

Gujarat's Maritime History: From the Harappan Civilisation to the Coming of the Europeans

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the historical journey of Gujarat's vibrant maritime connections from the Indus Valley civilisation till the arrival of the Europeans. It argues that the state's strategic location served as a gateway, an outlet and a transit point and thus facilitated a rich exchange of goods, culture and ideas from different parts of the world. In addition to bustling trade and commerce, this period also witnessed excellence in ship-building and navigation techniques, other marine activities and a confluence of seaward and landward ethos and cultures. While this significantly contributed to the development of India's eclectic maritime landscape bearing influences of seafarers, coastal communities and travellers, the arrival of the Europeans, especially the Portuguese, set the stage for competition, conquest and supremacy over the sea. This heralded a new chapter in the history of the western Indian Ocean. This study helps to understand the significance of Gujarat as a maritime actor, in particular, in India's maritime history and also its broader contribution to the field of maritime studies.

Keywords: Gujarat, India, maritime history, trade, Harappan civilisation

Introduction

As maritime studies is on ascendance in the world, a clear and comprehensive narrative helps to place contemporary studies and views on the subject in perspective. Within maritime studies, the Indian Ocean holds substantial significance, as it has been a major means of connecting Africa and Asia. This article looks at the maritime history of Gujarat from the beginning of the Harappan civilisation to the coming of the Europeans. This relatively long period of around 2,000 years shows a similar pattern with varying intensities – seas were seen as means of connections and finding new resources, a spirit of curiosity and intrigue in the people on both sides of the ocean which took them beyond their terrestrial limits, and an openness to conduct trade and form cultural relations with distant parts of the world.

Oceans have served as sources of subsistence and wealth. Though they are challenging, they also serve as conduits of interaction. They have been used to explore the unknown and to achieve political and economic domination.¹ If looked at history closely, it can be observed that numerous activities ranging from fishing for survival, to economic enterprises like trade and commerce to philosophical ones like exchange of ideas and spread of religions, have taken place through the seas. It has played a crucial role in developing and prospering humanity by being a resource and has served as means to

connect humans and civilisations. Though man is a terrestrial being and therefore, tends to be land bound, the fact is equally true that the earth contains water on three-fourths of its surface area and hence, makes an impact on human life.² Slowly and gradually, as people came to grips with the world, they found sources in the sea which they could utilise like fish and conch shells. And thereafter, began their quest for adventure and discovery to know more about the world. With spirit and courage, the sea became a road to exploration, new knowledge, prosperity, and conquests.

Because of these exploratory voyages, this aqueous mystery became a great medium for interaction amongst people, for commercial and cultural contacts, as well as wars.³ These connections forged new relationships, brought people closer and most importantly, created trade links and made the world a more connected and accessible place. With trade, also travelled new ways of living, novel artefacts, thought processes, engagements and lifestyles. These worlds got interlinked through these connections like never before. It made ways for prosperity, openness, conquest, and domination. Depending on the location, availability of resources, needs of the people and their skills, the sea entered the lives of the people and manoeuvred them, bringing in new things. This opening of the world was education to the people – in terms of geography, culture, trade and very importantly, military security.

Apart from advantage for trade and voyages, India's geographical position also provides it strategic advantage for maritime dominance. Being at the centre of South Asia, it connects with Arabia and Africa on the west and Southeast Asia on the east. The Indian Ocean gives India a prominent position in the southern hemisphere and, interestingly, amongst all the oceans in the world, the Indian ocean is surrounded by land the most,⁴ has been called an 'embayed ocean' and even likened to a 'land-locked sea'. Also, its orientation is east-west rather than north-south.⁵ This makes it accessible from various points. All along the long coastline of more than 7,500 kms on both the sides, rich social, economic, and cultural connections exist through expeditions and people have made use of this route to their advantage. Thus, people on both sides of the coast have their own sea-histories. In fact, in his history of the Indian Ocean, Michael Pearson argues that maritime history "*needs to be amphibious, moving easily between land and sea*".⁶

India has been an important point of sea-trade route in the South-Asian region since ancient times. Ancient India's maritime trade began with the Indus Valley civilisation which started having maritime journeys by 2,900 BCE. The peninsular location of India made it suitable for several trade routes and also, ports. The sub-continent hosted some of the busiest ports of the era.⁷ Blessed with a large coastline, Gujarat was the gateway for India to the Middle East and other parts. Connecting India with the rest of the world, it was also the 'Gateway of Maritime Commerce'. It provided an outlet to the northern plains of India as well as to central India till Pataliputra.⁸

As far as trade was concerned, recent advances in research firmly establish that the Indian Ocean was navigated for centuries, if not millennia, before 1500 CE.⁹ It seems evident that the authorities in India knew of the revenue bearing potential of trade including overseas trade which would supplement its income.¹⁰ Its maritime activities extended from Gujarat in the west to Kaling in the east.¹¹ The Indian river deltas were favourable for navigation and the distributaries linked with estuarine mouths developed a number of ports. It is also

believed that sometime during the middle of the first century BCE, sailors learnt to utilise the monsoon trade winds to shorten their journeys.¹² This understanding of the monsoon winds was a crucial factor in developing trade as it made the means of transport more efficient and faster, making foreign lands easily accessible. Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, a great advocate for the role of wind in world history, regards the Indian Ocean as “*the world’s most benign environment for long-range voyaging because of the monsoon*”.¹³

Crossing the boundaries of contemporary nation states is crucial to understand the history of any region holistically.¹⁴ Like all the other South-Asian regions, Gujarat also has its unique history. It was a coastal gateway to India, South Asia, and South-East Asia, and, its sea-route was a significant entry point and, a meeting point of different communities and professions many a time. Discoverers, wanderers, travellers, crusaders, and traders, all approached South Asia and India through Gujarat’s coastline especially, through the two Gulfs of Kachchh and Khambhat (then known as Cambay). This paper particularly focusses on the maritime history of the present-day Gujarat state, situated on the western front of India and discusses its vibrant maritime journey beginning from the Indus Valley Civilisation to the coming of the Europeans. During these 2,000 years approximately, Gujarat saw a rich legacy of trade, people-to-people connections, and maritime conquests. These practices and interactions shaped the spirit, attitude, and status of present-day Gujarat. In fact, according to one author, those who wished to plunder the wealth of Hindustan bid to control the ports of Gujarat.¹⁵

