

Turkish merchants at Port City of Surat during 16th -18th century: A Historical Study

Bhavna P. Gajera
Ph.D Research Scholar, VNSGU, Surat, Gujarat, India.
gajera.bhavna@gmail.com

Abstract

Surat, *Bandur Mubarak* or the auspicious port of the Great Mughal and they developed Surat port with such a great care that not only the local merchants and sharafs(A money changer) but also foreign merchants started taking advantage of the new business and entrepreneurial opportunity that Surat created in the 17th century. Among the foreign merchants settled in Gujarat like the Arabs and Persians; the Turkish merchants seem to have been better organized. The Turkish merchants followed the leadership of the Chalebi (Challeby) clan. Turkish merchants had well established their colonies at Surat. This paper intend to analyse in the context of economy of Turkish community invested their capital and transformed their idea of money to acquire political and social advantage. This paper attempts to re-evaluate the role of the Turkish Merchants at port city of Surat during 16th to 18th century.

Keywords: Chalebi, Amir, Rumi

The discovery of the sea-route to India which enhanced the growth of merchant capital and was initiated international contacts with India. The foreign trade of a country is an index of the economic activities of its people.

In Indian history coastal Gujarat has always been the home of one major oceanic port.¹ The Gujarat region situated in the western part of India is known for its business activities since ancient times. The region has been agriculturally fertile and it also contains a long sea-coast enabling the merchants to undertake overseas trade.² Gujarat has maintained its identity as a commercial centre and was famous for its industries, such as shipbuilding, cotton, silk, indigo, agate, paper etc. Different communities of merchants were involved in these industries. They have significant role in the business. These merchants were responsible for operations and organizations of the mercantile economy at large. They were involved in commodity trade, brokerage, money lending and banking. Thus the major merchant communities of Gujarat include Banias, Bohras, Parsis, Khojas, Memons, Ghanchis, Turks, Armenians and the European traders.³ the merchants of Gujarat have earned the reputation of being the best in the world.⁴

As the Redfield and Singer analysis indicates, Surat was a city of indigenous commerce, as opposed to an administrative cultural city.⁵ The seventeenth century was an era of prosperity for the port of Surat.⁶ Chalebi is a Turkish word which means *Amir* (Noble) or 'a man of god'.⁷ Chalebis were Ottoman Turks and by profession they were navigators.⁸ This term was used for upper classes in Turkey.⁹ with time the Chalebis expanded their commerce eastwards in countries like Persia, India and Burma. Sidi Ali Reis stayed at Surat for about a year, where after he went inland to Gujarat, Sind and Delhi.

He was probably the first Chalebi to establish himself at Surat even if temporarily.¹⁰

II

By the middle of the 17th century the chalebies were quite active in the commercial life of Surat. With time the Chalebis expanded their commerce eastwards in countries like Persia, India and Burma.¹¹ When a Persian embassy during the reign of Shah Sulaiman Safavi (1666-94) arrived in Siam in 1685, it was greeted by a man called Chalebi. He was a Rumi(Ottoman) and had settled in this country and been lately converted to Shi'ism. He was at that time the '*rajah*' of Suhan. Chalebi cordially entertained the embassy, furnished each of them with a well decorated boat and finally permitted them to go to the king of Siam.¹² Muhammad Chalebi and other members of his family were eminent merchants of Surat and owned a number of ships. There were Chalebis at Aleppo, mentioned by Tavernnier, the French traveller and Lannoy, the English Consul at Aleppo.¹³

Mohammad Chalebi was the oldest eminent merchant who had keen knowledge of trade and commerce. He owned a ship called 'Welcome' by which he regularly traded with Queda in AD 1672. He also used English ships for his business. In AD 1683, he imported some parcels through English ship 'laurel' from Gombroon. He did not pay freight for that because he had some agreements with the English Company.¹⁴ Ashin das Gupta cites the names of a few leading Chalebi merchants of first quarter of the eighteenth century, such as Haji Ahmed Chalebi, Ibrahim Chalebi, Hussain Chalebi and Omar Chalebi.¹⁵ Haji Ahmed Chalebi was an important shipping magnate and had at least eight ships of his own.¹⁶

