and sedimentation of colonial capitalism in the Indian Ocean. As a member of a

2. For example, J. K. Gani and Jenna Marshall, ‘The Impact of Colonialism on Policy and Knowledge Production in International Relations’, *International Affairs* 98, no. 1 (2022): 5–22; Alex Anievas et al., eds., *Race and Racism in International Relations: Confronting the Global Colour Line* (London: Routledge, 2014); Meera Sabaratnam, *Decolonising Intervention: International Statebuilding in Mozambique* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).
3. Examples of scholarship that challenges this tendency include: Divya Dwivedi et al., ‘The Hindu Hoax: How Upper Caste Invented a Hindu Majority’, *The Caravan* (December 2020); Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Rahul Rao, ‘Before Bandung: Pet Names in Telangana’, in *Meanings of Bandung: Postcolonial Orders and Decolonial Visions*, eds. Quynh N. Pham and Robbie Shilliam (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); Ida Roland Birkvad, ‘The Ambivalence of Aryanism: A Genealogical Reading of India-Europe Connection’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 49, no. 1 (2020): 58–79.
4. David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 4.
5. Nanji Kalidas Mehta, *Dream Half-Expressed: An Autobiography* (Bombay: Vakils, Feffer and Simons, 1966).
6. Gaurav Desai, *Commerce With the World: Africa, India, and the Afrasian Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 150.

wider cast of mobile ‘vernacular capitalists’⁷ active in the Indian Ocean world that reached a degree of economic prominence, Mehta’s commercial, interstitial, but still influential vantage point offers novel insights into a period marked by transitions. Born in 1888 to a devout Hindu, Lohana family near Porbandar in present-day Gujarat – M. K. Gandhi’s birthplace and an active port town for Indian Ocean trade at the time – Mehta went on to become an influential plantation owner and industrialist, as well as a philanthropist. His personal trajectory from cook, to trader, to proprietor of commercial ventures spanning cotton, sugar, tobacco, tea and cement across East Africa and India mapped onto and was shaped by key historical developments, from the building of the Uganda railway under the British East Africa Protectorate, to the two World Wars, to formal decolonization in India and East Africa. This was similarly a period which, building on a longer historical legacy of migration across the Indian Ocean, saw the expansion of Indian settlement in East Africa, the development of forms of South-South anti-colonial solidarity, as well as emergent Africanization policies.

In parts of Gujarat and amongst sections of the East African Indian diaspora, Mehta possesses something of a mythic quality. His autobiography is referenced in more contemporary diasporic narrations and his philanthropic ventures, including a national memorial he commissioned at the site of Gandhi’s birthplace, pepper the landscape of present-day Gujarat. Mehta’s proximity to key members of the Indian national movement and large-scale industrialists in the 20th century have prompted recent initiatives to reference him in school textbooks in Gujarat. Meanwhile, Mehta’s material legacy continues through the Mumbai-based Mehta Group, which remains a significant transnational conglomerate today with activities spanning three continents. The Mehta family has close ties with the leadership of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party in India and, reflecting wider developments in ‘South-South’ relations,⁸ the Mehta Group has been accused of land grabbing in Uganda, leading to protests and anti-Asian violence in recent years.⁹

By turning to Mehta, this article advances two interrelated arguments. First, I argue that Mehta lends insight into the agential role of mobile vernacular capitalists in promoting contact between ‘peripheral’ regions, as well as shaping and challenging the infrastructures and outcomes of empire. Beyond a mere ‘middleman’ within colonial capitalism, I suggest that Mehta was engaged in and offers a window into forms of worldmaking that transcended the nation, but that operated in a distinctive tenor from the sometimes-romanticized internationalisms associated with the Bandung moment. Dwelling on the mobile vernacular capitalist, then, offers a corrective to literature on

7. Ritu Birla, *Stages of Capital: Law, Culture, and Market Governance in Late Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

8. See Bikrum Gill, ‘Can the River Speak? Epistemological Confrontation in the Rise and Fall of the Land Grab in Gambella, Ethiopia’, *Environment and Planning: Economy and Space* 48, no. 4 (2016): 699–717.

9. The Mehta Group, which has extended its initial reach in Asia and Africa to North America, is involved in cement, sugar, industrial engineering, agro-chemicals, electric cables, insurance and shipping. In 2007 there were massive protests in Uganda, escalating into anti-Indian racial violence, in response to a government plan (ultimately dropped) which would have granted a large portion of the protected Mabira rainforest to the Mehta Group to expand their sugar plantations.

worldmaking within and beyond IR that has primarily been oriented towards ‘progressive’ movements.

Second, and relatedly, I argue that foregrounding these worldmaking visions and practices can build on recent literature that has examined racial capitalism beyond the Atlantic. A granular account of Mehta’s trajectory helps to enrich understandings of racial capitalism by illuminating the role of mobile vernacular capitalists and ‘local’ hierarchies in its entrenchment and operations in the Indian Ocean. From Mehta’s interstitial orientation, the submerged role of caste and kinship in supporting the differentiating logics of the colonially inscribed spread of capitalism becomes visible, bringing to the fore the connections and contradictions between race, caste and capital across geographies. Attentiveness to Mehta, then, underscores that a more capacious understanding of global racial capitalism necessitates consideration of sites, subjects as well as categories not primarily or exclusively associated with the Atlantic.

In addition to scholarship on worldmaking and racial capitalism in IR, this article contributes to recently resurgent literature on the relationship between race and caste.¹⁰ Centring the vernacular capitalist underscores the importance of considering these categories as not merely comparable or analogical, but also genealogically and geographically entangled and intersecting with capital. This not only helps to upend a tendency to treat caste as a subcontinent-bounded, feudal residue, but also, and more broadly, reveals a more complex and graded picture of the global (racial) hierarchies that shape the postcolonial present. Following the lead of anti-caste scholarship and literature which has applied the lens of coloniality to more unusual suspects,¹¹ this ultimately contributes to recent efforts to muddy dominant, binaristic conceptions of postcolonial difference upheld in IR, as well as spatial and temporal assumptions associated with decolonization.

To build these arguments, I adopt a materialist reading of Mehta’s autobiography. Autobiographical accounts can bring to the fore less-examined figures and – not confined by the same imperatives of classification as the colonial archive¹² – make apparent submerged connections or convergences. Yet they also raise their own questions concerning the relationship between narrative and material history and the ideological work

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10. Suraj Yengde, ‘The Harvest of Casteism: Race, Caste and What It Will Take to Make Dalit Lives Matter’, *The Caravan* (July 2020); Sankaran Krishna, ‘A Postcolonial Racial/Spatial Order: Gandhi, Ambedkar, and the Construction of the International’, in *Race and Racism in International Relations*, eds. Alex Anievas, Nivi Manchanda, and Robbie Shilliam (London: Routledge, 2014), 139–56; Ania Loomba, ‘Race and the Possibilities of Comparative Critique’, *New Literary History* 40, no. 3 (2009): 501–22; Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020); Anupama Rao, ‘The Work of Analogy: On Isabel Wilkerson’s “Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents”’, *Los Angeles Review of Books* (September 2020). Available at: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-work-of-analogy-on-isabel-wilkersons-caste-the-origins-of-our-discontents/>. Last accessed January 13, 2023.
 11. For example, Nitasha Kaul, ‘Coloniality and/as Development in Kashmir: Econationalism’, *Feminist Review* 28, no. 1 (2021), 114–31; Niharika Pandit, ‘Remembering: Tracing Epistemic Implications of Feminist and Gendered Politics Under Military Occupation’, *Feminist Theory* 24, no. 1 (2022): 102–22.
 12. Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 5.

an autobiography aims to do. In the case of Mehta, further questions are raised due to translation and the time elapsed between publication of the Gujarati and English editions, which spanned key historical events including a wave of formal decolonization in Africa. Drawing methodological insights from Global Historical Sociology,¹³ feminist materialist,¹⁴ and anti-caste perspectives,¹⁵ my approach to reading Mehta's auto biography is attentive to conditions shaping the material production of the text and to the story Mehta tells. Though it also considers its absences, by situating Mehta's account in relation to wider historical, socio-economic and political developments, not remaining tethered to questions of identity or subjectivity. To support this, I read Mehta's alongside other relevant biographies, colonial archival records, newspaper articles and limited existing scholarship on Mehta¹⁶ and his commercial and philanthropic ventures and their legacies.

This article proceeds over four parts. First, I recuperate a more fractured picture of colonialism and decolonization, and elaborate on my conceptualization of Mehta as a mobile vernacular capitalist active within a terrain of worldmakers. Second, I consider recent literature on racial capitalism beyond the Atlantic, underscoring how Mehta's interstitial vantage point can make apparent the role of less-examined forms of stratification, notably caste, to its establishment and operation. To elucidate this, next I offer a materialist reading of Mehta's autobiography, foregrounding his navigation of colonial capitalism. This account reveals continuities and ruptures across temporalities – between the pre-colonial, colonial and the emergent postcolonial – and sites – between India and East Africa – as well as the connections, collusions and contradictions between race, caste and capital. Finally, to bring the threads of this argument together, I reflect on how Mehta's life, legacy and alliances lend insight into graded and hierarchical internationalisms that shape the (post)colonial present.

