

Profiling a City through Regional Sources: A Study of the *Khatapatras* (sale deeds) of Medieval Ahmadabad

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, urban studies related to medieval Indian cities have relied heavily on Persian sources wherein features, now identified as 'urban' were taken for granted. Therefore such urban studies remained inadequate in its analysis of the urban dynamics of medieval Indian cities. It is only in the last four or five decades that urban historians have attempted to go beyond and use a combination of Persian, European (including both official documents and travelogues) and regional sources to bring out the dynamics of the processes of urbanisation in medieval Indian cities. Ahmadabad was one of the leading metropolitan cities of Mughal India. Apart from being a manufacturing center of enormous proportions, it was also the provincial headquarter of Gujarat province (*subah*) of the Mughals. This added to the multi-functionality of the city and also accounted for its survival in the midst of 18th century political crisis. The economic buoyancy of the city in the 17th century has been highlighted in several contemporary sources. The *Khatapatras* (sale deeds), dealing with sale-purchase of houses, shops and land in the streets and suburbs of Ahmadabad pertaining to the period 16th -18th centuries, provides us important information related to political, social and economic condition of the city and its suburbs. Based on an analysis of some of these *khatapatras* (published and unpublished), the present study is an attempt to sketch the political, social, economic and cultural profile of the city during the 17th and 18th centuries.

1. Introduction

Ahmadabad, during the 16th and 17th and at least till the first half of the 18th century, was a flourishing urban center due to several supporting factors. Gujarat, due to existence of several ports like Surat, Broach and Cambay was the 'gateway' to India. The scale of regional and international commercial activities turned it into the most urbanized region of Mughal India. Ahmadabad was one of the leading manufacturing metropolises of Mughal India in the 17th century. The city was conveniently located on the main trade route linking north India with Gujarat besides linkages with the other inland and port cities of Gujarat such as Surat, Broach and Cambay. After the Mughal conquest of Gujarat, Ahmadabad was made the provincial head quarter of the province (*suba*) and thus included among its residents, large number of nobles, officials and their dependents. This created a huge demand for both luxury and basic goods. The involvement of European companies in the Indian sub continental trade in the 17th century and the competition among them and with the Indian merchants to procure goods from the city sustained this demand. The demand thus generated, gave fillip to manufacturing and trading activities and created varied economic and employment opportunities in the city for several categories of merchants, artisans and labourers.

Presence of large number of nobility, members of the bureaucracy and their dependents along with substantial

number of merchants, labourers and artisans brought about a change in the demography as well as geo-morphology of the city. All the above categories of residents created their own residential areas or suburbs within and outside the citadel (*bhadra*) on both banks of the river Sabarmati, on the eastern bank of which the city was founded. Contemporary Persian sources like *Ain-i Akbari*ⁱ and *Mirat-i Ahmadii*ⁱⁱ, besides giving an estimate of the number of such *puras*, have also given a vivid account of the economic condition of some of these suburbs. These sources also inform us that a large number of these *puras* were founded by the nobles; others were founded by merchants and Sufi saints while few were occupation based. Internally, these suburbs of Ahmadabad were further divided into *pols* (streets), *sheris* (secondary streets), *khadkis* (dead-end streets) and *khanchas* (narrow and un-even curves) and *chaklas* (central meeting place).

The *Khatapatras* (sale deeds) provide us with detailed geographical boundaries of the property (house, shop and land) in transaction thereby giving us important insights into the lay out of the city suburbs. Besides, these documents also mention the caste of the buyer and the seller indicating the social composition of the *pols* of Ahmadabad. The amount of transaction mentioned in these *khatapatras*, give us a measure of the economic condition of these suburbs while the weight of the coins and its type gives us important insight into the system of coinage prevalent in the city. Apart from these, the sale deeds also mention about the political functionaries at

the center, province as well as the city. Much of the information contained in these documents can be validated from the other contemporary sources. Thus in this manner, as we shall see further, these *khatapatras* provide us important insights into the urban institutions and governance of the city on the basis of which we can sketch the political, social and economic profile of the city and its suburbs.

A number of Gujarati scholars such as Vibhuti V Bhatt, Bharti Shelat, Yetindra Dixit to name a few, have published some of these *khatapatras* highlighting the nature of information contained in them. However, the real worth of these documents, as a regional source to study the political, social and urban profile of the city can only be realized when they are studied together rather than individually. The factual details contained in the *khatapatras* can be collated and corroborate with other contemporary sources to come to some definitive conclusions regarding the political, social, cultural and economic trends of the medieval metropolises.