There is a saying in the Sanskrit language which states that friendship and debate are possible only among the knowledgeable; it’s not possible between an ignorant and a wise person. In a similar vein, trade is possible between two prosperous entities. Therefore, trade in Gujarat existed with other countries and civilisations as they were well to do as well. This is to highlight the fact that Gujarat could not have prospered without them. The cultural values of Gujarat which promoted non-violence, peace and tolerance also helped in its trade ambitions. Foreigners have even appreciated this value of the Gujaratis.¹⁶

The study of seas is unique as they transcend national boundaries and allow studying history in the *longue durée*. Maritime studies scholars have used approaches like multi-sited ethnography to capture the social construction of space and connections between land, ship and sea that defy a binary categorisation of local, national and global.¹⁷ One means to study them is as network studies which is an emerging approach to study interconnectedness. This serves as an organising principle for the multiple intellectual connections across the ocean.¹⁸ The overview of the study of the Indian Ocean till 1500 CE shows that network studies is a useful approach to study it, as one can see a number of layers overlapping and resulting in a complex mosaic of trade relations, cultural networks, religious exchange and intellectual conversations. The profusion of interactions actually formed a commercial, cultural and intellectual ‘network’. This article is an extensive study of secondary resources and weaves a rich narrative on vibrant maritime exchange of the state located in western part of India. It uses a qualitative and descriptive method to explore significant milestones and shifts in Gujarat’s seafaring, trading and other maritime activities. The article has also used archival data available in Gujarati language to decipher the ideas and practices that shaped Gujarat’s maritime history.

Trade

Gujarat's trade history goes centuries back to the Indus Valley Civilisation. There has been enough archaeological evidence to prove this. There have also been stories from religious texts and mythology mentioning and discussing matters related to the sea in India.¹⁹ To cite an example, the *Rigveda* talks about Varuna, the Lord of the Seas the *Puranas* talk about the story of *Samudra Manthan* (the churning of the ocean), and the Manusmriti provides for shipping laws.²⁰ Thus, issues related to the sea and the resources have been a part of the Indian imagination since long. India abounds with stories from mythology and even without delving into their historicity, it is important to acknowledge that these stories, anecdotes, and events have a great hold over the Indian psyche. They form an important part of people's everyday lived realities. They shape the way people think, live, and even practice their politics. Therefore, it would be useful to begin from the mythological connections Gujarat's sea route possesses. It is believed that Lord Krishna moved his capital from Mathura in the north of India to Dwarka on the coast of Gujarat after which the region attained maritime prosperity through trade, employment, and exchange of commodities. It is also mentioned in the Harivansh Purana that the opulence of the Yadavas (Lord Krishna's dynasty) was owing to sea-trade.²¹

Moving on from mythology, ancient Gujarat played an active role in India's maritime history and its maritime history is linked more with the history of India than only with its own.²² Going back to the earliest times, Gujarat was an important part of the Silk Route. On it lay the Kamboja-Dwarka route, which began at the seaport of Dwarka. This route connected the kingdom of Kamboja to today's Afghanistan and Tajikistan via Pakistan, thus making an opening for India to Central Asia. The strategic location of the Silk Route and its ports, connected markets of China with Europe and the Gulf. Bharuch was one port from Gujarat which benefitted immensely from this route. In fact, Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to India in 2014 started from Gujarat which was a symbolic homage to the state as it needs to be a crucial part of his dream of the 'New Chinese Silk Route Project'.²³

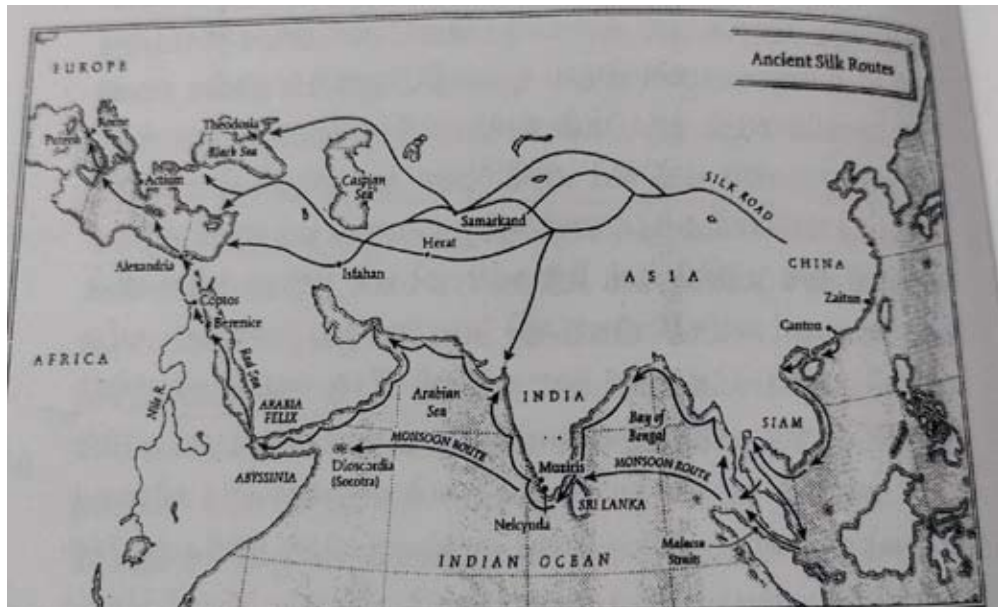
The famous Gujarati writer Gunvantrai Acharya in his novel, *Sarkkarbar* says,

"Like beads in a string – be it Kachchh, Saurashtra, Gujarat, or Hindostan – for a thousand years, the Darialal [sea] has played a fundamental role in the history of Gujarat; and therefore, the sea is indeed worthy of study and thought".