Locating the Mobile Vernacular Capitalist During Empire and Its Afterlives

In his autobiography, Mehta laments the loss of the 'natural bond of affection between the buyer and seller'¹⁷ to an emergent capitalist modernity he helped shape. His backwards-facing glance is paired with a forward-looking warning: 'no narrow nationalism or sheer anti-colonialism can serve the ultimate need of mankind'.¹⁸ For Mehta what was needed were 'men and statesmen. . .devoted to the soil' or nation, but with a 'vision of a

13. Julian Go and George Lawson, *Global Historical Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

14. Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of the Partial', *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1998): 575–99.

15. Shireen Azam, 'Blind Spots: Caste in Contemporary Muslim Autobiographies', *The Caravan* (April 2021).

16. Scholars who have drawn on Mehta's autobiography include Desai, *Commerce*; Dan Ojwang, 'In a Restless State: Mercantile Adventure and Citizenship in the Autobiography of Nanji Kalidas Mehta (1888–1969)', *Africa Today* 57, no. 3 (2011): 57–75; Savita Nair, 'Despite Dislocations: Uganda's Indians Remaking Home', *Africa* 88, no. 3 (2018): 492–517.

17. Mehta, *Dream Half-Expressed*, 96.

18. *Ibid.*

world state'.¹⁹ Although Mehta leaves this vision unelaborated, it offers a window into a period marked by multiple and contesting blueprints for an emergent global order. Yet Mehta's cautions concerning anti-colonialism and celebration of what Gaurav Desai refers to as 'commerce as romance'²⁰ do not fit neatly into tidy dualisms between colonizer/colonized often upheld in deployments of postcolonial theory in IR. Instead, apprehending Mehta's location and outlook necessitates moving beyond this normative script.

Marxist and anti-imperialist accounts have been more attentive to the fractured landscape of colonialism and decolonization, and how this has shaped the trajectories of postcolonial politics. As Aijaz Ahmad notes in *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, in contrast to a singular opposition marking a site of 'alterity and authenticity' as sometimes implied in invocations of the 'Third World', decolonization was not a 'uniform affair'.²¹ Instead, it was a 'riven terrain' in which '[a]ll classes and all political ideologies, from landowners of various sorts to fully fledged national bourgeoisies, and from the most obscurantist to the most revolutionary'²² vied for the role of vanguard. Reminiscent of Fanon's foresight in the *Wretched of the Earth* – published a edition of Mehta's autobiography – Ahmad offers an account of the 'second phase' of anti-colonial movements in the aftermath of formal decolonization in Asia and Africa, marked by socialist-inspired struggles against the hegemony of the national bourgeoisie.

These internal fragmentations are brought into further relief by anti-caste scholarship which points to how caste divisions have vanished into the category of the 'Indian'/'native' and notions of class-based differentiation in postcolonial and Marxist literature, respectively.²³ Meanwhile, recent scholarship which seeks to militate against the 'seduction of the horizontal'²⁴ in Afro-Asian and, more broadly, South-South relations has underscored the role of 'friction' alongside 'fraternity'.²⁵ Revisiting the 'Bandung Myth', Antoinette Burton has elaborated on its enduring role in buttressing postcolonial nationalism and notions of Indian racial and civilizational superiority.²⁶ In a similar vein, examining elitist invocations of pan-Asianism, Rahul Rao reminds us that discourses apprehended as

19. Ibid.

20. Desai, *Commerce*, 16

21. Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), 18.

22. Ibid.

23. Regarding postcolonial literature, see Dwivedi et al., 'The Hindu Hoax'. For Marxist literature, see Anand Teltumbde, *Republic of Caste* (Delhi: Navayana, 2018).

24. Antoinette Burton, *Africa in the Indian Imagination: Race and the Politics of Postcolonial Citation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 19.

25. See Sana Aiyar, *Indians in Kenya: The Politics of Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); Isabel Hofmeyr, 'The Black Atlantic Meets the Indian Ocean: Forging New Paradigms of Transnationalism for the Global South – Literary and Cultural Perspectives', *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies* 33, no. 2 (2007): 3–32; Nile Green, 'The Waves of Heterotopia: Toward a Vernacular Intellectual History of the Indian Ocean', *American Historical Review* 123, no. 3 (2018): 846–74; Martin Bayly, 'Global Intellectual History in International Relations: Hierarchy, Empire, and the Case of Late-Colonial Indian International Thought', *Review of International Studies* (2022): 1–20; Shobana Shankar, *An Uneasy Embrace: Africa, India, and the Spectre of Race* (London: C. Hurst & Co, 2021).

26. Burton, *Africa*.

‘straightforwardly anti-imperialist’ could ‘serve *both* progressive and reactionary ends’²⁷, often at the same time. Anti-caste²⁸ and Indian Ocean²⁹ literature similarly complicate notions of temporality common in postcolonial texts by drawing attention to forms of internal colonization and trans-oceanic contact, respectively, which preceded and have continued since the establishment and formal end of European colonization. Put simply, together this scholarship furnishes us with an optic through which to reckon with the contested meanings and dynamics of colonialism and decolonization. This creates space to consider a wider array of subjects, while illuminating sometimes-obscured forms of hierarchical differentiation across class, race and caste at the national and international level, shaping past and present, which this article seeks to foreground.

Mobile Vernacular Capitalism and Worldmaking

Having recuperated a more fractured political landscape, where might a figure such as Mehta be situated in this ‘riven terrain’? In relation to the actors and movements attended to in the rich literature on anti-colonialism and decolonization in South Asia, Mehta sits adjacent, but uncomfortably so. This includes scholarship on radical ‘leftist, revolutionary, and pan-religious’,³⁰ as well as more firmly nationalist and reformist, anti-colonial articulations and their global dimensions. Commonly centring connections between India and Europe or the United States and the ‘affective communities’³¹ and ‘coloured cosmopolitanisms’³² forged there, this literature has also set its sights on South-South connections.³³ In response to a proclivity to present (post)colonial cosmopolitanism as the primary purview of the ‘Shakespeare-quoting English-educated [upper caste, male] native elite’,³⁴ recent literature has crucially centred (elite) women involved in advancing anti-imperialism³⁵ and ‘cosmopolitan-nationalism’,³⁶ Black-Dalit solidarities³⁷ and a shared history of ‘coolitude’ across plantations in the Caribbean, South Asia and Indian

27. Rao, ‘*Before*’, 86

28. Sheldon Pollock, ‘Deep Orientalism? Notes on Sanskrit and Power Beyond the Raj’, in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, eds. Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter Van Der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).

29. Hofmeyr, ‘Black Atlantic’.

30. Rosalind Parr, *Citizens of Everywhere: Indian Women, Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism 1920–1952* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 3.

31. Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

32. Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

33. Kris Manjappa, *M.N. Roy: Marxism and Cosmopolitan Colonialism* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2010); Renisa Mawani, *Oceans of Law: The Komagatu Maru and Jurisdiction in the Time of Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Aiyar, *Indians in Kenya*.

34. Birla, *Stages of Capital*, 6.

35. Shruti Balaji, ‘From Colonial Subjecthood to Shared Humanity: Social Work and the Politics of “Doing” in Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay’s International Thought’, *Global Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (2023).

36. Parr, *Citizens of Everywhere*.

37. Suraj Yengde, ‘Harvest’.

Ocean world.³⁸ Although Mehta lent material and discursive support to forms of anti-colonial struggle and his outlook and actions transcended the nation, this was a distinct tenor in comparison to these actors. His travels to the metropole did not centre on the circuits of the Theosophical Society – although he did interact with its affiliates from Benares to Japan. Instead, his distinctly commercial itinerary brought him to the George Fletcher & Co. sugar machinery manufacturing plant in Derby, initially established to produce equipment for sugar plantations in the Caribbean. Moreover, undergirding Mehta's commercial endeavours, political and philanthropic associations, and broader affiliations, was an unsurprising antagonism towards anti-imperialist and workers' movements.

