

A STUDY OF SOME INDO-MUSLIM TOWNS OF GUJARAT

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Gujarat was ruled by its own Muslim Sultans from the year 1407. Of the towns founded by them the two most important are Ahmedabad (founded 1411) and Baroda (founded late 15th century); other Muslim towns on a smaller scale are Palanpur (late 17th century) and Radhanpur which were both ruled by Nawabs. Surat and Cambay, though not founded by Muslims, were under strong Muslim influence. Now, if one takes these six towns for a comparative study, a number of very interesting conclusions emerge and it is these which are discussed in this study. The data collected for is based upon field work carried out personally as part of a Ph.D. programme on the vernacular architecture of Gujarat, and for this only the old parts of these towns are considered. Since the road pattern and property rights are at least 250 years old, it means that these conclusions are valid for the early 18th century (the major roads are certainly older).

1. If one looks at the demographic pattern of these towns, it is clearly noticeable that the central areas which were commercially advantageous were overwhelmingly occupied by Hindus and Jains and not by Muslims. And this is not because Muslims had been driven out during the subsequent Maratha and British rule and replaced by Hindus. All the evidence points to the fact that Hindu and Jain merchants were in occupation of these prized locations from a very early time, as the following will show.

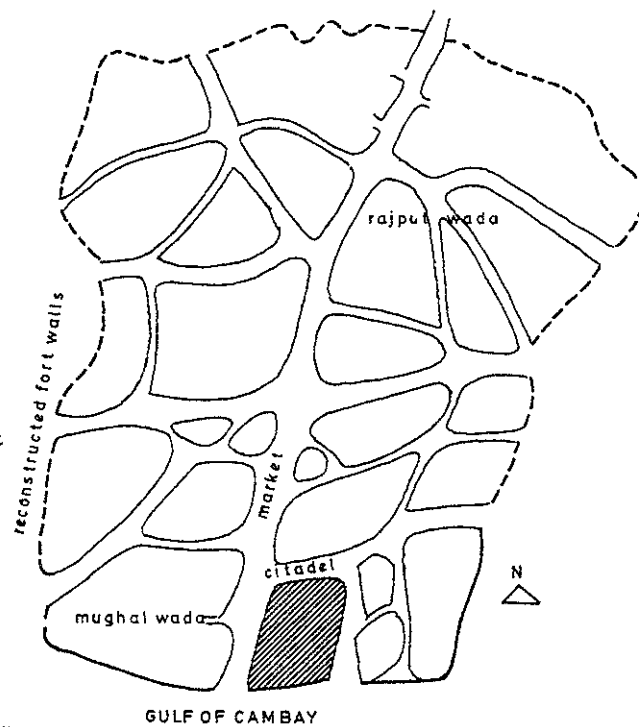
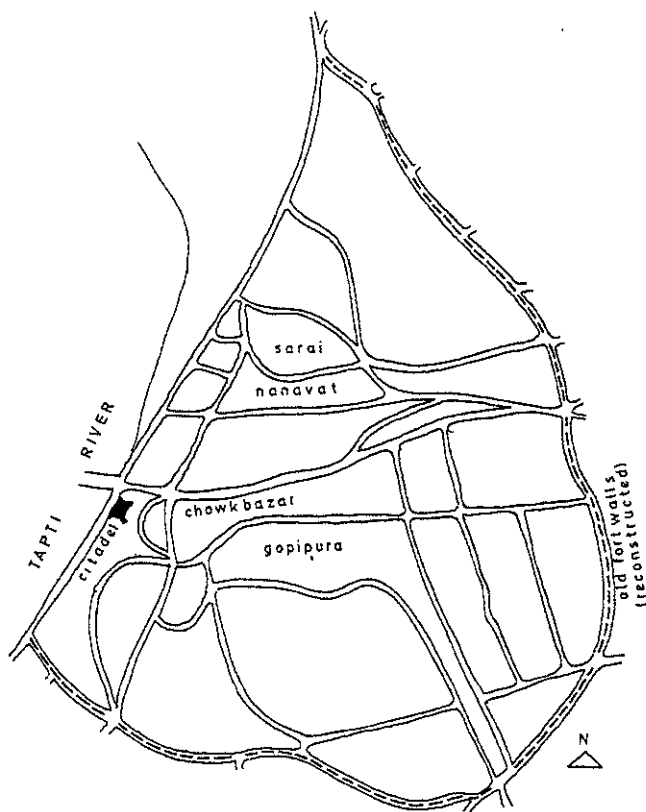
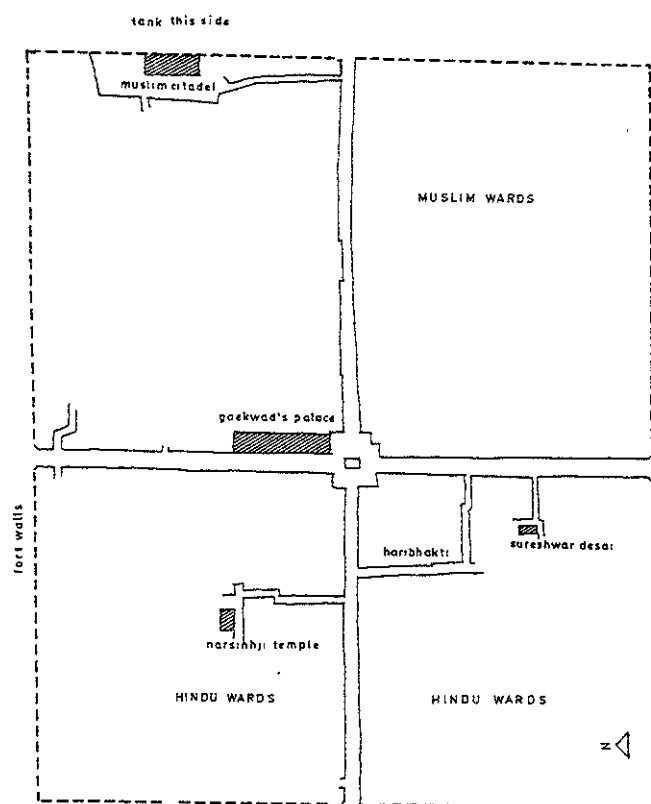
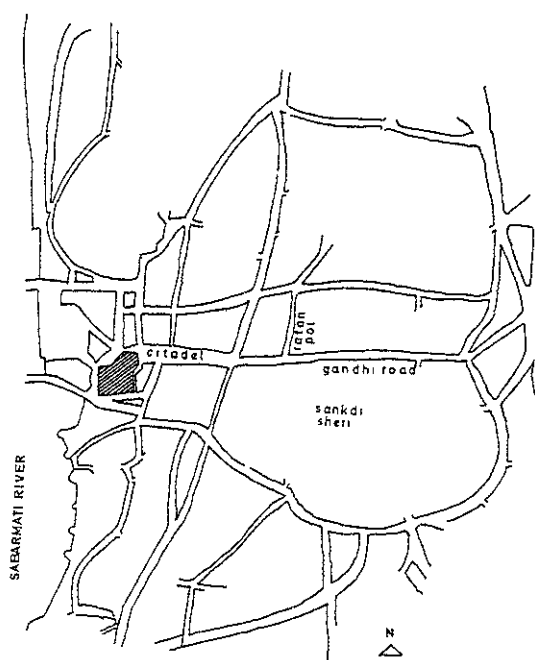
There is a record that when Baroda was captured in 1734 from the Muslims by the Gaekwad, one of the four Desais (revenue-farmers) who assisted him by creating local uprising was Sureshwar Desai. He was a Desai already under Muslim rule and his property was situated in the heart of the town (off Gendi Gate Road) from at least 1734¹. When the equally famous family of Haribhakti came and settled in Baroda (they were later appointed State Treasurers), they built a number of house in the same ward because that was already traditionally occupied by Hindu merchants. The bulk of the Maratha *sardars*, unable to disposses them, were forced to settle mainly outside the walled town, for example in the Wadi area (see map). Of the four quadrants into which Baroda is divided, two are almost wholly settled by Hindus. The Muslim area is to the east of this.

