The World of the
Indian Ocean Merchant
1500–1800
Collected Essays of Ashin Das Gupta

Compiled by
UMA DAS GUPTA

With an introduction by
SANJAY SUBRAHMANYAM

Ashin Das Gupta (1932–1998)
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his father's work
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7. Ibid.
8. Arun Das Gupta, op. cit.

A fact of life with which the student of India's medieval economy has learned to live is the absence of statistics. The history of foreign trade therefore becomes a discussion of the structure of commerce and the role of the merchant in it. And from what we gather by way of qualitative statements, it would seem beyond doubt that the Indian merchant investing in the trade of the Indian Ocean was the most important figure in the country's overseas trade during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was in the eighteenth century that Indian shipping and the Indian Ocean trade declined in importance to make way for European carriers and trade with Europe.

At the turn of the fifteenth century, India's mercantile marine, largely in the hands of Gujarati Muslim merchants, appears to have been deployed principally in the middle Indian Ocean, dominating the sea-lanes between Cambay and Malacca. To the west, Indian ships called regularly at the ports of the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf; but the carrying trade in the Arabian Sea was largely in the hands of Arab ship-owners. In the east, Chinese vessels excluded all

Indian Merchants and Trade in the Indian Ocean, c. 1500–1750

of the sixteenth century are still the best introduction we have to the previous hundred years. It is indeed wise to remember, as I.A. Macgregor wished us to do,¹ that in his *Suma Oriental* (c. 1515), Tomé Pires was pleading a case and was building up the importance of Malacca and the Indonesian archipelago at the expense of China for the edification of King Manuel of Portugal. There can, however, be no doubt that the emergence of Malacca as an entrepot where the Indian, Chinese and Javanese met to exchange their wares, was the most important development in the history of the Indian Ocean during the fifteenth century. Among Indians, the shipping was, of course, dominated by Gujarati Muslim merchants but a large number of Hindu merchants visited the port from the Coromandel Coast, while other Indians came from Bengal. Arab and Persian merchants usually journeyed to Cambay to take ships to Malacca but direct sailings between Malacca and the Red Sea were known. In fact, Albuquerque claimed in 1512 that as many as fifty ships sailed every year from Malacca for Mecca at the turn of the century, which was certainly a substantial exaggeration.² The main aim of both the Indians and the Chinese was to buy spices from the Indonesians, but some trade took place between them as well. Besides buying cloves, nutmeg and mace, Indian merchants took home Chinese porcelain and silks. Indian textiles, the principal commodity in demand in the Indonesian islands, probably did not sell in China, and ‘the Gores’ of Tomé Pires, who bought Bengali fabrics at Malacca, were either Japanese or from islands near Japan. Chinese demand for pepper was, however, considerable, and of the large amount they bought at Malacca some may have come from Malabar. It is possible that the Chinese merchants were interested in Indian opium. Sandalwood sold well to the Chinese, as did various types of incense, besides rarities like cornelian from Cambay.

It does not, therefore, seem that trade between India and China at Malacca was considerable, though there is a possibility that Chinese merchants bought Indian textiles to barter for Indonesian spices. Indian shipping did not penetrate the China Seas at the time, and the Chinese overseas traders were themselves struggling against the efforts of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) to restrain all foreign trade. Early in the fifteenth century the Chinese imperial attitude to maritime trade had been quite different. The energetic emperor Yung-lo (1402–24), had taken a keen and personal interest in asserting the Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean as part of his overall strategy.

Others between southern China and Malaya, while Malay and Javanese craft were prominent in Indonesian waters. The loosely-jointed structure which supported India’s overseas trade would already seem to have assumed the form it was to retain for the ensuing 300 years. Moreover, the important distinction between coastal India’s shipping interests, which were by and large Muslim, and the shore-based merchants feeding the shipping lines, among whom Hindus predominated, endured throughout the period. But partly through large-scale political changes within Asia and partly as a result of European intervention in the Indian Ocean area, the deployment of Indian shipping changed from time to time, the fortunes of particular ports and their immediate hinterland fluctuated sharply, and Indian maritime trade waxed and waned within the structure which had evolved and been sanctified by tradition. European trade in the Indian Ocean remained part of the traditional structure, which was enriched and strengthened through European skill and enterprise. Major alterations would only come with the establishment of an empire.

The Portuguese and their north European successors to the supremacy of the Indian Ocean trade have left enough documentation for the historian of India’s maritime trade to re-assemble the outlines of the Indian commercial structure and to indicate the broad alterations in the course of Indian commerce over time, but the task can only be approached with the depressing awareness that the documents are primarily concerned with the operations of official agencies, like the *Estado da Índia* of the Portuguese or ‘the Companies’ of the other Europeans. Being inestimable worth to historians of India’s trade with Europe, such materials offer little to the student of the Indian Ocean. European private trade, a vital factor in the situation, is not caught in such officialese. The trade of the Indian merchant in the Indian Ocean is, of course, much beyond the pale. The totality of Indian maritime trade would, however, comprise an understanding of all the three levels. Such total vision may not be for mortals, and in any event the reconstruction of the story of the Indian Ocean would appear to be a most unpromising effort, given the outlandish slant of the available documentation. The gloom deepens when we remember that whatever documentation there may be is untrustworthy, its narratives warped by personal considerations and its figures swelled by individual greed.

Nonetheless, the detailed Portuguese chronicles of the early years
Between 1405 and 1433 the able Muslim eunuch, Cheng-ho, scoured the Indian Ocean as many as seven times at the head of powerful Chinese armadas, often comprising sixty sails and over 20,000 men. Besides calling at various south-east Asian and Indian ports, the Chinese fleets reached Hormuz, Aden and the east coast of Africa. Among other things, these missions were intended to encourage the Indian Ocean states to come to trade in China and at the same time to discipline private Chinese merchants who belonged to a pirate fringe. This energetic maritime policy was, however, gradually given up during the 1420s, when the Ming capital was moved back from Nanking to Peking and the Mongol menace in the north claimed the attention of the Chinese emperors. Piracy in the China Seas, which had been one reason behind the Ming demarche in the Indian Ocean, intensified with the virtual withdrawal of the imperial navy. The so-called Wako pirates, based in Japan, operated freely all along China's southern and eastern coastline. It was to counter these pirate attacks that first the Mings and then the Manchus (1644–1911) tried to insulate China from the sea. Private Chinese merchants, however, persisted in the face of imperial edicts forbidding maritime trade but the Chinese junk traffic was confined to the sea-lanes to the east of Malacca.

The Indian ships were neither sturdy enough to withstand the typhoons of the China Sea, nor adequately armed to deal with the Wako marauders. Besides, the limited Chinese demand for Indian goods was adequately conveyed by the Chinese junks which visited Malacca. Indian textiles, however, clothed both the rich and the poor in south-east Asia, and Indian vessels called regularly at Pidie in north Sumatra and almost certainly at the neighbouring port of Pase. In western Sumatra, ships of Gujarat visited the four small seaport principalities of Priaman, Tiku, Baros and Singkel, as Tamil shipping had done centuries earlier. As for the Spice Islands themselves—the Banda islands producing nutmeg and mace, and Amboina, Ceram and the Moluccas growing cloves—there was no direct Indian shipping in the area. But by the end of the fifteenth century, these islanders had specialized almost exclusively in the production of spicery and depended on the regular supply of Indian textiles and Javanese grain for their daily living. In the main, it was Javanese shipping which conveyed Indian cloths and local foodstuffs to the Spice Islands to barter for spices. The southern Javanese port of Grise, conveniently commanding the channel between Java and Madura, established a monopoly in the spice trade to Malacca. Indian vessels had called at Grise earlier, but as with many other ports in Indonesia, they had withdrawn from the navigation with the rise of Malacca, preferring to obtain their requirements at the Malay entrepot. Indian merchants who had settled at Grise, however, were involved with the Javanese in managing the spice monopoly. Thus at the close of the fifteenth century, Indians with their large concentration in Malacca, their regular voyages to Sumatra and the strong connection they had with the Javanese port of Grise, maintained a strong presence in south-east Asia.

In the west, Indian trade flowed along the two established maritime channels, one through the Red Sea, Cairo and Alexandria, and the other through the Persian Gulf and up through Basra and Baghdad. The north of the Red Sea littoral was controlled by the Mamluk sultans of Egypt and Syria (1260–1517), while in Yemen, in the south, the Banu Tahir dynasty supplanted the Rasulids in the middle of the fifteenth century. In between, the Sharif of Mecca and the sharifian family ruled in Hijaz, enjoyed bouts of family feuds and usually conceded suzerainty to the strongest available Muslim power, in this case the Mamluks. At this time and afterwards, Indian merchants brought their wares to two rather different markets in the Red Sea. For one, there was the market of the hajj to which long-distance caravans converged from the entire area now known as the Middle East, and Muslim pilgrims arrived from the Indian Ocean littoral as well. It was through this conveyor belt that Indian produce and goods transhipped in India found their way to the European market. Besides this long-range network, Indian commodities were sold in a regional market which included the towns of Hijaz and Yemen, ports like Suakin, Massowa and Zeila on the African coast of the Red Sea, and the towns of the Hadramaut coast like Shihir, Qishn and Zofar.

The carrier trade between the Red Sea and the west coast of India was dominated by a Cairo-based mercantile organization called the Karim, but they had no monopoly in the traffic. In fact R.B. Sergant has shown from the evidence of contemporary Arabic chronicles written in Hadramaut, that Indian vessels called regularly at south Arabian ports and Gujarati banies had already settled in the area by the fifteenth century. The shipping of the Karim would seem to have been very largely in Arab hands, though S.D. Goltein has amassed enough data from the document of the Cairo
geniza to demonstrate that the trade to India itself was extraordinarily cosmopolitan in character in which even minority groups like Jewish merchants working with their 'Hindu brothers' and 'Muslim friends' could achieve an important position. It seems possible that the Karim which had come into existence late in the twelfth century, was already under serious pressure towards the close of the fifteenth century, before the Portuguese appeared in the Indian Ocean. There is some evidence to show that in the later fifteenth century the Mamluk sultans attempted to obtain more money from the mercantile communities under their administration than the trade itself could support. It has, in fact, been suggested that the Karim ceased to exist as early as the 1470s.

No such dramatic changes were presumably occurring along the Persian Gulf route where the island emporium of Hormuz had become the centre of a miniature maritime empire, commanding the allegiance of the important entrepot of Muscat on the other side of the Gulf and stretching nearly as far as Basra at the head of it. Indian vessels called at Hormuz and Muscat, and Gujaratis settled in Persian towns, much as they did in the Red Sea. Persia itself was, however, in a state of considerable political confusion which put the interior of that country more or less beyond the reach of the Indian merchants. The trade of the Gulf was thus much more of a transit trade, aimed at the towns of Mesopotamia and beyond, than was the case with the Red Sea commerce. From whatever descriptions we have of the Persian Gulf trade of the period, however, it would certainly seem that Hormuz was nearly as important an entrepot as Malacca in the eastern Indian Ocean, while Aden was already in its lean years. For Indian shipping, of course, the western orientation had not yet come, and compared to the concentration upon southeast Asia, the presence maintained in the west was not impressive.

Before we turn to consider the Indian ports themselves and the structure within India which supported the trade overseas, it is important to take note of the small enclave of Indian trade which had already formed on the east coast of Africa. Gujarati shipping called of Kilwa, Mombasa, Malindi and Pate, probably as part of their round voyage to the Red Sea, and obtained gold and ivory in exchange for textiles. These Swahili city-states were largely Arab and were the creations of men from Hadramaut although some claimed, and still claim, Persian origins. This east African trade as it was carried on immediately before the Portuguese came upon the scene, only emphasized the co-operation between Indians and Arabs in the western Indian Ocean, a peaceful sharing of profit which was soon to be overshadowed by other means of doing business.

Just as Indian merchants traded and settled more or less freely in Arab territories, Arab merchants were welcomed all along the west coast of India. Cambay, which was by far the most important Indian port of the period, had large colonies of Arab and Persian merchants dating back to the tenth century. The prosperity of Cambay had been legendary for centuries before it became the principal outlet to the sea for the sultanate of Gujarat (c. 1403–1573), but by the close of the fifteenth century the port was already moribund due to silt ing, and ocean-going ships were using the roadstead of Gogha facing the Cambay harbour for anchorage. Something of a race appears to have started between the twin cities of Surat and Rander on the one hand, and Diu on the other, to see which of them would replace Cambay. Diu, under the able administration of the Georgian convert Malik Ayaz, had built itself up as an important centre for the Red Sea trade, while Surat, under the astute Brahman Malik Gopi, hoped for the destruction of Diu in order to safeguard its growing prosperity, based on the same commerce. Farther down the coast in Konkan and north Kanara the four roadsteads of Chaul, Dabhol, Goa and Bhaktal served the needs of the two sultanates of Ahmadnagar and Bijapur, besides the empire of Vijayanagar. In Malabar, the dominating presence belonged to Calicut which would seem to have been the principal rendezvous for the Karim merchants in India. It is possible that Arab ships enjoyed a monopoly of the Malabar–Aden run, starting from Calicut, while they shared the routes emanating from Konkan and Gujarat.

On the eastern side, Pulicat and Negapatam were the principal ports of southern Coromandel. Pulicat and Bhaktal had the distinction of being the eastern and western outlets for Vijayanagar and enjoyed the prosperity that went with it. It is possible, but by no means certain, that Masulipatam in north Coromandel had already established itself; at any rate it was to do so soon enough. There is also some obscurity about the exact position of the Bengali ports of which Satgaon and Chittagong were certainly the principal ones, but probably Sripur, which served Sonargaon, the eastern capital of Bengal, was already functioning at the close of the fifteenth century. As with Cambay in Gujarat, the port of Satgaon which controlled the outlet of the Ganges was already dying a natural death and mer-
chants were looking for a more convenient anchorage farther downstream. Besides these major centres of oceanic commerce, there was the Lahri Bandar complex in Sind, which had lost its former splendour, while it is pertinent to remember that each important Indian Ocean port was supported by a string of subsidiary roadsteads, which had the function of assembling and distributing the exports and imports of India’s maritime trade.

