

## SHAHBANDAR (A MUGHAL PORT OFFICER); HIS ROLE IN THE CUSTOMHOUSE DURING MUGHAL PERIOD

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A port does not take time to become a wheel of economy when it runs competently. Presently the utility of a port is not only limited but has stretched to a logistical platform. The effectiveness of a port is important in international trade since a seaport is the nerve of foreign trade of a country.

A seaport is the essential transit point for the volume of the trade, permitting the imports of goods, which were not in sufficient quantity and the export of items which the country has a surplus or has a competitive edge to produce contributing to the progress of its economy. Besides a port is also a place for the provision of further services, which add value to the products transported and thus helps the increasing demand of trade. To cope with the ever growing world trade, ports of every country will no doubt continue to play a critical and vital role in providing the cheapest means of transportation.

A port can be defined as a place where goods, people and culture are transferred between land and maritime space. It is a mingle point of ocean and inland transport<sup>1</sup>. According to *Mirat-i Ahmadi*, “a port is place where big ships anchor , while *bara* is meant for small boats<sup>2</sup>.At the very beginning of the Mughal

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rule in India, the Mughal rule had no heavy of their own, nor we find any marked naval activities, except the Haj pilgrimage to Mecca and the transportation of troops. But with the conquest of Gujarat, Bengal, Orissa, Sind and Golconda, a number of ports lying in those provinces came in to possession of the Mughal and thus they came in direct contact with seas<sup>3</sup>. Since those were the biggest source of the revenue. At the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Gujarat, Mughal administration was driving a large income from Gujarat in comparison to other *subas*, from taxation on trade and commerce. It has been estimated by Shireen Moosvi that 18.65 % of the total assessed revenue (*jama*) in Gujarat came from trade and commerce. In *Sarkara* Surat itself, the proportion was 29.75%<sup>4</sup>.

As a result of overseas trade, the *Suba* of Gujarat became the most urbanized area of the Mughal Empire<sup>5</sup>. With the coming of Europeans and following the various trade concessions granted to them by the Mughal. The volume of trade, a particularly between Patna and Agra and then Agra to Surat and sometimes Agra to Lahore increased considerably. European factories were established in various ports and inland cities. Until well into the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Indigo was one of the chief commodities exported by Europeans from India<sup>6</sup>. Besides Indigo, the factors brought muslins, rice and silk from the eastern provinces.

The annexation of Gujarat by Akbar in 1573 had given him access to the sea and also provided an opportunity of getting to important ports of Cambay and Surat, which were famous for their trade activities. According to *Ain-i Akbari*, there were thirteen big ports and many smaller ones in Gujarat.<sup>7</sup>

Certain ports in Bengal like Satgaon, Hooghly, Dacca and Rajmahal were very important and rose to great eminence, but were mostly

controlled by the Portuguese. In the west, Thatta was an important city and capital of Sind, its port Lahiribandar was always humming with trade activities and was very busy port.

There were considerable inter-coastal trade activities in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Trade through river by boats was easier cheaper than by land, especially during the monsoon season, when the roads were flooded with water.<sup>8</sup>

The port contained a few distinct *mahal* such as *Furza*(custom house),*Khushki*, *Langarjahajat* and *Jihatgodi*, which did not exist in other ordinary towns. *Mahal Furza* concerned with seaborne trade i.e. checking goods, searching passengers and collecting custom; *Khushki*, a counterpart of Furza, dealt in trade through land, *mahal Langarjahajat* included such charges as supervision of harbor, anchorage of ships and anchorage fee etc, while *mahal Jihatgodi* or *Marammat-ijahajat* looked after ship repairing and shipbuilding workshop.<sup>9</sup>

Ports were the subdivision of suba in general, but for the administrative feasibility they were regarded as separate units. Sometimes for better administration the smaller ports were joined with a single unit and they were administered by single authority. The supervisor of the port of Gogha and Khandhar was entrusted to one person.<sup>10</sup>

In the administrative history of ports, *Mutasaddi* was the chief administrator of the port.<sup>11</sup> His appointment was based upon the will of imperial court through the *sanad* of the *diwan-i ala*.<sup>12</sup> He held the office at the pleasure of the emperor and it was necessary for him to have the perfect knowledge of judging the quality of horses and jewels. He could act as civil judge as well as a supervisor of the mint. In addition to this he was all in all in the customhouse of a port. None

of the ship could enter or leave the harbor, load and unload cargo unless the issued a permit.<sup>13</sup>

Before the dealing the role of *Sahabandar* in customhouse, It would be better to define the place of custom house department in Administration of the port. In contemporary Persian sources, the customhouse is called *Furza*.<sup>14</sup> It was the place where goods and passengers were searched, their *dastaks* checked, and custom charges on merchandise levied by the customer (*shahbandar*). In the European sources it had been variously called the “*Alfandica*”, “*Dogana*” and “*Choquidar*”,<sup>15</sup> where as the English Factory Records, usually called it “*Customhouse*”<sup>16</sup>.

