



From A 'musaffir' To The 'marifat' Of Urban Change: The Arabs And The Urban Cultural Landscape Of Coastal Western India

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Abstract:

Evolution, growth and decline of cities and the making of their urban cultural landscapes have been an integral area of research in historical geography. Though the physical geographical factors have always been stressed as the drivers of urban change, the modern urban historical geography has emphasised the human politico-economic factors as the strong force triggering the urban dynamics. The similar factors also play a seminal role in the evolution and structuring of the cultural landscape of the cities. The urban cultural landscape, thus, is viewed more as a reflection of the dominant economic and political factors at work in the given period of time. Coastal Western India, i.e. coastal Gujarat and Konkan, has experienced various phases of urban growth and decline during the making of its urban cultural landscape.

After the decline of the Mauryas and most importantly of the Buddhism during 3rd and 4th century AD, the region experienced its second phase of urban decline (first being after the fall of the Harappan system). Arabs emerged on the urban scene of the Coastal Western India during this period of urban decline and played an influential role in paving the way for the Indo-Islamic phase of urban cultural landscape. They not only infused life in the then dying urban landscape of the region but also got engaged in the rise of big cities like Cambay. A long period of residence of the Arabs in Coastal Western India marked the beginning of fresh set of cultural interaction between the locals and the Arabs. The Arabs fundamentally made a profound impact on the Gujarati and Marathi languages with the incorporation of Persian and Arabic loan words. The Arab cultural influence can also be seen in architecture, agriculture and industries of the then Coastal Western India. On this backdrop, the present paper attempts to gauge the nature of the Arab influence on the making of the urban cultural landscape of Coastal Western India.

KEYWORDS:

urban decline, urban cultural landscape, loan words

“Though modern Indian cities owe their position to a foreign mode of production, there were cities in India long before the machine age and before the feudal period. How did they develop out of prehistory?”

Damodar Kosambi
1972:53

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1. URBAN DECLINE IN THE MEDIEVAL COASTAL WESTERN INDIA

1.1 After the first phase of the urban decline (mainly experienced by the Harappas), the Western India started facing a second phase of decline of urban centers especially after 3rd century AD (Sharma, 1987). The first phase of urban decline was marked in the second half of 3rd/4th century with the loss of political control of the Kushanas and consequent decline of urban centers including those in Deccan. It is worth mentionable that this urban decline persisted even in the Gupta era, which is considered to be the golden period of Indian history. But during this period, long distance trade with Romans, Chinese and Parthian declined considerably. Loss of trade gave rise to loss of income to the state, merchants, artisans and others. Subsequently, lack of technological innovation failed to improve agricultural production in the hinterland of the erstwhile historical towns. Sharma (1987) argues that a social crisis arose out of this situation led to decay of the towns. The crisis affected a wide range of people, from the peasants to the city dwellers. The impact was seen on reduced tax collection, purchasing power and market activities. The second phase of urban eclipse got completed with the fall of Gupta Empire after 6th century AD. Decline of Buddhism also led to the decay of several towns that had grown with the religion. Markets of Broach and Sopara started shrinking and simultaneously the cities lost their functional space. Cotton producers, weavers and textile traders of Gujarat experienced the wrath of this decline resulting in reduction of trade activities with western and Southeast Asian markets. This social upheaval brought in the feudalization process (Sharma, 1965). The frequency of granting towns, shops and artisanal income increased among the rulers, which actually made the autonomy of artisans and merchants redundant. Guilds of artisans and merchants prevailing from ancient period turned into caste bound institutions with the above urban decay that led to political upheavals in the countryside, necessitating a larger portion of the revenue expenditure to be earmarked for military purpose. Simultaneously, the State started sharing its own responsibilities of policing with Brahmins and temple and monastery authorities. All these finally worked towards the formation of a Hindu brahmanical feudal polity in Western India.