To capture Mehta's orientation, adapting from Ritu Birla, I interpret him as a mobile 'vernacular capitalist'.³⁹ In her work on market governance in late colonial India, Birla contrasts the vernacular capitalist to the dominant reading of the Indian colonial subject in its 'Macaulayan' model⁴⁰ – the English-educated elite. These vernacular capitalists primarily originated from long-standing mercantile and money-lending communities in India – including Chettiars in the South, Banias and Marwaris in the North and East, and Parsis and Lohana (such as Mehta) in the West.⁴¹ Operating at the interstices of the agrarian economy, colonial administration and global trade, the existing and extensive networks of caste and kinship of these communities were integral to colonial expansion.⁴² Yet trade and speculation within the colonial economy was also lucrative for members of these communities, enabling their induction into manufacturing and participation in religious patronage and philanthropy.⁴³

As Birla elaborates, rather than primarily a linguistic category, the 'vernacular' denotes this inside/outside relationship between these capitalists and the colonial state: '[they] were understood [by the state] as insiders in the colonial economy but outsiders to modern market ethics'.⁴⁴ For these figures, circulation of capital and credit has typically depended on social relations and status, undergirded by alliances of caste, kinship and religious merit rather than formal legal institutions.⁴⁵ This has enabled vernacular capitalists to negotiate a degree of autonomy from the state. Yet this distance does not necessarily reflect a 'subaltern' status. Instead, 'vernacular' helps to avoid the pitfalls of a generalized 'subaltern' subject, which can project a romanticization of homogeneous alterity, mystifying the 'differentiated and disparate materiality'⁴⁶ of these

38. Marina Carter and Khal Torabully, *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora* (London: Anthem Press, 2002).

39. In his work on Mehta, Desai (2011, 2016) similarly draws on Ritu Birla's concept of the vernacular capitalist.

40. As set out in British Lord Macaulay's 'Minute on Education' in 1835 to create a class 'Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect', acting an intermediary between the British and those they governed.

41. Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Time of Democracy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 20.

42. Jain, *Gods*, 20.

43. Ibid.

44. Birla, *Stages of Capital*, 3.

45. Jain, *Gods*, 20.

46. Abeera Khan, 'The Virtue of Queer Diasporic Shame' (recorded in 2021 for *Thinking Queer Diaspora Now: A Virtual Symposium*). Available at: <https://queerdiasporas.com/diasporic-stories>.

subjects.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, adding *mobile* to this formulation challenges provincialism or territorial boundedness associated with the vernacular, while grasping the movement of capital and its custodians. Despite methodological nationalism common in literature on India's middle class and economic history, similar to Mehta, much of the mercantile world of merchants, traders and entrepreneurs were highly geographically mobile, often traversing the Indian Ocean.⁴⁸

The category of the mobile vernacular capitalist encapsulates Mehta's trajectory. It not only captures his relationship with the colonial – and later postcolonial – state which he navigated alongside, but also beneath and beyond, though which nevertheless shaped his trajectory in important ways. Beyond this, the mobile vernacular capitalist is a category that brings to the fore the 'interpenetration of commerce, religion, and sociality',⁴⁹ the 'bazaar' and 'modern', across geographies. This challenges not only the common approach to 'civil' and 'political' society as distinct domains,⁵⁰ but also the treatment of such figures as merely commercial middlemen, which I suggest has contributed to their relative absence from serious study in postcolonial IR.

In contrast to these truncated readings, I approach the mobile vernacular capitalist as part of a cast of worldmakers operating in the context of empire and its afterlives – a move which helps to capture the agential, imaginative and material dimensions that cohere through a reading of Mehta's life. This builds on recent literature in and beyond IR which has invoked a longer legacy of scholarship drawing on conceptions of 'worldmaking'⁵¹ to develop an archive of practices and possibilities beyond hegemonic conceptions of the world. In *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*, for instance, Adom Getachew homes in on black Anglophone anti-colonial nationalists in the decades after the Second World War. Outlining their reinvention of self-determination and projects of institution building, informed by an account of empire that 'exceeded the bilateral relations between colonizer and colonized',⁵² Getachew recasts anti-colonial nationalism as *worldmaking*. For these figures, national self-determination was inseparable from internationalism.

Scholarship on worldmaking has largely dwelled on figures and practices broadly conceived as radical or subaltern. Yet Getachew is careful to note these were not the only forms of worldmaking: anti-colonial nationalism was responding to 'a history of

47. See Ida Roland Birkvad and Alexander Stoffel and Ida Roland Birkvad, 'Abstractions in International Relations: on the mystification of trans, queer, and subaltern life in critical knowledge production', *European Journal of International Affairs* 0, no. 0 (2023). Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/13540661231176907>.

48. Historical and anthropological literature on the Indian Ocean world covering merchant communities includes Claude Markovits, *Merchants, Traders, Entrepreneurs: Indian Business in the Colonial Era* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Pedro Machado, *Ocean of Trade: South Asian Merchants, Africa and the Indian Ocean c. 1750–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

49. Jain, *Gods*, 20.

50. Partha Chatterjee, "'On Civil and Political Society in Postcolonial Democracies', in *Civil Society: Histories and Possibilities*, eds. Sudipta Kavirji and Sunil Khilnani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 165–78.

51. This term was first coined in Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1978).

52. Getachew, *Worldmaking*, 2.

European imperialism as itself a world-constituting force⁵³ or, as Duncan Bell puts it, ‘a technology for the taking and (re)making of worlds’.⁵⁴ While recognizing that power relations stabilize some worlds over others, Bell notes that ‘all humans partake in world making, although many do so only insofar as they help to reproduce existing worlds’.⁵⁵ Put differently, the concept of worldmaking offers scope to reflect on the material and theoretical implications of the fragmented politics discussed above.

Approaching Mehta as engaged in forms of worldmaking pushes against this focus on progressive figures, while elevating the vernacular capitalist – and commercial figures more broadly – as having implications for the study and practice of International Relations. Although Mehta did not seek to construct a counter-hegemonic world, as the next sections show, his navigation across worlds contributed to shaping transitions between them. And Mehta’s entangled commercial, political and philanthropic endeavours have impacted political and economic developments, as well as material lives, in India and East Africa. While Mehta offers no explicit political treatise, through his circuits of contact he makes apparent global alliances between commercial and political figures, who together were engaged in forms of proto-institution building.⁵⁶

Taking a cue from reappraisals of other worldmakers, uncovering a more fractured political landscape and the mobile vernacular capitalist’s agential role within it is not driven by a representational impulse. Instead, in what follows I consider how centring Mehta’s trajectory can contribute to recent discussions concerning racial capitalism, and the relationship between race and capitalism, beyond the Atlantic.

Race, Caste and Capital

In the article, ‘Deprovincializing Racial Capitalism: John Crawford and Settler Colonialism in India’, Onur Ulas Ince corrects the notion that ‘the intersection of colonialism, capitalism and race is primarily an Atlantic phenomenon’.⁵⁷ This intervention is reflective of recent inroads into the study of racial capitalism in and beyond IR covering an increasingly expansive geographic terrain.⁵⁸ Turning to European imperialism in Asia

53. Getachew, *Worldmaking*, 3.

54. Duncan Bell, ‘Making and Taking Worlds’, in *Global Intellectual History*, eds. Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 261.

55. *Ibid.*, 259.

56. See Howard Spodek, ‘On the Origins of Gandhi’s Political Methodology: The Heritage of Kathiawad and Gujarat’, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 30, no. 2 (1971): 361–72.

57. Onur Ulas Ince, ‘Deprovincializing Racial Capitalism: John Crawford and Settler Colonialism in India’, *American Political Science Review* 116, no. 1 (2022): 144–60.

58. For example, Laleh Khalili, ‘Humanitarianism and Racial Capitalism in the Age of Global Shipping’, *European Journal of International Relations* 29, no. 2 (2023): 374–97; Maia Holtermann Entwistle, *Fuelling Culture: Art, Race, and Capitalism on the Arabian Peninsula* (PhD thesis, SOAS University of London, 2022); Ida Danewid, ‘The Fire This Time: Grenfell, Racial Capitalism and the Urbanisation of Empire’, *European Journal of International Relations* 26, no. 2 (2019): 289–313. For a recent discussion on caste and racial capitalism, see Sheetal Chhabria, ‘Where does caste fit into a global history of racial capitalism?’, *Historical Materialism* 32, no. 2& 3 (2023). Available at: <https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/index.php/articles/where-does-caste-fit-global-history-racial-capitalism>

and, specifically, to arguments for British settler colonialism, Ince points to the advancement of a ‘capital theory of race’ which saw civilizational categories applied to the ‘capitalist organization of land and labour’.⁵⁹ These were not based on a colonial binary, but instead involved the incorporation of graded categories – for example, between Chinese and Indian labourers or artisans – into capitalist logics.

