

Gujarat - From Far And Near \*

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Gujarat from far and near

This essay endeavours to see Gujarat from far and near in terms of time and space, in terms of its history and geography; in other words, to see Gujarat as it was in the past and as it is at present. It is not an attempt to see Gujarat in all its multifarious aspects but only in a few select ones, which those who live in the state may take for granted and others who live outside are likely to miss, or misunderstand. Gujarat is known as the land of the Banias, and rightly so, for it is they who symbolize

Gujarat, form its image and foster its identity. At the outset, it is necessary to clarify that the Banias, like the Vaishyas, are not a caste but a community, a mercantile community which has dominated Gujarat and created a cultural climate - the Mhajan culture - in which the people of Gujarat have lived for centuries.

(History facts -Indus Valley civilization)

The origin of the Bania community can be traced to the Indus Valley civilization. There have been archaeological discoveries and excavations at Harappa in Punjab (1856), Mohenjo-daro in Sind (1922), Lothal in Saurashtra (1954) and recently in Dholavia in Kutch as well as in other regions of Gujarat and Rajasthan (300 sites have been unearthed, of which 50 are located in Kutch, Saurashtra and Gujarat).

They reveal that a pre-Aryan civilization and a pre-Vedic culture existed in the Indus Valley and other regions of north-west India 1600 km north-south from Oakthan near Peshawar to Ambhore near Mumbai and 1100 km east-west from Dwarka in Saurashtra to Alamgirpur near New Delhi - between 3000 B.C. No documents or monuments have been found and such relics as seals, coins and script still remain undeciphered. Hence, little known about its social structure, except that a predominantly mercantile community inhabited the Valley and that it had evolved a highly civilized society.

The Harappans came down from the Valley in the north to the sea-coast in the south around 2400 B.C. in search of fertile lands and potential ports. They developed Lothal as their most important port and consequently, as a great city -as great as Mohen-jo-dar. These were different from the cities in Egypt and Mesopotamia. The civilization at Lothal survived till 1500 B.C., even though it vanished from the northern regions in 1600 B.C.

Lothal (the mound of the dead), 80 km south-west from Ahmedabad, discovered in 1954 and excavated from 1955 to 1960, is an archaeological marvel. It harbours debris up to a depth of 20 meters. It measures 284 meters north-south and 228 meters east-west. At the height of its glory it must have covered a wider area, as remains of habitation 300 meters away from the mound suggest. Among its many magnificent remains is a huge dock -a 218 x 37 x 5 cubic meter baked brick structure -superior to that of Phoenicians and Romans in succeeding ages. The dockyard for berthing and servicing the ships could hold 30 ships of 60 tonnes each, or 60 ships each of 30 tonnes.

Its many remarkable relics - a mummy, an Assyrian's head, a seal with five ships sketched on it and seals of the Arabian and Sumerian cities and muslin and indigo found in the Egyptian pyramids - suggest that Lothal had overseas trade relations with Abbas, Bushayar, Behrin, Susa and Sumer: Lothal was, indeed, an international trade centre. Its prosperity came mainly from trade in cotton and ivory beads. The ancient sea-farers of Lothal are the ancestors of the Bania community and it is they who have bequeathed the legacy of sea-faring to the people of Gujarat.

### Mistress of the Sea

Gujarat has the largest coastline and largest number of ports of all the states of India. It has a 663 km coastline, which is 30% of India's total of 5700 km. Gujarat is surrounded by the sea on three sides. Of its 19 districts, as many as 10 have a sea-coast. It is this geography which has governed its history.

In pre-historic times, the Mahabharata refers to Prabhas and Dwarka, the two oldest ports of Gujarat. Dwarka literally means 'the gateway'. Phoenician ships came to the sea-coast of Saurashtra and Assyrian ships went to Iran via Dwarka.