1.2 Coastal Gujarat and especially Konkan were also no exception to this. Although trade continued for some time during Gupta period, there was no significant addition of new urban centers. A short-lived empire of Vallabhi (500 AD-770 AD) was established on the ruins of the Gupta Empire. However, their kingdom was taken over by the Chalukyas. North Konkan continued to be ruled by the Mauryas of Puri, while south Konkan was under the Kadambas of Vanavasi. Deccan, on the other hand, became the hotspot of struggle between the Chalukyas and the Rashtrakutas. By 600 AD, Gujarat was subjugated by the Gujara kings who received submission from the local chiefs of Kathiawar, Valabhi and Broach. Subsequently, the Chalukyas brought Deccan and Konkan under their control and established contacts with Iran sometime between 611 AD and 640 AD. However, they could not contribute towards strengthening an urban space in a significant way. Actually, it was the beginning of a new economy marked by urban contraction and agrarian expansion, which characterized the beginning of the early medieval period. It resulted in large-scale migration of Brahmins and craftsmen from declining urban centers to the countryside. Production of crafts and agriculture was picked up but got decentralised in a number of small towns spread over a large territory. The subsequent regrouping and reorganisation of social relationships led to the rise of class-based society along with spatial and occupational mobility of the artisans. De-urbanisation thus became a feature of classical feudalism (Sharma, 1987).

2. ARRIVAL OF THE ARABS ON THE URBAN SCENE

2.1 It was in the above backdrop that the appearance of Arabs in coastal Western India needs to be analyzed. Contemporary Arab geographers, familiar with Western India, had also mentioned about the above urban decline. Merchant Sulaiman (851 AD) had stated the absence of towns in greater part of Western India. Similarly, a comparison of Al Biruni's (1030 AD) list of towns in northern and Western India with that of Kushana and pre-Kushana towns clearly indicates a decline of many ancient urban centers (Ashrafyan, 1985; Sharma, 1987). It was not so that the Arabs in pre-Islamic period were not entirely acquainted with the sea. For centuries before the rise of Islam, people of southern Arabia had built ships and carried out maritime traffic in the Red sea and Indian Ocean (Lewis, 1950). Hourani (1951) and Tibbetts (1971)

elaborately discussed about Arab's trade liaison with India and rest of the eastern world in the ancient period. However, with the conversion of the Arabs to Islam, trade was expanded and distant socio-economic spaces were integrated. Simultaneously, from the second half of the 8th century, the land route through Central Asia got interrupted due to frequent confrontations of Chinese and Muslim traders with Central Asian tribes. It augmented the oceanic trade, which was also encouraged by the Abbasid Empire of Arabia (Jain, 1987). Trade of Islamic empire had a huge extent mainly from the parts of Persian Gulf region, such as, Siraf, Basra and Uballa and to a lesser extent from Aden and Red sea ports. Muslim merchants travelled to India, Ceylon, the East Indies and China for buying silk, cotton, spices, aromatics, timber, tin and other commodities, for both domestic consumption and re-export. Land routes also were developed up to India and China through Central Asia. The items brought from India mainly incorporated tigers, panthers, elephants, panther skin, rubies, white sandalwood, ebony and coconuts (Lewis, 1950). Accordingly, Western India received special attention from the Arab traders.

2.2 The first Arab raid of Western India came only a few years after the death of the Prophet Mohammad. In 636 AD, the governor of Bahrain sent naval expeditions against Thane and Broach. Although they met with no success (Jain, 1987), the Arab conquest of Sind in 712 AD altered the picture. Their military advance on land towards Western India was resulted by the Chalukyas and the Gujara-Pratiharas but their naval power continued to govern the coastal region. Consequently, coastal Gujarat became the locus of their activities. Periodic raids by the Arabs on Valabhi and Broach led to the fall of Chalukyas that was followed by the rise of the Rashtrakutas. Correspondingly, these raids disturbed the trading activities and the local traders were compelled to look for new ports. Trade links thus were reorganized and got concentrated at Cambay, which initiated its rise as a leading port city of Western India. Even though, Gujarat contained many ports and interior towns, it was Cambay that actually enjoyed the status of a port city. Mehta and Mehta (1971) mentioned about the encouragement given by the Jain merchants to Arabs for settling down in Cambay, Anhilwada Patan and other major urban centers. The major reason for the Arabs' settling here was the enormous profit gained by trading through the ports. Trade was so profitable that they married local women and settled permanently in these coastal cities (Thapar, 1966).