Yet while productively underscoring co-constitutions between race and capitalism in Asia, Ince’s account leaves less room to consider the role of local or regional forms of hierarchical differentiation, including caste, in influencing the stratified organization of labour. Revisiting a key insight from Cedric Robinson in *Black Marxism* can help address such omissions: ‘capitalism was less a catastrophic revolution (negation) of feudalist social orders than the extension of these social relations into the larger tapestry of the modern world’s political and economic relations’.⁶⁰ This temporal move has ontological implications, as highlighted by the work of Mishal Khan in the edited volume *Histories of Racial Capitalism*.⁶¹ Examining the racial ordering of categories of the indebted labourer in colonial India, Khan underscores that feudal social structures, including caste, ‘in many ways predetermined who would collaborate, who would profit, and who would labor in India and beyond’.⁶² Existing relations of indebtedness, for instance, enabled plantation owners access to ‘coolie’ labour, extracting landless/land-poor peasants from their villages.⁶³ Contrasting more orthodox Marxist and liberal tendencies to apprehend caste as increasingly obsolete with the entrenchment of capitalism, this offers a way to consider how colonial capitalism in India built on modes of surplus extraction that pre-dated British incursions⁶⁴ and the ‘modernity of caste, beyond orientalist and postcolonial frameworks’.⁶⁵ This makes apparent not only the constitutive, ongoing relationship between capitalism and caste long identified by anti-caste Marxists,⁶⁶ but also – attentive to the flexibility of global capitalism and its suturing with race, underscored by theorists of racial capitalism – the entanglements between race, caste and capital.

Greater understanding of these global entanglements can be gained by following scholars who have not only looked to geographies beyond the Atlantic, but also expanded beyond a primary preoccupation with political economic theorizing from the metropole,

59. Ince ‘*Deprovincializing*’, 145

60. Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000 (1983)), 10.

61. Mishal Khan, ‘The Indebted Among the “Free”’: Producing Indian Labour Through the Layers of Racial Capitalism’, in *Histories of Racial Capitalism*, eds. Destin Jenkins and Justin Leroy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

62. *Ibid.*, 96.

63. *Ibid.*, 97.

64. See Utsa Patnaik and Prabhat Patnaik, *Capital and Imperialism: Theory, History, and the Present* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2021).

65. David Mosse, ‘The Modernity of Caste and the Market Economy’, *Modern Asian Studies* 54, no. 4 (2019): 1225–71.

66. See R. B. More and Satyendra More, *Memoirs of a Dalit Communist: The Many World of R. B. More* (New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2020); Gail Omvedt, ‘Capitalist Agriculture and Rural Classes’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 16, no. 2 (1981): A140–59; Teltumbde, *Republic*.

considering alternative sites, categories and subjects.⁶⁷ I suggest that the mobile vernacular capitalist may be particularly productive towards this end. Recent historical interventions have underscored that rather than passive recipients, Indian merchants had an active role in shaping ‘infrastructures and outcomes of empire and capitalism’⁶⁸ in the Western Indian Ocean, in a two-way – though structurally unequal – process. This was especially the case for earlier storied figures such as Allidina Visram (1851–1916), as well as mobile vernacular capitalists who rose to economic heights such as Mehta and his contemporary Muljibhai Madhvani, also from Gujarat. Mehta’s interstitial, mobile, but still economically prominent orientation offers a vantage point that can make apparent collusions and contradictions between multiple forms of hierarchical differentiation across geographies during a period marked by significant transitions.

Moving from the abstract to the concrete, in what follows, I adopt a materialist reading of Mehta’s biography. The account in the next section is bookended by the entrenchment of colonial capitalism in the early 20th century and the period just prior to formal decolonization in East Africa. Aligning with his self-fashioning in the autobiography, this primarily maps onto Mehta’s ‘commercial’ transitions from trader to industrialist and philanthropist. At the same time, it is attentive to the concurrent political and economic shifts in the Indian Ocean world. This close engagement is particularly interested in how Mehta navigates, reflects on and seeks to shape (post)colonial capitalism, as well as the submerged logics and entanglements between race, class and capital it reveals. As the next section shows, travelling between India (his ‘national’ base) and East Africa (his ‘commercial’ base) over 40 times, Mehta’s frequent and circuitous itineraries reveal material connections often obscured by an analytic of linear migration in which ‘home’ and ‘host’ contexts are decisively split. Following this reading, the final section of this article more concretely considers not only its implications for reflecting on racial capitalism but also, more broadly, the coincidence of forms of hierarchical differentiation shaping the postcolonial present.

Worldmaking During Empire in Mehta’s Dream Half-Expressed

Call of the Sea

In his biography Mehta recounts, couched in narratives of wanderlust, his first of many trips across the *kala pani* of the Western Indian Ocean in 1901 which followed a longer kinship-based connection with East Africa. This was enabled by proximity to the West Indian littoral and a commercial disposition traced back to his caste lineage as a ‘Raghuvanshi Kshatriya’ and Lohana. In a formation that has gone to prefigure contemporary literature on Indian businessmen, Mehta frames his commercial acumen as a

67. See Malini Ranganathan, ‘Caste, Racialization, and the Making of Environmental Unfreedoms in Urban India’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 45, no. 2 (2021): 257–77; Jesús F. Cháirez-Garza et al., ‘Introduction to the Special Issue: Rethinking Difference in India Through Racialization’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 45, no. 2 (2022): 193–215.

68. Sheetal Chhabria, ‘Capitalism in Muddy Waters: The Indian Ocean Economy in the 19th Century’, *Journal of World History* 30, no. 1–2 (2019): 306–15.

byproduct of his caste or *jati* background, tethered to his DNA.⁶⁹ Set in contrast to, but still revering, the Brahmin ascetic, Mehta regards his innate entrepreneurial qualities, martial commitment to the nation, charitable nature and ‘restless spirit’ as coalescing in an outwards-looking direction. This vision was informed by the geographic and imaginative landscape of Porbandar, at the time a princely state ruled indirectly by the British since 1807, and from where Mehta’s family engaged in money lending, cotton ginning, shopkeeping and possessed ancestral estates. Influenced by ‘dhow stories’ – romantic accounts of enterprising merchants setting off from the Gujarat coast – Mehta followed the call of the sea and trajectory of his uncle, brother and a well-established Indian trading community, arriving in Madagascar during a period of marked transition.

Although facilitated by pre-colonial Indian Ocean networks and imaginaries, Mehta’s inaugural itinerary coincided with the entrenchment of the British East African Protectorate, established in 1894 and the expansion of European and Indian settlement in the region. Both were enabled by the completion of the Uganda railway in 1901. This colossal infrastructural project – dubbed the ‘lunatic line’ in the metropole (due to exorbitant costs) and the ‘iron snake’ amongst those resisting its establishment in East Africa – stretched from the port city of Mombasa to the eastern shore of Lake Victoria, a source of the Nile.⁷⁰ The railway as a technology for imperial extension and extraction in East Africa was influenced by the role of railways in integrating India’s local economy into the global trade of the British Empire.

The transposition of this imperial logic set the stage for the importation of Indian labour to East Africa, deemed better suited for railway construction than Africans due to experience and according to a racially stratified colonial economy of labour. Facilitated by the state-controlled system of indenture introduced in 1834 following Britain’s abolition of slavery to secure ‘free’⁷¹ labour for plantation economies, between 1896 and 1901 – when Mehta first arrived in East Africa – approximately 32,000 Indian indentured labourers were recruited to construct the railway.⁷² Though due to the non-agricultural nature of the work, geography and longer legacy of Indian migration – and a colonial vision to have Indians as ‘settlers’ in East Africa – the nature of this indentureship was distinct. Labourers largely originated from Punjab and Gujarat, until then relatively unaffected by indentured labour recruitment, and centred on ‘middle’ peasant castes – for example, Patidars and Jats – considered most ‘appropriate’ for this work.⁷³ This reflected the wider and submerged systems of differentiation operating to facilitate (racialized) colonial capitalism. As Mishal Khan explains, ‘the particular role that Indian labour was

69. Surinder S. Jodhka and Jules Naudet, ‘Introduction. Towards a Sociology of India’s Economic Elite: Beyond the Neo-Orientalist and Managerialist Perspectives’, *SAMAJ: South Asia Multidisciplinary Journal* 17 (2017). Available at: <https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/4316?lang=fr>

70. Aiyar, *Indians in Kenya*.

71. ‘Free’ was deployed to denote the distinction of indentured labour from slavery. See Radhika Mongia, *Indian Migration and Empire: A Colonial Genealogy of the Modern State* (London: Duke University Press, 2018).

72. Claude Markovits, *India and the World: A History of Connections, c. 1750–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

73. See Markovits, *India and the World*; Robert G. Gregory, *The Rise and Fall of Philanthropy in East Africa: The Asian Contribution* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1992).

called on to play in the new, expanding global economy was reserved . . . for particular Indians already embedded in internal, feudal, caste and service relations' operating according to distinct differentiating logics.⁷⁴

This state-regulated system of 'free' indentured migration was preceded by the recruitment of Punjabi regiments, and operated alongside the ongoing 'unregulated' Indian migration, of which Mehta formed a part.⁷⁵ As Radhika Mongia notes, 'until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the state monitored only the movement of indentured labor'⁷⁶ from India. Yet these systems of migration also converged in direct and indirect ways, and did so increasingly following the completion of the railway. Long-standing Indian merchant networks were involved in supporting recruitment and transportation of indentured labour, enabling the transfer of surplus populations from India's 'overcrowded provinces'. Unstable economic and environmental conditions in parts of India – significantly exacerbated by colonization – as well as visions of East Africa as a land of opportunity compelled migration across these groups of Indians.

