

# INDIAN DIASPORA IN OMAN: A STUDY OF THE KHIMJI RAMDAS FAMILY

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## **Abstract:**

‘Indian Diaspora’ constitutes an important and unique force not only in economy but also in socio-cultural spheres for both the country of origin and the country of residence or migration. Indians have been migrating for centuries; however, the most massive emigration among Indians took place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. According to studies, there are more than 20 million people of Indian origin settled out of India in different countries across the globe. However, when it comes to Indo-Arab or more specifically Indo-Oman ties, it is an undeniable fact that these relations have existed from times, literally, immemorial as evidenced by archaeological findings. The historical relations between these two regions have been extensively documented which also include narratives of trade and maritime contacts.

Indian merchants, particularly from Gujarati Baniya families were present in Oman for more than two centuries. There were strong Indian merchant families and individuals in Oman like Bhimani family, Ratansi Purshottam, Daulatgirji Manrupgirji, Khimji Ramdas, Danji Murarji, Vallabhdas Umarsi, Gopalji Walji etc. they have been the important players in the trade and economy of the State and hence had close ties with the Rulers of Oman. The connection of the Khimji Ramdas family with Oman apparently derives from a family member who operated a country craft involved in trade between India and the Gulf. He then setup a business in Muscat and Khimji Ramdas emerged to be the successful and strong member of this family business from whom the family takes its present name as Khimji Ramdas Company. Over time, these families evolved from small-scale traders to powerful merchant houses, becoming indispensable intermediaries in regional commerce. Their reputation for financial reliability and their ability to navigate multilingual and multicultural environments placed them at the centre of Oman’s trade activities.

This paper attempts to study the brief history of Indian diaspora in Oman with a special focus on the study of Khimji Ramdas family and its contribution and role in Omani economy. This will also study the impact of the Khimji groups on India as well as Oman. In doing so, the paper also contributes to broader debates about transnational entrepreneurship, identity formation in diaspora communities, and the role of long-distance networks in shaping modern economic systems. The Khimji Ramdas family serves as a compelling case study of how diaspora groups can successfully integrate into host societies while retaining strong cultural and emotional ties to their homeland.

**Keywords:** Indian Diaspora, Maritime trade, Gulf countries, Baniya communities, Khimji Ramdas Company, Omani trade and economy etc.

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**INTRODUCTION:**

The term 'diaspora' has been changing from time to time starting from the narrow semantic understanding to conceptual and disciplinary subject. Many studies propose to treat diaspora not as a bounded entity but as a term which has been stretched in various directions in its meaning and context. However, the essence of the meaning of the diaspora from the original Greek words 'Dia' (through/over) and 'Speiro' (to sow/to disperse), which means to disperse over different places is still widely considered as the integral part for labelling the term diaspora to certain groups of people. In contemporary usage, the concept of diaspora has expanded to include not only forced or voluntary migration but also the psychological, cultural, and political relationships that bind dispersed communities to their places of origin. This shift reflects the increasing significance of transnational mobility and global communication technologies, which allow migrant populations to maintain simultaneous presence in multiple social spaces.

When the question of Indian diaspora is raised, the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs states that India has the second largest diaspora in the world. The overseas Indian community estimated at over 20 million is spread across every major region in the world. The Indian diaspora comprises People of Indian Origin and Non Resident Indians and today are amongst the best educated and successful communities in the world. The economic impact of this diaspora is substantial; India has consistently been one of the top recipients of global remittances, with contributions from the Gulf region forming a significant portion. Beyond economics, the Indian diaspora serves as a cultural ambassador, transmitting language, cuisine, and artistic traditions across continents.

It also mentions that the overseas Indian community is the result of different waves of migration over hundreds of years driven by a variety of reasons like mercantilism, colonialism and globalisation. It points that the early experiences of Indian diasporas make up a saga of trials, tribulations and the eventual triumph of determination and hard work. The Indian diaspora thus constitutes a diverse, heterogeneous and eclectic global community representing different regions, languages, cultures and faiths. The common thread that binds them together is the idea of India and its intrinsic values. These values, such as respect for pluralism, family cohesion, and entrepreneurial initiative, often manifest strongly in diaspora settings, where communities attempt to preserve cultural identity while navigating new social landscapes. Such dynamics are particularly evident in Gulf countries like Oman, where Indian migrants have established vibrant cultural, linguistic, and religious institutions.