He further warns, "[t]hose who ignore the sea will never completely understand our region or country's history".²⁵ According to the American historian Michael Pearson,

*"The Arabian Sea, a region of the Indian Ocean, has played an important part in shaping the maritime history of Gujarat. Both in terms of cultural and commercial exchange, Gujarat was meaningfully linked with West Asia, Southeast Asia, China and Africa since the third millennia".*²⁶

Its location and long coastal boundary contributed greatly to it having good relations with other countries. It enjoys a pride of place for a very long tradition of its orientation

Figure 1 - Ancient Silk Route: Land and Sea

Source: Makrand Mehta, 'Praacheen Silk Route: Jameenmaarge ane Dariyaayi Maarge' (Ancient Silk Route: Land and Sea)²⁴

to the sea, especially in the western Indian Ocean. Endowed with a long coastline extending from Kathiawad to Daman, it also had a distinguished position as a trading zone. It was a leading commercial zone in Western India.²⁷ The three regions of Gujarat - Kutch, Kathiawad and Peninsular Gujarat claim a glorious maritime heritage of over five millennia, creating a niche of their own with trade in different products across the world.

To what extent the Indian Ocean and its commerce affected a specific region was proportionate to that region's degree of participation in oceanic activities.²⁸ Gujarat was actively involved in all kinds of commercial and cultural activities. Owing to linkages and commerce between Greece, Rome, Egypt and the Ottoman empire in the West and Java, Sumatra, Malacca and China in the East, it was the centre in the Indian Ocean for centuries and also anchored the Harappan civilisation. Factors like a productive landscape, people's spirit for risk, hard work and courage, and a stable political environment contributed to the commercial development of Gujarat.²⁹ Structural practices and the milieu of the port states were also an important aspect.³⁰ Pre-modern Gujarat was known for its crops, including some commercial crops. There were some important rivers present which fertilised the land and offered vital links to the sea. It also manufactured various craft products, especially textiles. Its ports made it one of the most significant maritime zones in the extended Indian Ocean history.³¹

Gujarat was concentric to the early modern Indian Ocean world. This centrist position not only put it very well in touch with the remaining parts of the world but also made it a linking point for the East and the West. To quote an example, Cambay stretched

out two arms – one each towards Aden and Melaka.³² There are diverse sources which point towards the cosmopolitan nature of Indian ocean trade like Sanskrit inscriptions, Arabic travelogues and European records. Together, they give a sense of the development and complexity of various mercantile networks across the ocean. Trade routes were also underpinned by religious and cultural movements.³³ Gujarat's port commanded a sizeable hinterland, reaching Ujjayini in western Madhya Pradesh and northern Konkan, the Ganga-Yamuna doab through eastern Gujarat, Rajasthan and finally, the Bayana-Bharatpur-Agra axis. It also reached out to the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea area. While Bengal became the gateway on the east for north India, Gujarat provided the outlet to the sea at the western end.³⁴ It had many safe harbours, accessible ports, and a rich and vast hinterland.³⁵ Gujarati seafarers and traders were featured regularly in the maritime history of the Indian Ocean.³⁶ Factors which contributed to the success of Gujarati traders were many – dependable and safe ports and the business environment, well-developed business practices, the structure of trade, a tradition of sailing, shipbuilding and navigational techniques, availability of marine insurance, a growing demand for textiles abroad and commercial connections between artisans and merchants.³⁷ The commercial cycles of the Indian Ocean were shaped by the economic and political situations of many major markets like East Africa.³⁸

Gujarat's early history is decoded mainly through folk-literature, travelogues and archaeological evidences monumental, epigraphic and numismatic.³⁹ The idea of Gujarat as a unified geographical space emerged during the Chalukya dynasty covering all areas such as Anarta (north Gujarat), Lata (central and south Gujarat) and Saurashtra, Kutch.⁴⁰ Scholars differ on chronology of the "urbanised mature Harappan Gujarat" followed by the "post-urban late Harappan phase" due to insufficient data and methodological problems to corroborate this evolutionary approach. Low number of excavations is a challenge to understand the precise chronological relationship between different phases of Harappan civilisation and the links between urban settlements of Kutch to the rural, agrarian and pastoral settlements of Saurashtra and Gujarat plains.⁴¹

The Indus Valley Civilisation Period

The Indian coastline is dotted with various physical features like lakes, estuaries, and lagoons that favoured the development of ports where vessels could be anchored. There are references to two types of seaports - *Pattana* and *Dronimukha* in ancient Indian texts.⁴² Examples of *Pattanas* (port towns near the coast or a river) include Visakhapatnam, Masulipattinam and Nagapattinam. Dwarka in Gujarat is an example of *Dronimukha*, a port situated near the confluence of the river and the sea. Archaeological excavations have revealed evidence of various types of maritime structure like jetties, docks, boat shelters, warehouses, landing places for boats etc.⁴³

The most striking feature of Gujarat's maritime history is its level of development during the Indus Valley period. Maritime culture was highly developed during this period. There were maritime contacts with the Sumerians and the Mesopotamians. It, arguably, also developed the world's first dock at Lothal.⁴⁴ Amongst the major coastal zones of India, Gujarat has a marked presence as it experiences the longest history of extra-continental

contacts and exchanges. Starting from the third millennium BCE, material evidence has been found by marine archaeologists showing connections between the Harappan and the Mesopotamian civilisations.⁴⁵ Port towns have existed in Gujarat since 3rd or 2nd millennium BCE (the Bronze Age) indicating the presence of an active marine trade.⁴⁶ All the parts of Gujarat – Kutch, Kathiawad and Peninsular Gujarat boasts a great maritime heritage of over 5,000 years. The pre-modern ports in the sub-continent were located not exactly on the sea-front but situated inland in the estuary or delta of a river. Thus, Lothal was on Sabarmati, Barygaza in the Narmada delta, Cambay on the Mahi and Surat on the Tapi/Tapti.⁴⁷ There is overwhelming evidence that commercial contacts existed between inhabitants of the Indus Valley and the peoples of countries abroad, such as Sumer, Egypt and Crete, not to mention others in Central Asia and Persia.⁴⁸ The coast of Gujarat is marked with several creeks and seasonal rivers which facilitated sturdy harbours all along the coast. The water was rich in marine resources such as shells, which were a major source of economy.⁴⁹

