

## ROLE OF ROYAL FAMILY'S MEMBERS AND NOBLES IN OVERSEAS TRADE DURING *MUGHAL* PERIOD

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### *ABSTRACT*

The present study basically deals with the position of the imperial family's members and nobles in overseas trade activity. During the seventeenth century, the interest of the Mughal Emperor and nobles towards commercial activities, specially foreign trade were largely confined to the procuring of rare and costly articles and to the ensuring of a regular supply of Arab and Iraqi horses for their armed forces and for purpose of display. The commercial profit formed a supplementary source of income for the ruling sections in the Mughal Empire during the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

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Maritime history is connected with the actions linked to the oceans and seas, for several eras' right from the earliest times till date. Maritime history of India has been really very important in the development of trade enriching the economy of the country. The world first tidal dock is believed to have been built at Lothal around 2300 B.C. during the Harappan civilization, near the present day Mangrol harbor on the Gujarat coast. Sea gained a prominent position with time and maritime activities began to grow with the different conquest. As far as the role of the port was concerned, the economy of Mughal Empire was depending on agriculture, trade and other industries. Agriculture has always been the backbone of economy of the country, thus in the Mughal era also agriculture was actually the biggest source of income, in other words it can be said that Mughal treasury drew considerable revenue from custom duty, levied on merchandise or exported by sea, and collected at the ports. Rapid development of trade and commerce was also supported by the improved transport and communication system. The Mughal rulers also encouraged the monetization of the economy. Another factor that helped in the tremendous growth of business in that period was the arrival of European traders and growth of huge European trade. As well as using India's rivers, ships sailed regularly from its western and southern coast: Abd'ur Razzaq and Nicolo Conti both saw vessels carrying merchandise from various ports. Early in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Terry observed that Mughal's sea-going ships were huge, weighted at least fourteen to sixteen hundred tons and carried many guns, but were unable to defend themselves.<sup>1</sup>

Sea routes were certainly significant as they supplied the means of business with foreign countries and establishing contacts with the foreign states in ancient and medieval times. Indian maritime history traces the dawn of the Portuguese to the coast of India and the activities that resulted in this arrival of foreigners to India. Trading activity was on its peak during the Mughal period in India. The role of port was exceptionally crucial in the economy of Mughal Empire. Cambay, Broach, and Surat on the western coast and Hooghly and Masulipatnam on the eastern coast were not only the major ports but also known as port-towns due to its geographical location. Geographical factors (like water body, rich hinterland) helped in the growth and development of trading port.<sup>2</sup> The Indian Ocean trading network extending from the Far East to the west Asia expanded in variety, density and traffic in the 16<sup>th</sup> century supported by the emergence of sprawling empires all over the Asian world, early in the century. These Empires

brought large areas under their control, and provided greater security for the movement of commodities across great distances. This was also the period when we see European companies establishing their trading settlements in Asia.<sup>3</sup>

The Mughal had no personal navy at the beginning of their rule in India, nor do we find any marked navel activities, except the *Haj* pilgrimage to Mecca and the transportation of troops. Each year Muslims pilgrims sailed in special ships on their way to perform their hajj, the pilgrims to Mecca, Arafat and Mina (holy places of Saudi Arabia) the fifth of the five pillars of Islam. Their ships mainly the Indian made and according to some observers, beautifully designed; but they were not very seaworthy.<sup>5</sup> With the conquest of Gujarat, Bengal, Orissa, Sindh and Golkonda, large number of ports, lying in those provinces came in to control of the Mughal and then they came in to direct contact with seas.<sup>6</sup> Since those were the biggest source of revenue. Cambay, Broach and Surat were the major ports in Gujarat and played an important role in the overseas trade due to its geographical situation in the western coast of India. The sea ports of Gujarat continued to be centre of trade and commerce, in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century A. D. Cambay and Surat emerged as the most important oceanic ports of Gujarat during the period. The port of Gujarat became the “sea gate” of north India, besides the major emporia for import and export.

In Indian historiography it has accepted being true that despite having a continental power the Mughal Empire had a little interest in sea-borne commerce. According to Moreland, “Indian state appreciated that benefits of foreign commerce and revenue which it brought to their seaports, but they did nothing for its protection.” He admits especially of Akbar, that he sent ships from Gujarat to Red sea but was content to let them sail under license from the Portuguese.<sup>7</sup> Akbar’s empire touched the sea after conquering Gujarat in 1572. On 12 December he reached at Cambay and went out on a vessel to enjoy the sea. He had substantial opportunity to achieve much information of both the ports and the trade.