Of India’s exports to the markets of the Indian Ocean, three points are worth noting. First, as for India’s major export, which was textiles throughout our period, the mass of it was of the coarser kind. In Indonesia as well as in the Red Sea, it was the commoner people who were the overwhelming majority of India’s customers and the more expensive varieties did not sell well. For instance, the Dutch Company relying on the costlier cloths of Coromandel could never compete with the Gujaratis at Mocha because Gujarat specialized in the production and export of the cheaper varieties. The evidence from the Red Sea during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in fact, indicates that the preference for cheaper goods was not confined to textiles but extended to the entire range of commodities. This does not mean that the more expensive goods, for instance the fine cloths in which Bengal and Coromandel excelled, were not in demand among the Asian aristocracy. Travellers who wrote enthusiastically of the trade in such luxuries were by no means fanciful; but the fact is that the mass of the trade was in cloth, which no one would write home about.

Secondly, India exported common foods like rice and pulses, wheat and oil, for which there was considerable demand. Bengal, Orissa and the Kanara coast to the north of Malabar, were the major grain-surplus areas, and besides supplying deficit pockets along the Indian coasts, like Malabar or on occasions, Surat, such exports helped feed cities like Malacca, Hormuz and Aden. It was acknowledged that the trade in foods fetched very little profit, even keeping in mind that profits in the Indian Ocean trade tended to be low in any case, but in years of scarcity it was as advantageous as any other. To this we may well add the trade in coconut products and the lesser spices like ginger and turmeric. The picture that emerges from these considerations is one which emphasizes bulk trading in goods of the cheaper kind, and also one which underlines necessities rather than luxuries.

Thirdly, the pattern of Indian exports like most other things with
which we are concerned, appears to have remained stable throughout the period. Besides the items we have already considered, Bengal exported sugar and raw silk, Gujarat exported raw cotton, while Malabar sent out its pepper to the markets in the Indian Ocean. It is possible, however, that as far as cotton and silk were concerned, Gujarat and Bengal mutually exchanged their produce without much of either going out of the country. Indigo was exported from Bengal and Coromandel as well as from Gujarat. Each major port had its list of minor exports of which one could mention wax and lac from Bengal and skins from Coromandel, but these were of no overall significance. An important development during our period, of which we shall speak again later, was that of Indian merchants losing the carrying trade in the major spices in the Indian Ocean. The importance of textiles thus came to be heavily underlined in the seventeenth century. Besides, Indian carriers lost the trade in pepper to a substantial extent and, to a lesser degree, the carriage of indigo, as European ships diverted the trade to Europe.

Indian imports were limited to bullion, spices and horses, besides minor items like tin from Malaya, ivory from eastern Africa and dyewoods, in the main, from the Persian Gulf. As with exports, a close look at the lists of imports of particular Indian ports would, of course, reveal many more commodities, but it is reasonable to hold that wines, rosewater, fruits or medicines did not do much apart from making the lists impressive. What is important for us is to grasp the crucial significance of the west Asian market for the Indian import of bullion. It was indeed with much justice that Mocha was called ‘the treasure chest of the Mughal’. The Persian Gulf also yielded a rich bounty of precious metals, and it was on these markets that India depended for the inflow of the much-needed currency. The trade with eastern and south-eastern Asia showed no overwhelmingly favourable balance and there is some reason to believe that, at times, India had to pay for her import of spicery with money, especially when the Dutch were in control of the trade. European import of bullion was not substantial enough to make a difference in the overall picture, and the development of new Indian Ocean routes by the Europeans only appears to have added a small amount of Japanese copper to the Indian imports.

On the whole, the trade in the Indian Ocean remained firmly in the hands of Indian ship-owning merchants with only an occasional flutter, especially in the early part of the sixteenth and seventeenth
centuries, when the Europeans threatened to cut in. Several factors seem to have worked to ensure the vitality of Indian shipping, not the least of which was the higher freight rates charged by the Europeans. Evidence from the turn of the eighteenth century indicates that European rates could have been double the rates charged by Indian owners. Besides, Indian merchants preferred to stick to the ships owned by men of their own communities because a sharp difference in the customs known to the freights and the owner, not to speak of differences in language, could cause grave complications. Further, it was the practice of Indian freights to split their risks, even by distributing their freight among the available shipping. And it is always useful to remember that the orderly world of the official European documentation concealed a very different reality, and Indian merchants were occasionally embarrassed by private demands made by European naval officers of which the Companies knew nothing. It is, of course, true that European ships were better sailed and better defended, and on occasions such qualities earned them considerable custom, but over the entire period these made no significant difference.

The vitality of Indian shipping notwithstanding, investment in shipping was not popular among Indian merchants. The main handicap was in the fact that ownership was almost invariably individual. Shared proprietorship was known but was, on the whole, a rare phenomenon in our period. Data on prices of ships, as with everything else of this nature, are scarce and unreliable, but it seems safe to assume that owning a ship locked up a substantial part of a merchant's trading capital. The returns on the investment were relatively poor, perhaps never more than 30 per cent in a good season, while the corresponding profits in the trade of the western Indian Ocean would be at least 20 per cent more. Ship-owning was not yet a distinct form of investment, and probably because the insurers were small people working individually, there does not seem to have been any insurance of ships as distinct from that of cargo. It is thus easy to see why there was real reluctance to invest in shipping and with the solitary exception of the Mulla family of Surat, Indian merchants did not own more than one of two ships, however affluent they might have been.

If we turn now to the ports which carried India's maritime trade during the fifteenth century, it is interesting to note that they served hinterlands which were sometimes substantial but always fragment. In the west, the Sultanate of Gujarat and in the east, the independent Kingdom of Bengal (1368–1576), were good illustrations of it, as were, of course, the Empire of Vijayanagara and its enemies, the successor states of the Bahmani kingdom in the Deccan. Besides, a social fragmentation had developed in maritime India during the 500 years prior to the arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean, which was to have important consequences in the period we have under review. Islam had come to the Indian coastal society through peaceful, commercial means and had converted more or less the entire seafaring population by leap-frogging along the trade routes from Gujarat to Bengal. Indian shipping was now overwhelmingly Muslim and this included most ship-owners as well as the seamen. Shore-based Hindu merchants were not necessarily men who never went abroad, but they followed general lines of trade which fed the shipping in the Indian Ocean and did not, except in a small way or in a particular area like southern Coromandel, themselves operate ships.

Indian merchants who travelled across the seas fell into three different economic categories. Firstly, there were 'the substantial merchants', who travelled in style with their valuable cargoes and establishment of domestics, claiming and often obtaining special treatment on board as well as at the Indian Ocean ports. Secondly, there were the merchants who travelled as agents of their principals, who were not on board, either because they were managing their businesses at home or because they were travelling elsewhere. There was naturally some overlap between these two kinds of men. The nakhuda on board an Indian vessel combined the features of both the types in that he was almost always an eminent merchant in his own right, while it was one of his duties to act as the agent of the ship-owner; he would act as a commission agent for other merchants as well. The third comprised the small merchants who invariably provided a ship with the majority of its passengers. Travelling as they did with their bale or two of textiles every year on the various ocean routes, they conjure up the classic figure of the Indian Ocean traveller made immortal by Jacob Van Lèur. It is, however, necessary to remember that men who travelled purely as factors of other merchants, earning no more than a commission on the proceeds of the transactions, were not necessarily the majority among the small men. In fact, it seems possible that for the most part such men owned what they sold or traded on 'respondentia'. The host of
small traders was swallowed by the common sailors, their headmen and the petty officers on board Indian ships, all of whom were allowed free space for small cargoes to supplement their meagre wages. These 'little men' were, however, overshadowed in the eyes of their contemporaries by the presence of rich and influential merchants who were, contrary to what Van Leur believed, just as non-political as the rest.

The world on board an Indian vessel reflected Indian society and, in particular, the world of the overseas trader. Merchants interested in foreign trade were overwhelmingly small men but each Indian port was dominated by a few wealthy traders. The small men, because they were small, investing little and profiting less as they did, could never be driven out of business, and the power of the great was circumscribed by the ubiquity of the small. A major reason why, for instance, Abdul Ghaffur, Gujarat's greatest merchant and ship-owner at the close of the seventeenth century, was unable to establish a monopoly in his favoured Red Sea trade, was that he was unable to cope with the multitude of small traders, many of whom he managed to drive into bankruptcy. It was a merciless world of almost unrestrained competition which often degenerated into feuding. But social custom as well as material condition saw to it that the apparently weak and inefficient retained their rights against the enterprising entrepreneur who received no assistance from legal and political coercion. Thus, even contracts as between merchant and weaver were not binding, provided the weaver returned whatever money he had received as advance payment from the merchant, before going over to the high bidder. It was only in the 1730s when the English with some political influence, if not power, began to chastise all breaches of contract as they understood them, that concepts of a new law were introduced into the Indian world.

The social and economic structures which supported India's overseas trade were based essentially on co-operation and conciliation which set certain limits for enterprise, but allowed for maximum competition within these limits. The ship-owner-cum-merchant and others dealing strictly in imports and exports relied on merchants and brokers, who specialized in supplying a port with specific commodities. The bigger the business, the larger was such reliance upon the intermediaries. There was no difference in this as there was none between an Arab, a Persian or, for that matter, an Indian ship-owner and the European concerns. Each would be tied to an alter ego in the shape of a general broker who would operate a vast network of middlemen to supply his principal with the range of commodities desired for export, or help sell the varieties of goods imported. This combination of a merchant with his broker always worked hand-in-hand with the fraternity of money merchants who took charge of assaying coins, of coining the imported bullion and of transferring funds. The hinterland of ports like Surat which eventually succeeded Cambay, and Hooghly, which came to replace Salsette, stretched over the entire north and west of the subcontinent, and the men of the ports were obliged to fall back on a host of others who produced, processed and transported their goods. In this complicated network, each man had his post and was indispensable in it.

In understanding India's overseas trade, it is necessary to appreciate the importance of the individual and the power of the specialized, local networks within the interlocking mechanism which kept the trade going. To take an example at the port itself, the sarrafs of the mint, to whom the importer of bullion went to have his Mughal rupees coined, were men of great consequence. In theory the Mughal mint was accessible to everyone and there was a darogha to supervise its operations and collect the nominal charges made for its use. In practice, of course, rich and regular importers had privileges which the commoner lacked, and the actual running of the mint was in the hands of sarrafs who framed the minting rights. Evidence relating to Surat in the eighteenth century indicates that the importer dealt with the sarrafs and made fresh terms for every transaction. The sarrafs of the mint charged the importer for the minting time which could be as long as six months. As bullion was usually imported in Surat mainly from the Red Sea in the months of August and September, there was a rush to have money minted at this time and the sarrafs drove as hard a bargain as they dared. In 1720-1, the Dutch factors at Surat, while negotiating a transaction with the sarrafs for exchanging Spanish rials with Mughal rupees, said, 'The price of this coin remains unchanged, but the difference lies in the time, sometimes the purchaser of rupees being obliged to agree for one hundred days and more, according as the mint has more or less work to cope with.'

Far away from the ocean ports, nestling close to the indigo-fields, stood small towns with their local brokers whom the merchants
were obliged to depend upon in purchasing the dye. Buying indigo at the close of the seventeenth century, as Matheus Van Heck explained from his twelve-year experience of the Gujarati countryside, was an extremely risky business because one never knew how much sand, oil and woodshavings were mixed with the blue. The man to guide one’s steps in negotiations with the manufacturers, at the time one tested what they offered and in the process of weighing and storing what one bought, was the local broker who would rent out his warehouse and serve as one’s factotum as long as one stayed in his qasba or small town. It was quite impossible to get round this little man, no matter how consequential one was or where one came from.

In some sense, the influence of money in a structure like this was at every point restrained by the need for ‘local assistance’. On the other hand, everyone in the chain, be it the peasant who sold his indigo at the village market, the weaver who made one piece of gold-embroidered cloth in a season, or the principal broker in a line of textiles, fiercely claimed his right to sell to the highest bidder and insisted on every little allowance sanctioned him by custom. We do not know whether, in the course of the 250 years that we have under review, any eccentric tycoon of the coastal cities, unmindful of the extreme instability of his foreign markets and undeterred by the mores of his society, attempted to break the chain, but the fact remains that at the end of the period the chain was unbroken: no one had succeeded in centralizing and directing production or controlling distribution. The autonomous man of the Indian marketplace was never turned into an employee of another. Government and society silently underwrote the right of every individual to work at the post to which he had been born and earn the profits to which he was entitled. The Indian world was governed by its unwritten law, its gamin; it was left unmarked by the innovating spirit, unchanged even by despotic caprice.

The government, in fact, seldom interfered in the affairs of the merchants, provided there was peace at the ports and the official revenues were smoothly gathered in. We must, in this context, remember that India never had the kind of coastal states which characterized, say, the Indonesian milieu or the Red Sea. Of the only two Indian possibilities, the rulers of Calicut throughout maintained a stance of strict neutrality in matters of trade, happy to live off whatever prosperity it brought to their port, while the Sultanate of Gujarat wished only to become a continental state and could be persuaded fitfully and with much labour to remember its maritime interests. Golconda or Bijapur, Vijayanagar or the Mughal empire never had a serious interest in maritime trade and usually relegated all matters relating to the sea to their local administrations. In an emergency which called for central assistance, it was the local administration and the regional network of mercantile interests which frantically tried to persuade the olymians to intervene, usually not with the kind of success they desired. The total absence of an Indian navy, willing and able to protect India’s considerable commercial marine, was, of course, a natural corollary to this continental attitude.