The first important port in Gujarat was Lothal, which flourished during the days of the Bronze Age Harappan civilisation from c.2600-1800 BCE.⁵⁰ Lothal is considered as the oldest port in India and was an important city of the Indus Valley civilisation. It is located in today's Bhal region of Gujarat. In Lothal, a mound, a township, a marketplace as well as a dock have been found, which confirms the existence of a port there.⁵¹ Archaeologists believe that Lothal is one of the earliest docks in the world and it connected the city to a trade route that passed through the Sabarmati River. It connected the Harappan cities and the Saurashtra peninsula. The engineers who built the port meticulously analysed the location and the movements of tides before constructing the port structures built of bricks. They selected an appropriate place which could give space to the vessels reaching the highest tidal amplitude of the Gulf of Cambay to pass through the flow tides in the estuary of the river. The dock also had a lock-gate system, passages made of bricks as well as ramps so that loading could be carried out easily.⁵² The measurements of the yard suggest that either it must have been used for large-size vessels or as a boat pen for a number of small crafts.⁵³ It mostly saw the export of jewellery, textiles, and mineral ores. Historical documents suggest the journey of valuable ornaments from Lothal to countries in West Asia and Africa.⁵⁴

Lothal is situated at the head of the Gulf of Cambay in the estuary of the Sabarmati and Bhogwa rivers. The excavation of these southern-most sites of the Harappan civilisation has brought a change in historical notions. Before that, the Indus Valley civilisation was believed to be a land-locked civilisation. Lothal has been described as a mooring station for merchant vessels and an entrepot for trade with Mesopotamia.⁵⁵ Apart from Lothal, the main centres of maritime trade were Kuntasi, Padri, Nageshwar, Bagasara, and many others. There were also several coastal towns which engaged in international trade and commerce including Beyt Dwarka, Somnath, Hathab, Vallabhi and Bharuch. There is archaeological evidence to show that the Gulf of Kachchh and the Gulf of Khambhat witnessed major maritime activity.⁵⁶

In 3700 BC, Lothal dock connected Sabarmati to trade routes in Sindh. In its hinterland were stored rich rice, cotton, and wheat. The people living there sent out agricultural and marine products and got in raw materials such as gemstones and metals for personal

consumption and manufacturing industries. A wide network of maritime trade existed between the Harappan and the Mesopotamian civilisations from the middle Harappan phase and the trade was handled by middlemen merchants from 'Dilmun' (modern Bahrain and Failaka). This long-distance sea-trade was possible because of the development of the plank-built watercraft, carrying a single central mast.⁵⁷

Besides Lothal, Bharuch was also an important port referred as Barygaza in the ancient Greek and Roman classics from this period.⁵⁸ It was also one of the most salient cosmopolitan cities in the world, located at the mouth of the river Narmada. Historians have calculated this port's history and ship-building to as far as the era of the Pharaohs. It also made use of monsoon winds and was a terminus for many sea-trade routes.⁵⁹ Barygaza was not a place where only cargoes landed, but was also a market centre. It imported both raw materials such as glass, copper, tin and lead and more expensive goods like wine, silverware, clothing etc. It provided an outlet for Chinese cloth and also for a variety of cotton textiles, silk yarn, long pepper and other items brought from the surrounding areas.⁶⁰ Merchants from Barygaza, as a custom, traded with Oman and places in the Gulf of Persia and brought in copper and logs of teak and ebony. Items exported from Barygaza included herbs, gum resin (probably transported from Kashmir), ivory, agate, carnelian, silk and cotton cloth, long pepper and others. Even the Malabar coast depended on Greek shipping and traffic from Ariake or Gujarat for its prosperity.⁶¹ Pliny also talks about Barygaza importing silverware, coral, wine, sweet clover and perfumes from the Mediterranean and glass, clothing and styrax from Egypt.⁶²

Sea-borne trade played an important role in the economic growth of the Harappan civilisation.⁶³ Talking about the excavations of the Indus Valley civilisation, the sites at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa have revealed enough evidence to support that there was a lot of maritime activity then. They have also been found to eat fish (both fresh water as well as sea). This also indicates inshore sea-faring and, interestingly, the Harappa hinterland and the dock have been dated to be of the same time. The Harappans must have been venturesome sea-farers from the sea-coast of India or the Persian Gulf as artefacts like shell-bangles and mother of pearl shells have been found along these coasts. The ingots found at Mohenjodaro and Lothal were different, indicating that the two places were getting copper from two different sources. Amongst the many seals discovered during excavation of Harappan sites, one showed an anchor, indicating the use of anchors and sea going deep-water boats and ships. Padri, situated a kilometre away from Bhavnagar, has also shown evidences of exploration of marine resources including a copper fishhook, whose length is 14 cm and has a weight of 45 grams. Such large hooks were probably used to catch large marine fish weighing more than 50 kg. This indicates that the Harappan of Padri had learnt the technique of deep fishing well. Apart from these sites, Dholavira is another site which shows signs of marine activity.⁶⁴ The remains of a jetty have been found at the mouth of the river Shetrunji near the village of Sultanpur. This was primarily a wooden jetty which got abandoned as new ports emerged in the surrounding.⁶⁵ Port ruins have also been found at Dholavira, Surkotda, Kuntasi and Lothal from different periods of the Indus Valley civilisation.⁶⁶