Foreign trade was flourishing in the country and Indian ships were carrying from India textiles fabrics, ginger, opium, spices, pepper, etc. to western Asia and brought wines, perfumes, brocade, china goods, silver, ivory, pearls, horses etc. This attracted the ladies of the royalty as well as some nobles of the state. English factory records referred that at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup>

century, Jahangir, Nurjahan, Prince Khurram later Shahjahan and even the queen mother owned ship which plied between Surat and the Red sea port.<sup>8</sup> During the same period, Jahangir's junks plied between Mocha and Gogha. In 1622, with the pressure by English on the Mughal Emperor to open the Red sea trade to them seized a number of Indian ships returning from Mocha, including one of the shipper and goods only belonged to the king, the Nurmahal, Asaf Khan, Safi Khan and the great men.<sup>9</sup> Jahangir also invested his money in the Cambay trade.<sup>10</sup>

During his viceroyalty of Gujarat, prince Khurram carried on intensive trade with Mocha, caring mostly broad cloth and textiles. His ships also went to Masulipatam, the major port of south India at this period and carried textiles and gum-lac to the Persian ports.<sup>11</sup> Another commodities in which Prince traded during this period was indigo.<sup>12</sup> After ascending the throne, Shahjahan continued to take interest in overseas trade. His ships the "Fettee" (fath) and the "shahe" (shahi) trade to the Red sea ports while another went to Achin (Sumatra) in 1636.<sup>13</sup>

Aurangzeb owned a fleet of ships which plied mainly to the Red sea ports. As for the size of the royal ships, Moreland concluded that a large ships or junks for sea-borne trade averaged less than 200 tons.<sup>14</sup> Prince Dara as the governor of Thatta, carried on an extensive trade with the Red sea ports. Though too many royal ladies of the Mughal harem did not actively participated in the economic field, yet there were distinguished ladies of that time like Jahangir's mother Maryam-uz-Zamani, Nur Jahan Begam and Shahjahan's daughter, princess Jahanara, were known to have taken an active participation in the trade and commerce of the time. Jahanara owned many *Jagirs*, the revenues of which came to her; some of her *Jagirs* were Panipat<sup>15</sup>, Bachchol<sup>16</sup>, Safipur<sup>17</sup>, Dohraha<sup>18</sup>, and Farjahara.<sup>19</sup> The revenue of the *sarkar* of Dohraha was given to her for the upkeep of her gardens and that of the flourishing port city of Surat for her expenditure on betel.<sup>20</sup> Jahanara extracted annual revenue of 30 million *dams*, equal to Rs. 750,000, from the Surat region, together with 10 million *dams*, equal to Rs. 250,000, from port dues.<sup>21</sup> Manucci informs us that Jahanara had an annual income of about Rs.3 million, in addition to the revenues she received from the port of Surat.<sup>22</sup>

Jahanara was able to trade voluminously on her own account,<sup>23</sup> running a large number of ships herself and entering into enormously successful trading relations with the Dutch and the English.<sup>24</sup> Their co-operation helped her to carry on extensive trade and make huge profits.<sup>25</sup>

Jahanara also carried on trading ventures through her ship *Sahebi* named after Begam Saheb (the popular title of Jahanara Begam). Usually the captain, crew and other officials of the ship were appointed by the owners. In the earlier phase, princess Jahanara left the ship to the care of her agents and *wakils* but in the later years, she made the appointment of Muhammad Rafi as the *darogha* of her ship.<sup>26</sup> This ship *sahebi* was used by the princess for profits as well as to assist *Haj* pilgrims.<sup>27</sup> In 1643, one of her ships carried pilgrims and goods worth Rs.5, 000-Rs.10, 000, to be sold at Jeddah. Jahanara Begam also gave orders that every year; rice was to be sent by the ship for distributing among the destitute and needy people of Mecca. No fare was charged from the Pilgrims. But they were warned against carrying the goods of other merchants in their names.<sup>28</sup> Merchants with cargo were also allowed to travel in it, though the vault (freight) collected from them was given away in alms. The cargo of the princess carried on this vessel was worth 10 to 15 thousands of rupees. The treasurer of the ship was in charge of keeping in his custody the amount received from freight and also the money got from the sale of the princess's cargo. The captain of the ship was under instructions to bring as many horses as he was able to procure at Jeddah. The *Sahebi* is known to have operated till 1663 A.D.<sup>29</sup> Another ship *Gunjawar*, which originally belonged to Shahjahan was given to princess Jahanara in December 1629 A.D, along with the instruments, valuables drugs and material. It also operated from Surat.<sup>30</sup> Jahanara Begum's management of her overseas trade with Jeddah and at the same time her concern and regard for the needs of the *haj* pilgrims and poor of Mecca establishes her ethical standards. The short survey of the commercial interests, activities and contribution of Mughal lady in the reign of Shahjahan reveals that even in the intricate field of economy they contributed actively, with interest and maintained the professional ethics. They invested significant wealth in trade and commerce and were rewarded with rich profits.

