

Surat: As a Major Port-Town of Gujarat and its Trade History

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Abstract: A port is a place, where people, goods and culture are transferred between land and maritime space. It is a mingle point of ocean and inland transport. A harbor is the essential transit point for the volume of the trade, permitting the imports of goods, which were not in a sufficient amount and the export of items which the country has an excess or has a competitive edge to produce contributing to the progress of its economy. The effectiveness of a port is important in international trade since a seaport is the nerve of foreign trade of a country. Surat is an ancient city and port by all evidence and had been through centuries a centre of maritime trade. The city was very populous and full of merchants. The city had a very considerable number of foreign settlers. Apart from the Europeans, there were Turks, Jews, Arabians, Persians and Armenians. Surat was a great port and commercial centre. The 17th century was an era of the prosperity for the city of Surat. The two great sources that contributed to the wealth and prosperity of the city were foreign commerce and domestic manufactures. Surat was a commercial emporium, besides such commodities as indigo, spices and cloths, many important goods imported from Europe were sold in its markets.

Keywords: Bara, Export, Factories, Maritime, Port Transportation.

I. Introduction:

The present study basically deals with the salient features of the port-town of Surat in Mughal India especially in the 17th century. The port's economy (export/import), trade relation with foreign countries, and Surat town's topography, habitation, and its productivity is also the part of this present study. A port does not take time to become a wheel of economy when it runs competently. Presently the utility of a port is not only limited but has stretched to a logistical platform. The effectiveness of a port is important in international trade since a seaport is the nerve of foreign trade of a country. A harbor is the essential transit point for the volume of the trade, permitting the imports of goods, which were not in sufficient quantity and the export of items which the country has a surplus or has a competitive edge to produce contributing to the progress of its economy. Besides a port is also a place for the provision of further services, which add value to the products transported and thus helps the increasing demand of trade. To cope with the ever growing world trade, ports of every country will no doubt continue to play a critical and vital role in providing the cheapest means of transportation.

A port is a place, where people, goods and culture are transferred between land and maritime space. It is a mingle point of ocean and inland transport.¹ The "Port City" is that city which located at the port. According to *Mirat-i-Ahmadi*, a port is a place where big ships anchor, while *bara* is meant for small boats.² Origin and growth of port depends upon different aspects. The site is an important aspect, which is associated with water, the port-town developed. Gujarat had an important place in the overseas trade owing to its geographical situation in the western coast of India.

II. Surat As A Major Town:

There are so many contemporary Indian historian, who has presented a lengthy account about political and military events of the reigns of Mughal Emperor, have very little to so about the economic condition of the people and their commercial activities. But the English and Dutch records of the period give very precious information. The letters of the East India Company's servant from Surat to their employers in England and from them to their Surat factors being chiefly devoted to their own commercial activities are of great value in tracing the trade of the city of Surat.

Besides these European travelers, visited Surat and other parts of the country in the 17th century, had given a good account of the socio-economic condition of the people and their commercial activities. They were the eyewitness and have left firsthand account of the social and economic condition of the people. They came by different routes on different purposes. Chief among them are Terry (1615-1625), captain to the embassy of Sir Thomas Roe, Pietro Della valle(1623-1625), Mandelso, the German traveler(1638-39), who reached Surat on 25 April 1638, the French physician Bernier, who lived in India from 1659-1666, his contemporary French traveler Tavernier who lived in India from 1641 to 1668, the French traveler Jean de Thevenot who reached Surat on 10th January 1666 and lived in India about a year, Italian traveler Dr Cremelli Careri (in India 1695).

Above and beyond these travelers the persons who served under East India Company at Surat, the most famous are Dr John Frayer, surgeon of English Factory at Surat, (1674-1681) and Ovington (1689-92) has given an excellent account of Surat in 1689.

Some Persian sources also throw some light on this subject like Abul Fazl's *Ain-i Akbari*, *Mirat-i Ahmadi* of Ali Muhammad Khan and edited by Seyed Nawab Ali gives extra information about the history of the period. The Persian sources supply us with additional information regarding the Mughal's attitude towards European companies at Surat, the administration of city and its port, the piracy in Indian waters, the weakness of Mughals at sea, attempt of the Mughals to hold responsibility of the European companies for the security of the Mecca ship etc.

In 1514 the Portuguese traveler Barbosa described Surat as "a city of very great trade in all classes of merchandise, a very important sea port, yielding very large revenue to the king, frequented by many ships from Malabar and all other ports." The city of Surat is about 10 miles by land and about 15 miles by water from the sea. Throughout the second half of the 17th century, it served as the emporium of the trade, both inland and sea-born and was the chief port of the Mughal Empire.