A pots-herd painting has been found at Mohenjo-Daro, dated as far back as 3,000 B.C. It portrays the drawing of a boat of that time. This drawing has striking similarities with

those found in the early pottery of Egypt, and with Minoan seals and cylinders found in Sumer.⁶⁷ Food must have been transported for various reasons including covering up food-shortages or certain foods acquiring ritual or elite status. To highlight the strategic location of Gujarat, it is important to note that though black pepper came from south India and long pepper from north India, most probably, they were shipped from the west of India - Bharuch or Barygaza.⁶⁸ The extensive trading networks of Gujarat brought a variety of commodities to the sub-continent and made the economy vibrant and monetised.⁶⁹

The different ports that have been excavated are Todio Amra in Kutch, Lakhabawal near Jamnagar, Kindarkhera near Porbandar and Prabhas near Veraval. Anchors have also been found indicating deep-water craft and sea-going missions. The dock at Lothal has been found to be 11 feet (3.30 metres) deep. This depth might have been maintained to save the dock from floods and siltation. There have also been other engineering calculations at the dock. The excessive pressure of water on the outer surface of the walls made of bricks was taken care of by providing off-sets which acted as wave-breakers and by building a thick eastern wall, which faced the maximum pressure of water.⁷⁰

Dwarka was the first site in India where marine archaeological exploration was commenced. Identical ring stones have been found from Dwarka and Oman.⁷¹ Similar anchors have been found in Dwarka and other places of Saurashtra.⁷² These show the continuity and coordination between different maritime stations. A small coastal village known as Mell Dwarka near Kodinar in the district of Junagadh is one of the claimants of the original Dwarka of Mahabharata. Locally, this structure is known as *Diva Dandi* which means a lighthouse. If this structure really served as a lighthouse, then this could be the remains of the oldest lighthouse on the Saurashtra coast. Also, apart from the similarity in stone anchors, Harappan and late Harappan settlement sites have been found in close proximity to each other.⁷³

The Harappan civilisation has been mentioned as Meluha in Sumerian literature. Mesopotomian texts have called Meluha as the land of seafarers. Excavations at Ras al-Jinz (Sultanate of Oman) have showed evidence of a direct connection between Lothal and other Indian coastal site through the sea. Interestingly, a painted jar found in the present day Oman is found to be inscribed with four Harappan characters. Conversely, materials from the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf region have been found at Harappan settlements. The Harappans created many sea-ports and dockyards for their maritime activities. There have been found boat models made of terracotta from Lothal and engravings on Indian seals.⁷⁴ After the cities of the Indus Valley civilisation got abandoned, Gujarat's relations with other countries broke down considerably. Both oceanic and riverine trade and navigation again sped up in the Mauryan period from 321 BCE to 180 BCE.⁷⁵ However, after the decline of the ancient Harappan or the Indus Valley civilisation, maritime trade also declined. It revived after many centuries with Sumer, Phoenicia, Egypt, Rome and Greece, East Africa, and Sri Lanka.⁷⁶

The post-Indus Valley Civilisation Period

The Mauryan empire (321 to 185 BC) had extensive contacts with the Greek kingdom and had a maritime aspect carried out by its occupation of Gujarat, Kathiawad, and the

Figure 2 - Major and intermediate ports of Gujarat

Source: Makrand Mehta, 'Adhunik Gujarat na Bandaro' (Ports of Modern Gujarat)⁷⁷

Konkan coast. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and the writing of Megasthenese give information about the Board of Shipping and the Commissioner of Ports who looked after sea traffic. There was also a post of *Navadhyaksha* (Superintendent of Shipping) who took care of shipping administration.⁷⁸

A long time ago before the Europeans 'discovered' India, traders from Arabia, Gujarat and other coastal areas were already using triangle sailed *dhow*s (a type of boat) to harness the energy of seasonal monsoon winds. The term *dhow* first occurs in documents of the East India Company to mention the traditional sailing craft.⁷⁹ Therefore, foreign travel and venturing afar was not an innovative concept for the sub-continent, introduced to them by the Europeans. In fact, long before them, the South Asians had become adept at it, owing to sense of adventure and a business acumen. These mechanized *dhow*s, functioning as an economy of arbitrage⁸⁰, continue to transport food items, dried fish, livestock, diesel, and charcoal through the old Indian Ocean routes where large container ships find it difficult to navigate. They have also played a crucial role in servicing minor ports in times of conflict, as illustrated during crisis in Yemen and Somalia.⁸¹

Another very important factor in the success of coastal trade was the domestication of camel, since coastal trade goods required a means of transport, camels proved to be an ideal medium. Available locally and abundantly on coastal areas, well-adapted to the hardships of sand, able to withstand difficulties of food and water and carry a considerable amount of load, camels proved to be a highly fruitful animal to carry goods after reaching the shores.

understood as one of his chief military successes. He won over Saurashtra and Malwa because of which several ports were opened up in the east and the west, which made trade and commerce possible.

The sea routes were not only used commercially but sometimes also as escape routes. Around 600 AD in Gujarat, the Saka kings could sense their doom. They started looking for a refuge outside India and finally, found a haven in Java. They started from Gujarat and landed on its west coast. Along with the kings, a huge group of other common people also came to the island who became the first wave of migrants from the west India in Java. This group of people contributed immensely to the spread of Indian art and culture abroad.⁸⁵ The sea was a route – surely for commerce and trade, but it also became a means of refuge in times of distress. There aren't many such recorded cases in Gujarat's history, but this one case surely reflects an instance where the sea became a medium of travel to find a new lease of life.