The absent-mindedness of the powerful Indian governments went hand in hand with sporadic interference in the world of overseas trade. Such interference varied from region to region and from time to time; it created an occasional difficulty but did not amount to a permanent problem. Local administrators like Mir Jumla of Golconda or Prince Azam in Bengal, took advantage of their official position to earn an unusual profit in trade. Such attempts at official enrichment were, however, exceptional, though conditions on the Coromandel Coast were much worse than elsewhere. By and large, the ethos of the amir would not permit an aristocrat to involve himself closely in trade and earn the odium of being a baniya. There was persistent aristocratic investment in trade—shipping in later seventeenth century Bengal, for instance, seemed largely owned by Mughal officials—but it was from a distance, and the money intended for a flutter in overseas commerce was usually handed over to a merchant to be ‘managed’. Only the coastal state of Travancore flouted all precedents by establishing a state monopoly in trade during the 1730s. But compared to the mass of India’s maritime trade over centuries, Martanda Varma’s Travancore was an interesting exception, which proved an important rule.

The Indian overseas merchant therefore neither enjoyed the patronage of his state nor did he live in fear of this government. The Hindu baniya, trembling in fear of ‘the Mughal’, unable to accumulate and retain property due to the fell attention of the government, is a figure largely conjured up by the ill-informed imagination of a few among India’s western travellers. Large properties were freely accumulated in maritime trade, and whether by Hindu or Muslim, such accumulations were dissolved in three to four generations.
Disputes within the family and misfortunes in trade, rather than official oppression, usually accounted for the brittleness of mercantile property, except in the years of crisis when the Mughal empire was dissolving. The bania ethos was one of great austerity: one could not easily tell a millionaire from a commoner. So it was under the Mughal empire and so it remained under the British Raj. The only extravaganza the bania would permit himself came in the wake of a death or a wedding in the family. The family deity accumulated ornaments which descended with the idol from generation to generation. But Hindu mercantile thrift restrained even the urge to accumulate merit. As Ananda Ranga Pillai, the Tamil merchant of Pondicherry, noted of a fellow businessman: ‘He spent lavishly for his god because he had much to spend.’ The Muslim merchant, on the other hand, was free of such inhibitions and the wealthier among them lived like aristocrats and wielded some political influence. It was difficult even for the more despotic of the local governors to fleece men of this class. Money, therefore, was hoarded only a little among Indian merchants, and if this failed to make an appreciable impact on society, it was not the fault of the oriental despot.

The use-value of money was, in fact, keenly appreciated and there seemed to be a perennial problem about the quantity of money available for trading in the coastal cities, in spite of the substantial annual imports from abroad. The rate of interest, therefore, like most other factors in overseas commerce, was seasonal in character and linked to the arrival and departure of shipping. Whatever was imported in the way of money, in what was probably the heyday of Indian maritime trade in the later seventeenth century, was at once absorbed in the process of providing advances to weavers, meeting ‘respondentia’ obligations and in starting a new cycle of lending to provide for shipping in the ensuing season. The thought that money was going out of the country was abhorrent. Thus the money merchants of Surat would not allow the Dutch to ‘export’ Mughal rupees though the Dutch Company wished to buy it for spices and use it as currency at Batavia.

In this system, therefore, prices were fixed freely and depended partly on the vagaries of nature and partly on the eccentricities of the markets abroad. The price of grain was the most important factor in fixing the price in the export market during any season. Besides, the harvest of cotton and indigo, and the production of silk, affected the calculations of the merchant. Given a good harvest at home, the merchant further had to consider the likely behaviour of the markets abroad. For the most part, such markets were small, unstable and unpredictable. Given that wars were recurrent and brigandage ubiquitous, transport was obviously the weakest link in the far-flung network of the Indian Ocean trade. Not much in the way of rational calculation could be made even with the most up-to-date commercial intelligence, which had, of necessity, to be at least a couple of months old by the time it reached the producing area. Niels Steensgaard underlines the dependence of even the more affluent merchant, upon the caprices of a violently fluctuating market and sees in this the true peddling character of the trade. And P.J. Marshall accounts for the developing differences between Europe and Asia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the persistence of an altogether unpredictable market in the Indian Ocean area.

Rich or poor, Indian merchants accepted uncertainty as a basic fact of life and fiercely competed with each other to gather and conceal for themselves whatever they could learn of the possibilities of the coming season. As a general rule, weavers obtained what can be called their basic contracts during the rains, and a variable amount of work in the autumn when the shipping returned with some information from abroad. The expectation of good hujj, for instance, would make for frantic buying in the months of September to January, while news of political unrest in the Ottoman empire or the Persian Gulf would immediately create a depression in the overseas markets in India.

In this context it is important to distinguish between two different methods of purchase prevalent among overseas traders. Substantial merchants undertaking annual voyages usually bought through the system of ‘advance payment’, while lesser men and unexpected callers at an Indian port would buy from the ready-money market of the city. Concentration upon the papers of the European concerns, who as large-scale and regular buyers used the system of buying on time, tends to obscure the existence of the other market, which was important enough in all the major Indian ports. It seems possible that apart from the unexpected arrival of foreign shipping, the smaller merchant buying speculatively in the mass on the prospects of a ‘good season’ abroad, could cause major upsets in the export market during the winter and spring, which ‘contracts’ had little power to prevent. Further, rings of sellers operated in the
wholesale markets, providing ready-made goods and any sudden demand was exploited to bring about dramatic rises.

The Indian merchant lived in a keenly competitive world, but he accepted important social limits to competition. He also accepted the importance of a way of living which did not allow him to develop impersonal forms of collaboration. Business was organized around the family with an occasional trading partner from the same social group. Thus the ‘firm’ of Mathuradas of Hooghly at the turn of the eighteenth century included, besides Mathura himself, his brother, two sons and two ‘friends’, Paran and Gosainram. Instances of Hindus and Muslims working together in close business relationships were known but unusual. The main tendency was to keep business confined within one’s community for the reason that disputes arising in the course of business could be solved through social consensus. There was no efficiently administered impersonal law, which would encourage merchants to seek wider co-operation. In fact, co-operation in business was unpopular. The much-discussed joint-stock companies, foisted upon the relatively weaker merchants of southern Coromandel by the English and the Dutch, eventually proved unimportant. It did not catch on in Bengal, where influential businessmen opposed it, and does not seem to have appeared anywhere else.

The structure of maritime trade which we have described above, can be pieced together from the fragmentary documentation of the sixteenth century and the fuller evidence of the 200 years which followed. The historian’s occupational hazard is to suspect basic changes occurring in the period he studies, but nothing in the evidence indicates any fundamental alterations in the structure during the years which separated Vasco da Gama and Ibn Majid from Warren Hastings and Kantu Babu. This does not mean that changes, which were not qualitative but nevertheless appeared spectacular to contemporaries, did not occur. In fact, the scene upon the Indian Ocean altered greatly during the sixteenth century by the establishment of formidable empires in its western regions, the development of the Portuguese maritime empire and by the virtual disappearance of the Ming imperial presence in the eastern seas.

The Osmanli Turks raced the Portuguese towards the Indian Ocean and Selim I overran Syria and Egypt in 1516-17. While it is true that the Turkish administration sat loosely upon the regional structure, which remained largely Mamluk, the major result of this move for India’s maritime trade was that the Turks in 1538 secured Aden at the mouth of the Red Sea. The Red Sea thus remained a Muslim lake throughout our period. Sulaiman the Magnificent, who followed Selim I, consolidated Ottoman conquests in the lower reaches of the Tigris and the Euphrates with Basra at the head of the Persian Gulf falling to him in 1546. The occupation of this city, as indeed the possession of Mesopotamia, was disputed by the Safavids of Persia who consolidated what became the national territory of Iran, beginning early in the sixteenth century under Shah Isma’il (1487-1524). Somewhat later, the Mughal empire in India absorbed Gujarat (1573) and Bengal (1576). It was this almost simultaneous emergence of the Ottoman, Safavid and the Mughal empires in the western Indian Ocean, which set a new scene for India’s maritime trade.

Such major political changes, it must be assumed, had their effect on oceanic commerce but it is not at all easy to say what it precisely was. In India the Mughals linked the eastern and western seaboard with the heartland of the subcontinent and provided further links for the overland trade to western and central Asia. Such connections had, of course, existed earlier but doubtless the structure now performed with relatively higher efficiency. The Safavids similarly established a better-regulated hinterland for the Gulf ports, and transport in Persia during the seventeenth century would seem to have been more efficient than in the neighbouring countries. The Safavids and the Mughals energetically encouraged pilgrim traffic to the Islamic holy cities in Hijaz. And it seems likely that the Islamic peace of the period, which the occasional Turk-Persian and Indo-Persian conflicts failed to disturb in a major way, and the relatively advanced administration, which these three empires provided for the territories they controlled, promoted a new prosperity for the annual market at Mecca. To the considerable boost to maritime trade that the increasing importance of such an international market must have provided, we have to add the fact of the development of the trade in Yemeni coffee which occurred in the sixteenth century. Later evidence indicates that ‘Turkish merchants’ were the principal purchasers of coffee in Yemen and this pre-eminence was not challenged by the European buyers even at the height of the European coffee trade in the early eighteenth century. Merchants from Persia were second only to the merchants of the Ottoman empire in the coffee market, whereas the Indians bought much less. It seems,
however, possible that the rush for Yemeni coffee was utilized by the Indians to good effect to push their trade in textiles. By the end of the sixteenth century, the Red Sea had emerged as India’s principal overseas market.

To some extent, the emphasis upon the Red Sea was the result of the diversion of Indian shipping from Malacca. The decline of Indian voyages to Malacca was largely caused by the Portuguese occupation of the port in 1511. Another reason why Indian shipping would veer towards the west was the determined war the Portuguese waged against the influential Arab merchants of the western Indian Ocean, among whom the Karimis or their successors were pre-eminent. Observers like Duarte Barbosa commented specifically on the fall of the commerce of the ‘moors’ at ports like Calicut in the early sixteenth century. Indian shipping, which was giving up the Malacca voyage and found the Persian Gulf closed, may well have found the vacuum being created for them in the Red Sea much too tempting, especially as it coincided with the increasing importance of the hajj and the trade in Yemeni coffee. Whatever may have been the reasons, the importance of the Red Sea for India’s maritime commerce remained a feature of the Indian Ocean trade throughout our period, to be modified only in favour of a renewed emphasis on the China trade around the middle of the eighteenth century.

Gujarati Muslim ship-owners, vitally interested in preserving the freedom of high-seas navigation and retaining the hold they had on the carrying trade in the middle Indian Ocean, were, from the outset, bitterly opposed to Portuguese penetration. It was they who organized the defence of Malacca against the Portuguese and, once Malacca fell, abandoned that port in favour of the north Sumatran principality of Aceh, and to a lesser extent for Bantam. Hindu merchants, on the other hand, who were less affected by considerations of freight trade, were less hostile and co-operated with the Portuguese authorities of Malacca as that entrepot began to function once more. The carriage of spices in the Indian Ocean was, from now on, shared between the Gujarats and the Portuguese. Aceh in the reign of Sultan ‘Ala’ al-Din Ri’ayat Shah al-Qahhar’ (c. 1537–71) became a principal rendezvous for Gujarati shipping, which successfully exploited the failure of the Portuguese to close the mouth of the Red Sea. After a dislocation during the first three decades of the sixteenth century, the spice trade to the Red Sea revived significantly, and Charles Boxer is of the opinion that it is almost certain that more pepper was being carried by Gujarati ships from Aceh to the Red Sea at the end of the sixteenth century, than was being taken by the Portuguese around the Cape to Lisbon.13

Indian maritime trade was therefore little affected by the Portuguese impact, though the disruptions of the first three decades of the sixteenth century were vexatious enough. One of the reasons why the Portuguese themselves somewhat mended their ways, was the reliance they began to place upon the customs from Indian shipping. Gujarati ships, which were obliged to call at Diu and pay the Portuguese customs at that port, enabled Goa to earn about a sixth of its entire revenues from the surplus of Diu at the turn of the seventeenth century. Similarly, Hormuz, which by an agreement of 1523, supplied the Portuguese with Rs 90,000 a year, provided only a little more than a third of this amount, if the Gujaratis did not come to trade there. At the other end, the Portuguese authorities of Malacca soon abandoned their anti-Islamic posture to lure Muslim shipping back to that port.

Besides the concern for maritime customs, the Portuguese were inclined to co-operate with the Indians for the sake of their private commerce. We have already noticed the co-operation between the Hindu merchants and the Portuguese of Malacca, and the story was repeated elsewhere in the Indian Ocean. Thus Goa was dominated by Saraswat Brahmans and banias from lower Gujarat, while Diu, which was the home of the Kapal banias of Saurashtra, became an Indo-Portuguese entrepot of importance. From the beginning of the sixteenth century, Portuguese officials traded on their private account and made free use of every official facility. They were soon joined by the resourceful Jesuits, the more ubiquitous mestizos, and deserters from the army. This unofficial Portuguese trade was financed, very largely, by the Indians, and the Portuguese flag often concealed Indian trade. As Boxer puts it: ‘In the Portuguese ships plying the Indian Ocean for inter-port trade the captain or the master was sometimes the only white man on board, for even the pilot and boatswain as well as the sailors were often Gujarati Muslims.’14 Moreover, trade with the Indian ports was important for the Portuguese establishments for their commerce with Europe. Thus, Goa traded to the value of Rs 4 million a year with Gujarat around 1600, and the bulk of the goods thus acquired were dispatched to Europe. A substantial number of private Portuguese
80 / The World of the Indian Ocean Merchant 1500–1800

traders settled down at Cambay and many more called annually by way of trade. By the close of the sixteenth century, the ramifications of this Indo-Portuguese commerce were wide, and the hostility faced by the north Europeans in their bid to penetrate the Indian Ocean trade, was, in part, due to the interests involved in the Indo-Portuguese network.