In addition to his individual ingenuity, networks of caste and kinship are framed as central to Mehta's travels to East Africa and escalating ventures into its interior which, in colonially inflected civilizational discourse reflecting the 'cross fertilization'⁷⁷ of vernacular and colonial registers, he presents as a site ripe for commercial speculation, but concurrently steeped in forms of primitive danger. Indeed, in contrast to the dominant notion of caste obsolescence upon traversing the *kala pani*, caste, jati and religious affiliation continued to shape forms of sociality, from the ship to littoral and onwards. As Mehta narrates, forms of segregation were replicated on the dhows and steamships crossing the seas: owing to 'social injunctions' '[o]n the ship every community would cook its own food'.⁷⁸ The maintenance of social injunctions, albeit with adaptations, was similarly enabled by proximity to India: Brahmins could more easily be brought to East Africa to cook and perform religious rituals; Hindu merchant men were able to return to India for marriage, keeping endogamy intact; and, though he later discontinued the practice, Mehta was able to undergo 'purificatory rites'⁷⁹ on return to India.⁸⁰

Set against the backdrop of the freshly built Uganda railway, from his more humble beginnings as a cook and assistant to his devout Vaishnava brother in Madagascar, Mehta's autobiography charts his journey through the porous, though increasingly mediated, boundaries of the Indian Ocean, during which he accumulated monetary and symbolic capital in East Africa and India. As Kimari and Ernston note, the railway 'reshaped lives and landscapes towards the goal of empire',⁸¹ entrenching imperial expansion and

74. Khan, 'The Indebted', 88.

75. Mongia, *Indian Migration*, 13.

76. *Ibid.*, 2.

77. Green, 'The Waves', 870.

78. Mehta, *Dream Half-Expressed*, 34.

79. *Ibid.*, 108.

80. See Markovits, *India and the World* and Gregory, *Rise and Fall*.

81. Wangui Kimari and Henrik Ernston, 'Imperial Remains and Imperial Invitations: Centering Race within the Contemporary Large-Scale Infrastructures of East Africa', *Antipode* 52, no. 3 (2020): 827.

extraction in the region. It similarly informed Mehta's own trajectory: '[a]s the Government of Uganda progressively annexed more and more territory, my trade followed in [its] wake'.⁸² Beyond colonial infrastructure, this was enabled by Mehta's merchant networks, 'men of [his] community'⁸³, who gave him goods on credit to sell onwards. The stitching together of port and hinterland saw the formation of new towns and the rapid escalation of Indians in the interior. Although the majority of indentured labourers who survived the harsh conditions returned to India upon conclusion of their contracts, 7000 remained in East Africa.⁸⁴ Many became *dukkawallas*, establishing small shops in towns along the railway, primarily selling goods to Africans.

Proximity to India and a favourable environment for Indian enterprise under British colonization spurred significant migration from Western India from the early 20th century. Many who arrived at ports such as Mombasa – which Mehta narrates as a 'cosmopolitan city' and extension of India, with traders from across religious and ethnic backgrounds – and proceeded to the interior had existing relations with Indians already in East Africa. Merchants and traders retained close ties with their villages, and it was from here that they drew their early employees – precedent for the intensive Indian migration during this period had been established in the preceding centuries. This migration complemented and coalesced with the orientation of British colonial policy to recruit 'skilled' workers from India as government servants, as well as encourage economic 'development' through Indian migration. In contrast to a tendency to present categories of labour and migration in homogenous, national or territorial terms, they were similarly at times stratified in colonial governance in ways that both aligned and contradicted caste-based differentiation. Together, merchant and colonial outlooks and praxes lent, though unequally, to the formation of a racially stratified landscape and colonial political economy, though with important forms of internal differentiation both revealed and collapsed in Mehta's account and the colonial archive alike. As Laleh Khalili elaborates, 'ties of kinship and community lubricated the machinery of exchange. But kinship and trust alone did not suffice'.⁸⁵ Instead, emergent colonial capitalism and the so-called 'bazaar economy' that preceded it worked in tandem, setting structural conditions for Mehta's ventures.

Navigating From the Middle

Yet, this was not without tensions. Mehta describes 'child-like'⁸⁶ Africans as initially resistant, but later grateful to Indians for introducing them to the gifts of modernity. As Gaurav Desai notes, this reflects a 'mythological charter that often accompanies Asian claims to the communities' contributions to East African modernity'.⁸⁷ Central to this is a moral economy predicated on reading (Indian) 'commerce as romance', distinct from

82. Mehta, *Dream Half-Expressed*, 87–8.

83. *Ibid.*, 88.

84. See Markovits, *India and the World* and Gregory, *Rise and Fall*.

85. Laleh Khalili, *Sinews of War and Trade: Shipping and Capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula* (London: Verso, 2020), 35.

86. Mehta, *Dream Half-Expressed*, 89.

87. Desai, *Commerce*, 16.

the exploitative initiation to modernity extended by European colonizers – and, for Mehta, reminiscent of economic liberalism, commerce offered the ideal ground for racial and religious ‘harmony’. Although as Mehta’s commercial ambitions grew, so did his confrontations with the British colonial state. The first such encounter he narrates concerns a colonial policy which introduced restrictions on the purchase of cotton by ‘middlemen’ in 1913, resisted by Indian merchants through the formation of the ‘Association of Indian Cotton Merchants’.⁸⁸ Although at times unmentioned in his account, Mehta would confront similar obstacles when his ambitions competed with the orientation of the colonial political economy.

While presented as a product of his deft navigation of contradictions between Indian and British capital through his innate acumen for speculation and networking, Mehta’s commercial success was also part of global conditions as the Indian Ocean world was increasingly melded into larger global networks. In contrast to the meritocratic tenor in which he attributes his ‘capital’ to his own credit,⁸⁹ Mehta’s initial fortunes in the cotton industry were entangled with developments across the Atlantic Ocean. As examined by Sven Beckert, Britain’s colonial policy to encourage cotton cultivation in East Africa and its colonies elsewhere aimed to reduce dependence on the precarious US cotton export supply during the Civil War and its aftermath, pointing to a longer history of cotton trade tying together a commercial web across Europe, Asia, the Americas and Africa.⁹⁰ Notably, the American Civil War and blockade on cotton in the southern United States were pivotal to the rise of modern Bombay as an industrial hub, and of the ‘indigenous’, or vernacular, capitalists based there.⁹¹ By the early 20th century many Bombay-based capitalists established textile mills which would be central to Mehta’s own transition from trader to industrialist. The first of these was established in 1854, and – though bearing in mind India suffered significant deindustrialization due to colonialism – by World War I (WWI) India’s cotton industry was the sixth largest in the world, with Indian capitalists controlling 80% of the industry.⁹² Some of these mill-made products were exported to East Africa to be sold by traders. And relatedly, as Mehta notes, by 1913 ‘[c]otton plantations rapidly increased and the remotest parts of East Africa bristled with new activities of cotton growing and cotton planting’.⁹³

The onset of WWI marked a critical juncture for Mehta, contributing not only to an increase in cotton trade and profits, but also his early involvement with Indian nationalist and Hindu reformist movements. For Mehta, his identity as a ‘Kshatriya trader’ dictated his lack of aversion to war. Instead, ‘[t]he sounding of war trumpets’ was ‘sufficient enticement’ to take his post amongst the ‘ambitious men of commerce’.⁹⁴ These ‘men of commerce’, including merchants and industrialists in East Africa such as the Madhvanis, as well as larger Bombay-based families such as the Birlas and Tatas, similarly profited

88. Mehta, *Dream Half-Expressed*, 113.

89. *Ibid.*, 83.

90. Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (London: Penguin Books, 2014).

91. See Sheetal Chhabria, *The Making of the Modern Slum: The Power of Capital in Bombay* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019).

92. Markovits, *India and the World*, 30.

93. Mehta, *Dream Half-Expressed*, 110.

94. *Ibid.*, 118.

from the shipping crises of WWI and the 1920s economic crisis in its wake. Mehta's economic success was supported by his navigation across colonial jurisdictions, including his relationship with the German firm Hensing & Company, based in German East Africa. It was similarly this relationship that enabled his early forays into the Indian nationalist movement, offering support to the revolutionary from Gujarat, Narsinhbhai Ishwarbhai Patel. Under investigation by the British Imperial Government's Criminal Investigation Department, Mehta helped Patel flee to German East Africa in 1914 where he was employed by Hensing & Company.