In ancient and medieval times, Gujarat had 52 active ports, of which Bharuch, Khambhat and Surat were the busiest. Gujarat had overseas trade relations with a large number of countries - Sumer, Phoenicia, Babylon, Egypt, Greece, Rome, Arabia, Iran, Maskat and Yeman, Hormuz and East Africa in the west and Lanka, Brahmadesh, Malaya, Burma, Java, Sumatra, Camboia and China in the east. Buddhist and Jain writings and Kautilya's Arthshastra mention the ports of Gujarat, the countries with which they had trade relations and merchandise they exported and imported. Ptolemy's Geography and Guide to Red Sea by an anonymous author provide detailed descriptions of the sea-coast of Gujarat. The latter even gives the Roman names of its major ports - Barik (Dwarka), Barigaza (Bharuch) and Kambayat (Khambhat).

Hsuan-Tsang's Travelogue identified the sea as a major source of livelihood for the people of Gujarat. On the walls of a temple at Borobudur in Java a sculpture depicts the journey of a few immigrants from Gujarat who settled in Java. On the walls of a cave at Ajanta a painting depicts the journey of Kumarvijay, the son of Sinhbahu, king of Sinhpur to Lanka which he renamed as Sinhaldwipa. History books in Lanka also record this story.

Gujarat was famous in the western world as 'the mistress of the sea' and the Saindhava community of Saurashtra as the 'lords of the ocean'. From the 11th to the 17th century, Bharuch was at the height of its glory. In the 15th century as many as 4000 ships passed through Bharuch. Next to Bharuch, Khambhat was a prominent port during this period.

In the 17th century, Surat surpassed both Bharuch and Khambhat. Traders from all over the world came to Surat. Muslim, Arab, Turkish, Iranian, Jewish, Dutch, Portuguese, English and American traders had settled in Surat. The Parsis had already made it their home in the 11th century. The Muslim traders were the most outstanding among them - Virji Vora, Mulla Mahammad Ali and Ahmed Chameli. Pilgrims went to Mecca for Haj from Surat. Hence, Surat was known as Meccaidwar, Meccabari, Babul Mecca. In the 19th century the Portuguese, Dutch, British and the French had factories in these three famous ports. Earlier, a local pilot, Kanji, had guided Vasco da Gama on his way to India.

In the 19th century it was again the people of Gujarat, especially the Parsis, who developed Bombay as a port, which till recently accounted for 40% of India's marine trade. It excelled over the other two ports of Gujarat including Surat. Lowji Nusserwanji Wadia, one of the world's greatest ship builders

was famous throughout the world. He was a foreman in a dockyard in Surat and was invited by the British to Bombay in 1736. In Gujarati, Wadia, means a ship-builder. His sons and grandsons were also great ship-builders. One grandson, Jamshedji Bomanji Wadia has built a ship in 1800 A.D. which sailed the world's seas for years. Another grandson, Narowji Bomanji Wadia, built the battleships which the British engaged against Napoleon, including Nelson's battleship at Trafalgar - the 'Victory'. One of them still exists at Gosport near Southampton. Again, it was a Gujarati family which established the first Indian shipping company in Bombay in 1919 - the Scindia Steam Navigation Company.

In the early 20th century, the Bania community established 66 textile mills in Ahmedabad, making it 'the Manchester of India'. In the late 20th century, Gujarat has the biggest port in India, Kandla, which handles three million tones of merchandise annually. It also possesses 40 small and medium size ports, which handle about 2 million tones of merchandise annually. This is 70% of the total merchandise handled by all other similar ports in India.

Gujarat ranks first amongst the states of India in individual and infrastructural investment. Of the total investment of Rs.12,30,745 crore in 3700 units, Gujarat's share is 10.49% or Rs 1,33,763 crore in 430 units. Of the total investments in industry in Gujarat, the share of the chemical industry is 70%. Gujarat is poised to emerge as 'the chemical state' of India at the beginning of the next century. For centuries the state has fascinated foreign traders. Currently it has attracted investments of Rs.3,435 crore from multinational companies for trade, commerce and industry. Of the 1.5 million Indians who have migrated and settled in UK and USA, 50% are from Gujarat.