Another Chalebi merchant was Noman Bin Hussain, he owned a ship named Ganjawar. One of the members of his family, Usman Chalebi, was the owner of many (fulkha, safineh, etc.)¹⁷ships. one of his ships, safineh ¹⁸ was captured by the Portuguese while returning laden from Jeddah. He traced it from Goa with the help of Rustam Manekji of Surat.¹⁹ to secure its release, Rustom (a parsi broker of both English and Portugese) went to Goa at the request of the governor of Surat, Amanat Khan.²⁰ The Portuguese commander returned the ship to Rustom with all its cargo, and he returned to Surat by the same ship.²¹

According to Suratni Mukhtasir Haqiqat, Chalebis were also involved in shipbuilding business. Some of the Chalebi merchants owned many ships. Taahar Chalebi had 9 ships, Ahmed Chalebi had 7 ships and Saleh Chalebi was the owner of 5 ships.²² Haji Ahmad Chalebi was, no doubt, an important shipping magnet.²³ It is interesting to note that after the house of Mulla Abdul Ghafur the house of Ahmad Chalebi was the second most important among the mercantile houses of Surat.²⁴ Among these Turkish merchants the Chalebi merchants came into prominence towards the end of the 17th century.

III

In AD 1702, Sulaiman Chalebi acquired influence over the Mughal governor.²⁵ He used his influence to extort money from the Banias of Surat. A Complaint was lodged against him by the Banias of Surat on 27 December AD 1703. They complained that Sulaiman Chalebi, being a favourite of the late governor Itibar khan, had extorted Rs. 85,000 from them, then he was

detained at kotwali with the object of forcing him to refund the money to the complainants. Sulaiman refused to pay the amount and said that he received that amount for the benefit and use of the previous governor. The new governor had put some guards at his house till he finally satisfied the complainants.²⁶ Ahmad Chalebi, a good friend of Mulla Muhammad Ali, was a successful businessman at that time. According to *Sunni Vahora*, Mughal emperor Alamgir honoured him with the title of *Zubd-ut-Tujjar*.²⁷ However, they were competitors in business pursuits since they were the common traders in the Red Sea region.²⁸ Ahmad Chalebi had a military contingent of two thousand Turkish (Roomi) soldiers. The father of Ahmad Chalebi Haji Saleh Bin Durwesh 'Musal' was employed at the court of Ghulam Khanzadah of Iraq. He came to Surat during Aurangzeg's reign. He built a mosque in *Saudagarwada* in Surat. It was called 'Chalebi's mosque'.²⁹

The diary reveals Ahmad Chalebi as a merchant (Saudagar) who transacted overseas commerce in various commodities such as rose-water (gulab jal), tobacco, Egyptian-willow (bidi mushk), sugar, etc. His ships had frequent access to the ports of Basra, Mokha and Jeddah. In December 1721, he exported rose-water (gulab jal), tobacco and Egyptian-willow from Surat. Similarly, in May 1726, he sailed a ship for the port of Basra, laden with rose water (gulab jal), sugar etc., with Mohammad Azam Kairani, probably a native merchant of Basra.³⁰ Basra, economically prosperous port attracted a number of merchants and foreign commercial companies. It was because of its prosperity that Salah Chalebi of Surat and other broker and merchants established their business at Basra.³¹ Of the later history of the Chalebis at Surat little is known. In 1740, another merchant, Ahmad Chalebi, is found engaged in commercial activities. A ship of his probably coming from the

Red sea carried a cargo of coffee (800 bales) on the English Company's account. This ship had been attacked and probably seized by two Portuguese 'grabs' near the road of the Surat port; and the English council were considering how to recover their cargo.³² It seems that he was a ship owner and must have belonged to the Chalebi clan. The Chalebies never deserted Surat and remained hostile to the development of English influence within the city, which they saw as a threat to their freight trade to the red sea.

Conclusion: The Chalebi were Ottoman. Turks, they were navigators by profession. They had operated eastwards in countries like Persia, India and Burma. The Chalebi were active on the routes to Batavia and Bengal as well. Turkish Chalebi community invested their capital and transformed their idea of money to acquire political and social advantage. The Chalebi merchants of Surat are one of the important Turkish trading families. Haji Ahmed Chalebi was an important shipping magnet of Turkish community and had at least eight ships of his own. By mid 17th century they established their colonies at Surat and acquired prominence later on.

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