A similar situation obtains in Ahmedabad where the central area of Ratan Pol and Sankdi Sheri, i.e. on both sides of Gandhi Road, are densely populated by Hindus and Jains. Maganlal Vakhatchand, who wrote a Gujarati description of Ahmedabad in 1851, quotes, for example, an inscription in Nagji Bhudar

Pol which states that it was founded in the year 1702 and was settled fully by Jain merchants² (this Pol is within the central area). Commisariat describes a riot which broke out in Jhaverivad in 1714 where stood the mansions of Madan Gopal and Kapurchand Bhansali — the latter was for some time the *Naqarseeth* or chief of the merchant's guilds; this is again in the central area. In Surat the central area known as Nanavat is close to the port and the Muslim *sarai*, and is yet fully settled by Hindus and Jains (See maps).

These large settlements of Hindus and jains in the central parts of Muslim towns indicate that they were not merely tolerated but actively encouraged to occupy such locations, and the obvious reason is that by their control of trade and manufacture they brought in revenue to the political authority.

2. It is well known that the towns of Gujarat were centres of trade and manufactures, and as already mentioned, a major part of this was in the hands of Hindus and Jains. Now, it is curious that despite this commercialization of urban life there were so few buildings designed for a commercial use. Field surveys showed that there were no remains of permanent markets, bazars, warehouses, hostelryes or courts for adjudication of disputes. Although the merchants were known to have their guilds, there were no institutional buildings where they could assemble. The only institutional building was the *Vada* which was built by a particular caste and was meant for social gatherings rather than commercial use. The Muslim *sarai* no doubt existed but it was rare in Gujarat, being found only in Ahmedabad and Surat. It is not as if commercial buildings had once



1. Ahmedabad 2. Baroda 3. Surat 4. Cambay
(Courtesy Mr. Sultan Ahmad, dept. of Archaeology, M.S. University of Baroda). (Fig. 36).

existed and later disappeared; the fact is that they never existed, and the reasons for this are complex.

One was that although Islamic tradition was very familiar with commercial buildings (see the famous *sugs* of West Asia), it was not this tradition which dominated commerce in Gujarat but that of the Hindus and Jains and the latter had no such architectural features. The trade which these merchants were engaged in was carried out, not in public places, but at home. It was the front part of the dwelling which was used either as shop or business premises and where clients were received. This was socially acceptable because Hindu women were never subjected to the severe seclusion prevalent in Islam, so that a casual view of the woman by clients was not forbidden. Exactly the reverse social situation existed in Islam. There the strict seclusion of women banned clients from the home and consequently there had to be shops and market places located away from residences. It is this which, in my opinion, accounts for the developed and permanent markets of West Asia.

It may here be objected that there are numerous references to Indian bazars by travellers and these were certainly public places. Here a quotation from Ovington regarding Surat is revealing; he found the local bazar so thronged "that it is not very easy to pass through the multitude of Bannians and other merchants who expose their goods. For here they stand with their silks and stuffs in hands, or upon their heads, to invite such as pass by to come and buy them"⁴. What this indicates is that a bazar was a temporary, makeshift affair with at best flimsy stalls such as exist even today. It was never meant to display any-

thing of great worth.

The second reason was that the Muslim aristocracy in India (including Gujarat) had developed the custom of summoning the trader to the private residence to transact business instead of visiting his shop. It additionally gave an opportunity to the secluded womenfolk to view the goods. It was in this manner that Tavernier gained entrance to many aristocratic houses⁵. Since this aristocracy was a major client for precious commodities, it automatically precluded the erection of impressive markets for such goods.

A third contributing factor was the instability of urban existence. Muslim political and administrative rule was so closely linked with the personal court of the ruler that it had no independent existence. Whenever that court happened to be stationed, there would assemble all the courtiers, commanders and the host of attendants. But this Muslim court had no fixed location. It could be changed at whim. One capital city could be abandoned at short notice and another set up somewhere else. The capital of Gujarat was successively shifted from Anahillapatan to Ahmedabad to Champaner and back to Ahmedabad. The shifting of the court meant the immediate decline of that town. No merchant would think of investing in permanent markets under these precarious conditions.