Emergency restrictions and relative sedentariness brought about by the war similarly invigorated Mehta's affiliation with the Arya Samaj. Inflected with a missionary orientation, the Hindu reformist movement initially founded by Dayananda Saraswati in Bombay in 1875 was 'highly conscious'⁹⁵ of Indians living in overseas colonies and found its first East African foothold in 1903 in Kenya. The first Arya Samaj branch was established by Hindu labourers from Punjab, and a year later Mehta had his first encounter with the movement in Zanzibar through a Gujarati businessman. Moored in Mombasa during the war, Mehta became a regular at the Arya Samaj Temple, which was one of the few sites open for sociality and commercial contact amongst Indians. Here Mehta both met 'important people whose voice counted in . . . civic affairs', including leaders of trading firms, and imbibed Dayananda's teachings.

As Ojwang underscores, Mehta's affinity with the Hindu reformists' 'simultaneous commitment to reform and cultural conservation'⁹⁶ needs to be understood in relation to his own rationalization of traversing caste boundaries as well as, I would add, his commitment to ideas of 'merit'. The orientation of the Arya Samaj helped manage contradictions that emerged as Mehta's commercial ventures led him to transcend certain racial, caste and religious boundaries. The importance attributed to 'merit-based varna'⁹⁷ over birth similarly found appeal with Mehta and amongst upwardly mobile commercial castes from Punjab and Gujarat. For Mehta, his affiliation with the Arya Samaj went on to inform broader notions of 'cultural synthesis' that guided his outlook, including his turn towards an increasingly muscular Hindu nationalism premised on a romanticization of a superior pre-colonial past – which, for Mehta, involved *both* a turn towards India's Vedic past, and to the early mercantile Indian Ocean past. Notably, the Arya Samaj was part of a growing number of Hindu organizations in East Africa, including caste associations, such as the Lohana Club, that Mehta would later preside over.

Mehta's affiliation with the Arya Samaj would shape his philanthropy in India and East Africa as his accumulation of capital escalated post-WWI. The war and its aftermath left many European cotton planters bankrupt, enabling Mehta to shift from a trade/purchasing agent – a 'middleman' – to set up his own cotton ginneries in Uganda.⁹⁸ Yet his

95. Peter van der Veer and Steven Vertovec, 'Brahmanism Abroad: On Caribbean Hinduism as an Ethnic Religion', *Ethnology* 30, no. 2 (1991): 160.

96. Ojwang, 'Restless State', 68.

97. John Zavos, 'The Ārya Samāj and the Antecedents of Hindu Nationalism', *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 3, no. 1 (1999): 65.

98. Mahmood Mamdani, *Politics and Class Formation in Uganda* (London: Monthly Review Press, 1976).

efforts to transcend stratifications of East Africa's racialized political economy were met with multiple obstacles – at the level of financing, as well as securing land and machinery – despite his close associations with British industry bodies and the colonial government. As in India, colonial stratifications in the cotton industry in East Africa lent to anti-colonial sentiment, offering insight into the symbolic role cotton went on to have in the Indian national movement. Mehta ultimately turned to Bombay for assistance, and the expansion of his ventures was enabled with support from Mathuradas Gokuldas, the one-time 'cotton king' of Bombay. This reflected the growing investment of Indian capital in East Africa, facilitated by the legacy of Indian trade and migration, as well as the alignment of legal and economic regimes between the British colonies. By 1926, Mehta was at the helm of 6 of the 24 cotton ginneries run by Indian Ugandans, out of a total of 114, owned primarily by Indians based in India, white settlers in Uganda, and those based in Britain and Japan.⁹⁹

From Intermediary to Industrialist

Although Mehta continued to cross geographic boundaries, within the frame of Uganda's racially stratified class formation and political economy, these conditions led to him being considered part of what Mahmood Mamdani refers to as the 'dependent commercial bourgeoisie'¹⁰⁰ or 'immigrant merchant elite',¹⁰¹ which would be in competition with the Baganda landed elite. This was a position distinct from the 'petty bourgeoisie' made up of Indian retail traders, though both were positioned above the African peasantry. Following a common vernacular capitalist trajectory, Mehta turned to the profit potential of industrial capital, as did the prominent Muljibhai Madhvani. With collapsing cotton prices later in the 1920s, both Mehta and Madhvani family firms sought to diversify their portfolios through large-scale sugar cultivation.¹⁰²

Mehta narrates the beginnings of the Uganda Sugar Factory in Lugazi in 1924 as a product of fate and ingenuity. The land it sits on is romanticized as 'Mehta's favourite hill', a site where land, labour and capital sit together in harmony:

I bought plenty of land around this favourite hill of mine and thousands of acres of land which were once barren and unproductive were gradually turned into a fertile plantation of sugar-canes . . . The scene is not only beautiful but sublime . . . The noise of the factory intensifies the stillness of the falling night and peace remains undisturbed even though the hurry and bustle of industrial life has overtaken it.¹⁰³

At the time of writing, the Uganda Sugar Factory at Lugazi – being run by Mehta's younger son – had 'twenty-two thousand acres of land under cultivation with hundreds

99. Ibid.

100. Ibid., 108.

101. Mahmood Mamdani, 'The Asian Question', *London Review of Books* 44, no. 19 (2022).

102. Giuliano Martiniello, 'Bitter Sugarification: Sugar Frontier and Contract Farming in Uganda', *Globalizations* 18, no. 3 (2020): 355–71. Available at: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v44/n19/mahmood-mamdani/the-asian-question>

103. Mehta, *Dream Half-Expressed*, 169.

of tractors for mechanised farming'. Similar spatial representations are present in *Tide of Fortune*, the Madhvani family biography written by Manubhai Madhvani, Muljibhai's son. For him, the fields around their sugar plantation, Kakira Sugar Works Limited, fold 'like green sari into the hills' while 'life on the plantation has a rhythm of its own', involving people coming together in 'common enterprise'.¹⁰⁴

These spatial imaginaries of sugar plantations presenting Uganda as a site of 'barren' abundance, with commodities waiting to be extracted, obfuscate the processes of accumulation and resistance involved with their establishment and expansion. The formation of these plantations entailed navigating a 10,000-acre limit on land alienation to non-Africans imposed by the colonial government, as well as a colonial economy geared towards African agriculture.¹⁰⁵ The Mehtas and Madhvanis developed strategies to lease and exchange categories of land within Uganda's land tenure system, engaging with African landowners and the Protectorate government alike. As Ahluwalia explains, the agreements that were likely the most exploitative were those impacting 'African tenants whose interest and legal rights were simply ignored by the African landowners'.¹⁰⁶ When these leases came into effect, 'peasants were simply evicted by the sugar companies'. The Mehtas and Madhvanis also filed applications to the colonial government for additional leases which sometimes found the favour of colonial officials. As Ahluwalia emphasizes, in practice colonial authorities were ready to alienate land in the interest of 'a certain portion of the Asian population in Uganda'.¹⁰⁷ For the colonial state, this was justified on the grounds that these 'limited companies' '[could] not be expected to undertake improvements in the living conditions of their employees unless they are permitted to hold sufficient land for that purpose'.¹⁰⁸

Yet labourers are largely missing in Mehta's discussion, reflecting a wider and revealing tendency in the autobiography. Mehta's identification with the 'soil' as Ojwang notes, 'bypass[ed] any identification of people living there'.¹⁰⁹ In practice, sugar plantations in Uganda initially faced issues securing adequate labour supply due to colonial policy encouraging small-scale cash crop cultivation, the conditions of which were preferred by workers to the exploitative wage labour on sugar estates. This shortage was addressed through the importation of migrant labour from Ruanda-Urundi, though Lugazi quickly became a 'trouble spot': in the early 1940s there were multiple riots and strikes over working and living conditions, followed by further unrest in 1956.¹¹⁰ As the largest employer in the Kingdom of Buganda at this point, the sugar factory at Lugazi also became a site of early union organizing linked to wider anti-imperialist networks, including the International Federation of Plantation and Allied Workers.

104. Manubhai Madhvani and Giles Foden, *Tide of Fortune: A Family Tale* (London: Manubhai Madhvani Bermuda Trusts, 2008).

105. The National Archives CO 536/207.

106. D. P. S. Ahluwalia, 'Contradictions in Uganda's Development: The Case of the Sugar Industry', *The African Review: A Journal of African Politics, Development and International Affairs* 20, no. 1/2 (1993): 81–93.