3. RISE AND GROWTH OF THE ARAB SETTLEMENTS

3.1 The Arab settlements in coastal Gujarat and Konkan emerged as major centers of trade dealing with Middle East and Far East. Initially, these were semi-permanent settlements where traders from far-off regions resided either to wait for the climate to change or to collect cargoes. Later, with growing maritime trade, the original Muslim community grew swiftly and embraced a number of local people either through conversion or intermarriages (Jain, 1990). Gradually they acquired personal and commercial rights from the local kings and their settlements became chief centers of operations. By constructing several fort towns, the Arabs created a suitable milieu for urban growth. Amidst an environment of urban decline (Sharma, 1987) mentioned earlier, trade activities by Arab traders led to substantial urban renewal. The same subsequently got transformed into a process of urbanisation under the Sultanates. The Arabs settled down in the declining or stagnating urban centers and revived the urban system through trade and allied activities. This happened throughout coastal Gujarat and Konkan. Many prosperous landlords and rich merchants sprang up in these towns with a significant improvement in the material culture (Verma, 1986). In most of the larger towns, especially in the suburbs, Arab traders and other Muslim immigrants were allotted plots of land for constructing residential houses, warehouses, mosques and graveyards (Habib, 1974).

3.2 A series of settlements along the coast of Gujarat and Konkan sprang up by 10th century with the spread of the Arabs and diffusion of their trade relations. From 10th century onwards, the Arabs started penetrating inside the country for collection of local goods. Inscriptional references on the same for the period of 1218 to 1291 have been found in coastal towns of Cambay and Somnath and also in the inland towns of Junagad and Anhilwada Patan (Jain, 1990). Literary sources like Prabandh Chintamani also confirmed the commanding position of the Arab traders at the major ports and markets of Western India. The Arabs legitimized their economic hold on Gujarat ports by paying regular taxes or tolls on the merchandise (Jain, 1990). Ibn Majid (1490 AD) has provided a list of the then existing significant coastal towns in Gujarat and Konkan (Table 1 and 2) while discussing the topography (Tibbetts, 1971).

TABLE 1
Major Arab Settlements in Coastal Gujarat

Sr.	Arab Settlements	Present Name	Sr.	Arab Settlements	Present Name
1.	Zajd	Dwaraka	9.	Pormiani	Porbandar
2.	Bhadra	Navi Bandar	10.	Shurawan	Chorwad
3.	Madwara	Mandwa	11.	Somnath	Somnath
4.	Kurinal	Girnar	12.	Diu	Diu
5.	Dilwada	Dilwara	13.	Navsari	Navsari
6.	Kanbaya	Cambay	14.	Jujah	Gogha
7.	Firam	islands of Piram	15.	Jandahar	Gandhar
8.	Baruj	Broach	16.	Dunbas and Surat	Damas

Source: Tibbetts (1971)

TABLE 2
Major Arab Settlements in Konkan

Sr.	Arab Settlements	Present Name	Sr.	Arab Settlements	Present Name
1.	Hajasi	Agashi	16.	Quandil	Khanderi Islands
2.	Mahim	Mahim	17.	Danda	Janjira
3.	Khor-al-Milh	Manori creek	18.	Anzatra	Anjarla
4.	Nawsahi	Vesave	19.	Harramarwaza	Harihareshwar
5.	Shabar	Chembur	20.	Ras Burya	Bhatye
6.	Jabal Anfalus	Cumbala hill or Trombay	21.	Ratnapur	Ratnagiri
7.	Biyundi	Bhiwandi	22.	Tomaschek	Vengurla
8.	Sindabur	Goa	23.	Supara	Sopara
9.	Dahanu	Dahanu	24.	Shaiyul	Chaul
10.	Islands of Dharavi	Dharavi	25.	Raspur	Rajapur
11.	Tana	Thane	26.	Dabul	Dabhol
12.	Khor Fali	Malad creek	27.	Hunzawali	Anjanvel
13.	Nal Qaisir	Worli	28.	Ras Mirya	Mirya
14.	Manbaya	Mumbai	29.	Dandabasi	Dandibandar
15.	Jabal Qil or Fil	Elephanta Islands	30.	Khor Banda	Banda