Thus the 'Indian Diaspora' constitutes an important and unique force not only in economy but also in socio-cultural spheres. Indians have been migrating for centuries; however, the most massive emigration among Indians took place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. When it comes to Indo-Arab or more specifically Indo-Oman ties, it is an undeniable fact that these relations have existed from very long time back as evidenced by archeological findings. The historical relations between these two regions have been extensively documented which also include narratives of trade and maritime contacts. Recent archaeological and anthropological studies highlight the extent to which these interactions shaped cosmopolitan port cities along the Arabian Sea. Excavations at sites such as Ras al-Hadd and Salut indicate continual contact with the Harappan and later Indian coastal civilizations, suggesting an early and sustained movement of craftsmen, traders, and navigators between the two regions.

Contacts between India and coast of Oman emerged very early in the commercial history of Indian Ocean when maritime trade was conducted between Sumer and the Harappan civilizations in the Indus valley. But it is difficult to make any generalizations about the role of Indian merchants in ancient trade with Oman. Though it is impossible to determine when the first Indian merchant settled at Oman, but historical accounts show that it was no later than fifteenth century (Allen Jr., Calvin H. 1987). Some historians, however, argue that informal settlement may have occurred much earlier due to the monsoon-dependent trade cycle that encouraged long stays or even seasonal residence. The patterns of migration were thus fluid, with merchants often operating temporary trading houses (factories) that became permanent as demand for Indian goods expanded. The longevity and depth of these connections have encouraged scholars to revisit the Indian Ocean as a distinct civilizational zone, one where cultural and commercial

exchanges often preceded the formation of modern nation-states. Oman's geographical proximity to the western coast of India made it a natural partner in these exchanges, shaping the movement of people, commodities, and ideas over time.

Initially, it was the Sindhi Bhattias from Thatta who started extensive business with Oman but later on they were replaced by Kutchi Bhattias of Gujarat. Since these were merchants so the term Baniya (the trading caste) community was adopted for all Hindu merchants regardless of their caste (Yule and Burnell, 1996). Though the Thattai Bhattias were initially supportive to the Portuguese but later on helped the Yariba rulers of Oman to expel the Europeans from Muscat in mid of the 17<sup>th</sup> century AD. This strategic shift in allegiance reveals the pragmatism of Indian trading communities, who prioritized commercial stability over colonial loyalties. Their role in the expulsion of Portuguese forces elevated their status within the Omani political hierarchy, granting them trading privileges and protection that helped secure their long-term presence.

Bhattia-support to the rulers proved to be very beneficial for the Baniyas and they started flourishing in trade and commerce before and after the establishment of Al Bu-Said dynasty in Oman. However, there were lots of ups and downs in the history of Gujarati Baniyas like on one hand they were supportive to the rulers so they got benefits of it but on the other hand the apparently bright economic prospects of the Bhattias were clouded by the brief regime change from Al Bu-Said family to Ibadhis. This was the serious brief crisis period in the Indian merchant community at Oman which was ended with the comeback of more moderate government under Turki bin Said (1871-1888). These political dynamics remind us that the diaspora's success was never linear; it was shaped by changing political alliances, taxation systems, and security conditions. Nonetheless, the ability of the merchants to adapt (by diversifying goods, forging elite partnerships, and maintaining transoceanic networks) ensured their survival.

During this period a whole new young group of Kutchi Bhattias emerged as the commercial leaders of Muscat. Since Indian merchants particularly from Gujarati Baniya families were present in Oman for more than two centuries, there were strong Indian merchant families and individuals in Oman like Bhimani family, Ratansi Purshottam, Dowlatgirji Manrupgirji, Virji Ratansi, Damodar Dharamsi, Khimji Ramdas, Dayal Purshottam, Danji Murarji, Vallabhdas Umarsi and Gopalji Walji etc. they have been the important players in the trade and economy of the State and hence had close ties with the Rulers of Oman. These families developed sophisticated trading infrastructures including warehouses, dhow fleets, credit systems, and multilingual brokerage networks. Their presence in Muscat, Muttrah, Sur, and Sohar enabled Oman to strengthen its regional trade dominance, especially in dates, limes, textiles, and Indian manufactured goods.