In the book, *History of Java*, Sir Stamford Raffles wrote,

*“In the year 525 Saka era (603 AD), it is being foretold to a king of Gujarat that his country would decay and go to ruin, he resolved to send his son to java. He embarked with about 5,000 followers in 6 large and about 100 small vessels, and after a voyage of four months, reached an island they supposed to be Java; but finding themselves mistaken, re-embarked, and finally settled at Matarem, in the center of the island they were seeking... The prince then found that men alone were wanting to make a great and flourishing state. He accordingly applied to Gujarat for assistance, when his father, delighted at his success, sent him reinforcement of 2,000 people....From this period, java was known and celebrated as a kingdom; and extensive commerce was carried on with Gujarat and other countries, and the bay of Matarem was filled with adventurers from all parts”.*⁸⁶

Contrary to the case mentioned above where a king left the place to save himself, around a hundred and fifty years later in 756 AD, the ruling kings reigned supreme over the sea and were known as *Apara Samudradhipati* which means masters of the Western Sea. There was a Saindhava chief – Pushyadeva of Jayadratha dynasty, who was under the Pratihara empire and ruling a state in Kathiawad. During this time, there was a sea-borne attack by the Arabs on the Sind. The Saindhava chief successfully saved themselves from this attack. A re-attempt of this was made by the Arabs in 776 AD but the Saindhavas were again successful in defeating them, and this time, once and for all. After this, the Arabs never attempted to attack India by sea.⁸⁷

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, biographical texts about prosperous merchants began to emerge on the literary scene. Texts celebrating them as *mahatmya* (great man) or *charita* (character-sketch) were written around their multiple achievements. Two such preeminent merchants of Gujarat were Vastupala and Jagadu who owned many ships and used them to travel to Persia, Arabia, and Africa. *Jagaducharita*, a biography written in verse form by Sarvananda Suri, talks about Jagadu's vast maritime trade empire of grains, cotton and spices. Both these merchants had immense wealth and were patrons of Jainism. The interesting and important thing is that they played the central character in a particular type of a literary genre which generally praised royal heroes.⁸⁸

Gogha was an ancient seaport on the mid-western shore of the Gulf of Khambhat. It was protected from the southwest monsoon, had a broad anchoring ground and therefore was an important seaport on the Arabian Sea till Bhavnagar developed itself in the 19th century. It was a tidal port and therefore, sailing vessels could moor and leave the harbour only during high tide. According to the Imperial gazetteer of India “*the natives of this town are reckoned the best sailors or lascars in India*”. There is archaeological evidence which shows that Arabs settled in Ghogha in the 7th century CE. Maritime activity reached its highest point in Gujarat during the medieval period (8th-14th C. AD). During this time, the Arab traders ruled the Indian Ocean for nearly a thousand years. Maritime activities in Beyt Dwarka reached its zenith during the ancient and medieval periods. It continued to be an important centre of maritime activity until the emergence of the Okha port in the Okhamandal area.⁸⁹

A merchant named Suleiman from Barsa, talked about the country of Jurz (Gujarat) in 851 AD. Apart from him, some other Arab travellers like Al Ishtakhri, Ibn Majid, Al Beruni, Ibn Haukal, Ibn Batuta and Al Idrisi have praised the sea trade of Gujarat (Kale). Talking about Cambay, the Arab traveller, Al-Masudi visited it in 913-914 CE and recorded, “*Khambhat enjoyed great fame for its semi-precious stones, which were very popular in the markets of Aden and mecca and in Baghdad*”. Another traveller, Al-Idrisi (1100 CE) also talks of it as a beautiful and popular naval station of Gujarat and its importance among the towns. According to Marco Polo, an Italian explorer, “*when merchants came to Cambay with their wares loaded on many ships, they bring, above all, gold, silver, and copper*”. The city reached its glory during the period of Sultan Muhammed Begda and traded with Persia, Arabia, and Africa in the west and China in the east. Finally, the trade saw a downfall in the 17th century when the navigational channel silted up and political disturbances appeared.⁹⁰

For products like spices, diamonds, pearls, precious stones, metal wires, rice, ghee, oil dates, ivory etc., India was considered a leading entity which was also highly reliable. At places like Muscat, Basra, Zanzibar, Mombasa, Daresalaam, Lamu etc., the chits given by Gujarat were considered as good as a bank statement. Gujarati businessmen were highly respected and valued.⁹¹ Baroach was a place which was occupied by *tizaratis* (traders) where Arabs also had their own centres of trade. Sopara was another city which was frequently visited by traders who were engaged in trading both commercial as well as household goods. It was a prosperous port on the western coast which attracted both the locals and Arabs for fishing and pearls. In a place called Sanjan, experienced businessmen and traders lived and enjoyed a prosperous life. An advantage that lay with this place was that the adjoining area was fertile and the farmers grew cereals which helped the traders settle down there.⁹²

Lotika Varadarajan points to the rich trading connection between Gujarat and Kerala. Gujarat was not only trading in the famous *patola* textile to Indonesia, but it had also become a hub for re-distribution of the Kerala black pepper and other south-east Asian good in markets of West Asia.⁹³ The *patola* fabric was called *Viralipattu* in Kerala and was worn by priests performing rituals in temples. Also, evidence from mural paintings of those times illustrate a cross-cultural connect as *patola* was also worn by Muslim clerics and Christian priests.⁹⁴

Culture

The Indian Ocean was not only a medium connecting different regions but it formed a wholesome zone of relations which was created by cross-cultural exchanges, and the movement of goods, ideas and people. It could not stay untouched from other aspects of life. Commercial routes starting from, ending at, and passing through Gujarat were also carriers of different facets of life like culture, religion, lifestyles, food and clothing etc. Traders and in some cases, conquerors who touched Gujarat left their impressions, in big and small ways. One such illustration is the religious architecture that throws light on the maritime cultural landscape of any region. Archaeological findings reveal an intricate connection between Gujarat's religious and maritime trade landscape. It manifests linkages with groups who travelled across the sea as well as those who used the interior routes.⁹⁵ Across any maritime landscape, one can see temples, mosques etc. The excavations at Padri in Gujarat's Bhavnagar district and a series of shrines along the Saurashtra coast with shops and markets, throw more light on how religion, social life and economic activity criss-crossed.⁹⁶ For example, there is an ancient mosque found in Gogha, which is locally called Baarwada *masjid* or *juni masjid* (old mosque). This is one of the oldest mosques in India.⁹⁷ Establishments like these display a sense of conviction from the side of the travelling communities. It indicates that they have convincingly settled in the new place, invested themselves and their resources and planned to continue their investments and stay. A sense of comfort and trust is also evident with such structures. The eclectic religious profile of the coastal communities also contributed to the trade in commodities like incense, oil etc., needed to perform various rituals and practices.

