

Role of Geography in Shaping the Structure of Trade in Mughal India

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Abstract: *Trading as an activity was at its zenith during the Mughal period in India. The role of Geography was exceptionally crucial in the foundation of a trading town. How propitious geographical factors helped in the growth and development of a trading town in that period is the foremost focus of this paper. Assortments of factors were responsible for the growth of trade during that period, among them geographical factors also played a key role. If a town was having a centripetal location, was near to a water body or had fertile soil or had a rich hinterland then it was considered apt for becoming a trading centre. Technology was not that advance as it is today so it becomes interesting to know how trading towns were affected by geographical factors.*

Keywords: Inland trade, Administrative, Topography, Entrepot, Water body

1. Introduction

Trading as an activity has always been a part of our economic structure though the scale at which it was conducted varied. One of the most significant contributions of trade is that it allows an area to experience a consumption pattern which not necessarily coincides with the production pattern of that area. During the Mughal period in India trading as an activity was at its peak. Several factors were responsible for such a scenario. Mughal Era observed a continuous interchange of people, capital and wherewithal, which paved the way for a well-built interaction between various provinces of that time. The aspiration to preside over a strong political empire by the Mughals gave birth to a series of urban centres in diverse parts of the empire for efficient control. Towns performed different types of functions by becoming either administrative or commercial or religious centres.

For nearly one hundred and seventy years (1556-1719) the Mughal Empire remained a dynamic, centralized, and complex organization. The main trade route acted as blood vessel which ran through whole of the Mughal Empire and strengthened the interaction between various trading centres. The role of geography of was very crucial in shaping the structure of trade during that period. Towns which developed as trading towns were taking benefit out of their geographical setting? The geographical factors like topography, presence of a river or nearness to a water body and Presence of rich fertile soil and having a rich agricultural hinterland were like a gift of nature for growth of trade.

It was easier for a town to grow if it had a central location. The presence of river or rivers ensured easy flow of commercial traffic. Goods and people both could be conveniently transported from one place to another with the aid of the river. The rich productivity of the area made sure that the area enjoyed continuous exchange of goods. Not only there was inland trade but also international trade. The international trade was possible because of the geographical

setting which provided access to the sea. Port cities were developed and there was a continuous exchange of goods of various kinds from all over the world. Though there were different types of towns which emerged in the Medieval Mughal India, performed various functions like becoming administrative towns or religious centre or trading centres or port towns, the geography of a particular town played a very important role in defining the significance which it had gained by becoming one of these towns. As far as the urban centres are concerned in the Medieval Mughal India, different types of urban centres came up. But the four distinct types of towns which can be identified are as follows.

First, there were those cities whose leading function was administrative and where other roles manufacturing or sacral were of minor importance too and were partly dependent on the primary role, of such kind were Agra and Delhi. Secondly, there were those cities enjoying a primarily commercial and manufacturing character, to which might have been attached administrative functions which on the other hand, remained subsidiary to their economic functions. Ahmadabad fell under this category.

Ahmadabad became a successful trading town because of its location. It is not the only reason for its growth as a trading centre but is most definitely an important one. It was near to both the important port cities of Mughal period i.e. Cambay and Surat. Ahmadabad was like a collection centre for goods almost all the goods which had to be exported from the interior parts of the Mughal India had to reach Ahmadabad to be further transported to the port cities. From there they were exported to other parts of the world where they were demanded. The goods which were imported from others part of the world mainly luxury items first travelled to Ahmadabad from the port cities and from there, they were sent to the other parts of the Empire.

Thirdly, there was the case of pilgrimage centres where trade and craft activities were drawn to where there was already an assemblage of both undeviating settled and ephemeral

population as in the case of Banaras, conveniently located in relation to the major river systems of North India. Here the proximity to river assisted commercial intercourse and unvarying crowding of pilgrims fascinated crafts and service recruits from the neighbouring districts or even further off region. And then were port towns like Cambay and Surat. Among the factors that aided to this process must be declared as the political circumstances approving to expanding economic activity the opening out of both long distance trade within India itself and of India's international trade with a network of other countries of the world.

Urban centres flourished in different parts of the Mughal Empire. The period of Mughal Empire or rather of the sixteenth century, seventeenth and part of the eighteenth century appears to be out-and-out golden age of urbanization. At least for much of the Northern and central India, there was both a spreading out of the size of the pre-existing cities and towns and a propagation of the new foundations

Overall, if one analyzes the whole issue one can summarize that urbanization foresees a state of development where among other things, a compact conglomeration of inhabitants within a delimited area, a centralized governing organism, and industries as the materially productive units exist. This is in contrast to the rural society which implies a dispersed population over a relatively larger area, a rather local administrative set up, and cultivation as the principal productive activity. But while the villagers without any large urban centres in the vicinity can persist for centuries, the latter would perish in the absence of an agriculturally prosperous hinterland, that is to say that flourishing agriculture is an indispensable complementary base for the size of an urban structure. During the Mughal era the towns grew so flourishingly because they were supported with rich agricultural hinterland.

