

# Trading Towns in Mughal India: A Case Study of Agra

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**Abstract:** *Mughal India was indeed a great platform for the birth and growth of various trading centres. Not only various commodities were traded but also the scale and magnitude of trading as an economic activity was immense. Inland trade and maritime trade both flourished during the Medieval period India. Definitely a single factor was not responsible for the emergence of these trading centres rather several reasons were responsible for such a scenario. The main trading route acted as a blood vessel which runs through whole of the Mughal Empire and strengthens the interaction between the various trading centers throughout the Empire. One of the significant trading centres was Agra. Numerous reasons were responsible for making Agra a wealthy town which was known for its grandeur and greatness. This paper tries to bring out the reasons responsible for the emergence of trading towns in Mughal India and gives the profile of Agra as a trading town by providing a glance at the various commodities which were available and traded.*

**Keywords:** Inland trade, Quicksilver, Bullion, Sarai, Karkhanas, Administrative, Topography, Entrepot, Maritime trade

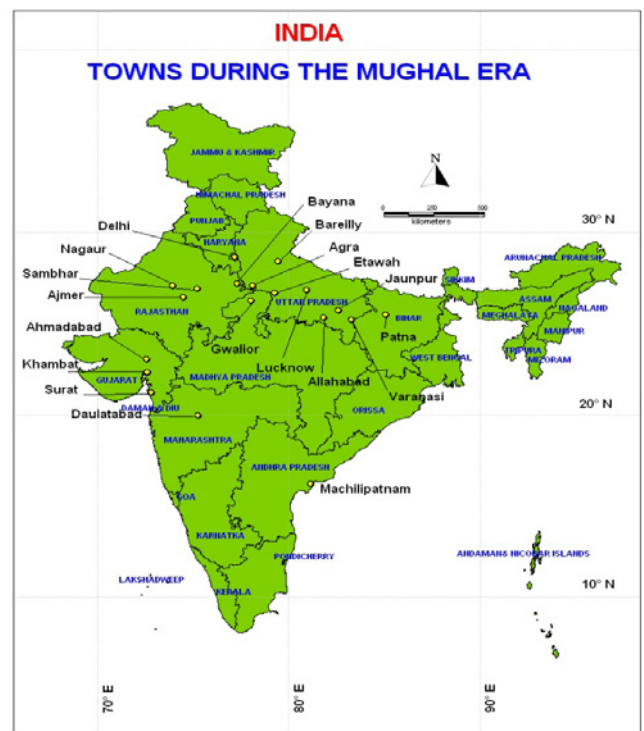
## 1. Introduction

Mughal Era witnessed a continuous movement of people, capital and resources, which led to a well-built interaction between the different provinces of that time. Towns performed different types of functions by becoming either administrative or commercial or religious centers. Different types of commodities prevailed in these towns and were traded. The "Great Mughal's" wealth and grandeur was recognizable, almost all observers were impressed by the magnificence and superiority of the Mughal Empire. For nearly one hundred and seventy years (1556-1719) the Mughal Empire remained a forceful, centralized, Multi faceted organization. During the Medieval era there was a continuous interchange of men, money, information and resources which in due course lead to a very strong interaction between the different provinces of that time, not only this interaction created opening for trade on a large scale, but also gave birth to several trading centers in different directions of the Mughal empire.

### 1.1 Factors responsible for the growth of trading towns during the Mughal period in India

Various factors were accountable for the growth of trading towns all through this period. The aspiration of governing a robust political empire by the Mughals gave birth to a series of urban centers in different direction of the empire for effectual control. The Mughal Empire provided an environment which was well equipped with peace and stability. Travel was easier both for people and commodities because of the development of roads and bridges. It stimulated the flow of trade with foreign countries. Trees were planted all along the roads to provide shadow and fruits. Several sarais were built in the trading towns to provide shelter to both the travellers and the beasts of burden. Geographical factors played an imperative role in making a town a successful trading town. Nearness to a water body and having a rich agricultural hinterland was a

huge advantage for the expansion of trade. Nearly all the needs of elevating a town such as ample supply of water, steady source of prerequisite and substantial amount of population was there. There was no shortage of water and the good quality of soil ensured an ample and continuous supply of agricultural products in the towns. The growth of these towns led to migration of people from the rural areas to the urban areas in search of employment.