In the 17th century Surat was a fairly big city of considerable size. Ovington says, "The circumference of it, with the suburb, is between two and three English miles, tending somewhat in its position to the form of a semicircle or half moon, because of the winding of the river to which half of it adjoins".³

The entrance in to the city was through several gates. The three main gates were one leading to Cambay and Ahmadabad, another to Burhanpur and Navsari. Sentries were posted at each gate, who kept on eye on all incoming and outgoing persons. The city has ordinary and splendid buildings. European travelers who visited Surat in the 17th century have remarked that the houses of the inhabitants were not in proportion to their wealth because they hidden their riches. Even the houses of the rich people were not splendid.⁴ The *sarkar* of Surat comprising 31 *mahals* including the Bandar (Port and surrounding territories) was placed under the governor (Hakim).⁵ Finch remarks about the location of Surat that the city has many fair merchants houses therein standing twenty miles within the land up a fair river is the Barred, where the ship trade and unload, where on at a spring tide is three fathom water. Over this channel is fair to the city side able to bear vessels of the fifties tuner laden.⁶

Surat is an ancient city and port by all evidence and had been through centuries a centre of maritime trade. The city was very populous and full of merchants. The city had a very considerable number of foreign settlers. Apart from the Europeans, there were Turks, Jews, Arabians, Persians and Armenians.

There is not an accurate figure about the population existing. However the population estimated to be able 2 laks. But the number increased considerably at the time when the ships came and went i.e. in the month from January to April. Then the town was so full of people. The population consists of administrative merchants, artisans, weavers and agriculturist, which may be mainly divided in to three broad sectors, the Muslims, the Hindus and the *Parsis*, besides these Foreigners.

The Hindus were in majority at Surat. They were occupied in trade and other line of work and also linked with administration and appreciated in revenue departments to the port where mathematical and commercial knowledge was necessary, i.e. as accountant and in the mint, to examine the purity of gold and silver. Some of them were busy as *Shroff* and other brokers. Among the Hindus, the *Banias* were the most noted inhabitants of Surat, who were merchants all by profession.⁷ There were very big merchants among them, Virji Vohra was the richest Hindu merchants at Surat whose property was plundered by Shivaji during the attack in 1664 and who was reckoned to be work at last light million rupees.⁸

Muslims were generally engaged in the administration- military as well as civil. The upper classes were appointed to the key posts of honor and trust. Some Muslims were engaged in trade at Surat for example, Haji Zahid beg and haji Kasim were rich merchants and their property was plundered by Shivaji during his attack on Surat in January 1664.

The *Parsis* were in minority, rich and industrious people. They were active in trade, craft and manual labor at Surat. Most of the *Parsis* worked as weavers. They were principal men at loom and most of the silks and stuffs at Surat were made by their hands.⁹ They used to supply cloth to the English factory at Surat.¹⁰

Among the foreigners, mention may be made particularly of the English, the Dutch and the French. They had their factories at Surat, established under the *farmans* of the Mughal Emperors.

III. Surat As A Port:

Surat as a port was described by Ptolemy. Hiuen tsang referred to this place as Sowrata which he found to be a trading port in the coast of Gujarat. Surat was a great port and commercial centre. Goods were brought up the river in boats. The boats were moored at flight of steps. This port and town were 20km up the river Tapti. The ocean going vessels could not come up to Surat. They anchored at *Suwli* road. The goods were carried by bullock carts or small boats to or from Surat.

Surat was ruled by the Muslim family of *Mirzas*. In 1573 Emperor Akbar laid a grasp on Surat to conquer it. The *Mirzas* offered the place to the Portuguese in lieu of their help in the war. On reaching Surat the Portuguese force gave up the idea of fighting the strong imperial force and took the stance of an ambassador before the Emperor.¹¹ The Mughal forces gained control over Surat. During Akbar's time Surat was an important port. Its revenue from custom and other dues was Rs.4 lakhs annually. Because of its importance as a port the Emperor appointed a *Mutasaddi* or revenue.

At the turn of the 17th century in Gujarat, Mughal administration was deriving a large income from Gujarat in comparison to other *subas*, from taxation on trade and commerce. It has been expected by Shireen Moosvi that 18.65% of the total assessed revenue (*jama*) in Gujarat came from trade and commerce. In *sarkara* Surat itself, the proportion was 29.75%.¹²

IV. Economy:

Surat was a convenient place for exchange of goods from Central India and the Deccan. Merchandise from Kashmir, Lahore, Agra and south India passed through Surat. Commodities from Europe and China came to Surat. "Everyone from the Cape of Good Hope to China, man and woman, was clothed from head to foot in material made in Gujarat." And most of it passed through Surat. Surat started to increase its importance due to the establishment of trading factories by the European travelers, whether they Portuguese or the English.