### **KHIMJI RAMDAS FAMILY:**

Since this paper aims to study the Khimji Ramdas family and its contribution in Omani as well as Indian society, so the main focus of this study will thus go to the Khimjis. The connection of the Khimji Ramdas family with Oman apparently derives from Ramdas Thackarsey when he set sail around 1870 from the coastal town of Mandvi, Kutch from India's Western coast Gujarat. He found it worthwhile to setup a business in Muscat to export dates and import various goods. He was succeeded by his son Khimji Ramdas, who sowed the seeds of successful business that eventually grew into a global enterprise that was named after him. Family and commercial ties to India remained very strong throughout the history of Khimji Ramdas family in Oman. It is significant that the family's entrepreneurial journey began during a period of intense commercial transformation across the Indian Ocean, as steamships, telegraphs, and improved port infrastructures reshaped trading patterns.

The family tree of Khimji Ramdas is extended to many sons and grandsons and granddaughters, however the senior most member of the family has been Kanaksi Gokaldas Khimji, the eldest grandson of Khimji Ramdas and the son of Gokaldas Khimji for quite some time. He is the director general of Khimji Ramdas Limited Liability Company (KR LLC). Valeri (2009) mentions that in 2000, the third generation of Ramdas family saw the split into four folding:

1. Khimji Ramdas (KR)
2. Ramesh Khimji (RNK)
3. Jamnadas Khimji (JK)
4. Ajit Khimji (AK)

This partition, common in large Gujarati business families, reflected the need to modernize management structures while giving each branch operational autonomy. Despite the split, the families maintained cooperative relationships, ensuring that their collective influence in Oman's commercial landscape remained intact.

One more heir of Khimji Ramdas family Gulabsi and his son Shaitania are in partnership with Turki bin Mahmood al-Said's Al-Turki Group of Companies. RNK is an important trading group in iron and hardware supplies in Oman and across the region especially for its 'Nails' product. AK is involved in hypermarkets, banking, advertising and public works. But KR group is currently the main Omani wholesaler and a giant in the world of trade and commerce in Oman. The diversification of branches into different sectors is strategically significant. It reflects an understanding that Oman's rapidly modernizing economy (especially after the accession of Sultan Qaboos in 1970) required businesses to move beyond traditional trading into manufacturing, services, and infrastructure development. In this sense, the Khimji family became not only beneficiaries of Oman's economic transformation but also active contributors to its modernization.

The KR is an established business group in the Sultanate of Oman which is trusted and respected for more than a century. It has constantly maintained its leadership position in the consumer, infrastructure and industrial arenas and covers many sectors like buildings, computers, leisure etc. it is also the exclusive agent in Oman for Rolex, Compaq, Motorola, General Electric, Fujitsu, Procter and Gamble, Philip Morris, Marlboro and Pizza Hut.

The acquisition of international franchises indicates the company's ability to negotiate with major global corporations and guarantee consistent market performance. These partnerships also mark the entry of modern consumer culture in Oman, with KR serving as a channel through which global brands become accessible to the Omani public.

KR has diversified business in four strategic groups: 1. Consumer Products, 2. Lifestyle, 3. Infrastructure and 4. Projects and Logistics. Thus it serves customers with customized software solutions, Turnkey telecommunication projects, education and training, retailing designer watches and luxury lifestyle accessories, international restaurant chains, supermarket retail chains, commodities and food stuff, pharmaceuticals and health care, home and office solutions including air-conditioning, kitchen and home appliances to electrical products, industrial machinery and tools, oil and gas, integrated defence logistics and equipment support and military and fire-fighting vehicle distribution and maintenance etc. This broad spectrum of activities reflects KR's evolution from a trading firm to a vertically and horizontally integrated conglomerate capable of shaping market trends in the Gulf region. The company's investment in technology, including enterprise software and digital service platforms, has enabled it to remain competitive in an era of accelerating technological change.

In view of the diversification of business of KR LLC it can be safely said that it is one of the biggest business conglomerates in the Sultanate of Oman which includes trading, distribution, retailing, service and manufacturing and which is also committed to customer service and excellence as well as offers world's leading brands in products and services. The firm has built up a workforce of more than 2,500, with 20 facilities across the sultanate and 3,500 distributor points spread around the country. Moreover, the human resource policies of KR emphasize multinational collaboration, with employees drawn from India, Oman, the Philippines, Egypt, and other countries. This diversity enhances the company's cultural



adaptability and fosters a workplace environment that mirrors Oman's status as a cosmopolitan Gulf society.

