MISCELLANEA

AHMADABAD IN THE XVIIITH CENTURY

The history of India in the seventeenth century is characterized by the emergence of various regions as distinct economic units. These were, Bengal-Bihar, Agra, Sialkot-Multan, Burhanpur-Deccan, Cochin-Madras and Gujarat. Each was dominated by a large urban center serving a vast area rich in agricultural and industrial production. By and large each area functioned as a separate economic unit though the existence of trade routes, an imperial administration and the activities of large commercial corporation often provided the nexus linking two or more areas together. Of all these areas Gujarat witnessed the earliest phase of a serious penetration of its economy by Western commercial interests and hence plays an unusually significant part in the economic history of the country during the seventeenth century.

The economic life of Gujarat was dominated by the port city of Surat which was linked to the hinterland served by several important commercial agglomerations. These were Broach, Nadiad, Ankleshwar, Baroda, Cambay and Ahmadabad, the last named being the most prosperous among the cities outside of Surat. Though much more recent in its historical beginnings than Surat and Broach, Ahmadabad lay at the heart of the Gujarati economy and in a sense more correctly reflected the indigenous industrial and commercial growth of Gujarat than even Surat. The purpose of the present paper is to examine the developments in the economic life of Ahmadabad in the XVIIth century and explore the impact of political and international events on the vicissitudes of its fortunes.

The city of Ahmadabad was founded by Sultan Ahmad Shah (1411-1442) of Gujarat in February-March 1411. The Mirat-i-Ahmadi, a chronicle of Gujarat written in the 1760's, describes it as “one of the new cities of Islam” located near the old town of Asawal on the banks of the Sabarmati river ¹). From the time of Ahmad Shah to that of Bahadur Shah (1526-1537), the last great independent Sultan of Gujarat, more than three generations of rulers beautified the city with imposing mosques, palaces and market places. The city was briefly annexed by the Mughal Humayun but it was only in the reign of Akbar (1556-1605) that it became a part of the Mughal Empire in 1572 during Akbar’s campaigns in Gujarat. Abul Fazl, Akbar’s court chronicler, calls it “a noble city in a high state of prosperity... For the pleasantness of its climate and its display of the choicest productions of the whole globe it is almost unrivalled.” The city then had 84 puras (wards) and 1000 mosques. It was the administrative headquarters of the sarkar (division) of the same name and the capital of the subah (province) of Gujarat. The Ain-i-Akbari states that the sarkar of Ahmadabad had 28 mahals (districts). It collected a revenue of 208,306,994 dams (or Rs. 5,207,675 at 40 dams to the rupee) and had a force of 20,500 infantry and 4,120 cavalry assigned to it for military protection. The revenues of the city with its suburbs amounted to 23,999,073 dams (about Rs. 599,976 or some 12 per cent of the total revenue of the province) and compared very favourably

with Surat, which along with its suburbs, accounted for 5,530,145 dams 1) (about Rs. 138,253). John Jourdain, the first Englishman to visit Ahmadabad on behalf of the East India Company in 1611, writes of it as “the principal city of Guzaratt, where there is a viceroy for the Mogoll. This city is one of the fairest cities in all the Indias, both for building and strength as also for beauty, and situated in a pleasant soil, and has much trade by reason of much clothing which is made within the city, as baftas (a general term for Indian piece goods), birames (fine cotton cloths of various colors), pintadoes and all other sorts of cloth. Likewise it is in the heart of the country for indigo, being near the town of Sarkhej, where there is much indigo made, as also in many other villages adjoining, which all goeth under the name of Sarkhej” 2). Four years later Nicholas Downton described Ahmadabad as “that great and populous city, the metropolis of all those parts of Gujarat, famous for nobility and gentry, also for rich trade in variety, indigo especially, by means of a general confluence of most nations in the world, English, Dutch, Portuguese, Jews, Armenians, Arabians, Medes and Persians, Turks and Tartarians, cum multis aliis ...” He further observes, “If please God, our trade to continue in those parts, I think Ahmadabad the chiefest place for residence of four or five factors, my reason (being) for the commodities there to be had and made for England, as likewise the convenience, it being so near to Sarkhej, where the most and best indigo is made in India” 3). J. Albert de Mandelslo, the German, who visited Ahmadabad in October 1638, describes the city and its suburbs as occupying some twenty miles, with broad streets and magnificent public and private buildings. He says that “there is not in a manner in any nation, nor any merchandise in all Asia, which may not be had at Ahmadabad, where particularly there are made abundance of silks and cotton stuffs ... They also make there great quantity of gold and silver brocades, but they put too much thin lace into them, so that in goodness and substance they come not near those of Persia, though some of them amount in the country to eighteen crowns the piece” 4). Finally, the Venetian traveller Niccolao Manucci who visited India during the reign of Aurangzeb (1658-1707) observes that in the province of Gujarat “there is made a prodigious quantity of gold and silver cloth, and of flowered silks. These goods are in demand in all the courts throughout the empire. They also make much gold and silver work, and a quantity of jewellery set with stones. The dealers who give the order for this class of work go themselves, or send agents to the diamond mines, to the kingdom of Pegu, to the Pescaria coast (Fishery Coast, Tinnevelly), and other places, to buy the precious stones they require. All these merchants are Hindu by religion, and are called Gujaratis. Their persons are well made, and their women always smothered in jewellery. The country is fertile in cereals ...” 5). Manucci further states that the province of Gujarat had nine sarkars and nineteen parganas yielding a revenue of Rs. 23,395,000, while a statement of 1707 gives the revenue receipts of Ahmadabad

3) W. Foster (Ed), The Voyage of Nicholas Downton (London, 1939), Pp. 151-152, 112.
5) W. Irvine (Trans), Storia Do Mogor or Mogul India—1653-1708, by Niccolao Manucci (Calcutta, 1966), II, Pp. 399-400.