Surat as a future trade market was chosen due to great entrepot of the Mughal Empire on the coast of India. According to a contemporary traveler, a city of great trade in all the classes of merchandise. A very important sea port and frequented Surat was a prominent port of the empire in the Mughal period and it came in to prominence during at the starting of the 17th century, after the discovery of *swally* hole.¹³ John Fryer visited Surat in 1674; found Surat as an entrepot for foreign as well as Indian trade. Surat has its trade relation with South East Asia and Middle East. The main imports of Surat from these countries were quicksilver, porcelain cowries or seashells.¹⁴ Surat became one of the emporiums of the world because of the merchandise it received by land and sea.

V. Factories:

The English East India Company soon realized the economic importance of the city of Surat. The English factory was established at Surat in 1612.

The Portuguese created many obstacles in the way of English as they did not welcome a new competitor. When in 1608 captain Hawkins arrived at Surat, he was not allowed to establish a factory there. He was however, advised by the viceroy of Gujarat, to apply for permission to the Emperor in person. When he landed his goods at Surat, he faced fierce opposition of the Indians which was instigated by the Portuguese just because of they were considered invincible. Hawkins proceeds to Agra to see Emperor but the Jesuits frustrated Hawkins plans. When in 1611 Henry Middleton had no other alternative but to meet force by force. In the battle that ensued, the English became victorious. The victory greatly enhanced the English prestige in the eyes of local authorities.

Like the English East India Company, the merchants of Netherlands formed a Dutch East India Company to trade with the East. Surat was a great place for producing indigo and textile industries in the 17th century. The first recorded attempt to enter the Indian cloth market was made by the Dutch at the end of the year 1601. Their earliest relation with Gujarat started via Achin. Two factor Messers wolff and Lafer, started from Achin for Akbar's Empire with articles of trade and a letter of recommendation to the Mughal Emperor, which was given to them by Sultan Alauddin of Achin. After a trip of three months and six days, they arrived at Surat, rented a house and the trade started.

The French factory at Surat was established in the year 1668. The English and Dutch had already established their Factories at Surat in the year 1612 and 1618 respectively. But the French took interest in India long before the foundation of '*Compagnie des Indes Orientale's* in 1664. The contact between India and French was established by three classes of people, first by Missionaries, second travelers and third traders who had a field already prepared by for them by the first two classes of people. Travelers like Jean de Thevenot, Francois Bernier, Jean Baptist Tavernier and other who wrote retailed accounts of the condition of India. The missionaries established contact with the local population and the native authorities, and the traveler gave their countrymen the benefit of their knowledge about India, about the social, political and economic condition of the country and about the immense possibilities of rising trade and commerce with this country. Thus was heightened the impatient desire felt in France to share with the Dutch and the English Europe's trade in the precious goods of India. Beber and La Boullaye started from Surat to the Mughal court at Delhi to seek trade privileges. They were welcomed at the Mughal court and presented the personal letter of Louis xiv to the Emperor Aurangzeb. The Mughal emperor granted them a *farman* dated 11 August 1666 and the French were allowed to establish a factory at Surat.

Caron, who had a vast knowledge of Eastern trade and served the Dutch East India Company for twenty two years, now joined the service of the French East India Company and started from France in 1667. Passing through Madagascar and touching at Cochin, he reached Surat in the beginning of 1668 and established there the first French factory.

Thus English, Dutch and French also established their factories in 1613, 1616 and 1668 respectively. To the English, Surat was an integral part of the commercial infrastructure.

VI. Export:

The articles of trade in Surat were manifold. Iron, copper, alum, diamonds, rubies, rock crystal, agate and carnelian were traded. The main exports were cotton and silk clothes. Wheat of Surat which was considered the best in the world found a prominent place in export. Exported agriculture produce included peas, lentils and beans. Soap, sugar, wax and opium were the other commodities exported. There were also exports of cotton and woolen carpets, wood work and furniture including bedsteads and writing desks exquisitely inlaid with pearl, ivory, gold and silver and 'all wonderfully cheap'. The chief article of exports from Surat was cotton textiles (calicos as they were styled in Europe), ordinary cotton fabrics being known in the country as '*Baftas*'.

Besides cotton cloth, cotton yarn was also exported. Spun cotton was exported to Europe in large quantities by the English and the Dutch companies. But there, only the inferior quality was in demand, for making candle wicks and stockings and for inter mixture with the web of silken stuffs. The finest quality was of no use in Europe.¹⁵

VII. Import:

The foreign trade of a country is a very good mirror of the economic activities of the people. The character of our imports in the 17th century was different from what is today. The imports chiefly consisted of gold and silver, a few articles of luxury and fancy goods meant for the rich. The English had to export mainly bullion from England in order to purchase goods at Surat, on the other side Dutch supplied Surat with spices and pepper and purchased calicoes and other commodities at Surat and hence they had not to export bullion to Surat in the same way as the English did.