It is, however, important not to form an inflated idea of the dimensions of Portuguese trade in the Indian Ocean. Admittedly, in the absence of relevant statistics—especially if we keep in mind that official Portuguese trade formed only one of the three channels of commerce in the Indian Ocean, and it is impossible to disentangle the Indian part from the Portuguese portion of the unofficial trade—we are in no position to form definitive ideas, but the impressions as summed up by Van Leur appear to be confirmed by the progress of research. ‘In trade’, Van Leur wrote,

the belligerent activity of the Portuguese had become by the close of the sixteenth century, one thread more in the fabric of the international exchange of goods carried on in those lands from Suez to Nagasaki. ... in quantity, Portuguese trade was exceeded many times by the trade carried on by the Chinese, Japanese, Siamese, Javanese, Indians from Coromandel, Gujarat and Malabar, and Arabs.19

And while we consider this verdict on Portuguese trade, it can as well be added that, fill well into the eighteenth century, the same was true of whatever European trade there was in the Indian Ocean. W.H. Moreland, who was considerably more European in outlook than Van Leur, noted:

It is easy for a student of the contemporary records to form an exaggerated idea of the importance of the Dutch and English merchants in the Indian markets where they possessed a footing ... but Indian markets were not dominated by the European trade. ... From time to time, the European merchants dominated the markets for particular commodities, but it cannot be asserted that they ever dominated the commercial outlook.16

The mass of Indian trade throughout the period we have in review, appears to have been in Indian hands and remained confined to the Indian Ocean.

The main reason why the Indian merchant never conceded superiority in trade to the European, though the latter was better organized and better financed, was that he was the thriftier of the two. The Indian spent much less on equipping his ship and sup-

porting his establishment, and he was content with much smaller profits. Besides, the Indian knew the ins and outs of the markets where he bought and sold his goods in a way the European could never match. There were ‘little arrangements’ at the customs house and local courts which always eluded the foreigner. And when everything seemed to fail before the European gun, there were local political strings to be pulled to set the Mughal on the adversary. The Indian merchant lost when the Mughal lost.

The force which the Portuguese employed was hurtful but ineffective. True, the port of Calicut, so closely watched from Goa, never recovered its earlier splendour, while, in general, the west coast of India remained quiescent before the impressive show of Portuguese strength and the Deccan ports were eclipsed. But in Coromandel, there was little to restrain the Indian merchant and though the Portuguese did build Hooghly to replace Sattagon in Bengal, local Muslim merchants quietly took over the port when the Mughals expelled the Portuguese in 1632.17 Malacca and Hormuz both lost their former pre-eminence under the Portuguese administration, and in south-east Asia, trade was dispersed and shared as between the Portuguese and the Asians. It was especially towards the end of the sixteenth century that the Indian merchants found more and more openings as the Portuguese relaxed their controls. Efforts to enforce the official monopoly of the clove trade, for example, were abandoned, and when the Dutch admiral Steven Van Der Hagen captured Ambon in 1605, he found that the Portuguese allowed Muslim merchants from all over Asia to buy cloves in that island. At the other end of the Indian Ocean, Portuguese vigilance had never been strict at Hormuz, because of the necessity to live in peace with both Safavid Persia as well as Ottoman Turkey, which controlled the head of the Gulf. When Ralph Fitch visited the island in 1583, he found Hindu and Muslim merchants using the emporium freely, while the trade in spices was openly conducted with no thought for the official monopoly.

During the sixteenth century, therefore, Indian maritime trade was redeployed, partly because of the development of the Red Sea market and partly due to Portuguese interference. There was nothing in the seventeenth century to match the emergence of the great empires of the western Indian Ocean and the period from the point-of-view of Asian politics must be seen as a continuation of earlier trends. The Zaidi Imams of Sana ended Turkish rule in Yemen in the
1620s and the Imam’s port of Mocha definitely replaced Aden which had languished under Turkish maladministration. The international market of the hajj continued to be the principal draw for the trade in the Indian Ocean, but complaints of tyranny and insecurity became more frequent than before. In the Persian Gulf, the Safavids expelled the Portuguese from Hormuz with the help of the English and trade veered to Bandar Abbas, linking itself more closely than before with Persia itself. The rise of the Yarubis of Oman proved to be a singular misfortune for the Portuguese and introduced an eccentric element in the commerce of the Arabian Sea. Muscat fell to the Yarubis in 1650 and in the next fifteen years, the Yarubi navy swept the Portuguese out of all their east African strongholds except Mozambique. Portuguese settlements in western India came under attack. Bombay was sacked twice in 1661 and 1662, as was Diu in 1668 and 1676, while Bassein was plundered in 1674. The uncertainty that these raids caused to Indian trade was reinforced by the fact that under Saif Ibn Sultan (c. 1692–1711), the Yarubi navy virtually became a powerful pirate force. Surat, which had built many of the Yarubi ships and continued to offer them maintenance, regretted its own liberality every year as the Muscat warships put in for trade, refit and riot at the Mughal port. Gujarati ships were often the target of Yarubi attack on the high seas. Insecurity at sea also continued to be acute at the other end, where the Ming dynasty in China finally made way for the Manchus, who found it necessary to interdict foreign trade in 1655, and follow it up by forcing the Chinese away from the coast in order to cope with Cheng Cheng-keng, master of Formosa and a partisan of the Mings.

Indian maritime trade was further re-arranged during the seventeenth century, not so much through the continuation of trends within Asia which had originated earlier, but by the emergence of the English and Dutch Companies in the Indian Ocean. The rearrangement, however, confirmed the tendency to emphasize western Asia at the expense of the south-east, which had marked Indian trade in the previous century. To begin with, the arrival of the north Europeans and the final breakdown of Portuguese restrictions liberated maritime trade in the Indian Ocean and caused prices to rise remarkably in several areas. For instance, it was estimated that pepper rose five times over its previous price when in 1599 the English appeared at Acheh, the favoured Gujarati market. But the initial buoyancy soon withered as the Dutch East India Company followed in the footsteps of the early Portuguese conquistadores, only with considerably greater efficiency and ruthlessness. The Dutch monopoly of the spice trade was real and nearly effective by the middle of the seventeenth century. The Banda islanders were exterminated in offering resistance to the imposition of the new restrictions and Javanese shipping virtually disappeared from Indonesian waters. Indian merchants felt the pressure keenly and though Coromandel merchants held on tenaciously at Acheh, the Gujaratis appear to have given up the south-eastern voyages fairly early, with not many of them going to Sumatra after 1618.

The near-complete abandonment of Indonesian voyages left the Gujaratis with only the Red Sea market and the Gulf. This was the real reason why the English met with such fierce opposition when they attempted to cut in on the trade between Surat and Mocha in the 1620s. Moreover, the trade to the Red Sea came to be more and more in Indian textiles, as spices were no longer obtainable. As the English factors at Surat put it: ‘The merchants of this place are also undone by our trade to the southwards (i.e., Acheh, Bantam etc.) which hath taken (as we may term it) the meats out of their mouths and overthrown their trade that way.’ Throughout the seventeenth century, however, Gujarati trade to the Red Sea continued in force and neither the English nor the Dutch affected the flow adversely. Because the conveyance of spice had stopped, the period may well be seen as the high tide of India’s textile trade to western Asia. During the last three decades of the century, Gujarati shipping increased significantly and some trade to south-east Asia as well as to China was resumed, with Indian vessels venturing for the first time into the China Sea. Doubtless this is partly to be attributed to the liberal attitude of the Manchu dynasty, once they felt free of any menace from the sea. In the 1690s, Indian ships also appeared at Manila, though the number of such voyages was small, not more than one or two a year from Surat and a similar number from southern Coromandel.

In northern Coromandel, the seventeenth century was similarly a period of commercial prosperity. Masulipatam’s importance dates from the later sixteenth century when it emerged as the principal outlet of the recently consolidated Sultanate of Golconda. The city of Hyderabad, built in the 1590s, and the trade in diamonds which turned Golconda into ‘the most important market for large diamonds in the world’ provided Masulipatam with fresh bases of
prosperity. The fall of Portuguese Hormuz and the establishment of Bandar Abbas in the 1620s opened the Persian Gulf more effectively than before to the merchants of this Coromandel port. An added impetus to expansion was provided by the desolation of Gujarat by the famine of 1630–2. Mir Jumla’s impressive trade, mainly directed towards the Persian Gulf in the 1640s and 1650s, was based at Masulipatam. Petapoli (Nizampatam) near Masulipatam and another port to its south were of some importance at the time. It is not clear how much importance should be given to Indian shipping of northern Coromandel, but the Dutch anxieties about the keen competition offered by the Indian merchants were real enough.

Through a curious historical coincidence, both Masulipatam and Hooghly were chosen as home ports by important communities of Shi’a businessmen. This meant a steady commercial contact with Persia and a reinforcement of India’s general orientation towards west Asia at the time. But Gujarati’s predominance in the Red Sea was not challenged and both Hooghly and Masulipatam, apart from the Coromandel ports like Pulicat, Negapatam and Porto Novo as well as Hooghly’s neighbour Balasore, concentrated upon the trade of the Bay of Bengal. Ships from these ports maintained a steady intercourse with Pegu, Arakan, Tenasserim and Acheh, while some trade with Macassar was done through the intermediary of Portuguese private traders. This division of the Indian Ocean as between the Indian ports, though a matter of emphasis, was an interesting feature which persisted later and with other merchants.

Taking one thing with another, it seems reasonable to hold that the later seventeenth century was the golden period of Indian maritime trade as well as the trade in textiles. But the prosperity proved to be remarkably short-lived. To a large extent, the debacle of Indian shipping during the early eighteenth century must be ascribed to the simultaneous political collapse in India and Persia, which was accompanied by the crippling civil war in Yemen from the second decade of the eighteenth century onwards. It is, however, important to remember that the decline of Indian shipping began much before the period of political unsetlement, as indeed is well demonstrated by data from the Dutch archives relating to the two ports of Hooghly and Balasore. Bengali shipping appears to have reached its high-water mark in the 1670s and fell away rapidly in the last two decades of the seventeenth century. Trade to Tenasserim and Acheh in particular, which had been brisk, almost ceased at the turn of the eighteenth century. The reason for this remains obscure but it is worth noting that Mughal officials who invested largely in shipping in this area withdrew their investments during the period, while other merchants continued their lower-key commerce as before.

Considerably more important than the decline of shipping in Bengal was the downfall of the great commercial marine of Gujarati in the early eighteenth century. Here again it is worth noting that the decline of Gujarati’s maritime trade, though much hastened by the growing political insecurity, had begun before the breakdown of law and order really began to bite. At the turn of the eighteenth century, foreign observers repeatedly commented on the paradox that while Gujarati shipping was at its height, the increased volume of Gujarati’s exports had glutted markets not only in the Red Sea but elsewhere in the Indian Ocean area. For several years between 1698 and 1710, the Gujaratis made unprofitable voyages which caused great concern. After that, anarchy in India disrupted Surat’s hinterland, while Gujarati merchants were mercilessly fleeced at Mocha to meet the costs of the Yemeni civil war. While Gujarati’s trade contracted absolutely during the first half of the eighteenth century—with Surat’s total turnover falling from about an annual Rs 16 million to Rs 5 million—the relative concentration upon the Red Sea was never given up by the Gujarati shipowners. As late as the middle of the eighteenth century, English factors, who were by then politically powerful, still met determined resistance in their efforts to share the Red Sea trade.

The decline of the Mughal port of Surat and the disappearance of the fleet which was based at that port—the actual figures falling from 112 vessels in 1701 to about 20 in 1750—were arguably the most important developments in the trade of the Indian Ocean during this period. To some extent, the developing English trade, particularly the expanding English private trade, made up for the loss of Gujarati commerce, but at the time only a small proportion of the decline could be made up in this manner. Somewhat later, English trade based at Bombay and mainly directed towards China, made a real difference in the overall picture of the Indian Ocean trade. Madras on the east coast had, however, definitely eclipsed Masulipatam and the southern ports before the close of our period, and English private trade to Manila, concealed for the most part under Armenian names, had become an important silver-earner for India. The growth of Calcutta was, if anything, even more
NOTES


3. The clove cultivation in Aboina was a development of the sixteenth century.


8. On an Indian vessel, the man in charge of the ship's navigation was called the sarang, while the timel was the headman of the sailors. Socially such men were far inferior to the nakhrula and as such, the latter, though often a landlubber, wielded supreme authority on board. In this the Indians were closer to the Portuguese ethos than to north European practice.


11. For the citation and a brief discussion of related issues, see A. Das Gupta, 'Some Attitudes among 18th Century Merchants', in B. Prasad, ed. Ideas in History (Delhi 1964).


17. The Portuguese built a stronghold at Mylapore (San Thome) and had a relatively weaker base at Nagapattam. San Thome flourished in the second half of the sixteenth century and may have contributed to the decline of Pulicat, which was really broken by the fall of Vijaynagar. Cf. J. Brening, 'The Textile Trade of Seventeenth Century Northern Coromandel: A Study of a Pre-modern Asian Export Industry' (unpublished D.Phil. thesis at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1975, pp. 11–12).


23. The eclipse of Masulipatam occurred early in the eighteenth century when the port was repeatedly attacked and on occasions cut off from the city of Hyderabad.