As the poet Nanalal says, 'Mahasagarnan pruthvivishal/ Sarovar Kidhan Gurjari ball' - the people of Gujarat have turned the vast oceans of the world into small lakes. A popular rhyme says, 'Jave je ko nar gayo, nave mandirmay / Jo ave pacho phari, pariya pariya khay!' - One who goes to Java, does not return. / If he does, he brings wealth which would last for generations. A popular phrase refers to 'Lankani ladi ne Ghogha no var' - the bride from Lanka and the groom from Ghogha. Such are the heroic tales of adventure and enterprise of Bania community of Gujarat! Such is the sublime saga of the seafarers of Gujarat!

It is neither monarchs nor the generals, not the Brahmins or the Kshatriyas, but the Bania community and its culture which has socially dominated and economically dictated Gujarat for centuries. The land of Gujarat is fertile. But more than the land and agriculture, its prosperity comes from the sea and trade, commerce and industry, owned and organized by the Bania community.

Peace is pre-requisite for prosperity. The people of Gujarat, therefore, prefer compromise and cooperation to conflict and confrontation. They are gentle, generous, not aggressive or assertive, nor stubborn or obstinate. They are broad-minded and large-hearted, honest and hard-working. They possess not only common sense but also unusual wit and worldly wisdom. They can solve a problem or resolve crisis with patience and persuasion. They do not bear grudge or harbor a grievance against anyone. Gujaratis would rather forgive and forget. They are humble and hospitable. They are tolerant and yet tactful; courteous and yet calculating. They can write off and give up but without writing off their dignity and giving up their honor. They will meet the opponent or partner halfway for mutual benefit. 'I give up half, you give up half, but let us go ahead' is their way of life. 'Live and let live. Earn and let earn!' is their motto. In a word, 'kadado' (compromise) is the secret of the success of the Bania community.

Many immigrants and exiles, traders and invaders settled in Gujarat, which not only accepted but absorbed and assimilated them. The most striking example are the Parsis. Around 766 A.D. they fled

Persia due to torture and persecution by the Arabs and migrated to Diu in Saurashtra, where they stayed for 19 years. Once again, around 785 A.D. they migrated to Sanjan in South Gujarat as a result of terror and persecution by the Portuguese. They sought asylum and Jadi Rana, the ruler of Sanjan, offered them a cup full of milk, implying that Sanjan was already overcrowded and there was no room for them. They added the sugar to the milk, and returned the cup to the ruler, suggesting that they would mix and mingle with the local people like sugar in milk. They were at once accepted and eventually settled in Navsari, Valsad, Udvada, Surat, Bombay and many other parts of Gujarat and India.

The spirit of Bania community and its Mahajan culture is embodied and expressed in one of the finest sayings in Gujarati language: 'Kajiyanu mon kalu' - the face of the quarrel is black, as also in some other sayings: 'Vano Verine Vash Kare' -courtesy conquers all, even the enemy; and 'Vaniabhaini nichhi muchh' - the Bania has lowered his mustache. In Nabhinandan's 'Jinnodhar Prabandh' Gujarat is glorified as Vivek Bruhaspati, a perfect example of equanimity.

The formal expression and the finest embodiment of the culture of the Bania community can be found in its mahajans (guilds). The history of the mahajans in Gujarat can be traced to the 16th century, though it could be even older, as old as the trade itself. The history of the mahajans of Surat and Ahmedabad is recorded in detail, including the names of their leaders - Virji Vora, Hari Vaishya, Abdul Gafur in Surat and Shantidas Jhaveri in Ahmedabad. Panchs, the artisans' guilds were caste-based, while the mahajans were not, being trade or profession-based. Their members were traders or financiers. There was no discrimination of caste, creed, color, race or religion and their members comprised Hindus, Muslims, Jains and Parsis.

The guilds were headed by 'nagarsheths' (city-heads), who formed a federation of guilds. They determined hours of work and wages, controlled prices, set holidays and festivals and managed educational institutions. They protected the rights and interests of their members, settled quarrels between individual members or mahajans and protected themselves against the state and fought against its tyranny and injustice.

