

# Indian Merchants in the Red Sea Port Mocha During Pre-Colonial Times

**SWETA BHARDWAJ**

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Department of African Studies, University of Delhi, New Delhi (India)

## ABSTRACT

Indian merchants were actively participating in the Red Sea trade at during pre-colonial times. The Red Sea port Mocha provided the Indian merchants a principal market. Hindu Bania merchants especially from Gujarat were participating in this trade. Along with them their fellow muslim shippers from Ahmedabad also took part in the process. Imperial ships were also trading at Mocha under the Mughal nakhuda. The Bania merchants were also settled in various Red Sea ports, and they were executing their mercantile activities in several Red Sea cities which were located not only on the east side of the Red Sea but also on the west side of the Red Sea.

**Key Words :** Red Sea, Bania, Yemen, Hindu, Nakhuda

## INTRODUCTION

Banias managed a number of mercantile functions. Many Banias were working as brokers under their richer caste fellows, Arabs, Europeans and Indian Muslim merchants. Others were shroff or money changers and bankers, wholesalers, insurance men, head of business houses etc. Many were shopkeepers engaged in retail trade. The Bania had a long history, they cannot be considered as an outcome of the European commercial activities for they had been there in dominant position and were shaping Indian economy even before the European arrival. At the end of the sixteenth century and by the beginning of the seventeenth, Bania evolved as a group of merchants manning the market-places and driving profits in India and abroad. The presence of Hindu Bania merchants was easily evident, "Hindu merchants were to be found in little colonies or merely as sojourners in every major port city all around the ocean's shores, including the so-called exclusive Muslim heartland of the Red Sea." <sup>1</sup>

According to Ashin Das Gupta there were two kinds of Banias engaged in the Red Sea trade; (i) those who

came and went every year. Banias from lower Gujarat, particularly from Surat and Cambay were of this kind. (ii) Those who had been long settled in Yemen and they were found not only in every Yemeni city but also port towns of Habash and the Hadramaut. The Kathiwari Banias, the Kapol Banias were settled in large numbers in Yemen, and more continued to come to Yemen throughout the first decade of the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

The importance of Bania merchants in the financial life of Mocha is evident from the nowroz; the new-year system of payment. "No one sold anything except coffee for cash at Mocha. For everything else, payment was deferred and was calculated according to the Bania calendar...The Gujarati New Year and Deewali followed closely on the departure of the Gujarati shipping. And at Mocha these were crucial dates of trading season. Besides, everyone at Mocha kept book in an imaginary coin of account, usually called the Mocha dollar, occasionally the Bania dollar...The coin of account, the system of settling debts, and the calendar all demonstrated the ascendancy of the Bania merchants."<sup>3</sup> According to Om Praksh the Bania devised coin at Mocha, which was 21 percent below the Spanish dollar or the rial of eight.

All transactions in Yemen were effected in this unit of account.<sup>4</sup> “The Bania high-seas merchants of Surat even maintained an extensive network of agents and correspondents (mostly again Bania) all over the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea region who lived in the region for extended period of time. But perhaps as an even more critical role the Bania merchants played in Indian maritime trade was as facilitators performing the role of being suppliers of export goods to ship-owners and other merchants actively engaged in coastal and overseas trade and generally acting as their agents and brokers.”<sup>5</sup>

The East India company records demonstrate that many Bania merchants were highly participating in the trading activities at Mocha. Diaries of the year 1733 mention the arrival of ships owned by Bania merchants to Mocha (also spelled Mokha). The entries of 23 April, 7 May and 8 May 1733 also refer to the arrival of Bania ships at Mocha. Apart from the Banias of Gujarat the Muslim merchants from Surat also visited Mocha; for example, the Mocha Supercargoes Diary mentions the arrival of ‘sidee ship’ to Mocha from Surat. An entry of 4<sup>th</sup> July, 1733 also mentions the arrival of a merchant named Mohammed Ali’s ship ‘Fateh Salam’ to Mocha on 23 April 1733.<sup>6</sup>

Every year around twenty Gujarati ships sailed from Surat to Mocha and Jeddah; it is possible that the ships took with them for million rupees worth of textiles. Ruth Barnes has examined the use of Indian textile patterns in the decoration of sixteenth century Amiriyya Madrasa and mosque in the Yemeni city of Rada. On her analysis Nancy Um has stated that “her compelling pairing of textile fragments with similarly designed and coloured patterns on the ornate mosque ceiling confirmed a relationship in which certain features of Indian trade objects had been transformed to the Arabian Peninsula eventually made their way into local lexicon of royal architectural motifs.”<sup>7</sup> The trade of Mocha with India was also noted by Rochet d’ Hericourt who found that Mocha was a necessary navigation stage between India and upper part of the Gulf of Aden. Though cotton was the principal import from India, Combes and Tamisier noted that each year there arrived 4,000 bales of tobacco from Surat.<sup>8</sup>

Mocha port welcomed a wide range of ships from trade routes originating below Jeddah gap. Every year at Mocha, the first ship from India was awaited for it marked the beginning of the trading season. A wide range of ships ran from Gujarat to the Red Sea especially between