Source: Tibbetts (1971)

3.3 Although the epigraphic records support the presence of Arab settlements in Western India, it is not sure whether such settlements of non-Indian traders on the Indian west coast began only with the Islamic Arabs or the Arabs were preceded by the Nestorian Christians (Chakrabarti, 2003). However, this was the period (8th and 9th century onwards) when various communities, especially entering from the sea, settled in coastal Western India and became an essential ingredient of the urban landscape. For instance, the settlements of the Jewish merchants and Nestorian Christians emerged on India's west coast during this phase. In the early 15th century, Nestorian Christians were spread all over India. Historical evidences suggest their presence in the city of Calicut as well as their occupation of important positions in the office of regional monarchies such as Vijaynagara (Chakrabarti, 2003). Nestorian Christianity in India is pre-modern in origin and is connected with the Sassanian influence on trade of the coastal Western India as early as 3rd century AD. Similarly, the last part of the 7th and the end of the 8th centuries was the period of the arrival of the Zoroastrians, later known as Parsis, on the coast of Western India, especially in Gujarat and parts of north Konkan. They initially landed in Sanjan and later spread to other coastal areas of Gujarat and Konkan such as Cambay, Diu, Thane, Chaul and Kalyan (Kamerkar and Dhunjisha, 2002). However, much

before the emergence of these settlements, a migrant community from Palestine known as Bene-Israelis arrived in the coastal village of Naugao in the present Raigad district in 730 BC (Gadkar, 1994). Later, Bene-Israelis spread all over the Konkan coast and primarily concentrated on the business of oilseed pressing. At present the maximum concentration of Bene-Israelis is found in Thane city. In the same period, another group of people from Palestine arrived in the port of Chiplun in south Konkan (Gadkar, 1995). These people, later known as 'Chitpavans', spread along the entire Konkan coast. All the above-mentioned groups – the Bene-Israelis, the Chitpavans, the Parsis and the Nestorian Christians – stayed permanently in Konkan practicing their own culture. Their long residence augmented further cultural exchange that became an indispensable part of the urban landscape of coastal Gujarat and Konkan.

4. THE URBAN ECONOMY OF THE ARABS

4.1 Although the Arabs settled in various places located along the trade routes in coastal Gujarat and Konkan, Cambay, as mentioned earlier, experienced the supreme primacy over the entire urban landscape. This could only be matched by the port of Thane in north Konkan. By maintaining their authority over both these ports, Arab merchants contributed to their further strengthening. Export trade of Cambay was comprised of indigo, lac, myrobalan, ivory bracelets, wheat, rice, agate goods, cotton cloths, beads and sugar, while horses, copper, quick silver, saffron, rosewater, silk stuff, dates, coral, pearls and velvets were the import items (Mehta and Mehta, 1971). Export of Thane port, on the other hand, composed food, rice, honey, spices, silk, velvets, salt, coconuts, laced shoes, leather, ivory, mangoes, lemons, beetle nuts and leaves, precious stones, drugs and perfumes, while the major import items comprised of horses, dates, sandalwood, white incense, etc. Cambay and Thane both were trading mainly with Arabian and African ports as well as with northern India and Deccan within the country. Women, eunuchs and boys were brought by Jews through the Persian Gulf and slaves used to be imported from Sofala in Africa (Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, 1882). However, this trade was continuously under threat of piracy, particularly in the region of western Kathiawar in Gujarat and Suvarndurg and Nivati in South Konkan (Nairne, 1894; Imperial Gazetteer of India, 1909).