Map 1: Towns during the Mughal Era

### 1.2 Commodities traded during the Mughal period

Several commodities were traded both luxurious as well as non-luxurious. In Delhi during that time, the popular commodities were sugar, indigo, paper, jaggery, turmeric,

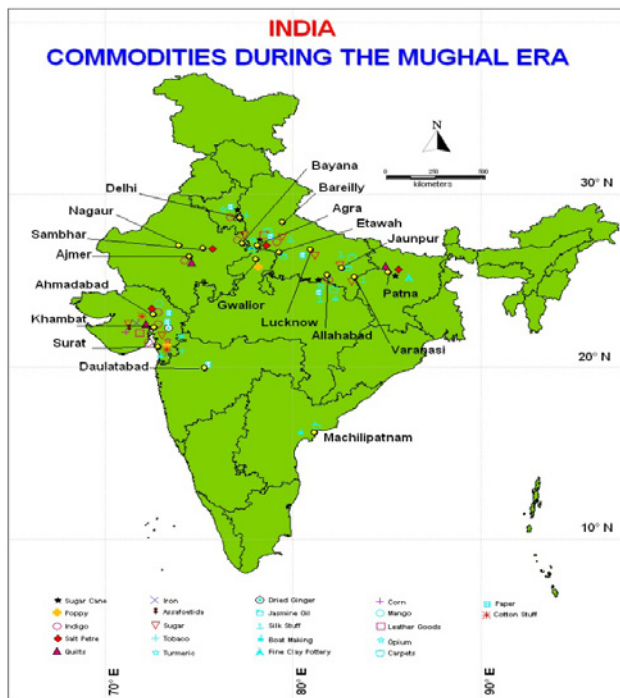
coarse muslin etc. Benaras was popular not only for its commercial significance but it was a famous pilgrim of Hindus. Silk stuff, gold and silver embroidery, sugar, calico, chintz, were among the commodities which were traded. It emerges as a significant trading centre regarding cotton textiles. . At Cambay goods available were. These piece goods were of all varieties these were painted silk stuffs, quilts, carpets ,Indigo, Paper, Leather goods, Dressed hide, Opium ,other drugs, Iron , Large quantities of Sugar, Dried Ginger, Raw Cotton, Assafoeteda, precious stones. Most of them were exported. The vessels reaching Cambay from east delivered silk from China, Quicksilver, Vermillion, Large quantities of Spices, Sandle woods, Pearls from extreme south of peninsula, Coconut in large quantity, Oil, Honey from Maldives, Slaves from Zeila. Besides these Rupee mint Aurangzeb was also there at Cambay.

By virtue of its location Surat also acted as the principal port for the exchange of goods between the empire and south India. The goods included Poppy, Indigo, Opium, Iron, Ship building, Pineapple, Gumlac, Spices, Sugar. Sandle etc. The economic importance of Ahmedabad was immense. Basically two types of trade were found in Ahemdabad that is local trade and the trade occasioned by virtue of its being and entre pot to the maritime commerce. It also acted as a major market for Indigo .Silk industry was quite prominent, the raw silk imported from Bengal and the Ahemdabad weavers had become experts in manufacturing satins and velvets of all kind and colours.

trade it used to do in Sugar and also for producing the finest quality of Indigo, which was not only meant for local consumption but was also exported to other places in huge amounts. Several towns like Lucknow, Ajmer, Bareilly, Nagaur, Daulatabad gained importance because of the presence of mints.

## 2. Case Study of Agra

Agra emerged as a very significant town during the Mughal Era , there were countless factors behind its magnitude but the two most important factors which played the strategic role were firstly , that it was the capital city and secondly, the economic worth which it had gained through the trading activity which existed in that period . Agra was also blessed with such geographical features which enhanced its potentialities in being a thriving trading town, the proximity to the river Yamuna was one among them, Agra had become an entrepot .The seventeenth century sources characterize Agra as the most important exchange centre in the Northern India. It acted as the junction for routes from all the directions; it had developed in to a Sub- continental genre for regional and long distance trade and communication and also an important place for manufacture.