Mocha and Surat. Indian ships also arrived from other ports, such as Cambay, Diu, Porbandar, Karwar, Kannaur, Kozhikode, Kochi, Pondicherry and Hugli. The trade at Mocha was heavily relied on the constant flow of goods and merchants along the Mocha-Surat route. Moreover, the imam of Yemen also sent two ships from Mocha to Surat.<sup>9</sup>

For their arrival at Mocha, the Indian ships were heavily dependent on the monsoon winds. The ships from India began to arrive at Mocha as early as January and continued to appear throughout the spring. The Indian ships made their return journey in August. As it has been stated earlier textiles were perhaps the most important commodity of trade. The Indian textiles represented a multitude of varieties in design, style and quality, for they were made in the production centers of Gujarat, the Coromandel Coast, and Bengal. The Indian traders also shipped lavish cottons and silks for trade and also used them for gift purpose. The vast range of cloths was for daily purpose, and they were consisted of cotton calicoes and chintzes that were block printed or resist-dyed. Salampore, a kind of Chintz, usually white, that was originally made in Coromandel region; betelles, a light muslin cloth made in Bengal had great appeal in the market. “An Indian textile known as Guinea cloth, made for the African market, travelled through Mocha, eventually ending up as far as the West Indies to clothe slaves on Caribbean plantations.”<sup>10</sup>

Other than cloths, spices from India and Southeast Asia including cloves, pepper, cardamom, mace, turmeric, cinnamon, dried ginger and nutmeg were also in demand. Metals such as tin, copper, iron, steel, lead, were also transshipped to Mocha. Powdered sugar and loaf sugar along with rice, oil and ghee were also made available at Mocha. The Indian ships returned to homeland carrying loads of bullion and cases of specie shipped from the Mediterranean for remitting into Mughal coins in India. Indian ships also brought other items from Mocha including ivory from the African coast, medicinal products such as aloe, local aromatics, and dye material such as wars, a Yemeni plant that produced a yellow pigment. Coffee was also shipped from Mocha to India; for example, Malik Ghafur also brought tons of coffee in his ships from Mocha to India.

The Muslim community of Gujarat also had its own prominent merchants who were operating in the Red Sea trade. Mulla Abdul Ghafur who came to Surat around 1670 was a very poor man, but soon made his fortune by

trading in the Red Sea. According to local legends, Abdul Ghafur started his career in association with a mosque. Manucci describes him as the most powerful merchant in Surat, and that he owns over twenty ships. Abdul Ghafur's family, between 1707 and 1736, owned about thirty four ships. One of them was the Hussaini of 400 tons and it was mounted by twenty- five guns. Abdul Ghafur extensively operated in the Red Sea and an English report of September 21, 1700 claimed that Abdul Ghafur's ship arrived at Surat with 5000 mans of coffee and other cargo. Abdul Ghafur significantly appears in the English records of the 1690s and 1700s in reference to European piracy in the Arabian Sea, and the damage caused to his ships by such piratical acts.<sup>11</sup> Ghafur had made enormous profit at the Red Sea, and he also owned one of the largest mansions in the town of Mocha. He was one of the most respectable man at Mocha and enjoyed special exemptions from customs at the port.

There is no evidence of any kind of rivalry between Indian traders sailing to Mocha. The imperial ships were also sailing towards the Red Sea and Indian merchants' ships gave salutation to them; for example, a ship named Fateh Murad saluted the imperial ships with its guns on way to the Red Sea. Siddis and Chellabys also directed their ships to Mocha, and also purchased goods on behalf of the East India Company. In its entry of 31 August 1740, Surat Factory Diary mentions the loading of a large quantity of coffee from Mocha on East India Company's behalf by Ahmed Chellaby.<sup>12</sup>

The famous Bania family who made fortune in Mocha is the family of Virachand in the seventeenth century. Virachand was also working as broker for the European merchants, and he was fluent in Arabic and spoken Portuguese. At Mocha, the Europeans often made their first halt at the home of Virachand until there was proper accommodation arranged for them. "It is well documented that Baniyan women never traveled with their husbands or other male relatives to...so the brokers' houses could serve as business facilities without conflict over family privacy." Virachand died in 1711, and he was survived by seven sons. His eldest son Mathura inherited most of the property and took charge of the family business. His other son Makhan managed the family business at the coffee market at Beit al- Faqih. The work of brokerage was taken over by Pitambar, the third son, and the Dutch papers eventually praised him for his linguistic abilities and work. The Bania trade network in Yemen was so strong that in 1721 the Dutch factors at

Mocha asked a Bania from Diu to get in touch with his caste settled in as far as the territories of Imam extended so that he could purchase a pair of desert mules for the governor of Ceylon.<sup>13</sup>

In the eighteenth century Yemen trade and politics were closely intertwined. It was not only the Indian merchants who visited Mocha, but the imams of the eighteenth century also took keen interest in trade with India. Zaidi imam annually deployed two ships on the Gujarat run. It was Amir Rezzak, the Arab landed magnate who always went in supreme command of the two ships of imam. Later, Amir Rezzak became the governor of Mocha in 1709. The involvement of the governors of Mocha in this trade started around 1704, but once began; it created inconvenience for the merchants.