In 1669, in Surat, the mahajan protested against the Kazi because he promoted the conversion of the Hindus and observed a week-long strike against the Maratha rulers. Foreign historians have noted that emperors (Moghul, Maratha and British) may come and emperors may go but the mahajans of Gujarat go on forever!

In the last 100 years there have been four non-political strikes in Ahmedabad by textile workers over problems of wages: an eight day strike in 1895, 15 days in 1917, four weeks in 1918 during which Mahatma Gandhi undertook a fast unto death and resolved the problem peacefully, and a 10 week strike in 1923. There was a unique 100 day political strike by textile workers in Ahmedabad against the British government as an integral part of the 'Quit India' movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi.

As a consequence of the 1918 strike, the Majur Mahajan was found in Ahmedabad in 1920 on Gandhian values and principles. Mahatma Gandhi was its member from day one till he died in 1948. He guided it as a model to be emulated elsewhere in India, making it one of the best organized trade unions in India. It has evolved a unique and highly successful system of industrial arbitration. For the last 80 years Ahmedabad has enjoyed industrial peace, as no other city in India -thanks to the Majur Mahajan which has inherited and imbibed the traditions of the old mahajans of Gujarat. The Ahmedabad Millowners' Association (now Ahmedabad Textile Mills Association) was established in 1891 and has been active for more than 100 years. The Gujarat Vepari Mahamandal (Gujarat

Chamber of Commerce and Industry) is a federation which was founded in 1948. At present, about 300 mahajans and associations of the trade, commerce and industry in Gujarat are affiliated to it.

Gujarat is protected by nature on all four sides: by mountains in the north, forests in the east, rivers in the south and the sea in the west. Hence, Gujarat has rarely been invaded, nor has it invaded others. The people have seldom engaged in warfare, being peace-loving.

In pre-historic times, as the Mahabharata, the mythical epic, says, Lord Krishna at a very young age migrated to Gujarat from Mathura, established a kingdom of Yadavas and founded its capital city of Dwarka. In the last years of his life he returned to Gujarat after the battle of Kurukshetra. During the middle years of his life he only acted as a peace-maker. Even on the battle field he acted as a charioteer and not as a warrior, he only drove Arjuna's chariot though he possessed the mightiest weapon of the war - Sudarshana. The myth has made a great impact on the history of Gujarat. Buddhism and Jainism in ancient times, Vaishnavism and the devotional songs of the saints in medieval times and Mahatma Gandhi in modern times preached and practiced love and compassion in Gujarat.

More than anything else, it is the culture of Bania community comprising different religions, faiths and ethnic groups that has moulded the unique character and determined the peculiar nature of the people of Gujarat. For centuries they have displayed their heroism and prowess, a spirit of adventure and supremacy in enterprise on the sea as seafarers, not on the land as warriors. Even the martial races, the warrior castes like the Rajputs who migrated from North India and settled in Gujarat, gave up their weapons and war mania.

Before Independence, there were 396 native states in Gujarat - more than 50% of the total 656 native states in India. In the past, when the subjects of Kutch and Saurashtra revolted against tyranny or rebelled against injustice, they employed the traditional techniques of 'traga' (fasting), 'dharanu' (squatting), 'risamanu' (non-cooperation) and 'baharvatu' (outlawry) against the state. In recent times, there were five strikes by textile workers and two satyagrahas by farmers against the British government on the problem of unjust taxes -at Kheda in 1917 and Bardoli in 1928.

It was here that Mahatma Gandhi experimented with satyagraha (non-violent non-cooperation) and later perfected it during his famous march to Dandi -the Dandi Kutch - in 1930. It is from Gujarat that a bania called Mahatma Gandhi bequeathed the gift of satyagraha to India and the world. Today, it is universally acknowledged that satyagraha, not war, is the only way to peace and happiness. There were two landmark agitations by the students against their own government which lasted for months - the Mahagujarat in 1956 and the equally famous Navnirman movement on 1973.