The Merchants of Surat, c. 1700–1750*

From about the middle of the sixteenth century, for about 200 years, the city of Surat, in the subah of Gujarat, was the major port of the Mughal Empire. Through this port, much of northern and western India maintained cultural, political and commercial connections with western Asia and the Indonesian world. At the turn of the eighteenth century, if not earlier, the city was the home of the largest commercial marine in India. The mercantile classes of this great trading metropolis naturally played an important role in the city and through it, in the trading world of India. In this chapter, I shall be concerned with some of the features associated with the role of the merchants of Surat in the first half of the eighteenth century. I have selected this period in order to look at the Indian world immediately before the establishment of the British Empire. But the sources for this study, as with any other study of Indian trade, are almost exclusively European. They comprise the archives of the Dutch and the English East India Company, supplemented by the papers of Sir Robert Cowan, governor of Bombay during 1728–34, now preserved at the Public Record Office, Belfast. Needless to say, these sources are neither satisfactory nor adequate, but they are contemporary, detailed and useful. I do not know of any Indian material directly bearing upon trade; however, the famous Persian

of religious men. Gujarat, as a whole, was an intensely religious part of the country and Surat had the added distinction of being the port of embarkation of pilgrims for the hajj. Every year, therefore, a large concourse of Muslim pilgrims from the north and west of India converged on the town. I am unable to discuss the local religious hierarchy and the place of the individual Muslim divines in it, but both the Dutch and the English documents, from time to time, noted the important influence of men like Shaikh Fazal, Syed Sadulla and Syed Zainal Abidin in the affairs of the city. Syed Zainal Abidin, in particular, was the most outstanding man among them in the 1730s and judging from the fact that the dawat of the Ismaili Bohras was, at this time, in Saurashtra and Malwa, it is possible that he was the amil of their dawat in Surat. Some of these men were certainly interested in worldly affairs as well and took part in ordinary business transactions. Together with the senior officials and the leading divines, the principal merchants of Surat comprised what were called the ‘principal inhabitants’ of the town. In any public matter of great import, these ‘principal inhabitants’ were always consulted, and often invited to act in the interest of the city.

It would be instructive to look at two lists, one giving the names of some of the leading merchants in 1727, and the other giving names of leading citizens, merchants, officials and religious leaders in 1734. It is also of interest to note the occasions of these lists. In 1727 the directeur of the Dutch Company in Surat, Abraham Weijns, was recalled to Batavia to answer charges against his administration and he was replaced by Herman Bruinink. But Weijns was very unwilling to go and, according to Bruinink, began to conspire with the nawab (that is, the mutasaddi) against him (Bruinink). It was to prove this fact that Bruinink drew up a declaration which he got attested by the seals of the great merchants of the city, Muslim as well as Hindu, and their names were as follows: Mulla Muhammad, son of Muhammad Ali, Haji Ahmad Chellaby, Ibrahim Chellaby, Hussain Chellaby, Shaikh Muhammad Kodsi, Hassan Badawi, Abdul Rahaman Sulaimanji, Omar Chellaby, Shaikh Ali Kaderi, Haji Hussain Abid, Muhammad Salebi Saketti, Haji Muhammad Baghdadi, Ilias Osman Baghdadi (?), Mustafa, Abdul Kaber Kamal, Mustafa Sale, Muhammad Aref, Kika Dada, Vanaridas Vallabhdas, Tapidas Revadas, and Vallabhdas Daldas.

The second list was enclosed in a letter to Robert Cowan, governor of Bombay, by Ahmad Chellaby dated at Surat, 24 September...
1732. Ahmad Chellaby thanked Cowan for help received from the English during a recent rebellion led by the merchants against the mutasaddi of the town, and enclosed what he called ‘a certificate under the seals of the Principal Inhabitants of This City, with Syeds as officers and merchants testifying to the gratitude of the city for what the English had done. This list (drawn up in two columns) was as follows: Ahmad Chellaby, Abdul Kader, Abdul Gunny, Abdul Fattah, Abdul Rahman, Abdul Salem, Mahmud Sayyid, Ibrahim, Hasan, Ali Ibrahim, Abdul Rahman Sulaimanji, Rahim Mulla in one column, and, facing it in another, Syed Zainal Abidin, Syed Abdulla Ibn Xarif (?), Syed Abdul Kader Ibn Ahmad, Syed Ataula Ibn Ismail, Syed Sayyid Ibn Omar, Kazi Hydaitullah, Mufti Azimuddin, Mufti Lutfullah, the Third Mufti [without name], Haji Ahmad Soalla, and Mahmud Arifa.

The first thing that strikes one is that, though these two lists were drawn up within five years of each other, of the twenty-one merchants in the first list only three figure in the second and even then, Abdul Kader, must be regarded as doubtful. Too much importance should not, however, be attached to this as much depended on who was drawing up the list and who were available at the time. It is however interesting to note that Ahmad Chellaby, who was the principal figure among the Chellaby clan in Surat, did not think it necessary to include any of his clansmen in his list, though they were so prominent in the declaration of Bruininik. It is possible that he thought his own attestation was sufficient for the purpose. Secondly, it is important to note the predominance of the Muslim merchants in the first list and the total exclusion of the Hindus from the second. Two explanations may be considered in this context. First, though the Hindus were numerically by far the largest group and no doubt controlled much of the wealth in town, individually, the Muslim ship-owners were the wealthiest and most influential. To this has to be added the fact that the administration was Muslim, which must have given some influence to the leading Muslim merchants, which the Hindus lacked. Secondly, the Hindu family which was undoubtedly the most influential in town also happened to be the family which worked in the interest of the English Company. Seth Laadas was the head of the family of Paraks and the broker to the English. Naturally enough Bruininik’s list would not include him and if Chellaby’s letter had been inspired by Cowan himself, as there is some reason to think that it was, it would not include the Paraks because their support for the English would be taken for granted. There is one other important omission from both these lists, that of the leading Parsi family of the Rustumjiis. But again, as this family provided some of the important brokers to the English during this half-century, their omission can be similarly explained. The fact that Armenian, Kashmiri, Jewish or Sindhi merchants were not included can be explained by the supposition that, though they carried on important trade in Surat, individually none of them merited inclusion. There is one more point to be noted before we leave these lists. These thirty or thirty-one men introduced to us as the leading merchants of Surat are, for the most part, men in shadows as far as our documentation is concerned. It is true that we know a considerable amount about some of them, and a little about a few others, but many of these men are only names. Now the documents we have are always informative about anyone who took any important part in public affairs. Thus it seems fair to come to the conclusion suggested by common sense that many of the rich merchants in Surat, though contributing in a general sense to the influence of their community, took no individual part in the affairs of the city but were content to fall in with the leading figures among them.

Let us now take a closer look at some of the men on these lists and see what kind of things are known about them and what conclusions these would suggest. The man who leads the list of Bruininik is undoubtedly the person deserving the most attention, though he was personally not very important at the time when the list was drawn up. This man, Muhammad son of Muhammad Ali, must have been a very young lad at the time as five years later, when his father was murdered, he was considered only a youth. It is significant that Muhammad Ali himself did not attest Bruininik’s declaration, probably because he thought this sort of thing beneath his dignity. This he well might, as he was at the time virtually the governor of Surat in all but name. The fortunes of this family of Ismaili Bohras had been founded by his grandfather, that is the great-grandfather of Muhammad who attested Bruininik’s declaration, Mulla Abdul Ghafur, in the second half of the seventeenth century. The members of this family were always called Mullas, sometimes Maulanas. This is curious, because they were neither particularly holy nor in any sense learned. It is possible, as local legends seem to suggest, that Abdul Ghafur, before he built up his fortune through trade, was connected with a mosque, probably as a
teacher. It is interesting to add at this point that another family fortune, that of the Rustumjis, was founded by a man who was of the priestly classes among the Parsis and very poor before he took to trade. The family of Seth Dayaram, broker to the Dutch East India Company in the 1720s, also had a similar introduction to prosperity. Ruiidas, Dayaram's father, was a munshi at the Dutch warehouse in Surat and took to trade in a modest way, which his sons consolidated. There are a few other examples of this kind as well. Now from these it would seem that there was a certain openness about the world of the merchants in Surat. It was of course always a great help if one inherited a fortune, but without that one was not necessarily in a hopeless position. It would also appear to be the case that men came to trade from other kinds of occupation, especially from genteel but indigent families.\footnote{7}

The major concentration of the Mulla family was in shipping. Some data on the shipping controlled by the Mullas are available from the list of passes issued by the Dutch between the years 1707 and 1736, after which this annual list unfortunately disappears from the Dutch papers. It has to be noted that these lists were usually only 'extracts' from the total number of passes issued in any year and they did not enumerate vessels which fell below a certain size. There is some reason to believe that the size of the vessels was usually understated. The largest ship on these lists did not go beyond 1200 khandis, that is 400 tons, but other evidence indicates that ships of up to 600 tons were, at the time, owned by Indian merchants of Surat. We have no indication as to how the fee for these passes was collected, but there is the possibility that the fee was paid according to size. If that was so, there would be a reason for understanding the actual measurement. The passes gave the date of issue, the name of the ship, the name of the nakhuda who would command the ship during the intended voyage, the tonnage of the ship, the number of its guns and finally its destination. The cargo was never noted. Naturally the Dutch secretary who made out the passes was often not very sure about the Indian names, and the spellings varied considerably. Data about tonnage and the number of guns carried by a particular ship also varied over the years, but this variation was slight. Ships were lost fairly regularly either due to natural causes at sea or by piracy. They were sometimes replaced by others with identical names, and this causes some confusion. But, bearing all this in mind, much reliable information can be gathered from these passes, especially when checked with data from other documents. In all, thirty-four vessels are shown against members of the Mulla family in these years. During the time of Abdul Ghaflur the total was eighteen, of which as many as fourteen were sent out together in the year 1707–8. This was the maximum figure for any year in this half-century, the usual number being about ten. It is therefore impossible to tell whether more than fourteen ships were ever owned by the family at any particular time. Abdul Ghaflur's son, Abdulla Hai, died shortly after his father and did not add to the fleet. But Muhammad Ali, the grandson, added thirteen, though these were for the most part smaller vessels. We do not know exactly how many he lost, but there is stray evidence of his losses. The son of Muhammad Ali, Mulla Muhammad, who later became Mulla Fakruddin, and his brother Mulla Aminuddin, are known to have added three more ships to the family total, but again we do not know their losses and no exact information is available for the years after 1736. The largest ship of the Mullas was called the Hussaini of a declared tonnage of 400 tons, carrying twenty-five guns of unknown calibre.\footnote{8}

Of the leading merchants mentioned in the two lists of Bruinink and Ahmad Chellaby, at least six are repeatedly mentioned in the passes issued by the Dutch and it is possible that some more of them were ship-owners as well, though their names cannot be definitely identified. Haji Ahmad Chellaby, son of Haji Sale Chellaby, was himself an important shipping magnate, though the maximum number of his ships that I have come across in any one year is eight.\footnote{9} The remarkable thing about shipping in Surat is that very few of the ships were owned by the Hindus. The maximum number in any one year in the list of passes is nine out of fifty-seven in 1707–8. Five of these ships were very small, between 50 and 100 tons; one was of 150 tons, two of about 175 tons and one, a large vessel of Tapidas Surji of Cambay of 1000 khandis carrying seven guns, commanded by nakhuda Trimbakdas Trikamdas and sailing from Cambay to Mangalore. Apart from Tapidas, there was another Cambay bania, Haridas Kalyan, taking out a pass this year, all the rest being from Surat. We know very little about these men, apart from the fact that they turned up from year to year in the list of passes and their number dwindled as the mercantile marine in Surat itself was gradually reduced. The Hindus, who played a prominent role in the city, for example the five men mentioned in
Bruinink's list, were all merchants, brokers and sarafs, but not shippers. It is safe to say that shipping in Surat was controlled by the Muslims as owners and sailors.

The number of ships owned by the Mulas should give us some idea, admittedly vague, of the wealth of the family. It is of course impossible to gain any precise information about this. At the time of his death in 1718, Abdul Ghafur is reputed to have left eight and a half million rupees in cash. This was presumably a conjecture formed at the bazaar in Surat but passed into local legend. In addition to his ships and a very considerable amount in cash, Ghafur also left a garden in the northern suburbs of the city, a family mansion in Sauagarpura, the locality of the merchants within the city, at least one more house in its neighbourhood, a mosque probably also in the same neighbourhood, a wharf to the south of Surat and some landed property on an island near Gogo in the gulf of Cambay. Muhammad Ali, his grandson, expanded the wharf by acquiring a considerable amount of land in its neighbourhood, and developed the area into a suburban complex. There he built a fort, several houses, and even laid down a few streets. He called the whole thing Maghbulbad and there was a time in the late 1720s when it was thought that Maghbulbad would become a new Surat. Abdul Ghafur himself is not known to have maintained any troops, though he must have had his slaves and retainers as all the wealthy Muslim merchants appear to have done. Muhammad Ali, however, in the early 1730s raised a small army of about 2000 men, to defend himself against the mutassaddi Sohrab Khan. In addition to this we must remember the sailors who manned the fleet of the Mulla family and who would be available for several months of the year when the ships were at their home port. It may well be noted at this point that the recruiting of troops by a merchant in Surat was a very unusual measure and the government frowned upon it. The army which Muhammad Ali gathered together became a source of conflict between the port-officer and himself. At the same time there was a close rapport between these two, and Sohrab Khan leaned heavily upon Ali's purse to secure his position at the Imperial Court in Delhi.10

Such wealth and influence were, of course, no common phenomena. The position of the Mulla family was quite unique and we must not think of Surat as a city dominated by its leading merchants. Ahmad Chellaby, the second man on Bruinink's list, was also the second most important merchant in the city, but well behind Muhammad Ali in terms of property and power. Unfortunately, we know even less about him than we do about the latter. Apart from being a large ship-owner, Ahmad was the principal figure among the Turkish community settled at Surat, and it is possible that he had links with Aleppo. There was a deadly enmity between the Chellaby and the Mulas and, while Muhammad Ali was at the peak of his power, Ahmad was once imprisoned by the governor of the town and on another occasion, had to seek safety in flight. Ali also made a determined attempt to run him out of the Red Sea trade in which both of them were largely interested. Ahmad Chellaby, in his turn, did his best to ruin the Mulas and was instrumental in the final downfall of Muhammad Ali. Afterwards, for a brief period, he was a successor to the fallen giant in that he became the principal financial support of the mutassaddi and inherited Muhammad Ali's considerable influence in the affairs of the town. However, this did not last long, and, after a humiliating setback in which he was worsted by the Paraks and the English, a mysterious murderer eliminated him from the scene in 1736.11