2. *Khatapatras*- the document

The *khatapatras*, as mentioned before, are documents dealing with sale, purchase and mortgage of houses, shops and land within the environs of Ahmadabad. Although the available *khatapatras* largely belong to the city of Ahmadabad, few of these, brought to light by some Gujarati scholars, pertain to other nearby towns such as Cambay, Nadiad and Kapadvanj, suggesting a wider prevalence of this type of document to record sale and purchase transactions in Gujarat. These documents cover a long period from 16th to 19th century including the reigns of Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan, Aurangzeb, Farrukh Siyar, Muhammad Shah, Shah Alam II, Marathas and the British period. *Khatapatras* therefore, can effectively be used to study the historical geography and changes in geo-morphology of the city if any.

A large number of these documents (about 123 in number) have been preserved in excellent condition in the B.J. Institute of Oriental Research, Ahmedabad. Few *khatapatras*, acquired by the author, fall in the category of private collection.ⁱⁱⁱ These documents can be termed as semi-legal as they are without any stamp of the registering authority. However, similar documents in Persian called *bahinama* have invariably been found with the seal of the local *qazi*, who was the registering authority of such transactions in Mughal India.

The *khatapatras* have been written on a piece of cloth with excellent black ink in old Sanskrit-Gujarati language in Devnagri script. While majority are written in mixed Sanskrit-Gujarati language, few of these documents are also bi-lingual (Gujarati-Persian or Arabic-Persian). For the purpose of recording the year of the contract both, Vikram and Saka era has been used. The day, date along with lunar positioning (*Krishna paksha* and *Shuklapaksha*) also find mention in the beginning to establish authenticity of these documents.

3. Details of the Functionaries

An interesting aspect visible in almost all of these *khatapatras* is the listing of political functionaries at the central, regional and local levels along with the name of the reigning Mughal emperor. The political functionaries, other than the emperor, mentioned in these *khatapatras* are- Provincial level officers (*subadar, diwan, qazi, miradl, bakshi*) and local officials (*kotwal, waqianavis, darogha, durgpaal, faujdar, amin, qanungo*). Mention of such a large number of functionaries (along with their names) is congruous with the fact that Ahmadabad was the provincial head quarter of the province of Gujarat and therefore was a residence for large number of provincial and local officials. Names of the above functionaries can be validated from the contemporary Persian sources like *Ain-i Akbari* and *Mirat-i Ahmadi*. The long list of functionaries contained in these also corroborates the notion of a centralized bureaucratic nature of the Mughal state.

The titles (in the manner of eulogy or *prashasti*) used for the Mughal emperors also makes for interesting reading and analysis. Some of the titles used are- *ripurayanmanmardan* (enemy destroyer), *sakakrayanshiromani* (Head of all the rulers), *abhinavmartandavtar* (incarnation of the sun), *sangramGandhir* (one who is patient during war), *danakveer* (alms giver), *pawankutilak* (belonging to the family of God Hanuman), *ashvapati* (lord of horses), *gajpati* (lord of elephants), *narpati* (lord of men), *chhatrsinghasanvirajit* (occupier of the umbrella throne), *tejpratap* (full of glory and splendor), *prodhpratap* (person with majestic maturity), *maharajadhiraj* (lord of all the rulers) etc. These titles traditionally relate to *dharmik* sanskrit kingship and are generally associated with the Hindu kings. At one level, these titles may be seen as an attempt to confer legality to the document. At the other level however, these may also be seen as a symbol of cultural acceptance of the Muslim kingship in a largely Hindu set up. Similar eulogy has been used for the Mughal rulers in the Braj vernacular literature of the 16th-17th centuries too.^{iv} Even when the city was brought under the Maratha governance in the second half of the 18th century, similar eulogical references continued to be made with respect to the existing Mughal ruler in these documents.^v

Another functionary mentioned in some of the *Khatapatras* is *nagarsheth/shresta*. The institution of *nagarsheth*, according to D Tripathi and M. J. Mehta, was an extension of the institution of *mahajan* (a merchant guild headed by a *shreshtha* or *sheth*)^{vi}. But in the context of Ahmadabad, *nagarsheth* can be seen as the chief merchant of the city. Shantidas Zaveri, the jeweller-merchant of the city, belonging to the Oswal Jain community, enjoyed this unofficial position for a long time in the 17th century. Based on the analysis of several *khatapatras*, Tripathi and Mehta have argued that the position of *nagarsheth* was coveted enough to cause a conflict between the Oswal Jains and Vaishnav Banias and that the position of *nagarsheth* kept on shifting between the two groups after the death of Shantidas Zaveri in 1660 CE.^{vii} Reference to this functionary can be found in several

khatapatras beginning 1627 right up till 1780.^{viii} Mention of *nagarsheth* along with *panchkul* and *panchmahajan* in these documents reflect their position as important functionaries even though un-official. Thus, the *khatapatras* are an important source to study this important urban institution of medieval India.