107. *Ibid.*

108. See note 103.

109. Ojwang, 'Restless State', 70.

110. The National Archives CO 822/816.

This history sits in sharp contrast to Mehta's own descriptions of Lugazi, reflecting the charter of 'commerce as romance':

The factory . . . employs thousands of people of all races. There are pucca built quarters for the members of the staff and factory workers, a well-equipped hospital with a hundred and twenty beds and modern school buildings where five hundred children take their education. Lugazi township has sports grounds, parks, clubs, a police station, telegraph and postal offices and has an appearance of a modern industrial town.¹¹¹

This image, which I suggest can be understood as a 'micro' version of Mehta's world-making vision, bears resonance with his descriptions of Mauritius – 'the land of sugar' – which he visits to glean knowledge and secure machinery for his factory. Reflecting the transnational circuits of contact between Indian capitalists mediated by the 'plasticity'¹¹² of caste and kin networks, Mehta visits a fellow Indian capitalist. For Mehta, Mauritius is similarly a site of racial harmony and Hindu and Muslim unity, where divisive distinctions of 'caste and creed' are absent. Here, reminiscent of a proto-multiculturalism, the plantation is again a site where land, labour and capital sit in happy union, obscuring the racialized stratifications of plantation economies – including a history of caste-based indentured labour in Mauritius. Following his time in Mauritius, Mehta introduced machinery and reforms to his own sugar operation, reflecting the role of Indian capitalists in the spread of transnational plantation logics, which helped bring 'diverse geographies into the same temporal rhythms'.¹¹³

Philanthropy, Spirituality and Capital Between India and East Africa

Through his circuitous migration, Mehta's success in East Africa is intimately connected to his mounting commercial, philanthropic and political ventures in India. Complicating a linear notion of movement, Mehta's trajectory underscores circulation of thought, praxes and people, and their impact on the 'homeland'. Crucially, this more expansive optic similarly upsets a tendency to view Mehta as merely an 'apolitical' member of East Africa's 'commercial bourgeoisie'.¹¹⁴ This – which I suggest is a product of an overly nationalist and territorial framing of politics, as well as a culturalist framing of the diaspora – fails to grapple with Mehta's activities in East Africa and India as entangled at multiple levels, which is better captured by the category of the mobile vernacular capitalist. As Mehta's biography shows, his accrual of symbolic and material capital in East Africa avails him an audience with the Indian nationalist elite, collapsing scales between his 'national'/'spiritual' and 'commercial' homes. Mehta becomes affiliated with the Indian National Congress and his vision of a muscular and independent India bears resonances with the political ambitions of other Indian capitalists supporting the national struggle, for whom a strong state was needed 'to build infrastructures, protect markets,

111. Mehta, *Dream Half-Expressed*, 182.

112. Jain, *Gods*.

113. Manjapra in Khan, 'The Indebted', 97.

114. See Mamdani, *Politics and Class Formation*.

enforce property rights, and maintain an advantageous labor market'.¹¹⁵ Yet, for Mehta, this had a more distinctly transnational orientation, committed to the movement of not only capital, but certain people, which in turn could help to address the problem of India's 'teeming millions',¹¹⁶ as well as what he saw as Africa's civilizational deficit.

In contrast to the large-scale cotton capitalists of Bombay or Ahmedabad, Mehta's inaugural large-scale commercial venture in India, Maharana Mills, was established in 1934 in Porbandar. On invitation and with land allocation from the ruler of the princely state – with whom he had established a close relationship through his philanthropy, funded through his ventures in East Africa – Mehta built the district's first textile mill. This commercial site also became one of political activity. In 1927 the ground of Maharana Mills was the venue for the regional-level Kathiawar Rajkiya Parishad which sought to draw closer association between the Kathiawar princely states and the Indian National Congress, supporting a unified vision of India. In attendance were both Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and M. K. Gandhi, with whom Mehta would have further encounters with through his involvement with constructing a Gandhi memorial at Porbandar and in his efforts to secure support, although unsuccessfully, against legislation in East Africa in 1947 which sought to limit Indian immigration.

Porbandar, where he ultimately settled while maintaining connection with East Africa through his sons, became the site of mounting commercial ventures for Mehta, including a hydrogen plant and a cement factory in 1961. Yet reflecting the sticky intersection between the cultural and economic, it was also the location of many philanthropic endeavours. Reflecting his mobile vernacular capitalist orientation, as the autobiography progresses Mehta's attention turns more squarely towards sites of philanthropy and pilgrimage, even as his commercial ventures on both sides of the Indian Ocean continued. In 1937, Mehta established the Arya Kanya Gurukul, which was informed by his vision of 'cultural synthesis' where 'East and West were gradually harmonized', influenced by his affiliation with the Arya Samaj. This girls' school was organized around a 'liberal outlook' though also sought to uphold 'the duty of Aryan women to preserve, defend, and contribute to their rich culture'¹¹⁷ – an orientation which both aligns with and contradicts Mehta's celebration of *sati*. Notably the Arya Kanya Gurukul committed to educate women across castes, including those he referred to as 'harijans' or 'untouchables'. Beyond a reflection of his reverence for Gandhi and the Arya Samaj, Mehta's views on untouchability were influenced by his own travels, including his witnessing of racism on the part of Europeans in East and South Africa. Reminiscent of more contemporary comparisons between race and caste, Mehta expresses that the reprehensible 'colour distinction' in South Africa 'could be compared to a certain extent' to the situation of 'Harijans in India'.¹¹⁸

Yet while moving away from the strict Vaishnava practices of his youth and transcending caste 'taboos' in ways that were comparatively progressive, Mehta maintains the centrality of caste to preserving 'Indian unity'. As articulated in a Gandhian tenor

115. Beckert, *Empire*.

116. Mehta, *Dream Half-Expressed*, 256.

117. *Ibid.*, 208.

118. *Ibid.*, 200.

– wedding ‘Hindu caste practice’ with concerns for ‘efficient organization’¹¹⁹ – during one of the many pilgrimages that occupied his later years:

It was in ancient times that the Hindu society made itself strong and indivisible by splitting itself in four classes – the Brahmins looking after their work of teaching; the Kshatriyas taking care of the country’s defence; the Vaishyas looking after the production and distribution of wealth and the Shudras who served for the welfare of society. Through knowledge, strength, wealth, and service they created a co-operative whole and produced a strong, stable and well-balanced society. Even today the willing co-operation of the rich and the poor, both ready to devote their talents and labour to their country’s good, would bring back the pristine feeling of Indian unity followed by peace and happiness for all.¹²⁰

Mehta’s nostalgia for a strong Hindu society not only omits Dalits, but, following Ambedkar’s critique of Gandhi in *The Annihilation of Caste*, entails the advancement of not only a caste-based ‘division of labour’, but ‘division of *labourers*’ (emphasis added).¹²¹ And this was a division of labour that ‘Indian women’, committed to upholding Indian culture, were integral to reproducing through sati and, in turn, endogamy – integral to his ideas of national self-sufficiency. Mehta’s abstraction of a caste-based division of labour into the class-based categories of ‘rich’ and ‘poor’ reflect what anti-caste scholars have pointed to as the obfuscation of caste to forge a Hindu majority, aligning with Mehta’s increasingly Hindu hegemonic inflections.

While arguing against the excesses of racism in South Africa and untouchability in India, race and caste respectively and concurrently serve an ordering purpose for Mehta. The caste system, just as the plantation system in Mauritius and Uganda, offer archetypal schemes for the division of labour, national and global, which in turn allow for smooth commercial exchange – and in turn, harmony and unity. This outlook not only sits comfortably with Mehta’s reading of entrepreneurialism as part of his jati DNA, but aligns with his concrete practices which promoted ‘uplift’, though strictly within the logics of hierarchy. This includes, for example, in relation to Mahers, who Mehta long regards as a martial clan that is ‘brave’, ‘strong’ and vengeful, but ultimately misdirected in their activities. While not included in his biography, in the 1950s Mehta reportedly hired Mahers to break up a Communist-led strike at Maharana Mills.¹²² Here, Mehta ostensibly deploys a caste-based division of labour to restore, in his view, the naturally harmonious, stratified relationship between capital and labour. Notably, this division of labour also transcended India’s boundaries. In the final pages of his autobiography while reflecting on his successes and failures, Mehta sums up:

It has been my keen desire and earnest wish that Africa should not only advance industrially but agriculturally too. That required a contingent of able-bodied loyal men who could work hard at factories and farms. So I made it a point to take about two thousand Mahers and other sturdy

119. Spodek, ‘Origins’, 371.

120. Mehta, *Dream Half-Expressed*, 247.

121. B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition* (New York: Verso, 2016).

122. Ojwang, ‘Restless State’.

people from the Barada region to Africa. With their hard labour and supervision agriculture prospered in Uganda and elsewhere. It has helped to create such agricultural conditions which led to expand industry and trade in East Africa.¹²³

Here, caste does not simply precede capitalism, but is adapted and mobilized towards its ongoing operation – nationally and internationally.