Gujarat simultaneously worships both mammon and the muse. Both Laxmi (goddess of wealth) and Saraswati (goddess of learning) have showered their blessings on Gujarat. While being materially rich, it is certainly not intellectually poor. It is rich in matters of the mind. Since medieval times the people of Gujarat and their language and literature have been derided: 'Gurjarnam mukham bhrashtam' -the mouth of the people of Gujarat is corrupted - and 'Shun shan paisa char' - their language is worth four paise. This is an unfair and distorted perception.

Gujarat has a history of learning comparable with any other state. In ancient times, Hsiuan-Tsang and I-Tsing noted in their travelogues that the university at Valabhi, the then capital of Gujarat, was as great as those at Nalanda and Taxshil. In medieval times, at Patan, the then capital of Gujarat, Hemachandracharya's grammar 'Siddhhen' was placed on an elephant and taken out in a procession which was led by Gujarat's king, Siddharaj. Hemchandracharya and Vastupal were great scholars and their disciples were known for their learning. At Patan, Siddharaj founded 21 libraries, one of which

had a collection of 15,000 books. He even had the manuscript of Agam sculptures written in gold ink. Gujarat claims the great Sanskrit poet Magh and the great astronomer Brahmafupta s its own.

In the history of medieval Gujarati literature, the 'prabhatis' (metaphysical poems) of Narsinh Mehta, the 'chhappas' (satirical poems) of Akho, the 'akhyanas' (narrative poems) of Premchand and the 'garabis' (lyrical poems) of Dayaram are rare achievements. In the history of modern literature, Balashankar, Manishankar Bhatt, Sursinhji Gohil 'Kalapi', Balvantrai Thakore, Nanalal, Sundaram and Umashankar Joshi stand out as major poets; Govardhanram Tripathi and Pannalal Patel as major novelists and Manilal Dwivedi, Narmadashankar Mehta and Anandshankar Dhruv as major essayists. Gujarat has claimed two Gyanpith awards -Umashankar Joshi in 1968 and Pannalal Patel in 1986.

For generations to come, Gujarati will be known throughout the world as the language of Mahatma Gandhi. The fact is that Gujarati men of letters have kept a low profile, practicing their art in the midst of a very practical people. In 1959, at the Nikhil Bharat Bang Sahitya Sammelan in Ahmedabad, Devesh Das, listening to Gujarati poets at the poetry reading session said to Umashankar Joshi, 'Gujarati poets exercise great restraint'. Umashankar Joshi answered, 'It may be so. We write poetry in the midst of people who are pragmatic. We would seem absurd if we let our emotions loose'.

A few facts and figures regarding education in Gujarat speak for themselves. There are six universities and 42,000 educational institutions from the primary to the higher secondary levels in which 9800,000 students pursue their studies. Currently, Ahmedabad has half a dozen educational institutions of national and international repute: IIM, PRL, NID, ATIRA, CEPT and GLI. Literacy levels stand at 60%, which is higher than the national average and makes Gujarat the fourth most literate state in India.

Gujarat is not a large state. Its total area is 196,000 sq km which is 6% of the total area of India. It has a population of 44,400,000, which is 5% of India's population. Its land is fertile. It is famous as 'Urvisar Gujarat' -the essence of the earth. 60% of the population is engaged in agriculture and 18% in industry. A part of its prosperity comes from the sea. Gujarat is vertically split, as the poet Nanalal says , 'into two wings, one blue, one green.' The western wing is blue and the eastern is green, with the sea on the west and the forests on the east. There is, therefore, prosperity in the west and poverty in the east.

Of the total population of Gujarat, 7 % (3.5 million) are harijans, 15% (6.5 million) are Girijans and adivasis. Thus, they make 22% (10 million) of the total population of Gujarat. In other words, one in five persons in Gujarat is either a harijan, a girijan or adivasi. Of the total population of Gujarat, 30% live below the poverty line against 40% of the total population in India.

In the 21st century, illiteracy will pose the greatest challenge To Gujarat. The large number of illiterates are a matter of shame and concern. Illiteracy is a man-made evil. It is the root of all evils, namely poverty and disease. When Gujarat eliminates these three evils, it will be worthy of itself, it will be true to its name 'Garavi Gujarat' - the glory that is Gurjardesh.

Thank You.

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