In the 1720s, local Arab merchants who were close to the government maintained monopoly on certain commodities, and they began to take part in the Indian Ocean trade. The documentation of politics at Mocha is found in some European documentation associated with the killing of the qanungo of Mocha by the visiting Mughal nakhuda in 1698. Saleh Bhai was the qanungo (the official who represented the interests of the foreign merchants at the port). He and his brother Kasim Bhai were the deadly enemies of the Mughal nakhuda, who was in supreme command of imperial ships named the Fateh Shahi and the Ganj-i-Sawai visiting Mocha in 1698. The nakhuda had the qanungo murdered before he left for Surat, and also took Kasim Bhai away to India. In response, a senior official named Ali Wazir was sent to the Mughal court as ambassador of the imam, but he appears to have acted with the nakhuda and returned to Mocha. The imam was furious; he punished not only the governor of Mocha but also several prominent Arab merchants of the city who were believed to have tied up against the qanungo. Ali Wazir tried to settle down at Mocha as a private merchant, and he further decided to not to return to political life, but Shaikh Saleh Horebi, who had established some monopoly at Mocha, forbade him all the trade at Mocha.<sup>14</sup>

There were struggles for powers at the Red Sea ports. The Imam Al-Mahdi was already in his eighties when struggle of succession began between his son Sidi Ibrahim and nephew Sidi Qasim. Saleh Horebi, Amir Rezzak and another leading merchant of Mocha named Qasim Turbati were supporting Sidi Qasim faction. Meanwhile, a highly respected Mughal nakhuda arrived

at Mocha in 1712. He was a commander of five thousand horses and a former governor of Gujarat. He was not aware about the politics of succession. On his arrival, the Bania merchants at Mocha flocked to him regarding their ill treatment at the port. This Mughal nakhuda who was called Mirza Saheb made the journey to Imam's court for the redress of their (Indian merchants) grievances. Sidi Ibrahim considered it a chance to wipe out his rivals at Mocha. Abdur Rahman, the deputy of governor and his Bania counselor Manji were made to pay fine. Amir Rezzak was untouched but Qasim Turbati was exiled from Mocha and he went on to live at Surat with his entire family.

In spite of the contribution of the Indian merchants in the trade of the Red Sea; they were not welcomed in the heartland of Islam. They were considered infidels, and on this ground in 1700, a massacre of three hundred Hindu Bania merchants was arranged, but it was prevented by resolute opposition from all Muslim merchants of Mocha. Bania merchants were not allowed to publicly perform their religion, and they were to be buried after death. Valentia also noted that at Mocha, the local Arab ruler also invented a new method of extorting money from the Banias, by confining them in a room and fumigating them with sulphur, till they complied with his demands.<sup>15</sup>

The persecution directed against Bania families was the cause of the decline of many Gujarati families in Mocha including Virachand's family. The persecution of Bania merchants at Mocha not only caused the decline of some families but also the decline of Gujarati trade to the Red Sea. The persecution of Bania merchants at Mocha began around the same time when Pitambar left for India and it was at its full capacity in the 1720s. Pantzer who wrote his memoir at Mocha in 1719 regretted that there was no broker as able as Pitambar left to do the service. Even more regrettable fact was that no Bania had money to lend it to the Dutch for the purchase of coffee. Bania concealed all their money for fear of being fleeced by the administration.<sup>16</sup>

The Bania family from Diu and Porbandar were often over assessed at customs by 100 percent, and Muslim merchants from any place of the world were treated a little better. At Mocha, there were also incidents of prominent Hindu merchants being mercilessly beaten till they paid what was asked. There are repeated references to merchants leaving Mocha and occasionally fleeing to mosque outside the town walls for safety. The

persecution varied; those who could do least to save themselves suffered the most. However, it does not mean that the Indian Muslim merchants also escaped from the wrath of authorities at Mocha; for example, in the 1720s, the government made extortions from the house of Ghafur. Individual misfortunes were nothing new at Mocha, but it was this breakdown of administration at Mocha that also caused the decline of Gujarati trade to the Red Sea.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, the Indian merchants were actively participating in the Red Sea trade. They were not only active in the Yemeni port Mocha but also other ports; such as Sana, Aden and Jeddah. There are references of trade and commerce carried on in the Red Sea by the Indian merchants on the western side of the Red Sea. Their involvement was not limited to the Mocha only, but the Indian merchants were also participating on the African side of the Red Sea. There was significant presence of Bania merchants at the Mamluk controlled ports such as Suakin and Massawa. Besides this, Indian goods were also carried in the interiors of Egypt such as Fustat and Alexandria. Thus, the myth that Hindu merchants were not crossing the sea and their trade was limited to Indian port cities appears irrelevant, for the Bania merchants were residing in several Red Sea ports. Hence, the opinion that the Indian merchants did not cross the ocean and it limited their commercial activities can now be challenged.

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