This brings us to some of the men who were not on either of the lists with which we started. The family of the Paraks comprised the leading group among the banias of Surat. The family of the Rustumjis included the principal men among the Parsis. As between the Mulas and the Chellaby, there was a traditional and deadly feud between these two families. Because both the bania and the Parsi family had close contacts with the English, we are somewhat better informed about the rise and progress of this enmity. In the year 1662, Bhimji Parak, along with his three brothers Kalyandas, Kisoo and Vitaldas, was appointed the broker of the East India Company by Sir George Oxenden. Kalyandas died ‘soon after’, though we do not know exactly when. We know he left a few children but we do not know their number or names. Bhimji, after a highly successful career as the chief English broker, died in 1686. Kisoo and Vitaldas Parak looked after the office of the broker on behalf of themselves and Banwaldas and Shankardas Bhimji, the children of their elder brother. In 1697 however the two Bhimjis became the sole brokers. For various reasons all the Indian merchants who were connected with the English, came under severe pressure in the 1680s and the pressure continued for about twenty years thereafter. In 1703 Shankardas gave up the office of the broker and
Banwalidas took over the sole concern. But soon after disputes arose between the English Company and the family of the Paraks and as a result of this, Banwalidas was totally ruined. His two children were surviving 'on the charity of the caste' in the 1720s. The family fortunes were revived with the emergence of an extremely able youth, Laldas, son of Vitaladas, in about 1718. In that year, Laldas carried through complicated negotiations, on behalf of himself and other members of the extended family with Charles Boone, governor of Bombay, and after a great sacrifice, salvaged something of the family fortune. It is interesting to note that, while conducting these negotiations in 1718 and again while arguing the case of the Paraks later, Laldas maintained that the four brothers who had originally begun the family's business with the English Company were involved in it as follows: Bhimji Parak as the eldest, had eight shares; Kalyandas had five, Kissoo and Vitaladas had four each. Unfortunately we do not know why this division was made in twenty-one shares and what was the reason behind the specific allotments. It is also difficult to tell how long the original group of the four brothers and their children stayed together. We know that when Shankar gave up the office of broker in 1703, he also separated from his brother Banwali, so that he was untouched by the calamities which overwhelmed the latter immediately afterwards. Thus it would be safe to assume that other members of the family had separated from the two children of Bhimji Parak before 1703, probably in 1697, when they ousted their uncles from the broker's office. However, as the accounts of the Parak family with the English Company were concerned mainly with their transactions in the 1680s, Laldas Vitaladas repeatedly emphasized the division in the several shares and attempted to protect himself and the other members from a wholesale claim. He maintained that the concessions he had made under threat in 1718 were severely criticized by the rest of the family. However, in the 1720s, Laldas became the broker of the English Company and for about fifteen years the Paraks once again became a leading family in Surat. 12

But the great rivalry between the Paraks and the Rustumjis had begun already. Rustumji Manakji rose to affluence in the last two decades of the seventeenth century and became the broker of the New English East India Company at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The two young Paraks, Banwalidas and Shankardas, were at the time the brokers of the old Company and appear to have been outsmarted by Rustumji. In 1712 the United Company moved against Banwalidas for old debts and the sole brokerage was given to Rustum. The family of the Paraks went into an eclipse from which it would only emerge after the death of Rustumji in 1719. Seth Laladas Parak now managed to turn the tables against the three sons of Rustum, Framji, Bomanji and Nowroji Rustumji, who had succeeded their father in the office of broker. Laldas discovered evidence of systematic cheating of the English Company by the Rustumjis, and as a result the family was turned out of office and large claims were made against its members. Framji was imprisoned in Surat and Bomanji was arrested in Bombay while Nowroji managed to sail to England to plead the family's case before the Court of Directors. The master-stroke of Nowroji in England appears to have been the successful revival of an old claim against the Paraks. There is no evidence that Nowroji was directly responsible for this, but while he was in London, the Court of Directors not only agreed to make large restitutions to the Rustumji family, but also bought from the family of Sir John Child, English Chief in Surat in the 1680s, an old claim they had against the Paraks, at Rs 150,000. In 1725, when Nowroji returned to Surat he immediately spread the news of a disastrous claim, soon to be made against Seth Laldas by the English Company. The instructions which the governor and council at Bombay received from London, in the matter, were very clear, and it seemed that a persecution of the Paraks was about to begin just after the persecution of the Rustumjis had ceased. But Laldas fought a masterly rearguard action and Nowroji, in the excitement of his triumph, overplayed his hand. Laldas refused to acknowledge that the claim of the Child family was just and thus that the Company had any legal right to demand restitution from him for what it had paid the Childs. But, as he was the broker, he wished to please his employers, and 'solely for this reason' paid his four shares of twenty-one of the 150,000 paid in London. However, he was obliged to sign for the rest of the debt though he never acknowledged its validity. Nowroji, on the other hand, when asked whether he would take over the office of the broker if Laldas failed to discharge the debt, put forth exaggerated conditions including what amounted to a total control of the Company's affairs in Surat and the countenance of the Company's navy in his persecution of the Paraks. The friends of Laldas in the Bombay Council, among whom was the governor William Phipps himself, rejected these
demands. Laldas was confirmed as the sole broker of the English Company. As
long as Seth Laldas Vitaldas Parak lived Nowroji Rustumji was entirely unable to make any impression in Surat. In the late
1720s and the early 1730s, on the other hand, the Rustumji family
built up a base in Bombay away from Surat. They acquired landed
properties on the island and several members of the family began
to live permanently there. The Paraks do not seem to have made
any similar move and remained firmly based in Surat. In these
years the council in Bombay was dominated by the friends of the
Paraks, the most outstanding of whom, after governor Phipps, were
governor Robert Cowan and Henry Lowther, the chief in Surat,
1729–34. Lowther, in particular, was a close business associate and
an admiring friend of Seth Laldas and helped to preserve the
influence of the family after the sudden death of the latter in 1732.
But the Rustumjis came back into the picture very strongly in the
mid 1730s. Robert Cowan was recalled home in disgrace to answer
charges made against him before the Court of Directors. John
Horne, who succeeded Cowan, was totally unsympathetic to the
Paraks and was most probably acting in Rustumji’s interest. Henry
Lowther was soon in trouble and, rather than return to Bombay to
to face his enemies in the council, he escaped from Surat in a private
trading vessel to the Persian Gulf and thence made his way to London.
The persecution of the Paraks now began in earnest and the
fortunes of the family were almost totally destroyed between
1736 when Seth Jagannathdas, eldest son of Laldas, was arrested
in Bombay, and 1738, the year in which he escaped to the Maratha
camp. In 1737 Nowroji Rustumji returned to Surat as the ‘sole
broker’ of the English East India Company and had the satisfaction
of personally conducting the sales of the property of the Paraks.
But the tables were turned yet again in the 1740s when the
Rustumjis again retired to Bombay and Jagannath took up the func-
tions of the broker, though this time, much reduced in terms of fortu-
unes and influence.
This particular rivalry between two of the leading families of
Surat, during the first half of the eighteenth century, is thus known
to us in some detail. The other rivalry, and obviously the more im-
portant one, between the Mulas and the Chellaby is known only in
its barest outlines. We also have evidence that within the Rustumji
family, there were furious quarrels between its different branches,
primarily between Manakji, son of Nowroji Rustumji, and Cowji,
son of Framji Rustumji. These rivalries were therefore marked fea-
tures of the world of the Indian merchants in Surat. It would be a
mistake, I think, to treat them as tensions among the different com-
munities which comprised the mercantile society. They should
rather be thought of as personal and accidental, but inexorable once
they developed. What is clear from the accounts of these quarrels is
that among each of the major communities in Surat, there was at
least one leading family whose fortunes had been founded by the
abilities of an outstanding individual. This family would gather
around itself other members of the community in relations of busi-
ness, patronage or distant kinship ties. In a quarrel of the kind we
have been considering, the group would act in the interests of the
head of the family.
Now, if we turn from a consideration of the individual merchants
and the families to which they belonged, and examine the varying
occupations within the mercantile world which they followed, the
picture is somewhat different. All the multifarious activities hung
together, and were directed to the end of gathering the production
of northern and western India at the port of Surat and then export-
ing it to other Asian ports and to Europe, as also to the importing
of a considerable amount of bullion from abroad and some amount
of spices, silk and other items and distributing these through other
networks into the interior of Gujarat and northern India. Naturally
the Muslim ship-owners played an important role in this and we
may think of them as the ultimate exporters or the first importers.
If we concentrate on exports first, the thing to notice is that the final
exporter always acted through another group of men called dalai or
broker, at times wakil, which is best translated as representative,
agent or attorney. It is important to realize that the ‘broker’ was not
an institution invented for the convenience of the Europeans, who
did not know the country, but the ordinary indigenous institution
through which all exporters would work. The amount of depend-
ence upon the broker would of course vary according to the
exporter’s experience of the local conditions and related factors. The
Mulla family had two main brokers, both banis, called Rajaram and
Jeddaram. We do not know the name of Ahmad Chellaby’s broker,
but in the late 1720s there was a quarrel between the two, and Mu-
hammad Ali took advantage of it to have Chellaby imprisoned.
There were two kinds of brokers. The men we have been consid-
ering can be called general brokers and the other kind, usually called subbrokers, would be more usefully called commodity-brokers. Exporters like Muhammad Ali, Ahmad Chellaboy or the English Company handled a wide range of goods. The broker who took upon himself to provide all of them did not himself deal in everything, perhaps in nothing at all. It was his business to get in touch with other men who dealt in various kinds of textiles and indigo and to procure different commodities through different brokers. The latter were the brokers for particular commodities. It was this ring of commodity-brokers who were in direct touch with the primary producer or in most cases their pateel or headmen. We must also remember that for much of the period we are considering, little manufacture was done in Surat itself, and the general brokers in Surat procured their goods through their contacts in places like Broach or Ahmedabad. The man who can really be called a sub-broker is a general broker at a place, say Broach, acting as the wakil of another, also a general broker, in Surat. It is important to remember that between the primary producer and the ultimate exporter stood at least the pateel and two different kinds of brokers.

It would seem that the Hindus and the Parsis were exclusively engaged in the profession of brokers. I have not come across a single instance of any other social group supplying a broker to the exporters or importers. The importers usually held public sales of their goods in Surat, which were attended by merchants dealing in particular commodities, brokers of the same kind and brokers or wakils of merchants interested in buying the goods, but living away from Surat. A group of Kashmiri merchants, for example, permanently maintained their wakils in Surat, who bought a large amount of spices each year from the Dutch and sent these across to the northern cities where their principals lived. It is possible that, once the spices reached, say, Agra, Delhi or Lahore, another public sale would take place before they reached the retailers, who would finally dispose of them to the consumers, but we cannot be certain about this from documentation relating to Surat.21

Apart from the exporters and importers, and the brokers, another important group of men formed part of the mercantile world. These were the merchants in money, usually called sarafs or shroffs. Their main business was the conversion of currency but they also lent money, bought and sold bills of exchange on distant places and undertook marine insurance and ‘respondentia’ loans. Lending of money or selling bills was also done by ordinary merchants, but, because the sarafs as a group were the largest operators of this kind, they settled the rate of exchange, discount and interest. Again I have not come across any but Hindu names in this profession, but it is possible that at least the Parsis were engaged in it as well. However, there can be no doubt at all about the absolute dominance of the Hindus in the money market and it is quite certain that no Muslim saraf was ever known.22

Now that we have seen how the different kinds of mercantile occupations were the specialities of the various social groups, we may ask the question whether these different social groups and men in these different but related occupations were organized in any common body, and, if not, what their reaction was to matters which affected them all. We must also ask whether organizations existed at the lower level of particular occupations or a single social community. The answer to the first question is definitely in the negative. There is no evidence at all that the Bohras and the Turks, the banias and the Parsis formed parts of a single organization, and it is quite clear from the rivalries among some of them that this did not exist. There was however a very real concern for the common good, and common action would often be undertaken in an emergency. Occasions for this became more frequent as law and order gradually gave way to anarchy in Surat. The initiation of such common action was however left to one or other of the leading families in the town and there was no knowing whether and when such action would come and how much support it would get. In the period we are considering there were however common forms for such action. In the first place some of the leading merchants of the different communities would call upon the mutasaddi and ask him to redress whatever the grievance might be. Then, if unsuccessful, they would make representations to the Imperial Court through their wakils, and try to gather more general support within the town by passing around a petition or a declaration setting forth the grievance. This would be accompanied by meetings of the merchants at the house of the leading figure who had taken the initiative in the matter. And, if the problem was still not resolved, the merchants concerned would shut their shops and offices and sometimes leave the town and disperse into the surrounding villages, which happened in the case of the Hindus and Parsis who returned to their ancestral seats. The magnitude of such action varied according to the occasion. Thus in
1729 when Muhammad Ali had Ahmad Chellaby arrested by Sorab Khan, the mutasaddi, representations were repeatedly made at the darbar for Chellaby’s release by Ibrahim Chellaby, Ibrahim Kotsi, Sidi Ambar, the leading sarafs and, surprisingly, by Muhammad Hussain, son of Muhammad Ali. These representations continued till Ahmad Chellaby was set free with special marks of honour. More serious trouble followed shortly thereafter when Ahmad Chellaby led a group of merchants, including some notable figures among the Hindus as well as the Muslims, to the protection of the Castle, and issued a statement of grievances against Sorab Khan to be signed by prominent citizens in general. Sorab, on his part, rallied Muhammad Ali and several of the leading sarafs and Armenian merchants to his side and a counter-petition setting forth the wickedness of Chellaby, disturber of public peace, was organized. Some of the shops were shut but the governor forced them to reopen. He also prohibited any soldier from enlisting with Chellaby. The wazir of Chellaby at the Imperial Court however obtained instructions in his favour which obliged Sorab to retract his steps. At this point a Muslim holy man, Gazi Fazal Hassan, mediated between the parties and the dispute was resolved amicably.