Sanjan situated on the northern bank of the Baroli river, is also the place where the Zoroastrians came in the 8th century CE after they fled Iran because of the Arab invasion.⁹⁸ Being the entry point of a vast sub-continent and because of its accommodating temperament, Gujarat provided refuge to a community in distress. This instance speaks volumes of Gujarat's open-heartedness and generous culture. It also strengthens the maritime credentials of Gujarat as it welcomed not only trade interests but also became a haven for distressed communities. A place can succeed commercially only if it considers the growth and interest of its people as well.

To consider another instance, Beyt Dwarka, Okhamandal Dwarka and Mul Dwarka have ancient temples dated 10th-12th C. AD. These institutions, apart from being temples, were also used as coastal marker points for navigators and points of worship by traders before beginning new journeys.⁹⁹ Such architectural points did not only act as stationary worshipping places for the local people living there but also as structures which imparted a message of cross-cultural interactions. Being used as navigation points, they proved to be secular and cosmopolitan structures of communication, utilised by sea-farers from all religion, regions, and communities. As starting points for long voyages, they would of course be considered auspicious places, but also points of get-together and congregation. Religious architecture, thus, apart from playing its fundamental role, also provided reasons for scientific development and progress.

Sea routes were used for religious travel along with commercial travel. As the Arabs and other Muslim communities settled in Gujarat after the 7th century, the Haj pilgrimage demanded sea travel from one or the other part of Gujarat.¹⁰⁰ However, the interesting point here is that this religious travel was an off-shoot of trade travel. Traders travelled from India to South-East Asia, and took Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism with them. These religions were promoted more by traders than by missionaries. When traders moved their commodities from one region of the world to another, they also took an aspect of themselves and, upon reaching the destinations, they passed on their cultures and religions. Islam later spread in the same way from 700 CE.¹⁰¹ Thus, the sea became a means of spreading religion, culture, ideas and most importantly of introducing new thoughts and ways of life. The coastal communities learned from the outside world, and were linked to the landward communities as well, resulting in an intriguing mix of seaward and landward ethos and cultures.¹⁰² The traders demonstrated exceptional ease in adapting to new and distant environments. During their stays, they transitioned between old and new identities, as well as between 'rootlessness' and reconnection to their homeland. A trader would rather be a Swahili-speaking Zanzibari of Indian ancestry than a diasporic Gujarati.¹⁰³

Most of the major ports in the western Indian Ocean were cosmopolitan. Gujaratis, Kachchhis, and others mixed with Arabs, Persians, Afghans, Turks, Jews, Armenians, Africans, and, eventually, Mughals and Europeans. All the communities did not live close together, and it did not result in the formation of a creole society, but it did bring about intimacy in language and customs. People of many religions, including Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, Christians, and animists, learned to tolerate one another. These commercial communities grew to be as diversified as they could. Furthermore, while promoting transregional trade, regional merchants were mentioned.¹⁰⁴ With the arrival of the Arabs after the 7th century, they coexisted with the natives peacefully. The Hindu king here appointed the *Hunaraman* (a designation for the Muslim head) showing trust between the communities. He also designated a Muslim official to look after Muslims' welfare. The administrative matters were overseen by a Hindu officer. The Muslim officer could issue decrees or judgements for Muslims. The Muslim community born of Indian people were known as *Biyasara*.¹⁰⁵

The Arabs came and settled on both big and small ports.¹⁰⁶ The well-educated ones started translating well-known Sanskrit works. This illustrated that they were getting acquainted with the local culture and were even interested in knowing more about it. Going to the extent of translation would involve learning the local language meticulously and showing interest in transferring local knowledge to their culture. This indicates not only tolerance, but even acceptance, adaptation, and amalgamation. If the Arabs were open to learning from Indian culture, the Indians were equally inviting and generous towards them. There are accounts of Arab merchant talking about the congeniality of Indian political authorities matching inscriptions from the West. Arab merchants settled there and maintained friendly relations with the local authorities and were also a part of social and cultural occasions.¹⁰⁷

An important role was played by the Arabs in Indian waters as seafarers right from the proto-historic period. Various accounts including the *Kitab-ul-Hind* give a great deal

of detail about the maritime activities of India with other countries. They also talk about the industries, distance between the port islands and gulfs, sea-routes, the population, animals etc. Sources belonging to post-10th century show that the entire west Indian coast was full of Arab traders' and shipmen's settlements. In the beginning, these were not permanent settlements and long-distance traders lived here waiting for the direction of the wind to change so that they could collect their items. With the increase in maritime activities, the Muslim community grew swiftly, and mingled with local people, either through conversion, or intermarriage.¹⁰⁸

Arab travellers, geographers, and historians have described India in general but have given vivid descriptions of the ports and coastal towns of Gujarat in particular. According to Al-Idrisi, Arab Muslims frequented Patan for trade and business. The Hindu officers were cordial to them and provided safety to them and their goods (*mal-o-asabab*). The Arabs took to prevalent local traditions, e.g., beef was prohibited. Apart from describing Patan, Idrisi has defined Cambay as a place of joy. Along with him, Masaudi and Yakut have described this town as a centre of attraction among Arab traders.¹⁰⁹

Besides the traders, there were also many coastal communities whose lives were also affected by activities on the sea. There were diverse maritime communities in western coastal India.¹¹⁰ Himanshu Prabha Ray argues that fishing and sailing communities formed an important aspect of maritime activity in the Indian Ocean. Because of their engagement with the sea, seafaring could continue. It is useful to know that the boats used in the Indian Ocean were made of coir-rope. Coconut palms were not available all throughout the coast and therefore, it is assumed that coir-rope would have been in demand at different places where boats would have been built. Hence, the manufacturing of the *dhow* (traditional watercraft) demanded trade and transportation of wood and coconut coir which created networks of interaction among the different coastal places.¹¹¹ This interaction would have been crucial for the existence and continuity of the coastal communities as exchange enables survival.

