

Positioning Gujarat as a Medieval Mercantile Centre

Contours and Context

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This paper is presented in thematic sequence rather than in chronological order. It does not comprehensively cover major themes relevant to the development of Gujarat during the mediaeval period. Its thrust is towards depicting the many-hued facets of mediaeval trade and the vibrant counterparts on which these were based in Gujarat in terms of business expertise, products manufactured and maritime expertise.¹ Starting with features of hydrography and physical geography, it moves on to relations with eastern and sub-Saharan Africa merging into the presence of the Siddi community in India and the analysis of aspects of the carnelian trade. The combination of Islam, trade and the itinerant *pir* is found replicated in Gujarat as the Baba Ghor legend unfolds.

Ports are expressive of trade and trade is a product of a virtual galaxy of interconnected and intersecting conditionalities. Gujarat has embodied many of these factors. Undoubtedly, aspects of physical geography and hydrography have played a role. The mountainous features of north-western India did not pose serious physical barriers in the past as the trade routes, collectively the so-called Silk Route,² have made abundantly clear. Hydrographic conditions in the Arabian Sea have also favoured the conduct of trade during the period of the Northeast Monsoon (see Murty and Tapaswi 2006, 408-14; Khare and Mehta 2011, 37-45). The gradient of the continental shelf on the west coast is approximately 1:30 whereas on the east coast it is 1:15. As for the wind system in winter, the north-eastern trades originate in the subtropical belt extending 40°-50° North. For the Indian subcontinent, the decisive factor

is the wind system arising in the Gobi desert belt. Whereas in the Arabian Sea, the strength of the northeast monsoon is tempered by the Hindu Kush range, the range is of lower height in the eastern Himalayas and the force of the wind is not broken as effectively. As the winds sweep across the Bay of Bengal, they gather momentum. In fact, taking both monsoon periods into account, it may be stated that the fair season prevails in the Bay of Bengal only during the period between January and March. These favourable conditions have favoured latitudinal passages across the Arabian Sea (Varadarajan 2006, Vol. II, 470). Connectivity with the East African coast was dominated by the prevailing pattern of wind and wave and the southernmost point on the East African coast with which trade links could thus be established was Sofala, the effective point of termination.

Two factors have contributed to the richness of trade possibilities in Gujarat – the diverse ethnicity of its inhabitants and its geographical location which has linked it with Central and East Asia in the north and with maritime trade routes providing outlets to the regions of the Persian Gulf, areas around the Red Sea, Egypt and the Mediterranean on the one hand and the African continent on the other. Gujarat has been linked not only with the East African littoral but also with West Africa through the desert trade routes. The area around Borno, Central Sudan around Lake Chad stretches between north-east Nigeria and the Chad Republic. After the tenth century, there was an influx of exotic goods into the Chad basin. This included copper and carnelian beads. The copper could have been locally sourced, as also the carnelian, but some aspects of the technology by which the latter had been prepared pointed to an Indian source. The route could have been via the Red Sea and Egypt. By the thirteenth century, there were far-reaching trade contacts which incorporated the Chad region with the wider network of the Sudan (Gronenborn 1998, 226-7, 251-2). Further to the west, carnelian beads have been found as early as the eighth century at Gao and Timbuktu in Mali. It is to be noted that from the eighth century onwards, West Africa had been connected with the Muslim-dominated trade networks. Gao was the former capital of the Songhai empire (*ca* 1340-1591) and a major trans-Saharan trade centre. There is some evidence of carnelian manufacture in the Gao region. Burial sites dated to the ninth and tenth centuries in south-eastern Nigeria have also yielded carnelian beads. These may have arrived either through southern Chad or through the trade networks of west central Sahara. Scientific examination has established that while many carnelian beads were of Gujarat provenance, some were of West African provenance (Insoll *et al.* 2004, 164-1165, 1172).

In this context, some basic attributes of trade have to be kept in mind. As has been pointed out by Timothy Insoll, trade had many facets. While he

has indicated these characteristics in relation to his area of study, they could be held equally valid for Gujarat. It acted as both a stimulus and an agent for conversion. It could be local, inter-regional or long-distance in character. They could include the predatory activities of traders such as seeking slaves, gold and ivory for international markets. They could be conducted by diverse groups of peoples such as Arab traders of the lower Sahel and indigenous merchant groups such as the Mande of western Sudan. Trade also functioned as a vehicle for transmission of ideas as traders would be accompanied by religious teachers and holy men (Insoll 2003, 32).