#### **IMPORTANT DIRECTORS OF KR LLC:**

- Kanaksi Gokaldas Khimji, the senior most director of KR LLC has a strategic mind that has been recognized as much for business acumen as for his contribution to the community. Kanaksi Khimji's leadership is often described as visionary, particularly in his emphasis on balancing commercial progress with philanthropic engagements. His reputation extends beyond the business domain, where he is respected for supporting education, cultural preservation, and charitable initiatives benefiting both Omanis and expatriates.
- Anil Mathradas Khimji, who has accepted business challenges from an early age, he is the guiding force for the growth of global brands, especially in the Watches and Luxury & Lifestyle Categories. Under Anil's supervision, KR expanded its luxury retail portfolio dramatically, introducing premium boutiques in Muscat's high-end commercial districts. His understanding of changing consumer preferences in the Gulf has helped the company stay competitive in sectors where global competition is intense.
- Ajay Mathradas Khimji had steered the P&G business earlier on but now handles the Nutro biscuit brand, for a sister company of KR, based in the UAE. Ajay's experience with Procter & Gamble (the world's largest consumer goods company) enabled him to incorporate best practices in distribution logistics, brand positioning, and retail engagement. These skills have contributed to the growth of indigenous brands like Nutro, strengthening regional food manufacturing capabilities.
- Pankaj Kanaksi Khimji is a man of various facets; business leader; promoter of Omani culture, arts and heritage; active supporter of community projects; and a pillar of strength for the KR Group. Beyond business, Pankaj has played an active role in Oman's sports and cultural diplomacy. His participation in cricket development, heritage conservation initiatives, and inter-community dialogue highlights the multifaceted role diaspora leaders often play in strengthening host-country relations.
- Nailesh Kanaksi Khimji is a stickler for quality, he was instrumental in implementing ISO 9002 in 1996 in the company; and responsible for Roto Packaging and SFIC, sister companies of KR, in UAE. By leading quality-control initiatives and expanding KR operations to the UAE, Nailesh helped integrate the company into the broader GCC market. His focus on packaging and manufacturing also underscores the family's commitment to developing industrial capabilities rather than relying solely on trade-based activities.
- Hritik Ajay Khimji is recently inducted onto the KR Board, he started his career in investment banking & has experience of setting up his own company, operating in the areas of IT, Education and Real Estate. The induction of younger family members like Hritik signifies the company's orientation toward next-generation leadership. Their exposure to international finance, technology, and start-up culture positions KR to adapt to future economic shifts, particularly those associated with digitization and diversification agendas under Oman Vision 2040.

#### **SOCIAL WORK OF THE KHIMJI RAMDAS FAMILY:**

Due to its perfect professional attitude as well as personal bonds with the royal family, the KR family is still close to the ruling family. KR has been involved in the military sector since Said's time and is the representative of Bombardier and Hummer. Khimjis have contributed considerably to the public sphere in Oman as well as in India. Their longstanding relationship with the Al Said dynasty is rooted not merely in business but in mutual trust, political loyalty, and philanthropic engagement. The Khimjis often served as interlocutors between Indian communities and Omani authorities, facilitating dialogue, supporting migrant welfare, and promoting Indo-Oman bilateral relations at critical historical junctures.

In 1975, under Kanaksi Gokaldas Khimji's leadership, the Indian merchants' body in Oman established the first ever English medium school in Muscat. This milestone institution, the Indian School Muscat, later expanded to a network of Indian schools across the Sultanate, serving tens of thousands of students. The

Khimji family's involvement in education reflects their commitment to community upliftment and their understanding of the needs of a growing expatriate population.

The Khimjis have also utilized their proximity to the ruling family in the cause of the Diaspora and strengthening links between India and Oman. Thus the former president of India, Shankar Dayal Sharma, had called Kanaksi Gokaldas Khimji 'the real ambassador of India to the Gulf countries'. Chandrakant Chothani, one of the founding members of the Muscat Gujarati Samaj said, "Kanaksibhai has not only earned the respect of the Indian community but also of the citizens of Oman". This dual recognition from both Indian and Omani circles, illustrates the unique diplomatic role played by influential diaspora individuals. Their presence often supplements formal diplomatic channels, facilitating cultural exchanges, trade agreements, and people-to-people linkages.

