

Lecture-5



Settlements: Surat, Madras, Bombay and Calcutta

SETTLEMENTS OF BOMBAY

Amid the discomfitures and distresses of the Company at home, resolute groups of Englishmen were making their presence felt in India. The sites of their settlements were at first determined by political rather than by commercial considerations. During centuries the natural meeting-marts of the Indo-European spice trade had been the ports of Malabar; but the monopoly of those marts was secured to Portugal by her fortress-capital at Goa, and the coast rajahs were on too small a scale to afford protection to newcomers. If our captains of the "Separate Voyages" were to find a footing in India, it must be under the shelter of a strong native government. The march of the Moghul Empire southwards, at the end of the sixteenth century, gave them their chance. Leaving the direct route from Africa to Malabar, they struck northeast to the Gulf of Cambay, on whose coasts the Moghul Emperor Akbar had imposed his rule, between 1572 and 1592. Encamping at Rajapur on the Bombay Coast formed a chief inlet of the Arabian commerce for the yet unconquered kingdoms of the South. In vain the Company's servants at Surat protested and tried to found a rival station in the South. Captain Weddell secured by lavish gifts the support of the King of Bijapur, and began to plant factories along the coast. The sagacity of his selection is proved by the part which these factories played in the subsequent annals of the Company. From home the Surat factory could get no succour, nor any certain sound from their distracted masters, then in their desperate struggle with the court cabal. We have seen that fifty-seven ships and eighteen pinnaces had been sent out for port to port trade alone, during the twelve years ending 1629. The Company's records, which during the same period abound in journals of voyages to and from India, preserve only eight such documents for the thirteen disastrous years from King Charles's grant to Courten's Association in 1635 to his Majesty's death in 1649.

But the factors of the Company at Surat, although left to ruin, asserted their vitality in a wholly unexpected manner. They practically kept up the trade on their own account, continued to patrol the pilgrim highway, and maintained an attitude at once so reasonable and so resolute that the Moghul government repented of having punished them for the piracy of their rivals.

As the emperor used the English to check the piracy of the Portuguese, so he employed them to bring it to an end. The Portuguese had continued to plunder Moghul ships, subject to such

reprisals as the English could inflict on them. But the English president at Surat had now made a treaty on his own account with the Goa viceroy: Why should he not also include in it the Indian government? In 1639 the Surat Council found themselves raised into negotiators between the Moghul governor and the Portuguese. The degenerate successors of Albuquerque and the halfbreed corsairs of Goa for a time transferred their piracies from the Mecca route to the Bay of Bengal, and the cold shadows which had fallen on the Surat factory were again warmed into prosperity under the sunshine of the Moghul court.

However low the fortunes of the Company sank under king or Commonwealth in England, the Surat factory grew with a strength of its own. In 1657, on account of the prosperous condition of that factory, the Company decided that there should be but one presidency in India – and that Surat. I have narrated at some length the rise of the Surat factory for several reasons. It formed the first headquarters of the English in India – a centre of English control in the East which had a vitality in itself apart from the Company in London, and which won by its Persian Gulf victory our first revenue grant – the Customs of Gombroon – and profoundly influenced our later settlements on the Indian continent. It also illustrates the position which the English quickly secured in the economy of the Moghul Empire: as a sure source of revenue, a sea-police for the coast, and the patrol of the ocean path to Mecca, gradually developing into negotiators on behalf of the native government. Surat forms the type of an early English settlement under the strong hand of the Moghul emperors.