

Gujarat and the Sea

A Study of the Overseas Jain Merchants in the Ancient and Medieval Periods

Gujarati business castes and communities such as the Jain, Hindu, Khojas, Bohras, Memons and Parsis have played an important part in the Indian Ocean Trade. However, it was the Jains who, in spite of the variety of sects among them, were the earliest overseas merchants. This Chapter shows that Jain monks and merchants shared common ethical values based on the philosophy and practice of ahimsa or non - violence, and this was one of the important reasons why the Jains identified themselves as a business community since the Mauryan period (322-185 BCE).¹ They operated as overseas merchants from ports such as Broach, Sopara, Valabhi, Mangrol, Cambay and Surat. The presence of Arab merchants in the ports and urban centres of Gujarat after the eighth century brought new dimensions to the coastal and overseas trade. Furthermore, it is shown in the chapter, how Jain businessmen interacted with their Arab counterparts, shaping the sea – culture of Gujarat. Similarly, Jain business magnates were in the forefront of overseas trade in the seventeenth century; they competed with their European counterparts – the English, the Dutch and the French.

Gujarat and the Sea Culture

Gujarat, with its 1600 km long coastline, has played an important part in the maritime history of the world. Facing the Arabian Sea, an extension of the Indian Ocean, its ports carried on maritime trade with West Asia, South East Asia, China and East Africa at different periods in time. Historically, the Arabian Sea has linked the cultures and economies of widely dispersed peoples, allowing knowledge, ideas and beliefs to be

1 Mehta, 2009; Dundas, 2002

freely transmitted. Gujarat was linked through its ports with ancient Sumer, Phoenicia, Mesopotamia, Iran, Arabia, Egypt, Rome, East Africa, Java, Sumatra, and China. Commercially and culturally the Indian Ocean was then, a single maritime world and Gujarat's sea culture was considerably shaped by this phenomenon. Its long coastline, agricultural fertility, availability of artisanal products and the the enterprising spirit of its merchants, along with the institutions of sreni, mahajan, sreshthin, saraf and dalal, stimulated the overseas activities of the people of this region, making it the fulcrum of maritime trade in the Arabian sea². The emergence of ports such as Lothal in the Harappan period, followed by Dwarka, Veraval, Broach, Sopara, Nagara, Valabhi, Cambay, Diu, Ghogha, Bhadreswar, Mandavi, Mundra and Surat in different periods, shows that Gujarat has been actively engaged in international trade for at least 4000 years, with established commercial links with ancient Mesopotamia, Iran, West Asia, South East Asia, East Asia and the Roman Empire. This was because the Gujaratis had remarkable foresight and resilience in dealing with their foreign rivals including the Arabs, the Portuguese and the English. To quote M. N. Pearson :

"Gujarat had been an economically advanced area for three millennia, with an active, dynamic group of merchants. Cambay ('the Kingdom of Gujarat') was a great center from the time of Buddha at least. The Eurocentric stress on trade to Europe ignores the vast bulk of Asian trade that was not bound for Europe. And in this inner Asian trade it was the Gujaratis, not Arabs, who were dominant. Among these great merchants living mostly by sea trade, it seems that Hindus and Jains outranked Muslims... In the economy of Gujarat as a whole there is no doubt that the dominant group in all trade matters was the Vantias if only because of their numerical predominance."

(Pearson, 1976, 10, 124)

Gujarati navigators and merchants were familiar with certain well-defined sea routes : from China and Indonesia to Malacca; from Gujarat to the Red sea; from Malabar to the Red sea;

2. Mehta, 1991a

from Gujarat to Malabar and intermediate ports on the western coast; from Aden to Hormuz, from East Africa to Gujarat; and from Gujarat to Hormuz. Tome Pires, a Portuguese traveller who visited India in the early sixteenth century, stated :

"Cambay (the Gujarat region) chiefly stretches out two arms. With her right arm she reaches out towards Aden and with the other towards Malacca, as the most important places to sail to, and the other places are held to be of less importance. The Gujaratis are better seamen and do more navigating than the other people of India and so they have larger ships and more men to man them. They are great pilots and do a great deal of navigation"

(Pires, 1944,42)

Pires' observations are supported by the fact that it was Kanji Malam, a Kutchi navigator who had piloted the ship carrying Vasco da Gama from Malinidi in East Africa to Calicut in South India in 1498. Being requested by the ruler of Malinid, Malam guided the Portuguese navigator across from Africa to Calicut in Malabar.³ Commenting on Gujarat's engagement with trade in East Africa, C. R. Boxer notes :

"Mozambique or Portuguese East Africa, was full of Gujarati merchants. The economic life of the East African littoral had been oriented towards India long before the arrival of the Portuguese and continued to be so for long afterwards. The gold, ivory and slaves, which the Arab traders and their Portuguese successors obtained from Bantu tribes in the interior, were purchased chiefly with Indian cotton textiles and piece – goods from Gujarat and Coromanded. The retail trade of sofola was mostly in the hands of the Banias of Gujarat."