Map 2: Commodities during the Mughal Era

At Allahbad the commodities which used to be traded were sugarcane, Saltpetre, Paper, Turmeric, Silken stuff, Grapes. Ship building was a popular industry at Allahabad. Mihirkul and calico were the important variety of cotton textiles which were produced. Biana became popular because of the



Map 3: Divisions of Agra in 1595

The centrality of Agra from mercantile point of view, is superlatively illustrated in the statement of Pelsaert, a Dutch factor who stayed at Agra for about seven years around 1620:

*All goods must pass this way, as from Gujrat, Tatta or (Sind); from Kabul, Kandhar, or Multan, to the Deccan to Burhanpur and to Lahore: and from Bengal and the whole East country; there are no practical alternate routes,*



***and the road carry undesirable quantities of merchandise, especially cotton goods***

All along the routes Sarai were built, by local officials and nobles for use by merchants and travelers. These were constructed at an expedient distance, River Yamuna served as the chief waterway, several commodities such as salt, textile, raw cotton, carpets etc. The surge of the mercantile traffic was so gigantic that it had turned Agra in to a grand exchange centre for a huge range of products and the consequence of this was that numerous markets with explicit specialization come into sight in different parts of the city. Several commodities were available in Agra, of these the following were the most prominent carpets, gold and silver embroidery, sugarcane, saltpeter, indigo, quilts, sugar, shoes, turmeric, jasmine oil, silk stuffs etc. Products of different regions were available at Agra, raw cotton and woven silk came from east cotton goods, indigo, sugar etc from the region of Awadh.

Cotton industry arrived as a most important industry during the Mughal era and therefore trade in cotton stuffs and raw cotton was a widespread feature of the Mughal era, quite a lot of varieties of cotton were available. The most popular at Agra were Calico, Chintz, Bafta, Chautar, Ghazi, Sahan etc. The availability of so many commodities and specialization in production of distinct goods gives testimony to the grandeur and magnificence of Agra as a big trading centre.

The enterprise taken by Akbar to have carpets produced in the imperial establishments (known as karkhanas) was rewarded with intense activity and they soon became an important item of trade in regional market. Silver stuffs and very fine cloth of gold and silver were woven for turbans, lace, or other adornments for women. Raw silk for silken goods were also exported, Quilts too are reported to have been made here and these were frequently in demand for export Agra was also distinguished for its dyestuffs and also was noted for its extraction of rose essence and perfumes.

Due to the deep political and economic activities Agra acted as a great attraction and pull to all types of professional group of people, such activities have also led to the development of different social groups and institutions, the city thus kept expanding both in size and population, The geographical setting of Agra made the flow centripetal and Agra stood as the proud town of the Mughal Era. All the routes in northern India branched out to and from Agra depicting it the core of the empire.

## **2.1 Postscript**

During the Mughal era the towns grew so flourishingly because they were supported with rich agricultural hinterland. Promising agriculture is a harmonizing base for the rise of an urban structure. Further, if a towns industrial and economic activities are to grow an optimum utilization of all the natural assets and resources with which the area may be endowed, becomes an necessary precondition.

The agricultural prosperity has therefore, to be in regard to both food grains and valuable crops specially the cotton crop, so that while the former sustains the urban population, the latter feeds the industrial particularly the cotton industry, because during that time the cotton fabrics dominated the economy in much the same manner, as steel works do today. The volume and variety produced and the level of traffic achieved in cotton goods went a long way in determining the wealth of a town. It was through their manufactured products and commercial association that the towns were able to attain feasibility.

Urbanisation was used as a instrument by the Mughal Emperors to preside over a well-built political era. By opening towns in numerous directions of the era, they could keep a check over the whole empire and also were able to make a strong economic and political empire. Geography was the fundamental aspect in shaping the rate of progress of a town. The hinterland of the town had to be rich not only in the production of food grains but also had to have substantial resources in respect of valuable crops, metals, and mineral wealth's in order to support the urban industries.

Geographical factors such as proximity to a water body also affected the growth of a trading center as it gets the opportunity to be a port and a lot of goods and commodities can be imported or exported. Most of the urban centers fell in Uttar Pradesh another major commercial centre were Ahmadabad in Gujarat, Patna in Bihar, two ports also were very significant, and these were Cambay and later Surat.

Agra grew as an important trading town since it had almost all the requisites fulfilled needed for the growth of a trading town in the medieval India. It was the Administrative capital for quite sometimes this factor made it the seat of power and hence a significant centripetal city. To cater the demands of both the royals and the subalterns the city lured goods, people and resources from all parts of the empire. In addition its geographical setting was blessed and provided all the requirements needed for trade. Agra therefore reached the zenith of glory and grandeur during this period.

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