4. Urban Geography of Ahmadabad

The *khatapatras* provide us a good deal of information on the internal structure of the suburbs (*puras*) which functioned as extensions of the city. While mentioning the boundaries of the property (house or shop), these documents provide detailed information about *pols*, *chaklas*, *sheris* inside the suburb. Several references to suburbs situated on the western bank of the River Sabarmati give us a measure of the urban geography of Ahmadabad during the period of our study. The information contained in these documents related to the suburbs and their extension can also help us in sketching a historical map of the city. A thorough analysis of these documents, which covers a long time span (Mughal through the Maratha to the British period), would also bring to light physical changes in the city if any as they refer to suburbs both within the Ahmadabad citadel (*bhadra*) as well as outside spread on both eastern and western banks of the River Sabarmati.

Name of some of the suburbs occur in several of these documents. A case in point is the suburb Raipur within the citadel which finds mentioned in about 8-9 *khatapatras*. These mention Sanklisheri, Lakha Patel *pol*, Nathumal *Khadki*, *chakla* Ghalib Khan as part of the Raipur suburb. Other suburbs outside the citadel that find frequent mention in these documents are Idalpur, Shekhpur, Rajpura, Faridabad (all located on the western bank of the River Sabarmati); Astodia Kalupur, Jamalpur (inside the citadel) etc. The details of some of the *pols*, their extension and the boundaries that we find inside these documents do not often match with those outlined in other 19th century accounts of the city.^{ix} This change in nomenclature might suggest change in the internal structure of the suburbs. Most of the suburbs of medieval cities were founded either by nobles or by Sufi saints or merchants. This was largely true of Ahmadabad too. Usually in many cases death of a noble brought an end to the suburbs but the case of Ahmadabad was different as many of the suburbs here performed different economic roles (custom station for the city cloth market or *mandvi/mandi*) for the city. Change in the name of the streets in the later sources may be due to renaming of the street with physical changes.

5. Social categories

Ahmadabad being one of major manufacturing and mercantile metropolises of medieval India, its streets were inhabited by several mercantile castes along with various categories of artisans. The *khatapatras* also provide a great deal of information on the social compositions of the *pols* of Ahmadabad. From the names of the buyers and sellers mentioned in these sale deeds several mercantile and artisan

castes can be identified. These are - Muslim commercial caste such as (vohra); Hindu commercial (*vanik*) castes like disawal, nagar, modi, Valkhilya, dasapodwal, pateletc; Brahmins such as Shrimali, nagar, disawal and Jharola and artisan castes such as nagar, soni, kansaras etc.

An important fact that emerges out of the sale-deeds is that often castes of the buyers and sellers do not match even though the transaction relates to the same street. In one of the *khatapatras* dealing with sale of land in Thaltej (suburb) area of the city, the seller, Premji belongs to Kadua Patel caste whereas the buyer Vishambhar Purushottam belongs to Medpaw Brahmin caste.^x Two Persian documents of the similar sale-purchase transaction also provide evidence for metropolitan nature of some of these streets even though the later were dominated by a particular caste.^{xi} M J Mehta too, in his work on a Will (*vasiyatnamu*) of Shantidas Zaveri, has pointed out that among the neighbours of Shantidas in Zaveriwad (suburb) one was Guru Raj Vijay Suri, one Englishman and one Muslim Vohra.^{xii} Even though more analysis is required, but whatever evidence we get from these documents, they militate against the traditional notion of caste-exclusiveness of the *pols* of the city. This aspect can be further examined with a detailed study of these *khatapatras*.

6. Economic and other Details

All the documents that have been analysed invariably mention the transaction amount with respect to sale of a house, shop or land. The amount of transaction is also a measure of the economic condition of the suburb which featured in the transaction. The transaction amount ranges from Rs 50 to Rs 601. A higher transaction amount, wherever mentioned, would indicate higher level of economic activities being undertaken in that suburb. One *khatapatra*, dealing with sale of shop in Idalpura suburb refers to a transaction of Rs 200 while another, dealing with sale of a two shops in Shaikhpura suburb refers to a transaction of Rs 601.^{xiii} Considering the contemporary economic standards, the amount of transaction indicates a highly commercialised nature of these two suburbs both of which were located on the western bank of the River Sabarmati. This would help us trace the economic profile of the city and its suburbs. Moreover, the transaction amount has been mentioned along with the type of the prevalent coin in circulation with their precise weight in the following manner- *chalniya* (current) *rokda* (cash) *navi adina* (new coin) *masana* 11 ½ (weight). This is important from the point of view of study of coinage in medieval India.

