

Lecture-6



Settlements: Surat, Madras, Bombay and Calcutta

SETTLEMENTS OF SURAT

Surat, the emporium of this ocean inlet and the capital of Gujarat, lies on a bend of the Tapti where the stream sweeps abruptly westward toward the sea. The name Surat is the modern representative of the ancient province of Surashtra, which at one time included not only Gujarat but part of Kathiawar.

In ancient times the city was the chief maritime centre of India, and Ptolemy, about 150 B.C., speaks of the trade of Pulipula, which has been identified with Phulpada, the old sacred part of Surat town. In course of time, however, the silt-bearing currents of its river and sand-laden ocean tides blocked its approach to medieval shipping, although they formed a roadstead. protected by mud-banks at Suwali, near the river mouth. Gujarat was cut off from the Moghul base in Northern India by mountains and deserts, and its annexation to the Moghul Empire cost twenty years of war, from 1572 to 1592. The work of conquest was rudely interrupted by revolts, which flared up afresh in the early years of the seventeenth century; but the long arm of the empire at length prevailed, and just as the anarchy ended the English came upon the scene.

In 1607, Captain William Hawkins, of the third "Separate Voyage," landed at Surat with a letter from James I to the Moghul Emperor Jahangir, and proceeded to the court at Agra. But the magnificent monarch of India did not take seriously the proffers of an unknown island-king brought by a ship's captain. Such European influence as then existed at the Moghul capital was entirely Portuguese; and, after four years, Hawkins returned to Surat with a native wife, but without any grant for trade.

Meanwhile the local governor of Surat had allowed some of Hawkins's followers to remain there, apparently as a set-off to the Portuguese, who formed an unruly element at the roadstead. In 1609 a shipwrecked crew of our fourth "Separate Voyage" also claimed shelter. This Moghul governor, whether "bribed by the Portugals" or merely afraid lest he should have too many of the European infidels on his hands, discreetly refused. The poor sailors had to make their way home, part of them by way of Lisbon, by the clemency of the Portuguese, who were only too glad to get rid of them. The accounts which thus reached England from Surat, of its settled government under the cegis of the Great Moghul, and of its opportunities

for trade, determined the Company to effect a settlement at its port. In 1611 Sir Henry Middleton, of the sixth "Separate Voyage," landed at Suwali in spite of the Portuguese, although they had compelled him to do business by exchanging cargoes in the roadstead.

The Moghul governor, while still refusing us a factory, allowed some trade. Next year, 1612, Captain Best with the old Red Dragon, and the little Hosiander routed the Portuguese squadron that commanded the approaches to Surat, while the Moghul governor looked on from the shore. A month's hard fighting destroyed forever the Indian legend of the Portuguese supremacy over other Europeans.

The gallant Captain Best would have been satisfied with his victory, but he had with him a man who was resolved that England should reap its full results. Thomas Aldworth, factor and merchant, improved the momentary congratulations of the Moghul governor into a grant for our first settlement in India.

"Through the whole Indies," Aldworth wrote to the Company in 1613, "there cannot be any place more beneficial for our country than this, being the only key to open all the rich and best trade of the Indies."

With a handful of English merchants in an unfortified house he struggled through the reaction against us which followed the departure of Best's ships, until Downton's sea-fight two years later established for ever our superiority at Surat over the Portuguese.

Downton's feat of arms proved, unexpectedly, to be a great strategic victory. He had cut in half the Portuguese line of communication along the Indian coast. That line was held by Goa as its southern, and by Diu as its northern, base; and between the two by a squadron, which assured to Portugal the traffic of Surat and its presidency.