Long periods of intimate connection with the sea helped local seafaring communities like Kharawas, Memons and Kolis develop special skills and knowledge of seafaring in addition to indigenous navigational techniques. In the early days, they were transferred orally from one generation to the next within the communities whose traditional occupation was seafaring. This tradition continued for long and only around the 15th century, this wisdom was made into handwritten seamen manuals called '*pothis*' and diaries or '*roznamas*' of each voyage.¹¹² Writing down of seafaring knowledge must have been a major development in the sea-history of Gujarat as this would have coded and consolidated knowledge for the first time which would have helped the subsequent generations.

Gujaratis were successful traders, but they opted to lead modest lives and because of Gujarat's challenging environment, it became a defining aspect of their life. Additionally, they displayed a sense of unity in their business dealings. Apprenticeship was a key component of this business climate. In addition to providing funding to keep goods in circulation, they also provided training for aspiring business owners. This system of apprenticeship was nearly a must in order for the apprentice to gain business knowledge

and experience that would finally lead to independence.¹¹³ They were also an honest and reliable community. The trust was so high that people easily handed them over their money.¹¹⁴

Talking about the influence of international connections on language, there is a very famous proverb found from ancient Gujarat known as, *Lanka ni lari ane Ghogha no var* which translates as “bride from Lanka and groom from Ghogha”.¹¹⁵ This shows that Gujarat had cultural relations overseas and marital alliances took place between Ghogha (Gujarat) and Sri Lanka. This reflects the far-sightedness of Gujarat and the trust it vested in a foreign community. Also, having a marital alliance shows a sense of faith and openness with the other community and that Gujaratis did not shy away from taking bold and adventurous decisions.

Conclusion

Gujarat’s long and rich trading and cultural connections is a testimony to its significance, not only in the maritime history of India but also in the global maritime studies. Starting from the Indus Valley civilisation, it has been active in maritime affairs. It had trade connections as far as with the Mesopotamian civilisation, indicating its extent and maritime prosperity. It is also assumed that these partner civilisations were as prosperous because only a sense of equality can promote trade relations. Thus, Gujarat was not working in isolation. With the end of the Indus Valley civilisation, there was some break in the maritime activities of the region but then they were again revived during the Mauryan period. In subsequent period till the coming of the Europeans in the 17th century, it saw different actors utilizing the resources of Gujarat and making it a vibrant commercial and cultural hub. The empirical evidence and the historical survey of Gujarat’s emergence as a centre of mercantilism, modernity and urbanism, provides interesting insights into its power networks and ideas that established exchange and eclecticism.¹¹⁶ Some of these port towns were not only business and trading centres but also functioned as garrisoned military outposts to ward off external invasions via the sea.

The strategic location of Gujarat is the most important factor which has made it an important nodal point in the maritime history of India as well as South Asia. It has connected the western part of the world, namely Arabia and Africa with Southeast Asia. This also made the other parts of India approach the rest of the world as being a strategic coastal state, and provided an outlet to the Indian inlands. Thus, it not only did its own trade because of its open position, but also facilitated trade for other parts of India. It was considered the ‘gateway of maritime commerce’, an outlet and a transit point, becoming a very important location. All the foreign entities which wanted to enter India did so through Gujarat.

In addition to its strategic location, what else contributed to Gujarat’s maritime richness was political stability and the interest of the rulers in promoting trade. For a long period of time, Gujarat witnessed political stability with low friction. This made it conducive for trade to prosper. Also, as mentioned earlier, the rulers must have been aware of the income potential of both terrestrial and coastal trade and therefore, consistently engaged

it and incurred benefits. The people of the Indus Valley civilisation, the Mauryan kings, the Gupta kings and the subsequent leaders and communities made use of this opportunity and incurred benefits.

With these trade activities, the cultural landscape of Gujarat also grew. During the Indus Valley civilisation period, items of decoration and jewellery like carnelian stone, blue pottery etc. were transported. Items like these were valued in different parts of the world and similarly, artefacts which were not available in India, were brought in from outside. An important transfer was the transfer of religious thought. Jainism, Buddhism, and Islam travelled along with traders and were spread in different parts of the world. Different communities also settled in new places and accommodated themselves in the new environments.

Beginning from the Indus Valley civilisation, trade continued up to the coming of the Europeans. Apart from some small gaps intermittently, there were trade activities throughout the state. This continuity gave it advantage as it constantly stood out in the eyes of the world and also endured its trade potential according to the changing demands of the world. For instance, textile was one important product from Gujarat. In fact, clothes were so much in demand in Europe that the king of Italy said that they needed to stop buying cloth from Gujarat if they wanted to save their treasuries.¹¹⁷

Until the arrival of the Europeans, Gujarat's maritime space was a peaceful place. It engaged in trade, spread of religion, cultural exchange, and international cooperation.¹¹⁸ However, after the arrival of the Europeans, especially the Portuguese, competition and rivalry began. The Portuguese, the Dutch and later the British, who apparently initially came for trade, became competitive as they all vied for supremacy in the ocean to tap India's resource potential. Thus, from a peaceful place of trade, commerce, and cultural exchange, it became a place for rivalry. The power and authority of the local rulers now saw a face-off with these foreign entities. It was challenged and the space had to be continuously negotiated. The dynamics of the sea changed with these new players and new ambitions. The sea, which till now, was home to local authorities and some friendly foreign actors, now fell prey to alien powers. This began a new chapter in the history of the western Indian Ocean.

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