Custom house was the major administrative unit of the port. Each port had one customhouse, which generally two gates; one great gate opened towards the sea and had wide and spacious courtyard in front, while the second opened in to the bazaar.<sup>17</sup> Generally ships or boats were stopped in knee deep water by the signals given out by the officials, when they close to the custom house. With the help of porters, the passengers and goods were carried ashore. After the passengers and their goods were strictly searched in the big hall of the custom house, the process of searching was started from morning and continued till noon and generally took time more than a quarter of an hour per head.<sup>18</sup>

The clerks of the custom house at the instance of *Mutasaddi* or *Shahbandar*, prepared the records of the passengers and their goods and then were systematically searched. The European travelers visiting in the 17<sup>th</sup> century have given a detailed account of the extreme care and caution with which the custom officers searched the luggage as well as person of everybody. Thevenot has given

the account of the search at custom house in minute detail and his description in fuller and more accurate than given by other traveler: he says;

“But is no severe and vexatious a manner, that though I did except it, and had prepared myself for it beforehand, yet I had hardly patience enough to suffer the searchers to do what so ever they had a mind to, though I had nothing about me but my clothes.”<sup>19</sup>

### Shahbandar

The *Shahbandar* was perhaps the most controversial figure amongst the Mughal officer. He was the second chief officer of the port administration. He had full control over all the matters related to the custom.<sup>20</sup> All merchants, trader or travelers had their first encounter with the staff of the *Shahbandar* on landing in India. His duties were not pleasant but they were necessary. The *Ain-i Akbari* describes him as an officer responsible for the care and maintenance of the port.<sup>21</sup>

From the various account it appears that he was also sometimes called *Mir-i bahr*.<sup>22</sup> In the bureaucratic hierarchy, he was just after the Governor or *Mutasaddi*. In the absence of *Mutasaddi* he was responsible to take the command of all affairs of the customhouse. There are so many terms used by the European travelers for him, such as *Darogha* (of the customhouse), *Shahbandar* and *Customer*.<sup>23</sup>

As far as his duty was concerned he was responsible for checking goods and searching passengers, estimation of the value of goods at the market rate and collecting the custom dues. The goods already checked could not release without stamped with the king's seal<sup>24</sup>. It was his duty to prepare a daily records of

the customhouse, wherein were written the particulars of goods, passengers, income and expenditure and submit to the *Mutasaddi*.<sup>25</sup>

Although he had delegated power but could not act freely; for example without the permission of the *Mutasaddi*, he could not allowed any foreign ship to enter the harbor, to load unload cargo or any stranger to land and open business.<sup>26</sup> He had to be vigilant and make sure that whoever came in to the customhouse, did not evade the custom.<sup>27</sup>

The *Shahbandar* in his work was helped by a host of clerks, waiters, porters and other (whom Thevenot calls the peons of the customhouse).<sup>28</sup> The clerks maintained the customhouse books,<sup>29</sup> and assisted the customer in the duty of strict search, the valuation of goods, the assessment and collection of customs.<sup>30</sup> The book of customhouse was maintained both in Persian the official language and in Banian Guajarati.<sup>31</sup>

The sole responsibility for the routine management of the custom lay with the *Shahbandar*. In any higher policies he could not act at his discretion, but had to have the permission of the central government. He was only to execute the order of the *Mutasaddi*, for instance he could not permit any merchant from a foreign country to land without the sanction of the *Mutasaddi*.

When Hawkins visited at Surat (1608), at that time Muqarrab Khan was the Governor of both Surat and Cambay, when Hawkins asked the *Shahbandar* of Surat for permission to unload his cargo and to open a factory at Surat to sell and purchase merchandise, the *Shahbandar* told him that it was not within his jurisdiction to deal with his case. The customer took the permission from the *mutasaddi* on behalf of the English.<sup>32</sup>

From the reports we come to know that sometimes, *Shahbandar* was not only misused his power whenever he got any chance but also embezzled government money. Itimad Khan was the *Naib Mutasaddi* of Amanat Khan, who was the governor of both Surat and Cambay, was reported to have practiced many abuses and embezzled Rs 1345 from the revenue of the Gogha port. He was removed from the service.<sup>33</sup>

The *Shahbandar*(or *darogha-i-furza*) was generally a close relative of the *Mutasaddi*.<sup>34</sup> In 1663, Mustafa Khan was the *Mutasaddi* of Surat and his son was the *Shahbandar* of that port.<sup>35</sup> Mustafa was replaced by Inayat Khan when a delegation of merchants complained against his son, and after appointed as new *Mutasaddi*, Inayat Khan dismissed the whole old staff of the customhouse and appointed new men from amongst his relatives and favorites.<sup>36</sup>

Sometimes we finds that office of customhouse was also held by the merchants, for instance, Haji Muhammad Zahid Beg, the *Shahbandar* of the customhouse was a renowned merchant of Surat in 1620<sup>s</sup> and 1630<sup>s</sup>.<sup>37</sup> Another example was of Khwaja Jalaluddin a local merchant of Surat, appointed as *Shahbandar* by the English factor in 1627-28.<sup>38</sup>

Besides *Mutasaddi* and *Shahbandar*, there were other important officers related with the port administration worked under the command of *Mutasaddi* were *Mushrif* for *furza* and *khushki*, *Tahwildar*, *Darogha-i khazana* and *Muqim* appointed from the imperial headquarter.<sup>39</sup> The other workers like waiters, porters and peons mentioned by the European were called *piyadas*. There were various kinds of works, performed by them such as watchmen, inside the customhouse at the gate and in the harbor, while many others were employed to bring the men and commodities on their back from the dock to the customhouse.<sup>40</sup>

In short the *Shahbandar* commanded respect and awe and was considered the “king of the port”. As soon as merchandise arrived at a port, it was taken to the customhouse where it was examined, assessed, the appropriate duties levied and then released. The goods and the personal effects of ordinary traveler were cleared sooner the commercial merchandise. The strictness of the custom officers and *Shahbandar*, particularly in Surat was proverbial.

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