4.2 It can be observed that apart from several political upheavals taking place in post-10th century, trade continued to occupy a prominent position in the economic landscape of the region. Political situation being very unstable rulers frequently had to overlook trade related affairs, which subsequently made the merchants quite influential. Anhilwada was conquered by the Solankis by 941 AD. Although the well-known sack of Somnath temple by Mahmud of Gazni in 1026 AD shook the sovereignty of Solankis, it could not generate any enduring consequences (Imperial Gazetteer of India, 1909). By the middle of 12th century, political power was passed on to the Vaghelas of Dholka. By this period, Gujarat's maritime commerce grew with a strong network of internal trade routes established in Western India, along which many towns sprang up. There was a coastal route connecting all major and minor ports of Konkan with coastal Gujarat, while other routes mainly served as links to interior Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and connected them farther to northern India and Deccan (Jain, 1990). This internal trade was part of a pan-Indian framework and involved not merely the transport of luxury goods such as silk, cotton, spices and horses over long distances but also items such as food grains, sugar, oil, pottery, etc. over comparatively shorter distances (Chakrabarti, 2003). Routes linking Gujarat with the rest of India went to Sind, Rajasthan, Konkan coast and Malwa. Like Konkan, Gujarat was an important reaching point of the trans-shipment of horses from the Gulf ports and Aden towards the end of the 13th century. Major imports of this period comprised of copper, vitriol, tin, lead, silver and gold. In addition to Aden, Southeast Asia was the major source of this import. Precious stones came from the Gulf and Sri Lanka. Silk came from China through Sri Lanka and Malabar (Jain, 1990). Spices and aromatics came from Southeast Asia and south India although the role of the former as a source region was more important of the two. Ivory was dominantly African and miscellaneous items like rose water, dates, asafetida and saffron came from west Asia. Among the export items textiles, iron and iron swords, leather and leather goods, timber, aromatics, spices and dyes, precious

and semi precious stones, sugar and food grains like rice and wheat, and miscellaneous items like birds, animal horns and slaves (Jain, 1990) were significant.

4.3 Trade was also encouraged by the Chalukyas, which turned to be favourable for Arab settlers on the coast. It, however, was detrimental to the growth of Shilahara dynasty in Konkan resulting into recurrent attacks of Bimb kings of Champaner (Kelkar, n. d.). However, trading on the Konkan coast prospered with the Indian merchants getting engaged more in coastal trade under the Shilahara dynasty. Thane, Chaul and Sopara were prominent urban centers in Konkan under the Shilaharas. After defeating the Shilaharas, the Bimb kings acquired a large area of north Konkan making Mahim their capital. They attempted to revitalize the trade links of north Konkan with Middle East and Southeast Asia by keeping cordial relationships with the Arabs. However, urban centers such as Thane, Mahim and Sopara suffered from instability due to incessant warfare with local kings as well as Muslim invaders. Although the Vaghelas surrendered to Yadavas of Deogiri, commerce still flourished in Gujarat and merchants remained active in coastal towns.

5. ARABS AND THE MAKING OF THE URBAN CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

5.1 A long period of residence of the Arabs in coastal Western India marked the beginning of fresh set of cultural interaction between the locals and the Arabs. The Arabs, fundamentally, made a profound impact on the Gujarati and Marathi languages. Many Arabic and Persian loan words are found to be intermixed in both these languages. Mehta and Mehta (1971) have enumerated a list of such loan words in Gujarati (Table 3). Most of these words including baraf, marifat, nakkad, zakat, kagaz as well as nargil (coconut) are found in Marathi with minor alterations, while other words like banduk, jamin, rakam, jahaj, dalal have entered in their original forms in Marathi. Similarly, words of Persian origin like Bandar (port), Saj (sag-teak) are also used in Marathi.