As Lisa Lowe describes, global racial ‘capitalism [has expanded] not through rendering all labor, resources, and markets across the world identical, but by precisely seizing upon colonial divisions’.¹²⁴ Through the reading of Mehta’s autobiography and vernacular capitalist trajectory offered in this section, we can not only see this operating in more intimate detail, but also the entangled role of ‘pre-colonial’ divisions in this process.

Conclusion: Hierarchical Internationalisms in the Age of Decolonization and Its Aftermath

Despite Mehta’s turn towards the ‘spiritual’ in his later years, he remained engaged in ‘worldly’ endeavours – commercial, political and philanthropic ventures in India and East Africa. Although left out of his autobiography, reflecting Mehta’s prescription for a ‘world state’ this involved efforts to advance a geographically expansive idea of India in the face of an increasingly territorialized vision espoused by India’s leading anti-colonialists and postcolonial state builders. This included through his affiliation with S. K. Patil. Patil, who wrote the foreword of Mehta’s autobiography, was a Congress leader, long-standing Mayor of Bombay, and right-wing member of Nehru’s inner circle, well-known for his support of ‘big business’, staunch anti-communism and as a party ‘strongman’ – particularly for his role securing the defeat of the Communist Party in state-level elections in Andhra Pradesh in February 1955.¹²⁵ Patil led an organization called the Brihad Bharatiya Samaj (BBS) with A. B. Patel, a Kenya-based Hindu lawyer born in Gujarat and former President of the East African Congress from 1938 to 1945. A. B. Patel was known to be a political moderate. While advocating against the ‘colour bar’ in East Africa, he cautioned against radical anti-imperialist and labour organizing across Indian and African communities in Kenya, revealing divisions within the Indian anti-colonial political landscape.¹²⁶

According to colonial archival sources, BBS was founded in 1950 and described by Patil as a ‘cross between Chatham House and the Overseas League’.¹²⁷ In the context of an emergent distancing policy by the newly independent state towards Indians overseas, the organization sought to connect Indians abroad, upholding a more deterritorialized India.¹²⁸ In April 1955, shortly after the Bandung Conference took place, S. K. Patil travelled to East Africa as part of a ‘goodwill mission’ to connect with Indians abroad and secure funding to construct a BBS hostel/research institution in Bombay.¹²⁹ Mehta donated

123. Mehta, *Dream Half-Expressed*, 319.

124. Lowe, *Intimacies*, 150.

125. The National Archives DO 35/5307.

126. *Ibid.*

127. *Ibid.*

128. *Ibid.*

129. *Ibid.*

considerably, and in 1963 the N. K. Mehta International House was built in Bombay. Patil's circuits in Uganda in 1955 followed Mehta's own: giving a lecture at the Lohana Club, visiting the Arya Samaj and attending a dinner Mehta hosted to honour Patil's visit. Crucially, responding to the emerging climate of African anti-colonial nationalism, Patil repeatedly stressed the need for interracial and religious harmony, and emphasized that Indians in East Africa were not exploiters, nor was their presence temporary.

Yet, in a tone reminiscent of Mehta, Patil also affirmed logics of racial and caste-based stratification when engaging with British colonial officials. As noted in colonial correspondence regarding their meetings with Patil: 'there was some justification for the desire of more advanced communities in East Africa to have a measure of social segregation from more primitive people (he [Patil] admitted a similar antipathy on his own part towards eating with, living in close proximity with, e.g. the "adivasis")'.¹³⁰ In Patil's articulation of his sentiments towards adivasis, there are similarities with his descriptions of African 'backwardness' in the foreword to Mehta's autobiography. Given the role of adivasis in Communist mobilization in India, his anti-'primitive' and anti-communist sentiments can also be understood as interlinked, and his emphasis on 'social segregation' around food and housing reflects casteist notions of purity and pollution. This reveals how the complex translations of racial hierarchies, and how casteism and forms of internal racialization in India (in this case, towards adivasis), lent justification to the racialized character of East Africa's political and social economy. Ultimately, Patil and Mehta were, individually and collectively, engaged in forms of worldmaking which, while advancing anti-colonial nationalism and internationalism, maintained notions of civilizational superiority. These were not only predicated on forms of differentiation and incorporation which aligned with the optic of the three-fold racial hierarchy between Europeans, Asians and Africans, but also contradicted and exceeded it in its gradations.

What is revealed by the account of Mehta navigating and shaping the emergence and outcomes of colonial capitalism in the Indian Ocean world, along with his political orientations and affiliations? Returning to the arguments outlined at the outset of this article, taking seriously the mobile vernacular capitalists through the figure of Mehta brings to the fore outlooks, practices and alliances which operated in a distinct register from romanticized anti-colonial inflections and solidarities associated with the Bandung moment inaugurated in 1955, as well as its antecedents.

In this way, centring Mehta builds on recent literature which, in turning to Indians in Africa, and Afro-Asian relations more broadly, has highlighted 'mixed registers of equality and hierarchy' in Indian international thought¹³¹ as well as 'non-Western' forms of race-making.¹³² The aim here is not to label Mehta and other vernacular capitalists as straightforwardly imperialist, or downplay or displace the brutality and ferment that accompanied colonization and its aftermath. Mehta expressed opposition to European colonialism's excesses and was broadly supportive of national independence. Moreover, the ruptures of decolonization would have stark initial implications for Indians in East

130. Ibid. The following also draws on Patil's discussion of adivasis: Kalathmika Natarajan, 'The privilege of the Indian passport (1947–1967): Caste, class and the afterlives of indenture in Indian diplomacy', *Modern Asian Studies* 57 no. 2 (2022): 321–350.

131. Bayly, 'Global', 3.

132. Shankar, *Uneasy*.

Africa. Alongside the expulsion of thousands of ‘Asians’ from Uganda by Idi Amin in 1972, members of prominent families, including the Mehtas and Madhvanis, were arrested and their properties seized. Albeit, reflecting ongoing political contestations in the wake of decolonization and the durabilities of colonial histories, this land was eventually returned and their business operations restored, though with closer cooperation with the Ugandan government.

Instead, aligned with this recent literature, my aim is to complicate neat temporal and political analytics between colonial and pre-colonial, as well as colonizer and colonized, often emphasized in postcolonial IR. Yet Mehta’s commercial orientation also lends to this scholarship a more explicit engagement with questions of capital and labour. Mehta’s practices and common refrains to unity were predicated on the preservation of hierarchical differentiations: not only across race and caste, but also between capital and labour, all operating in tandem, even if at times in contradiction. His meditations on divisions of labour, explicit and implicit, reflected a wider tendency amongst anti-colonial nationalists across Asia and Africa. As Getachew notes, to make cases for international redistribution, Michael Manley and Julius Nyerere ‘analogized the international division of labor to its domestic counterpart’, with postcolonial states ‘cast as the workers and farmers of the world’.¹³³ Earlier and closer to home, Mahadev Govind Ranade conceptualized colonial India as a ‘dependent’ economy within the global division of labour.¹³⁴ However, rather analogizing the domestic and international divisions of labour to address international relations of inequality, Mehta drew on them to advance what might be considered a hierarchical national and global division of labour, in which caste and race were enmeshed. Rather than the circuits of middle-class intelligentsia, Mehta came to these positions via his mercantile itineraries and commercial, philanthropic and political ventures, through which he attempted to bring aspects of this vision into fruition with varying success.

Relatedly, and returning to the second argument advanced in this article, foregrounding Mehta’s mobile vernacular capitalist orientation adds texture to recent writings on racial capitalism beyond the Atlantic in and outside IR. Returning to Ince’s piece referenced earlier, the forms of differentiation and incorporation he cites as central to European imperialism in Asia resonate with Mehta’s own vision and practices. Yet through Mehta we can also see the ongoing operation of local and regional hierarchies, and the dynamic processes through which they are incorporated into the differentiating logics of colonial capitalism across geographies. By offering a lens into what Robinson calls the ‘coincidence of different relations of power colliding’,¹³⁵ Mehta’s circular mobilities illuminate the entangled and graded workings of race, capital *and* caste in the Indian Ocean region and how they are linked with the Atlantic, as well as their material effects.

Together, this speaks to recent reappraisals of the decolonial moment and its afterlives in IR. Beyond illuminating more fragmented axes and meanings of decolonization, by bringing to the fore submerged stratifications, turning to the mobile vernacular capitalist

133. Getachew, *Worldmaking*, 158.

134. Goswami, *Producing India*, 211.

135. Cedric J. Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film Before World War I* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), xi.

may also offer insight into how these graded hierarchies shape the (post)colonial present. This includes by historicizing forms of expropriation within the global South, as well as offering a spatial analytic to help apprehend the increasingly global dynamics of caste – ultimately underscoring the importance of taking up calls to ‘deprovincialize’ both racial capitalism and caste, within and beyond IR.

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ORCID iD

Shikha Dilawri  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1641-7615>