This discussion leads to that of the presence of the Habshi or Siddi community in Gujarat, one scintillating aspect of which is the legend of Baba Ghor and the imputed birth of the carnelian industry. As early as the first centuries of the Christian era, there were references, as in the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, to slaves forming a constituent in the trade between the Aksumite port of Adulis and western India. At a later date, these Ethiopian slaves, converted to Islam by their captors, came to be called *habshi* (derived from the Arab name for 'Abyssinian') in western India. In the fourteenth century description of the port of Gandhar, District Bharuch, Ibn Batuta commented on the prowess of the *habshi* men-at-arms. With the advent of firearms in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden in the late fifteenth-early sixteenth centuries, a Muslim state centred at Adal, east of Ethiopia came into being. In the sixteenth century, Imam Mahfuz, ruler of Zaila, a port on the Gulf of Aden carried out annual slave-raiding expeditions from Adal into the interior of Ethiopia. This resulted in an expansion of the slave trade and the export of numerous Ethiopian slaves to Arabia, India and elsewhere. Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim, the son-in-law of Imam Mahfuz, intensified this effort. In Gujarat, as elsewhere, there was an augmentation in the supply of *habshi* slaves. João de Castro, who died in 1548, and who had considerable exposure to the Indian west coast, remarked on the fact that many feudatories in India preferred *habshis* above others for their armies (Pankhurst 2003, 189-90, 192, 194, 199, 201, 203).

The legend of Baba Ghor as the patron saint of the agate industry shows how mythology has been continuously used in India to link the factual with the societal through an elaborate play of symbolism. Makrand Mehta has drawn attention to the Nigerian origin of this merchant-*pir* who is said to have been the founder of the carnelian industry of Gujarat (Mehta 2009, 26). Ratanpur, located in District Bharuch, is the centre for the mining of stones used in the manufacture of Indian agate beads, and this includes the carnelian variety. Among the communities living here, an important segment comprises the Siddis. Although agates have been mined in Ratanpur from very early times, the cutting and exporting centres have varied. In the

twelfth century, the centre of the bead industry shifted to Limodra, while the exporting centre continued at Bharuch. In the fifteenth century, the centre shifted to Khambhat where the industry continues to this day. The centre thus shifted from a Hindu to a Muslim area and, indeed, this community comprised the main consuming class. This change is attributed to a Muslim *pir*, Baba Ghor, who became the patron saint of the industry, venerated by both Muslims and Hindus. The final identity of Baba Ghor is a product of popular culture (Francis 1986, 198-201. See also Basu 1993, 293-99). He is ascribed Abyssinian as well as Nigerian origin and in view of the contacts with both areas, and particularly in the context of carnelian, both genealogies make sense. His connection with the agate industry also carries echoes of the African markets and connections.³ The veneration in which he is held by members of the Siddi community shows how his image has been appropriated to serve as a factor bonding the community.

Since Gujarat was not only a production centre but also an important entrepôt, a glance may be cast towards its neighbours – Egypt, Aden and, at a later date, Ottoman Turkey and Safavid Persia. As has been stressed by Pascal Arnaud in his analysis of the much -- discussed *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (Arnaud 2012, 48-59), this anonymous work unveiled new trade horizons to the Greek and Roman worlds hitherto enclosed within the confines of the Mediterranean Sea. The ‘Discovery’ of the seasonally-reversing monsoon winds in the Arabian Sea posed a cartographic challenge as the then-known determinants were confronted by empirical data demanding an extension of the limits of the existing boundaries of Greek and Roman geographical knowledge.⁴ This led to the gradually-increasing dimensions of trade leading from east to west in which Gujarat continued to play a focal role. Vallet, in his discussion on the mercantile operations of the *al kārim ca* 1310 refers to the division of the rich Indian Ocean trade between the Rasulids of Yemen and the Fatimids of Cairo prior to its onward transmission to the Mediterranean world. The Karimi merchant, al-Balishti, to whom a reference has already been made, pursued his mercantile activities in India through his slaves (Vallet 2010, 498, 587).

The Ottoman Empire extended into both eastern Europe and West Asia. During the period of initial expansion of Turkey and Persia, relations between them were hostile. However, once frontiers had stabilized, a spirit of compromise prevailed. With the advent of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean, Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-66) realised the necessity of accommodation with the reigning Safavid monarch, Shah Tahmasb I (1524-6). At the same time, the Portuguese success at the Battle of Diu was offset by Ottoman resistance at Aden. By 1538, the Ottomans had secured a base at Basra. The Portuguese at Hormuz also realized the benefits of local trade

by accommodation with Turan Shah VI of Hormuz and around 1580, they agreed to share the local revenues accrued through trade with the ruler of Hormuz (Murphey 1993, 1-18 cited by Murphey, website).

The presence of medaeval Gujarat cotton textiles in Fustat, Egypt is well-attested (Varadarajan 2003, 27-37). Similarly, the presence of Gujarat trade textiles in Indonesia has formed the subject of much discussion (Andaya 2011, 397-400). However while the role of Patan *patola*, called *tchinde* in Indonesia, has received much attention, a question which seeks an answer is its presence, both in physical form and depictions, in mural paintings in Kerala. The connectivity between Gujarat, Kerala and Indonesia in relation to *patola* is perhaps to be sought in the unique trade commodity of Kerala, black pepper. Gujarati merchants not only catered to the required demand in trade commodities in the Indonesian markets, including the special category of *tchinde*, but Gujarat itself also served as the point of re-distribution for Kerala black pepper and other East and South-east Asian products for markets in West Asia. Balan Nambiar and Eberhard Fischer have made a detailed study of the phenomenon of the ritual status accorded to *patola* as a fabric by members of all religious groups in Kerala, as also its depiction in the plastic arts in the same locale (Nambiar and Fischer 1987, 121, 123, 124, 126-30 and plates 1-8).