Besides, the *khatapatras* also provide important insight into the architecture of the house and shops prevalent during the period of our study. The details of the internal structure and condition of the property are exhaustive. These include- size of the house (single or double storey), rooms (*Ordo*- big; *Ordun*- small), kitchen (*rasodun*), water filling area (*paniyarun*), wells (*kunwo*), windows (*khadki*), living room (*diwankhana*), lobby (*parsaan*) etc. At times, houses of the neighbours have also been described. This information is

helpful in studying the architectural pattern of the houses in medieval Ahmadabad.

7. Conclusion

Thus, from the above details of the nature of information contained in the khatapatras, underlines the importance of this regional source for urban study of medieval India. What is

astonishing about these documents is the fact that one single *khatapatra* contains the above details. There is no doubt that if all the khatapatras are analysed properly a coherent political, social, economic and cultural profile of the city of Ahmadabad can be sketched including changes in the urban geography of the city.

END NOTES

ⁱFazl, Abul, *Ain-i- Akbari*, Vol I, tr. H. Blochmann, Calcutta, 1927, Vol II, tr. H. S. Jarrett, Delhi, 1988 (Reprint).

ⁱⁱKhan, Ali Muhammad, *Mirat-i-Ahmadi (Khatima)*, tr. S. Nawab Ali and C. N. Seddon, Gaekwad Oriental Series, No XLIII. Baroda, 1928; also *Mirat-i-Ahmadi*. Vol I and II, tr. M. F. Lokhandwala, Gaekwad Oriental Series, No 146, Baroda, 1965.

ⁱⁱⁱ I am grateful to Dr B. M. Modi (an MBBS doctor) of Ahmadabad and a regular visitor to the B. J. Institute, Ahmedabad for handing me over a number of *khatapatras* from his private collection.

^{iv} See Busch, Allison (2005), Literary Responses to the Mughal Imperium: The Historical Poems of Kesavdas', *South Asia Research*, Vol 25(1), pp 31-54

^vDixit, Yetindra (1979), Mughal Padshah Shahalam Bijo Samaynu Gujaratnu Gharna Bahananukhatapatra (Gujarati), *Journal of Gujarat Vidyapith*, Vol 97, pp 54-64. In this *khatapatra* dated 1774 AD, titles like *samastrajavalisamlankrit*, *abhinavmartandaavatar*, *sakarayashiromani* has been used for the Mughal ruler Shah Alam II even though Maratha commander Apaji Ganesh was in control of the Ahmadabad city.

^{vi}Tripathi, Dwijendra and Mehta, M. J. (1978), The Nagarsheth of Ahmadabad: The History of an Urban Institution in a Gujarat City, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol 39, No 1 pp 481-496

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii}*Khatapatra* no. 91 (1627 CE); *Khatapatra* no 84 (1660 CE); *Khatapatra* no 15 (1676 CE); *Khatapatra* no. 42 (1677 CE); *Khatapatra* no 31 (1678 CE); *Khatapatra* no 23 (1685 CE); *Khatapatra* no 24 (1712 CE); *Khatapatra* no 104 (1780 CE)

^{ix}Vakhatchand, Maganlal (1851), *AmdavadnoItihas* (Gujarati), Gujarat Vidya Sabha, Ahmedabad.

^x*Khatapatra* no 7 (1718 CE)

^{xi} One Abdul Rahman sold his house in Kucha Lalchand in Bhandaripura pol in Ahmadabad city to one Harakji of Hindu kunbi caste and in another case one Abdul Razzak of chakla Teen Limdi of Bhalka Pol sold his house to a Hindu Ijram of khatri caste. The documents are dated 1759 CE and 1802 CE respectively. These documents are a part of a family collection in possession of Dr. B. M. Modi of Ahmedabad

^{xii}Mehta, Makrand J. (1997), Mughal Hindna Suprasidh Vepariane Danvir Sheth Shantidas Zaverinu Vasiyatnamu (AD 1656): Amdavadna Sanskritik Itihasnu Vishleshan, *Samipya*, January-March, pp 142-160

^{xiii}*Khatapatra* No 4 (1714 CE); *Khatapatra* no 1 (1706 CE)