The most serious incident of this kind occurred in 1732 when, for once, Muhammad Ali made common cause with Ahmad Chellaby and Seth Laldas Vitaldas, and the combined merchants drove out the mutasaddi Sorab Ali Khan as they had found his government to be too oppressive. They were however unable to change the nature of government in Surat as the governor they selected for themselves turned out to be just as oppressive. The complete unity which was achieved in this instance was never recaptured.

It would seem that at the level of relatively homogeneous communities and particular professions, insofar as they were the preserve of particular communities, there was more organization and discipline. But it should be noted that at this level, European documentation is extremely scanty and may well be misleading. However, we do have evidence that the sarafs of Surat had a fairly disciplined organization of their own. In the year 1733, Cowji Framji spread a rumour in the town of Surat that Nowroji Rustumji, his uncle, had lost a hundred thousand rupees that he had invested in ‘respondentia’ in Bombay and, further, that the governor of Bombay had extorted forty thousand rupees more from him. Once the rumour spread, a run started on Manakji Nowroji, son of Nowroji Rustumji, in Surat, and he saved himself from total ruin only through the powerful financial support of several of the leading sarafs and merchants, among whom was included Ahmad Chellaby. Now, according to the information collected by Chellaby, a saraf called Shudas Parak had been used by Cowji Framji for making this mischief. Chellaby, therefore, called two of the leading sarafs, Banarasidas Jewdas and Jagivan Mehta, to his house and ordered them to expel Shudas Parak from their organization. Banarasidas and Jagivan both agreed that ‘no punishment can be too great for such a crime’ but argued that ‘as Shudass has a very honest and fair character, it would also be unjust to condemn him without either examining the affair or hearing what he had to say for himself’. However, Chellaby bullied them into doing what he desired, and ‘the poor timorous baniis, for fear, signed a paper whereby they declared Shudass Parrack expelled the community of shroffs without mentioning his crime’. I believe that the strict organization suggested by this piece of evidence was the result of the dominating position of the baniis in the profession of saraf. There is also evidence that the baniis of Surat taxed themselves by common consent in order to support the hospitals for animals which they maintained in the town. The social composition of a profession was therefore the crucial factor in determining the character of its organization. Because of the paucity of evidence, however, all conclusions on this point must be regarded as strictly tentative.

Thus it appears that the mercantile communities in Surat, when united on any particular issue, became an important counterweight to the political hierarchy in the town. The family of the Mallas, by itself, could for a time claim this distinction. But we should remember that the officials in Surat were lesser men compared to those in charge of the capitals of the various Mughal subahs, not to mention the Imperial cities in the north. Unity among the merchants was comparatively a rare phenomenon and the Mallas were a very exceptional family. The influence of the merchants was essentially defensive, in the sense that they were in a position to redress particular grievances though this might set them at odds with the local port officer. In the period we are discussing a defensive reaction was only natural as mercantile property was threatened more and more by political pressure. It would however be wrong, I believe, to put the influence of the merchants in any stronger terms than these. Thus I doubt whether we are justified in saying that the merchants
not think the Mughals ever had anything which can be called a commercial policy. The Imperial Government was naturally concerned with the revenue from sea customs, and if the merchants could show that a particular administrative measure would be likely to affect it adversely, this would be considered seriously. The merchants of Surat, though they appear to have had some organization at certain levels, never evolved a comprehensive impersonal body to take care of all their common interests. Although common actions were often undertaken, they were always open to certain risks and frequently foundered in fruitless compromise. Intense competition and bitter personal rivalry were the marked features of the mercantile world.

It remains for us to consider the relations of the merchants of Surat with the rural society from which they drew their exports, and their connections with the Europeans who were, at least some of the time, setting an example of combined action. Information about the first problem is scanty and, again, may well be misleading. It is, however, clear that the pull of the export market was felt mainly along the major roads connecting Surat with Baroda, Broach, Ahmedabad and Cambay. The principal ‘villages’ like Ankleswar, Pillad and Dholka, which were often mentioned as centres of supply, were on these roads. Each centre of this kind would have a weaving population of its own and also villages in the neighbourhood up to a maximum radius, which I should guess would be about twenty miles, would send in their cloths to it. This was also true of the major towns like Broach and Surat. Now, most of the merchants of Surat were probably village-based in the sense that they had ancestral villages with which they retained some connection, but none of them owned land outside the town of Surat. The kind of property we hear of is always a house or a garden in the town of Surat. They were thus in no position to influence the village-world round them. Further, the wealthiest among them, the ship-owners and general brokers, dealt with the weavers through intermediaries like commodity-brokers or brokers in localities away from Surat. The headman of the weavers came between any broker and the men who actually produced the goods. Thus men who had the money, operated at a certain distance form the system of production which turned out the stuff they wanted. Neither through local influence nor through direct contact could they hope to break

no evidence to suggest that they ever attempted this and failed. Weavers were in fact sometimes displaced and wandered from one centre to another, but these were the results of natural calamities or political disasters and there is nothing to show that the merchants of Surat ever took advantage of these to expand production under their own supervision.27

The wealthiest of the merchants in Surat—the group of Muslim shippers—had no direct connections at all with the European companies. Their names are never mentioned in the sales of the European imports and, of course, never in connection with the procurement of European exports. They were, in fact, the rivals of the Europeans in the market in Mocha and the Persian Gulf, especially in the matter of procuring freight from Surat to these places. Below this level, the families of the Paraks and the Rustumjis are good examples of men growing rich and influential through a ‘European connection’. It must be realized, however, that the brokerage they earned from the Company must have been a very small fragment of their total profit through this connection. The major advantage of such a post was obviously the credit which it brought with it and the trading connections it opened up. The management of most of the private English trade in Surat appears to have been a perquisite of the office of the broker. However, the fortunes acquired by these men were modest in this period. When Seth Laldas died, he left about five hundred thousand rupees in all kinds of property. And, as is clear in the case of the Rustumjis, a demand in the neighbourhood of three hundred thousand was enough to send them crashing. None of the families which were connected with the Dutch could arrive at affluence, and the other Europeans were of no importance at Surat in this period.28

Towards the middle of the eighteenth century, the sustained plunder of mercantile property by local officials drove several of the middling merchants of Surat to the ‘protection’ of the English and the Dutch Company. Of the top-ranking men only Mulla Fakruddin, the great grandson of Mulla Abdul Ghafur, retired to Bombay for a short time before finally returning to Surat. The Chellaby never deserted Surat and remained hostile to the development of English influence within the city, which they saw as a threat to their freight trade in the Red Sea. The Rustumjis made Bombay their home fairly early in the century and soon became the leading merchants there.
It has sometimes been suggested that the Parsis, as a community, possessed certain entrepreneurial qualities which other Indian groups lacked, and this led to their prosperity in the nineteenth century. Here I am not concerned to examine this proposition in detail but from the evidence relating to the first half of the eighteenth century, it would seem there was no difference between the Parsis and the baniyas or Bohras in Surat as far as business was concerned. On the other hand, it is possible to suggest that the Parsis were a small community in Surat and could never hope to match the influence of the baniyas among whom the Paraks, the deadly enemies of the Rustumjis, were the most prominent men. This might have been a factor behind their early departure to Bombay. But the new structure of business in Bombay is best explained by an exact examination of the historical developments, with all the accidents mentioned as they occurred, rather than from the immutable qualities of particular people. The evidence I have seen seems to suggest that those with influence and power in Surat were most unwilling to move even when faced with disaster, while others with less at stake moved with less reluctance.

NOTES

1. The Papers of the Dutch East India Company are preserved at the Algemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague, and the English papers at the India Office Library, London. As it will appear, these papers contain, in addition to letters written from Surat to Bombay, Batavia, Amsterdam and London at the time, several diaries and journals kept in these years, different kinds of accounts and a number of letters and petitions written by the Indian merchants. The Papers of Sir Robert Cowan (R.C.P.) are the earliest of such private collections and elucidate the magnitude and methods of trade of the European private merchants. Sir Robert had strong connections with Surat and especially with the family of Seth Laldas Vidalas Parak. I have studied this collection in microfilms at the India Office Library and I wish to acknowledge my most sincere gratitude to Dr. Richard Bingle for drawing my attention to it. The Persian text of the Mirat-i-Ahmadi, edited by Syed Nawab Ali in two volumes, is available in the Gaekwad Oriental Series, Nos. 33 and 34 [Baroda, 1927–8]. Ali Muhammad Khan also wrote an account of Gujarat as a supplement to this history. This work, called the khutnum, is available in English translation by Syed Nawab Ali and C.N. Seddon, Gaekwad Oriental Series, No. 63 [Baroda, 1928].

An English translation of the Mirat by Professor M. Lokhandwala is also now available in the same series No. 146 (Baroda, 1965). [All references in this chapter are to Professor Lokhandwala’s translation.] For the text of the biography of Rustumji Manakji, written by Jamshed Kalkobad, private tutor to Newroji Rustumji, the third son of Rustum, in 1711, with extensive annotations and translations in English, see Sir J.J. Modi, Asiatic Papers, Vol. 4 (Bombay, 1929), pp. 101–320.

2. Alexander Hamilton, an English free trader using the port of Surat in the 1720s, estimated its population to be 200,000. See A New Account of the East Indies, ed. W. Foster (London, 1930), Vol. I, p. 89. William Phipps, governor of Bombay, once described Seth Laldas Vidalas as ‘the principal of about 400,000 people’ as opposed to Newroji Rustumji, whose community, the Parsis, formed a small and, according to Phipps, despised section of the populace of Surat. See Bombay P(ublic) P(roceedings), Vol. 6, Consultation, February 23, 1728. Walter Ewer, ex-member of the Court of Directors, on a visit to Surat in 1796, noted that ‘the population was supposed to be about 300,000’, Home Miscellaneous, Vol. 438, p. 37.

3. The distinction between Ahmedabad and Surat is to be seen in the ranks of officers appointed to these two places. Thus Amnat Khan, who was the dewan in Ahmedabad, was appointed to be the mutassadi in Surat in 1699, and Kartalab Khan, who was mutassadi in Surat with the rank of 900 (zat) and 700 (swar), do-aspah, se-aspah, was promoted to be the governor of Ahmedabad with a rank of 5000 (zat), 4000 (swar), do-aspah, se-aspah: Mirat-i-Ahmadi, pp. 278–9 and 283. For a discussion of Mughal ranks, see M. Athar Ali, The Mughal Nobility Under Aurangzeb (Asia Publishing House, 1966), pp. 38–43. In 1720 Philip Sael, Dutch director in a letter to Batavia, expressed his apprehensions that now that lesser men were taking charge of the Gujarati towns it would affect the administration adversely: Kolonial A(rchief), 1839, p. 28. A memorandum drawn up in 1759 on the revenues of the Surat Castle is to be found in G.W. Forrest, Selections from the State Papers of Bombay (Home Series, Vol. 2, Bombay, 1887), pp. 108–16.

4. Excellent discussions on the local official hierarchy are to be found in the memoirs of Hendrik Zwaarder, 1702, in Hoogle R(egeering) te Batavia, No. 834, pp. 16–30, and that of Jan Schreuder, 1750, H.R., 838, p. 61f. The transfers noted in the early years of the century in the notes kept in Surat gradually ceased. Thus Joan Diodati, a senior Dutch official, noted in his personal diary on September 3, 1699 that the kotwal of Surat was being replaced by an officer sent from Delhi: K.A. 1558, p. 369. Again in a letter to Batavia, the Dutch Council noted on 21 July 1708 that the higher officials in Surat had all been recently replaced by orders from the Court, including the kazi, the harkara (the Imperial reporter) and the kotwal: K.A., 1645, p. 235. No such comments are to be found later on.

5. Early in 1713 the Dutch had high hopes of getting the palace of Itibar Khan, lately mutassadi in Surat, by virtue of an Imperial firman. These hopes were however frustrated mainly by the strenuous efforts of Shaikh Fazal supported by Syed Sadulla. They created a great tumult in town, threatened
to leave in a body and finally persuaded the killadar to come out openly for
them. Shaikh Fazal had lent Rs 5000 to the sons of Itbar, and thought that
this money would be lost if the house went to the Dutch: K.A., 1710, pp.
341-4. Syed Zainal Abidin was repeatedly mentioned, usually as Zaid Zein,
in the papers of the 1730s and, as will be seen below, was a leading signa
tory in Ahmad Chellaby's letter in 1732. In 1737 Syed Zainal was involved
in a dispute with the English Company, who were trying to realize a large
claim from their broker, Seth Jagannathdas Laldas. Syed Zainal, who had
also lent some money to Seth Jagannathdas, took possession of a house and
a garden of the Seth as security, and the English had to appeal to the
muhasalat and have the Syed's peons removed from the premises: S(urat)
F(actory) R(ecords), Vol. 21, entry 27 March 1737. For the organization of
the Ismaili Bohras see S.C. Misra, Muslim Communities in Gujarat (Asia Publish-

6. For Bruinink's list: K.A., 1970, pp. 197-8. The letter from Chellaby is in
B.P.P., Vol. 6, 6 October 1732, pp. 34-5. Needless to say, much ingenuity has
to be exercised in reconstructing the possible Indian names from their forms
in European transmigration. I have retained the name Chellaby as this was
the fairly consistent spelling in the English documents throughout. The Mirat
has it as Chalabi and Chalafi, which are perhaps more accurate. A question
mark indicates that I suspect my own ingenuity or that I admit defeat.