Kanaksi Khimji was also one of the overseas Indian to receive the first Centre's Bhartiya Pravasi Award, in 2003 along with nine other members. Indeed, Kanaksi Khimji's 'Bhartiya' persona is reflected in his spiritual practices. He has an idol of Lord Shreenathji installed in a temple at his home. He does not touch non-vegetarian food; his office kitchen serves delicacies like rotla and chaas that keep everybody's palate satisfied with wholesome, and vegetarian, Gujarati delicacies. Such cultural practices reflect the diasporic negotiation between adaptation and continuity. Even while adopting Omani dress and social customs, the Khimjis maintain core elements of Kutchi-Gujarati identity, demonstrating how diasporas weave together multiple layers of belonging.

The meaning of 'Sheikh' in Arabic is an elderly person but when it is used as a title, it is usually given in either honorary or in political terms. Taking into account the enormous contribution of Khimjis in Omani trade and commerce, Kanaksi Khimji, the head of Khimji Ramdas Group of Companies, was not only among those few Indians who were given Omani citizenship but also conferred the title of sheikh by the Sultan of Oman and interestingly, he is the world's only Hindu Sheikh. Sultan Qaboos has also offered his yacht LoLo to KR LLC for developing tourism business in the Sultanate. The conferring of Omani citizenship and the honorific title "Sheikh" on an Indian Hindu businessman is a powerful symbol of the depth of Indo-Omani relations. It signals the Sultanate's appreciation of diaspora contributions and the trust placed in the Khimji family as long-standing partners in nation-building.

## **CONCLUSION:**

The impact of KR group of companies on Oman is enormous and equally important is their meaningful contribution towards India by their success records. Today, when an Indian origin Khimji family member dressed in a flowing full-length robe and wearing the kaffiyeh, the cloth that covers the head, he can easily pass off as an Omani but even though his admired entrepreneurship branches are spread out across the globe, but his roots lie in Gujarat and he has strong connections with the homeland. This dual identity (Omani in appearance and Indian in heritage) captures the essence of the diasporic experience. The Khimji family exemplifies how migrant communities can fully integrate into the social, political, and economic life of the host nation while cultivating enduring emotional, cultural, and economic bonds with the homeland.

Khimjis share a strong bond with their country of origin. This is reflected in their language, cultures and traditions that have been maintained, even over a century, and continue to be vibrant and unique. The relationship between India and its overseas community is growing, new partnerships evolving and newer multi-faceted dimensions being explored.

For example, the Indian government's Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, various diaspora welfare initiatives, and recent diplomatic engagements with the Gulf all highlight India's recognition of the diaspora as a strategic asset. Oman, likewise, has continued to welcome Indian entrepreneurs and skilled professionals, positioning the diaspora as a key contributor to national development under Oman Vision 2040.

Since Khimjis have been sincere and serious players both in economic and cultural spheres in Oman which not only brought good name to Indians but also paved the way for trusted partnerships between India and Oman so India's engagement with its Diaspora in Oman is symbiotic, the strands of both sides of the relationship equally important to create a resilient and robust bond. In many ways, the Khimji Ramdas enterprise has acted as a microcosm of Indo-Oman relations, anchored in mutual respect, commercial collaboration, and cultural accommodation. Their presence demonstrates how diaspora communities can serve as stabilizing forces in international relations, especially in regions such as the Gulf where migration is central to economic life.

To engage with the Diaspora in a sustainable and mutually rewarding manner across the economic, social and cultural space is at the heart of the policy of the Indian Ministry.

Understanding the successes and challenges of families like the Khimjis provides valuable insights into how such engagements can be strengthened. It illustrates the importance of recognizing diaspora contributions not only through economic metrics such as remittances, but through their roles as cultural mediators, political interlocutors, and nation-builders.

Ultimately, the story of the Khimji Ramdas family illustrates the remarkable potential of diasporic enterprise to connect nations, shape economies, and nurture enduring multicultural identities across generations.

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