The Mughal nobles whether they were jagirdars, received their income generally in cash or *naqdis*. Nobles were found accumulating enormous treasure in specie, cash and jewels as these Mughal nobles who had a large amount of cash in hand desired to increase it still further the invested it in trade, either by engaging in trade directly or by making advances to merchants.<sup>31</sup> A big source for capital needed for sea-borne trade came from the Mughal aristocrats. Tavernier says that "on arrival for embarkation at Surat, there was plenty of money.

For it is the principal trade of the nobles of India to place their money on vessels on speculation for Harmuz, Bassora and Mocha and even for Bantan, Achin and Philippenes.<sup>32</sup>

The Mughal aristocrats invested large amount of capital in sea-borne trade. Apart from the capital advances the Mughal nobles were also engaged in business investments. It is well known that Private trade or *Sauda-i Khas* of the governor was a characteristic feature of India's economic life in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Many influential people like Mir Jumla, Shuja, Sha'ista khan were involved in this device.<sup>33</sup> In Bengal, during the governorships of Mir Jumla (1658-63) and Sha'ista Khan (1663-93), the navy received a new impetus. Mir Jumla organized new *nawarra* (flotilla<sup>34</sup>) but after his death the flotilla was smashed and Bengal once again was exposed to pirates. Mir Jumla had frequent business deals with the English and sometimes he advanced money to the English factors also, he was in a real sense a merchant prince. His activities in the commercial sphere are the most striking example of such business investments. His ship carried on trade between Arakan, Southern India, Bengal, Persia and Arabia.<sup>35</sup> Mir Jumla offered the example of a Mughal noble taking part in sea-borne trade.

Sha'ista khan was the best example of a noble engaged in the internal trade.<sup>36</sup> He was the viceroy of Gujarat and apart from this his administrative activities, he kept himself busy in economic enterprises. He was fond of buying of rarities of Europe especially the pearls and jewels. When he was the *subedar* of Gujarat, he purchased such articles from Tavernier worth Rs.96, 000 in 1652. Sha'ista Khan was a good lapidarist (connected with stones and work of cutting and polishing them) and skilled appraisers of precious stones. He was man of firm judgment, very wealthy and powerful and of good reputation. Manucci calls him great amateur of precious stones.<sup>37</sup> Sha'ista Khan always paid much regard to the European travelers and merchant with whom he had business transactions, and entertained them with great hospitality and generosity was cunning and harsh in business matters. Sha'ista Khan created a new flotilla: three hundred strong ships were built and equipped. With carefully conducted but tireless campaigning he suppressed the pirates and soon conquered Chittagong. Tavernier says with reference to these nobles in 1633 in Gujarat, this prince, who was otherwise magnificent and generous, showed himself a stern economist in matters of purchase.<sup>38</sup> Realization of bribes or taking bribes in the form of present and gifts by the governor and other subordinate officer was a characteristic feature of that period.<sup>39</sup>

The above study shows that the Mughal Emperor and member of the royal family continuously participated in commercial activities particularly in the sea-borne trade to the Red sea ports and also to some extent with ports to the south of Surat up to Achin and ports on the East coast of Africa.

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- <sup>9</sup> W.H Moreland, India at the Death of Akbar, *An Economic Study*, London, 1920, pp.204, 264, 271,272.
- <sup>10</sup> In 1622, Jahangir sent to two lack rupees to be invested in the goods for the Red sea, the proceeds of which  
Were to be given to the poor at Mecca, see English Factories In India (E.F.I.),(ed) Foster William, 1622-23, pp.144, 171.
- <sup>11</sup> Letters Received by the East India Company; ed. W. Foster, London, 1897, vol.iii, 1615, p.270.  
English factories in India, (ed), W. Foster, Oxford, 1914, (1818-21), pp.92, 106,113,177,240,328.
- <sup>12</sup> When Prince Khurram rebelled against his father, all goods were seized, including his junks and his indigo  
Which was sold by armfuls. (E.F.I, 1622-23,pp.218,233).
- <sup>13</sup> E.F.I (1634-36), p. 255.
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- <sup>15</sup> Khan Inayat, "Shahjahan Nama", P.447.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid, Vol-I, Pt-I, P.209.
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