(Boxer, 1956, 128-35; Also see Boxer, 1969)

Although the pre – Portuguese and pre-Arab periods are important, little research has been done on Gujarat from about the first century BCE up to the thirteenth century CE. This is clear from the language used to describe Gujarati traders from this era. It is customary to use a generic term bania or vania

3. Pearson, 1976, 1; Strandes, 1899, 30; Pearce, 1920, 254; Salvadori, 2000, 4-5

to describe the activities of the 'Vaishya business communities'. But the Hindu Vaishnava castes emerged at a much later stage. Before the Vaishnava Bhatias took to overseas trading in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, we hardly find any mention of Vaishnava as overseas traders. The Lohanas and the Patidars followed much later. On the other hand, contemporary Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit and Chinese sources show that Jains had established their trading networks with Sri Lanka, Java, Sumatra, Malacca and also with Hormuz and Basra on the Persian Gulf and with Muscat, Aden and as far away as Mocha and other ports on the Red Sea.

Ancient and medieval Hindus and Jains had their own notions of the world, as is reflected in their writing. Wilhelm Halbfass provides an interesting example of an 'Indian' who met Socrates (469-399 BCE) in Athens and asked him about the meaning of philosophising. When the great philosopher replied that he was studying the problems of human life, the Indian laughed and explained that it was impossible to study and understand human things without considering the divine.⁴ This was even before Alexander's invasion of India in 327 – 25 B.C. after which a systematic dialogue started between India and the Western world. My contention is that, howsoever fantastic and supernatural ancient and medieval Hindu and Jain literature may appear, it should not be dismissed by a historian. The cultural narratives provided in biographies, poems, agamas, kathas, vartas and also proverbs are useful in reconstructing the business traditions of Gujaratis which were so closely linked with their religious and cultural traditions.

That ancient and medieval Gujarat had developed port administration can be seen from the presence of terms such as *naukadhyaksa* and *navikapati* (head of ships), *hiranyasamudrayika* (customs collection on sea ports) and *atithyam* (customs at sea ports from foreign merchants). Words such as *mandapika* and *pattanam* (customs house and duties on ports), and *velakuladhyaksa* (chief customs official) show the mercantile activities of the sea port.⁵ Gujarati proverbs such as 'a bride from Sri Lanka and a husband from Ghogha', and 'One who goes to Java returns with fabulous wealth' also reflect the

4. Halbfass, 1990, 8

5. for technical terms see Jha, 1967; Majumdar, 1956

business spirit of Gujarat.⁶ Francois Pyrard, a French traveller who visited Gujarat in 1608, stated that the Gujarati language was the most widespread and useful accounts and business language in the Indian Ocean countries.⁷ A little later John Fryer, who visited Surat in 1672, noticed that the Gujarati merchants were using sign language in their dealings with foreign merchants. He was astonished to see the Surat banias instructing each other with fingers covered under a piece of cloth and fixing prices of goods in a way which effectively concealed them from their European counterparts. The secret of silent bargaining was all under cloak, the prices being determined by signs that were understood by the mere pressure of fingers. Frier remarked : "Such a subtle generation is this, and so fitly squared a place is Surat port to exercise their genius in".⁸

From the aforestated paragraphs it can be derived that the Gujaratis had developed a sophisticated sea culture. This was reinforced by the political stability at different periods in time. In spite of occasional warfare, Gujarat was under the control of the Mauryas (322-185 BCE), the Indo – Greeks / Bactrians (185 BCE – 78 CE), the Guptas (320 – 470 CE), the Maitrakas (470-800), the Solankis (942-1200) and the Mughals (1573 – c. 1700).

6. *Majumdar, 1965, 73*

7. *Gray and Bell, 1888, 250*

8. *Crooke, 1909, 248*