The instability of urban existence derived from yet another source. Muslim histories are full of frequent civic disturbances caused by rival factions; the mere unexpected death of a ruler was sufficient to let loose a horde of riff-raff which looted houses and shops mercilessly. A nobleman out of favour might find his residence plundered at the orders of his superior. The *Mirat-i-*

Ahmadi gives numerous such instances from which two are quoted. During the rule of Mahmud Shah, a nobleman named Imadul Mulk came to meet the Sultan of Champa-ner when a chance cry arose at night that, "..... the Sultan's order is to plunder Imadul Mulk....."⁶, which was at once carried out by a mob. The Sultan was infuriated at this — but then that was the kind of civic lawlessness which prevailed. In another protracted clash at Surat between Behram Khan the Port Officer and Mulla Muhamad Ali, which lasted one month and during which cannons were used, at once a rabble collected to plunder property⁷. In such an atmosphere merchants would find it too risky to display their costly wares in public markets and that is why none were built.

Regarding the *sarai* or hostelry for travellers, the Hindu caste system which precluded eating together or accepting water from lower castes would inhibit Hindus from either conceiving such a public feature or using them freely when introduced by the Muslims. They would lodge either with their relatives fellow cast-men, or in a religious *dharamsalā*.

The conclusion of the above evidence is that commerce in these towns had largely a private character and hence produced little architectural expression.

3. All the six towns were fortified, and all had some kind of inner citadel for the residence of the ruler or governor. Now, it is a curious fact that all of these citadels of Muslims were located, not in the centre of the town where security was maximum, but on the periphery (see maps 1, 2, 3, 4). The peripheral location was more exposed to an attack and yet it was preferred. An in-

interesting example is provided by Baroda. The old palace of the Muslims (called Bhadra) is situated in the north-east whereas the palace of the subsequent Gaekwad is located in the centre. Why should this be so? To me it seems that the problem revolved around the Muslim seclusion of women. The following quotation from *Akhbar-i-Muhabbat* regarding the founding of Calcutta, though late, is revealing, "Mr. Charnak (Job Charnok) founded a factory, the buildings of which raised two and three stories high. (Later) the nobles and chief men among the Saiyds and Mughals... went to (the) Faujadar of Hughli, and declared that if the strangers were allowed to ascend their lofty houses, they, the Mughals, would be greatly dishonoured, seeing that the persons of their females would be exposed to view"⁸. In other words, what determined the architecture was the extreme necessity of female seclusion. This could be best guaranteed by a peripheral location so that the palace could close itself off on three sides facing the town and open itself on the fourth facing outside.

But this at once raised problems of security, and this was solved by locating the citadel either next to a river (as at Ahmedabad and Surat), or to a large body of water (as at Baroda and Radhanpur), or next to the sea (as at Cambay). The body of water acted as a barrier to attack. This explanation will also show why the citadels of Agra and Delhi have a similar location.

The location of the citadel at the periphery had as a consequence that generally all main roads converged

on it, i.e. there arose a radial pattern of roads. This is ideally represented at Ahmedabad and partially at Surat. Baroda is an exception for which no explanation is available.

4. Finally, there arises the question as to why all of these six towns were fortified in addition to their having a citadel. The fortification was not the security of the ruler for that was achieved firstly by citadel, and secondly the system of military *mansabdars* who operated in the field. That this was considered adequate is proved by the fact that Agra, where the Mughal treasure was stored, had no fortification; Surat also originally had none. The only explanation is that the fortification was built, not in defence of the political authority, but in defence of the civic population — and this population was worth defending because it was engaged in trade and commerce which brought in revenue. In other words, it was an active commercial life which made fortifications necessary and not political danger. One could even say that merchants would not have settled in towns (to the benefit of the ruler) unless such a fortification existed. If this explanation is true, then it would mean that there was a close symbiosis between political authority represented by the Muslims and the commercial classes represented largely by Hindus and Jains, and that the Muslim town was in fact a reflection of this. The demographic picture given earlier fits well into this conclusion.

References

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6. *Mirat-i-Ahmadi* of Ali Muhammad Khan, tr. M.F. Lokhandwala, Baroda, 1965, p. 70
7. *ibid*, p. 495 ff.
8. *Akhbar-i-Muhabbat* of Nawab Muhabbat Khan, from Elliot & Dowson, republished Allahabad, Vol. VIII, p. 378 ff.