

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURYI: Major Political Changes ⁽¹⁾

The Marathas had begun to attack Gujarat before the death of Aurangzeb (1707 A.D.), but began to make territorial conquests from about 1730 when Pilaji Gaekwad assumed the leadership of the Marathas in Gujarat. By the time Pilaji's son Damaji II died in 1768 the Marathas had replaced the Mughals as the supreme power in Gujarat. Throughout the period 1707-68 there was continuous fighting among many power groups in Gujarat, and Central Gujarat lay between three crucial places in these fights: Ahmedabad, the capital of the Mughal governors, Baroda, the capital of the Gaekwads, and Cambay, the stronghold of the Mughal noble Mominkhan. Central Gujarat was therefore a scene of several battles during this period. The Marathas could never establish their authority over Cambay, which continued to be ruled until 1947 by the Nawabs, the descendants of Mominkhan. In the rest of Central Gujarat, the parganas (administrative units) of Borsad, Petlad, Nadiad, Mahudha and Matar, came under the authority of the Gaekwads between 1742 and 1748. Radhvanaj was situated in Nadiad pargana, and this pargana was given by Damaji II in 1744 as a jagir (personal estate) to Khanderao, his brother and deputy.

The conquests made by the Marathas in Gujarat were divided into two equal parts between the Gaekwads and the Peshwas in 1752. In Central Gujarat the parganas of Matar,

Mahudha, Nadiad and half of Petlad were given to the Gaekwads, while Thamna, Mahmedabad, and half of Petlad were given to the Peshwas. However, the revenues of the Peshwas's parganas were collected mostly by the Gaekwads, who therefore remained the de facto rulers of most of Central Gujarat from 1742 A.D. The Nadiad pargana, in which Radhvanaj was situated, remained the jagir of Khande Rao Gaekwad.

Khande Rao, and then his son Malhar Rao, played an important role in the protracted succession dispute that followed Damaji's death in 1768, and this made Central Gujarat once again a scene of frequent battles. In 1801 the Gaekwad took Nadiad pargana from Malhar Rao in exchange for Kadi pargana in North Gujarat, and placed his own official (Kamavisdar) to administer the former. It was however soon given back to Malhar Rao, with the latter's promise that he would behave properly. He misbehaved, and consequently on 6th June 1802 the Gaekwad appropriated an area worth 5000 Rupees of revenue from the Nadiad pargana as a punishment to Malhar Rao, and gave it over to the British in appreciation of their aid in fighting Malhar Rao. Malhar Rao fled away from Nadiad after a few days, and the Gaekwad ceded the entire Nadiad pargana to the British in payment of their subsidized troops. Matar and Mahudha parganas were ceded in the same way on 21st April, 1805. Thus, Radhvanaj and the villages around it were among the earliest British acquisitions in Gujarat. The British acquired a few more parganas from the Gaekwad in 1817, and later on some territory from the Peshwa.

II: Changes in Pargana Administration

During the rule of the Gaekwads, as that of the Mughals, villages were grouped into units called parganas and tappas for administrative purposes. A pargana included from about forty to about seventy villages, whereas a tappa included about twenty villages.⁽²⁾ (I will ignore the distinction between pargana and tappa and refer only to the parganas.) Radhvanaj was one of the thirty-nine villages in Nadiad pargana, and Nadiad town was the administrative centre of the pargana.

During the Mughal regime a pargana was headed by a military and police official called Foujdar.⁽³⁾ Out of the parganas taken by the Gaekwads, a couple of parganas were granted to the members of the Gaekwad family as personal jagirs, such as Khande Rao's Nadiad pargana. The Jagirdar paid an annual tribute to the Gaekwad. He had his small body of troops to administer the jagir internally and to help the Gaekwad when called upon to do so. The Gaekwad could withdraw a jagir, or substitute one pargana for another pargana as jagir.⁽⁴⁾

In most of the other parganas the Foujdars were replaced by the Gaekwad's officials called Kamavisdars. A Kamavisdar was in charge of usually one and occasionally more than one pargana. He was a civil, political and military representative of the Gaekwad, and had a body of troops to administer the pargana internally and to check the activities of the Rajputs and Muslim princes in his vicinity. He was appointed for a specific term on a contract that he would pay the

Gaekwad annually a lump sum for the right to collect taxes. If he collected more than the contracted amount he made a profit for himself. He was far more independent and powerful than a Mughal foujdar. The Gaekwads never bothered to supervise administration at the local level. They had neither time nor leisure to do so. Almost all the officials from the level of the Kamavisdar to that of the Diwan were Maharashtrians and the language of administration among themselves was Marathi.⁽⁵⁾ When the British took over administration in Central Gujarat, Nadiad and Matar parganas were under a single Kamavisdar named Mairal Narain, a Maharashtrian Brahman.⁽⁶⁾

Whether a pargana was under a Jagirdar or a Kamavisdar its internal administration was of the same kind. Each pargana had one or more hereditary officials called Desais. The Desais existed during the Mughal period also—they must have existed even before the Mughal period, because the word is derived from the Sanskrit desa—and it seems the Desais in Gujarat were similar to the pargana officials called chaudhuris in other parts of North India during the Mughal period.⁽⁷⁾ Nobody has however made a study of the Desais during the Mughal period.