Patan *patola* is called *viralipattu* in Kerala. It is depicted in temple and palace through the medium of mural paintings. It also plays a strong role in diverse forms of ritual use. The term *pattu* is derived from silk while *virali* has its origin in the variegated colours or in the word petal. It is used ritually for the worship of the Mother Goddess. Priests could wear it around their waist during the performance of temple rituals, and it could be used during female puberty rites. Its patterning could be duplicated in mural paintings and ritual floor decoration. It symbolized the Mother Goddess Bhadrakali when painted on the hull of ships. Other communities in Kerala also made similar use of this fabric. It could be found in an Islamic context in the *mimbar* of mosques, while among members of the Orthodox Christian community, the main officiating priest in the *Qurbana* (from the Syriac 'Kurbono' meaning, among other things, the Holy Mass) used it as part of his ceremonial robes. When the members of the royal Chirakkal family wished to honour Theyyam artists, who during performances assumed the persona of the deity itself, such items would be gifted to the performers. An examination of plates 1-8 establishes beyond doubt that these were Patan *patolas*. Their manifold cross-cultural uses across diverse communities serves as an indicator for the volume of its trade in Kerala during those times.

The prime importance of trade activity could not have been achieved without an equivalent support structure of many dimensions within Gujarat.

Among the trading communities should be included the Jains (Makrand Mehta 2011, 575-98) and the Bhatias (Shirin Mehta 2011, 613-25) – to whom European sources jointly referred as *banians*– and Islamic communities such as the Khojas (Goswami 2011, 627-43). Banking facilities, insurance systems and letters of credit were well in place, and the expertise of the Shroff community in bullion transactions provided added amenities. The strength of the tradition is also expressed in literary expression (Parimoo 2011, 509-19). A rich symbolic system preserved in shrines and modes of worship found scattered in different parts of Gujarat provided psychological relief to stress, a necessary ingredient for the avocation of life at sea with its inevitable see-saw of suffering and good fortune showered through the vagaries of the natural elements (Varadarajan 1983, 5-9). Arunachalam, while discussing the role of the island of Socotra in Gujarat sailing traditions refers to the Mother Goddess Shikdara Mata, worshipped by sailing communities, whose temples may be found along the Surat coast (Arunachalam 1993, 118). Gujarat is also unique in the sense that it is only here that we find a community specifically associated with sea-faring, the Kharwas. Boat-building traditions, maritime charts and a rich heritage of nautical expertise were the sinews which made the voyages of Gujarati merchants to distant destinations a practical possibility (Varadarajan et al 2011, 155-178; Varadarajan unpublished 2012).

Notes

1. For a brief historical outline, see Internet *GEL*.
2. Chinese trade routes to the west were initiated during the Han period (206 BCE-220 CE). These Central Asian Trade Routes, later to be given the generic title, 'Silk Route', were expanded by Emperor Wu, *ca.* 138 BCE. He sent General Zhang Qian on an exploratory mission to the 'western regions' so that contacts could be established. During antiquity, the main traders along this route comprised anonymous Indian and Bactrian merchants. Sogdians appeared in the fifth to the eighth centuries and later many other groups have received mention. These include Iranian, Kazak, Kushan, Mongolian, Scythian, Tajik, Tibetan, Tocharian, Turk, Uigur, Uzbek and Yuezhi agents. Apart from Indian participants in trade, there are also references to several Indian scholars. In the second century CE, two Indian monks were brought from Afghanistan to Changan, China in compliance with orders issued by the Chinese emperor. They translated into Chinese many of the Buddhist texts brought from India and breathed their last in China. There was also the case of Pandit Kumarayana of Kashmir, the father of the great scholar Kumarajiva of Kucha, Xinjiang Province Chinese Central Asia, who left India in the fourth century CE and settled in Central Asia. In this context, it is important to remember that the port of Bharuch served as an outlet for the Central Asian Silk routes. Circa thirteenth-fourteenth centuries the land

routes were interrupted owing to political circumstances and recourse was now taken to sea routes. (Synopsis kindly made available by Dr. Chhaya Haesner, Tagore Professor, National Museum, New Delhi.)

3. Eric Vallet, in his discussion of the Karim trade identifies the Karimi merchant, Nasir al-Din Muhammad b. Musallam al-Balishti, who died in 1375, as a person who had commercial interests in India, Yemen, Ethiopia and Mali in West Africa. See Vallet 2010, 478.
4. Indeed, the intellectual climate of the times could be compared to that of the fifteenth century when the empirical data brought together subsequent to the Portuguese 'Discoveries' created questions seeking accommodation within the prevailing scholastic intellectual tradition and the Aristotelian schema of the world.

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