TABLE 3
Loan Words from Arabic/Persian in Gujarati & Marathi during the Arab Phase

Sr.	Arabic/ Persian Loan Words	Meaning	Sr.	Arabic/ Persian Loan Words	Meaning
1.	baraf	Ice	10.	nakkad	Cash
2.	banduk	Gun	11.	jamin	Guarantee
3.	khas bazaar	Main market	12.	rakam	Amount
4.	mashal	Torch	13.	jahaj	Ship
5.	hauz	Fountain	14.	furajah	Custom house
6.	marifat	Agent	15.	dalal	Broker
7.	kasid	Messenger	16.	zakat	Custom duty
8.	khabar	Information	17.	musaffir	Traveler
9.	dukan	Shop	18.	kagaz	Paper

Source: Mehta and Mehta (1971)

5.2 Cultural interaction was also vibrant in the field of architecture, music, technical and manufacturing skills. Islamic architecture was introduced by the Arabs to western coast by constructing Jami mosque at almost every place they resided (Briggs, 1975; Jain, 1990). Further, available evidences suggest that Bhairav, one of the ten 'that's' (systematic combinations of 'swaras' that finally go to create a 'raga'), extremely important in north and south Indian music, was brought to Indian music from Arabia. Actually, the mode was first known as 'Hijaz' and the name 'Bhairav' seems to have been replaced it later (Jairazbhoy, 1975). Persian wheel introduced by the Arabs became widespread in Western India and played a key role in agricultural expansion (Sharma, 1987). Likewise, the art of paper manufacturing was also diffused by the Arabs, which was adapted by the Gujarati artisans. Nicolo Conti, an Italian traveler, mentioned about the

use of paper by only Gujaratis, while other Indians, according to him, still wrote on tree leaves (Mehta and Mehta, 1971). The present suburb of Kocharab in Ahmadabad city was actually 'kuch-i-Arab', i.e., the settlement of the Arabs, where descendents of the indigenous paper manufacturers lived (Mehta and Mehta, 1971). Arab impact on the early medieval landscape thus was quite significant and rendered an extensive spatial basis for future Islamic empires to come. They not only renewed the decaying urban landscape but also contributed to the making of a heterogeneous socio cultural urbanscape in coastal Gujarat and Konkan.

6. ARABS AND THE SPATIAL BASIS OF THE SULTANATE REGIME

6.1 By the time the Arabs arrived in Sind in 712 AD, the Arab merchants had been mostly controlling the economic space of coastal Western India. The convergence of the time of their arrival and the objective condition of the country were significant. Although this infiltration came as a business need rather than a conscious attempt, the feudal economies of the scattered villages experienced substantial growth with the settling of the Arabs. However, the Arabs, though were successful in integrating two distinct markets of Arabia and India, they could not exert any control over the political space of coastal Western India. Arab settlements, therefore, largely developed on the mercy of the local Hindu rulers. Urbanisation brought by these Arab merchants was thus at a relatively smaller scale and transitory as well depending on the duration of their stay in coastal towns. Delhi Sultanate and even the regional Sultanates, on the other hand, were principally rulers and administrators who controlled the political space and subsequently the economic affairs of their region. Urbanisation became a part of their agenda for political consolidation (Naqvi, 1972) and they systematically pursued it. The vast territorial expanse of their regime was governed through a series of well-dispersed towns located at strategic points, which helped them in making their state a continental one.

6.2 Arab conquest of Sind cleared the physical access to central Asian rulers, especially the Turks and the Afghans, facilitating their entry from northwest India. These rulers tended to settle in the towns, which gave rise to a distinct urban culture (Thapar, 1966). The perception of these rulers about India as 'land of gold' was developed gradually through the account provided by the Arab merchants. Similarly, trade with India became vital for them and the larger Islamic world due to the relative decline of west Asia in late 10th century (Bose and Jalal, 1998). It led to a string of invasions (997-1030 AD) conducted by Mahmud of Ghazni who targeted the accumulated treasures in the palaces and temples of northern India such as Somnath in Gujarat. Such raids were primarily driven by economic and political motives rather than religious fanaticism, as finance was crucial for the Central Asian rulers to build up their empire. The politico-economic motive that brought the Turkish ruler Muhammad Ghuri to India in 1192 was much more than just loot. It paved the way for the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate that brought a fresh wave of Islamic urbanisation in India. Arabs, who came as 'musafirs' or travelers actually served as the 'marifat' or an agent of urban change and played a pivotal role in the making of urban landscape of medieval Coastal Western India.

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