7. For the local legends concerning Abdul Ghafor, see Gazetteer of the
Bombay Presidency, Vol. 2 Surat (Bombay, 1887), p. 110 n. The immaturity
and youth of Muhammad, the eldest son of Muhammad Ali, was commen-
tioned by directeur Pieter Phoonsen on 17 June 1733: K.A., 2213, p. 120.
All the Mullas were always referred to as bohrs. The fact that they were
Ismailians is my conjecture from the private mosque the family had near their
ancestral home. I believe the Sunnbohuras usually went to public mosques.
Further there is the fact that Ismaili Bohras in Surat are called Mulla bohrs.
As for the Rustumjis, in addition to the biography of Rustum himself cited
above, much information is available in P.S. Pissurlekar, Portuguese Records
on Rustam Manock (Nova-Goa, 1936). The reader will have to ignore the
variant spellings: it is the same man. The origins of the family of Dayaram
can, of course, be traced in the Dutch records, especially in a letter to Batava,
10 February 1718, where Ruidas Commisser(?) was first mentioned: K.A.,
1805, pp. 54-5.

8. The shipping list for the season 1707-8 is in K.A., 1638, pp. 268-81.
Mulla Abdulla Hai, son of Abdul Ghafor, appears as a ship-owner only in the
prominently from 1721-2: K.A., 1875, pp. 145-8. There is no list for the sea
son in between. Muhammad Hussain's first appearance is in 1732-3: K.A.,
2185, p. 1351. Of the evidence relating to the losses suffered by Muhammad
Ali, there is the interesting letter from him to Charles Boone, governor of
Bombay in 1720, in which he urged upon Boone the necessity of a coalition
against the Angria: G.W. Forrest, Selections from the State Papers of Bombay,
Vol. 2 (Bombay, 1887), p. 18.

9. The eight ships of Chellaby were not in the pass list but in the list

10. The garden of Abdul Ghaffar was often mentioned. For example, in
1711 when Delawar Khan, newly installed governor of the city, was coming
to Surat, he spent a few days in this garden before actually entering the
town: K.A., 1721, p. 41. The family residence within the town was next to
the English Factory. As Henry Lowther, Chief of the Factory, not during the
rebellion of 1732: 'As to my own part I shall endeavour all in my power to
prevent a street fight any more and especially since we are so ill situated
[sic] on both sides of him [Ali]', Lowther to Cowan, 3 August 1732, R(obert)
C(awon) P(apers), India Office Microfilm 2034, under date. In 1721, the
French Company leased a house from Muhammad Ali and later there was
some correspondence about repairing this house. See Pondicherry to Surat,
10 July 1727, Vol. C 74, p. 170, and Pondicherry to Surat, 26 January 1728,
ibid., p. 292, at the Archives Coloniales, Paris. The family, in fact, owned the
small island near Gogo where Muhammad Ali built a fort and tried to settle
people. But there were so many snakes on the island that the plan had to
be abandoned: Mirat, p. 457. The buildings and fortifications at Athwa were
often referred to in the late 1720s and early 1730s. Pieter Phoonsen once
noted that it was becoming like 'a new Surat': in a letter to Batavia dated
26 February 1730, K.A., 2060, p. 77. For the relations between Muhammad
Ali and Sohrab Khan and the rebellion in 1732 see my article 'The Crisis in
Surat, 1730-32', Bengal Past and Present, LXXXVI, article IX above.

11. In the European documents this family is always called Turkish. In
the Mirat they are Rumi, and, to the author of the biography of Rustumji,
they are Turki by jat. I do not know whether they were ethnically Turks or
a Syrian family who spoke Turkish. For the Syrian connection see Charles
Fawcett, ed. English Factories in India (New Series), Vol. 3, p. 311 n. The hostil-
bility between the Mullas and the Chellabys would from time to time erupt
into public disorder and were noted. Thus the dag register or the diary of
daily events maintained at the Dutch Lodge described how, in January
1729, Muhammad Ali persuaded the custom-master to tax Chellaby's goods
at a higher rate and in the difficulties which resulted he had arrested by
the governor: K.A., 2029, pp. 272-3. On 2 July 1730 Sorab Khan pressingly
invited Chellaby to come and dine with him but Chellaby discovered it was
a plot of Muhammad Ali, probably to have him poisoned, and declined;
Dag Register, K.A., 2094, pp. 749-51. In October of that year he fled to
Hormuz to avoid further persecution: Dag Register, 29 October 1730, ibid.,
p. 825. The attempt to monopolize the Red Sea trade and its specially
adverse effect on Chellaby was noted by the diarist on 28 September 1731:
K.A., 2143, p. 889. The career of Chellaby after the death of Ali can be fol-
12. A considerable amount of material on the Paraks and the Rustumjís is available in the Papers of the English Company relating to Bombay and Surat, and also in the Papers of Sir Robert Cowan. The most concise account of the Parak family was written by Seth Laldas himself and is to be found in B.P.P., Vol. 6, entered after consultation of 10 December 1725. Also in the same volume, the defence of Laldas against the claims of the Company is entered under date 7 December 1725. The negotiations of 1718 and the emergence of Laldas are best studied in S.F.R., Vol. 9, which is wholly devoted to the settlement with the Paraks reached in that year.

13. In addition to references above in connection with Rustumji Manakji and the family of the Paraks, see B.P.P., Vol. 5, consultation 13 April 1722, 16 April 1722, 9 May 1722 and the report on the Rustumji entered after the consultation of 2 November 1722. A typical private comment on this feud between the baniás and Parsi families was in Robert Cowan's letter to the ex-governor Charles Boone, 8 December 1724: 'If Nowrooj [Nowroji Rustumji] goes home [to England] doubtless he expects you ... will espouse him, if he resolves to go to Law and sue the Company, it will be many years before such a sute [sic] can be ended, and very flagrant proofs of the infidelity of that family will be sent from here [i.e., Surat], for no such inveterate Enemys [sic] are under the sun as these black fellows to one the other.' R.C.P., Microfilm 2013, under date. Also see Nowroji's memorandum setting out the conditions under which he was willing to accept the office of broker, entered after the consultation of 30 November 1728, B.P.P., Vol. 6.

14. The involvement of the Rustumji in Bombay is clear from the documents relating to several law-suits in the 1730s. See the petition of Nowroji Rustumji against Sagoon Siny in 1730, Mayor's Court Proceedings, Range 416, Vol. 103, pp. 2-3; Bomanji Rustumji vs. Chandaboy Borah, Vol. 109, p. 93; Bomanji vs. Ventu Morarset and others, Vol. 110, pp. 62-4. Also the petition of Manakji Nowroji, son of Nowroji Rustumji, seeking permission to build a Parsi temple in Bombay in 1735, B.P.P., Vol. 8, p. 163. In 1731, Laldas asked permission to build a house in Bombay in the manner that the Rustumji had already done, and though permission was granted, the family do not seem to have followed it up, B.P.P., Vol. 7, Consultations, 3 December 1731.

15. Henry Lowther wrote much in public and private to testify to the qualities of Seth Laldas. A typical example would be his letter to Cowan on 2 September 1731, when discussing the difficulties in the trade in woollens, he wrote: 'Indeed it is very well, his [Laldas's] Genius is so well adapted to Trade besides having a spirit to undertake anything that has the least prospect to success.' R.C.P., Microfilm 2033, under date. For the developments subsequent to the death of Laldas see S.F.R., Vol. 21, 3 January 1737ff.

16. For Jagannath's arrest see B.P.P., Vol. 9, pp. 70-4, Nowroji's appointment in ibid., p. 113. A fierce denunciation of Nowroji, written in Gujarati, for the part he played in the persecution of the Paraks was dropped near the gate of the English Factory. I believe this document more accurately portrays the true feelings of a large number of baniás attached to the Parak interest, than anything officially recorded by the English. See S.F.R., Vol. 21, Consultations, 20 June 1737.


18. This particular quarrel within the Rustumji family led to grave consequences in 1734, when the English Company's warships blocked Surat. Later John Braddyll of the Bombay Council, enquiring into the incident, thought that Henry Lowther, who had a grudge against Nowroji Rustumji, took advantage of this quarrel between the two cousins to embroil the Company in a way which would be to the disadvantage of Nowroji. B.P.P., Vol. 8, pp. 180-1. For a few more details see below, p. 218. It is interesting to note that in the quarrel between the Paraks and the Rustumjis, the faction of Framji Rustumji was supporting the Paraks in 1737; B.P.P., Vol. 9, p. 231.

19. In each of the grave incidents connected with these leading families, several persons would be mentioned who stood by their principals. Thus Muhammad Aref and Muhammad Sayyid, relations of Muhammad Ali, shared all his troubles including a spell of imprisonment with him in 1732: S.F.R., Vol. 17, pp. 36-7. There are also frequent references to the 'adherents' or more critically 'hangers-on' of each of the leading families. In January 1732, when Muhammad Ali was arranging a petition to Batavia against Pietar Poonsen and his Council, Henry Lowther noted that this petition was to be signed by all his hangers-on and that these are pretty numerous': R.C.P., Microfilm 2034, Lowther to Cowan, 7 January 1732.

20. It is interesting to note that as the principal assistants to Muhammad Ali in all his financial dealings, Rajaram and Jedda were arrested along with Muhammad Aref and Muhammad Sayyid: S.F.R., Vol. 17, pp. 36-7. The difficulties with Chellaby's broker were noted in K.A., 2029, p. 272. On 25 March 1732 Lowther wrote to Cowan, Chellaby, I understand, will not long escape this [persecution] owing to a complaint lately renewed by his Broker, whom he tortured very barbarously and afterwards took one lakh of rupees from him'. R.C.P., Microfilm 2034, under date. In 1727 the Dutch offered the post of their warehouse munsiri to a baniá called Girihar-das who turned it down, as he said he was much better employed as broker to the leading Muslim merchant Abdul Rahman Sulaimanji, K.A., 1996, p. 62.

21. The two kinds of men engaged in brokerage were, of course, noted almost every year by the English and the Dutch. An interesting example was provided by Laldas when, in the course of his investigations into the methods by which the Rustumjís used to provide the 'investment' for the English Company, he turned up two baniás, one at Nadiad, about thirty miles to the south of Surat, and the other, who had provided goods about 20 per cent cheaper than the rate the Rustumjís actually charged the Com-
pany, in Surat itself: B.P.P., Vol. 5, the report on the Rustumjis entered after Consultations, 2 November 1722. Girdhardas and Vanmaldas, two brothers, were brokers for a particular kind of silk cloth called patola in Ahmedabad. The Dutch tried to move them to Surat in 1734 and they said they would have gladly come but that they were unwilling to abandon their 'old master', Bishubhundas, broker to the Dutch Lodge in Ahmedabad, K.A., 2247, pp. 145-6. For the Kashmiri merchants: K.A., 1946, pp. 82-3.

22. The best description of the money market in Surat was written by Jan Schreuder as part of his memoir: H.R., 838, pp. 54-5. The role of a sanafs acting as an agent for 'respondentia' loans was discussed in some detail in the case of Brindabandas Nanabhai, who negotiated a large sum for a ship freighted by Seth Jagannathdas going to Siam: S.F.R., Vol. 26, pp. 88f.

23. See the extracts from Dog Register, K.A., 2029, pp. 271f.

24. The two petitions circulated by Ahmad Chellaby and Sorab Khan, in K.A., 2060, pp. 177-20. The development of events is set out in the extracts from the daily diary cited above. See A. Das Gupta, 'The Crisis in Surat, 1730-32', Bengal Past and Present, LXXXVI, article IX above.


26. In an anonymous description of the pinjrapole (hospital for animals) at the outskirts of Surat, written in 1841, the author noted the rates of contribution levied by the mahajan upon the banias for the maintenance of the establishment: 'Notes on Gujarat', European Manuscripts A 28, Vol. 729, pp. 157-8. All the eighteenth century travellers in Gujarat of course, noted these hospitals and the fact that they were maintained by the banias, but only in general terms.

27. One of the reasons for thinking that the maximum distance of a village from its market in town was perhaps no more than twenty miles is a statement in a memorandum on the revenues of the Castle in Surat, drawn up in 1759. The memorandum noted that some of the villages of the pargana of Ankleswar paid their revenues to the kiladar in Surat and the distance of this pargana from Surat was twenty miles. Then it went on to observe: This district being at such a distance from Surat, and the people not necessitated to bring their grain or other produce hither to this market is the occasion that its revenue is most troublesome to recover, for the other districts and villages that pay the Castle jagheer are all situated near, and bring their produce hither to the best market which makes them keep on good terms.' Selections from Bombay State Papers (Home Series, Vol. 2), p. 109. The fact that most of the Parsis lived in villages and only some had, by 1750, come to the towns, was emphasized by Schreuder in his memoir on the trade of Gujarat: H.R., 837, section 105. There is no direct statement of this kind about the banias but there are occasional references to sanafs living in villages, for example K.A., 2143, p. 788. The Muslim merchants, on the other hand, appear to have been exclusively urban. The fact that the weavers usually worked under headmen can be gathered from occasional references,

but there is one clear statement of the distribution of the English 'investment' in 1741 among the weavers in Surat from which it appears that much of the money advanced was to seventeen 'chief weavers' each of whom had about a hundred corges (twenty pieces) to supply. At the end of the list it was added that in addition to these 101, 'particular weavers' were also employed: S.F.R., Vol. 27, pp. 28-32.

28. The statement about his inheritance was made by Seth Jagannath in 1736 and there was corroborated by it from two other merchants: B.P.P., Vol. 8, p. 174. For the fortunes of the families of Kissendas and Ruidas, see K.A., 1946, pp. 378-81, and the appendix to the memoir of Jan Schreuder, where he lists the value of property owned by the leading merchants of Surat in 1750.