Copper was an important articles of import at Surat. The metal was brought to Surat by the Dutch and the English merchants from Japan in Asia and from Sweden in Europe.¹⁶ The use of copper was multiple. It was used for making weapons. It was chiefly of importance as a coinage metal.¹⁷ *Dam* (1/40th rupee) *pice* (1/2 *Dam*) and *Damri* (1/8th *Dam*) were made of copper. Numerous domestic utensils were also made of copper. The price of Copper at Surat ranged between Rs. 18 to Rs. 22 per mound.¹⁸ The English company sold their copper to the individual merchants at Surat on contract basis and in the year 1669 a contract was made with Virjee Vorah and Mirza Mosum (the rich local merchants of Surat) to sell the whole quantity of copper at Rs. 22/- per mound.

Broad-cloth was manufactured in England and the company was required to export large quantities of broadcloth. But there was no ready and profitable market for it at Surat. Surat itself was a great centre for the trade in Indian cloth and the factors saw the difficulty of putting up broadcloth for sale in such a centre. They found no proper demand for English broadcloth at Surat and in a letter dated 2nd April 1656 the English president at Surat reported to the company.

"Broad-cloth was in no demand at Surat owing to the great quality remaining of the stock lately imported and so they intended to send some to Agra for sale".¹⁹

Another commodity imported to Surat was quick silver. It was supplied from China as well as from Europe. There were sharp fluctuations in the price of the metal in the second half of the 17th century. The price of quick silver in the year 1650 was Rs125¼ per mound.²⁰ The price was high and the reason for the price hike was the failure of supplies from China. Lead was imported to Surat by and large from Europe, but the market for it was not free. The local Governor purchased all that was imported in Surat and no other merchant was permitted to purchase it.²¹

Other articles of imports at Surat were tin, iron, allom, coral, etc, and a few luxury commodities noted for their novelty. The English merchants describe these novelties as toys. These were not very profitable trade commodities. The demand for these goods at Surat was very limited. But merchants had to import it in order to save bullion. These items came mostly from Europe, coral, came from Mediterranean and ivory from the coast of Africa. These goods were often sold to individual merchants at Surat on contract basis.

VIII. Trade Relation:

As a result of overseas trade, the suba of Gujarat became the most urbanized area of the Mughal Empire.²² Surat was famous for traffic throughout Asia for silken cloth and for *zarbaft* or the cloth of gold from Persia. In large numbers of quantities of pearls were brought here from Persian Gulf. Diamonds rubies Topazes and other splendid stones from other countries were also brought to Surat Age, carnelians, *niganess*, desks could be purchased at Surat at a reasonable price.²³

Goods were brought to Surat from capital cities known for particular commodities. They were sold in quantities to European Turks, Arabians, Persian and Armenians who travelled the farthest.²⁴ Surat had internal trade relation with Masulipatnam and Bengal. The goods from Bengal consisted of *lac* and Sugar which yielded a good margin of profit.²⁵

In course of its rise as an entrepot of the area, Surat developed links with almost every major and minor regional trading system. Surat also traded with Southeast Asia. This aspect of trade has been underestimated in our historical literature and its decline has been antedated. The voyages were longer therefore less frequent than those to west Asia and were only undertaken by the larger operators. But it was an important part of the trade of Gujarat. On the Eastern coast of India, Surat had a strong trading connection with Masulipatnam. Through this link western Indian and West Indian goods were brought to Masulipatnam and from the Coromandal and Bengal goods were to Surat.²⁶

The 17th century was an era of the prosperity for the city of Surat. The two great sources that contributed to the wealth and prosperity of the city were foreign commerce and domestic manufactures. Surat was a commercial emporium, besides such commodities as indigo, spices and cloths. Many important goods imported from Europe were sold in its markets. It was famous for its commerce throughout Europe and its commercial importance was greatly increased with the arrival of the English and the Dutch merchants in the first quarter of the century.

IX. Conclusion:

During the later part of the 18th century Surat was described as very prosperous and one of the principal cities of India. The Tapti was crowded with merchant ships from all commercial nations of Europe and Asia. It was also the home of merchant communities due to its flourished economic condition, and it became the chief port in Western India during the 17th century. The banks of river were busy with shipbuilding. In Surat shipbuilding was an important industry. The ships built at Surat were known for endurance- they were built to last a hundred years. The ships built for China trade were of 500 to 1,000 tons, quite big compared to the contemporary size of the ships. Surat rose to prominence in the Mughal period and declined with the decline of Mughal. With the growth of Bombay the importance of Surat declined. The merchants, traders and shipbuilders shifted their activities from Surat to Bombay.

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