Promising agriculture is a complementary base for the rise of an urban structure. Further if a town's industrial and economic activities are to grow, their most favourable utilization of all the natural assets and resources with which the area may be endowed, becomes an indispensable prerequisite. 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 industry particularly the cotton industry, because during that time the cotton fabrics dominate 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 shaping the wealth of a town. It was through their manufactured products and commercial intercourse that the towns were able to attain feasibility.

The great expansion of commerce during the Mughal period – to be seen most strikingly in the manufacturing and marketing of textiles to meet both an internal and external demand- unavoidably brought swelled wealth to the major urban centres of the country, especially to those cities whose

location made them natural entrepôts whether by land or by sea.

1.1 Agra

The city of Agra by far was considered the largest and most popular city of the Mughal Empire in the seventeenth century. The geographical location of Agra made the flow centripetal and Agra stood as the pompous town of the Mughal Empire. All the routes in northern India radiated to and from Agra portraying it as “the heart of his empire or the navel of the entire dominion

All goods moving between any two diverse parts of the empire were required to make a halt here. Apparently the city besides handling its own imports and exports was also acting as a transit depot, thus adding to its own Thus during 16 and 17 centuries Agra became a nucleus of international trade and reached its pinnacle in economic prosper. Besides its favourable geographical setting, undeniable other factors also played a conspicuous role in the economic advancement of Agra. The commercial and industrial life of Agra could not have received such a momentum had there not been a constant supply of food stuff and raw materials from the fertile hinterland for the overgrowing needs of the city's mobile and permanent population. They were complimentary to each other, resulting in a relationship of mutual benefit. The surrounding hinterland found a ready market for their agricultural produce and the population of Agra city never felt a paucity of such articles of daily consumption.



Figure 1: Divisions of Agra in Mughal Era 1595

1.2 Delhi

Precisely like Agra, Delhi also had proximity to river body and this geographical gain was very beneficial in defining the commercial traffic at Delhi; numerous commodities were found in Delhi during that time, the popular ones were sugar, indigo, paper, jaggery, turmeric and coarse muslin etc. An assortment of coarse muslin was found here, these were Gangajal, Calico, Chintz etc. if one looks in to the

paramount industries of Delhi, Cotton industries but more so Chintz were well coloured, next in quality to those of Masulipatnam only these were also produced in large quantities and several qualities with a wide range of prices to suit the pocket of high and low. This very fact shows that Delhi had material available for both the classes i.e. for the privileged as well as for the common man.

1.3 Cambay

It appears that a large variety of goods were exported annually from Cambay and the vessels on their onset composed and brought various special goods and commodities from different places



Figure 2: Division of Delhi in Mughal Era 1595

These goods were of all varieties these were white stamped and painted silk stuffs, quilts, carpets, Indigo, Paper, Leather goods, Dressed hide, Opium and other drugs, Iron, Large quantities of Sugar, Dried Ginger, Raw Cotton, Asafoetida, precious stone

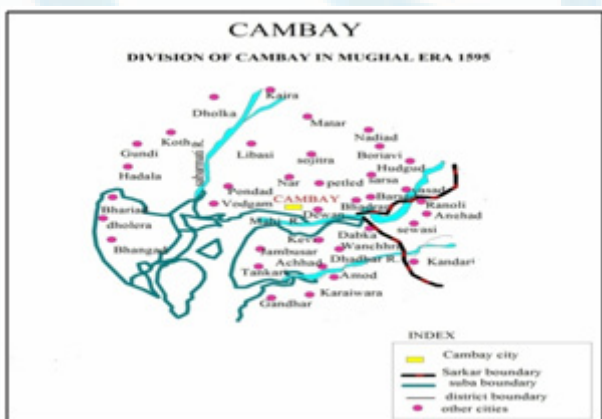


Figure 3: Division of Cambay in Mughal Era 1595

1.4 Surat

It was already a port of some magnitude for pilgrim traffic since Tapti River presented a harbour, while within small discharge silting was not too immense a peril. Its benefit as a port was enhanced by the unearthing of a hole or a natural

under sea though opposite the village of Swally, presenting outstanding anchorage for huge ships.

2. Postscript

Clearly during the Mughal period in India the role of geography in the foundation of a trading town was immense. Today it's easier to build the transport and communication lines because of the developed technology. Even if geography poses some obstacles in the foundation of a town or any other developmental work it is taken care off because of the presence of advanced technology. It is not that during the Mughal Era that the will power of mankind was less but paucity of technology was there. Occasionally more than one factor could coalesce to account for the rise and growth of a trading town. But by and large it may be said that Geographical factors like topography, presence of a river or nearness to a water body and Presence of rich fertile soil and having a rich agricultural hinterland were imperative for the growth of the trading towns.

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