As the Desai's office was hereditary it led to a proliferation of Desais in course of time. Actually in every pargana during the Gaekwad's rule there were one or two principal Desais and several inferior Desais. Where there were more than one principal Desai the villages of the pargana were divided among them for the purpose of revenue collection, and each principal Desai divided his villages

among his inferior Desais. A principal Desai and his inferior Desais constituted a joint family or a lineage segment headed by the principal Desai. Unlike Kamavisdars and Jagirdars, the Desais were local men, residing in the chief town of the pargana. Different parganas had Desais belonging to different castes, as for example, Patidars in Nadiad, Banias in Matar, and Brahmans in Petlad. Each Desai had a staff of Amins (revenue-assessors), Majmudars (accountants), Mehtas (clerks) and Ravaniyas (peons).⁽⁸⁾

Since the time Nadiad pargana was the jagir of Khande Rao it had had two principal Desais, named Bapoojee and Shankerdas, both of the Patidar caste. The villages of the pargana were distributed between them by a sanad (charter) granted by Khande Rao. Bapoojee was however an incapable fellow. He went on increasing revenue demands in his villages, which led the villagers to migrate from Nadiad pargana to other parganas. He soon relinquished his office, and Shankerdas was left the only Desai in the pargana. When it was ceded to the British in 1803, Parbhoodas, son of Shankerdas, was the only Desai in the pargana.⁽⁹⁾

III: Classification of Villages ⁽¹⁰⁾

Villages were classified into two main categories, namely rasti, peaceful or loyal, and mewasi, turbulent. This type of classification seems to have prevailed during the Mughal period throughout the Mughal empire.⁽¹¹⁾ The mewasi villages were populated predominantly by Rajputs and Kolis who asserted their independence from any higher authority. It should be noted that all the Rajput and Koli villages were

not mewasi. Radhvanaj, although dominated by Rajputs, was a rasti village. The Mewasi villages were situated mostly near the deep ravines of rivers and in the jungles bordering the plains region, where they could fight guerilla warfare. Some of them had fortifications, and acted like independent states. They were fairly well controlled during the Mughal rule by police stations spread over the country side, but they raised their head as soon as the Mughal rule became weak. The Kamavisdar or the Desai had to go every year with armed troops to collect revenue from mewasi villages. The latter paid revenue in the form of a lump sum which varied from year to year according to the ability of the Kamavisdar or the Desai to negotiate and enforce payment. In the rasti villages revenue was collected without the necessity of exerting physical force.⁽²⁾ In the terminology of Mughal administration, the mewasi villages were zamindari or talugdari whereas rasti villages were raiya.⁽³⁾ The mewasi Rajputs and Kolis not only refused to pay revenue but also tried to collect 'blackmail' from neighbouring villages and from travellers on highways. Many rasti villages had to buy peace by granting fields or annual cash allowances to the mewasi Rajputs and Kolis. There is evidence of a few such fields in Radhvanaj (see below p. _). There were also some villages, called rasti-mewasi, which were sometimes loyal and sometimes turbulent.⁽⁴⁾

The rasti villages were of two main categories, namely, narwadari and senja. Radhvanaj was a senja village, and among the adjoining villages, Antroli and Vansar were senja, whereas Undhela, Alindra, Palana and Sandhana were narwadari.⁽⁵⁾ A narwadari village was dominated by a few Patidar lineages, who

owned most of the land in the village and managed its revenue affairs. The revenue was assessed in a lump sum for the entire village, its payment was the joint responsibility of the landlord lineages, and it was apportioned among them according to an accepted principle. The landlords responsible for the payment of revenue were called Narwadars or Patidars. This was a term of great prestige, and the Patidars used to distinguish themselves from other members of their caste who were called Kanbis.⁽¹⁶⁾ There is a strong tradition among Patidars that the narwadari system originated, and the Narwadars began to call themselves Patidars, during the Mughal period. The narwadari system of revenue-collection, like the mewasi system, seems to have been a political arrangement whereby the rising power of the dominant Patidar lineages was recognized by the ruling authorities.

The internal structure of mewasi and narwadari villages is a fascinating subject of study, but as I do not have much data about them and as Radhvanaj was a senja village, I shall not deal with the narwadari and mewasi villages in detail.

IV: Changes in the Administration of Senja Villages

For the collection of revenue from senja villages during the Gaekwad regime, every year a little before the monsoon crops were ripe, the Kamavisdar entered into an agreement with the Desai, that the latter should collect a particular amount of revenue from a particular village. The Desai had to furnish the security of a Bhat for the agreement.⁽¹⁷⁾ The Bhat was a bardic caste, considered to be sacred like the Brahmans. They could stand as security because they would kill or wound themselves if the agreement was not fulfilled, and such suicide or

self-injury was dreaded as a source of supernatural danger by parties to the agreement. The Bhat's curse was also feared.⁽¹⁸⁾

The figure for the amount of revenue was arrived at by negotiation, on the basis of the actual collections in previous years and the state of cultivation in the current year. If the Desai collected more than the contracted amount he made a profit for himself. If one Desai did not agree to a reasonable amount the Kamavisdar could, and sometimes did, give contract to some other Desai. The Desai held revenue-free land in each village under his charge and also received a fixed proportion of the amount of revenue he actually paid to the Kamavisdar.⁽¹⁹⁾

The Desai rarely collected the revenue of a village directly from the villagers. He entered into an agreement with a wealthy influential man of the village or a neighbouring village that he should collect a certain amount of revenue from the village. The competition between different wealthy influential men enabled the Desai to arrive at a profitable agreement.⁽²⁰⁾ The early nineteenth century records of Radhvanaj state that its revenues were collected usually by the Patidars of the adjoining village Palana and sometimes by others. In 1802, the year before the British took over administration, the revenues were collected by a Brahman of Nadiad, and in the next year by a Patidar of Palana. In every senja village there were one or more Matadars (lit., signers of documents, agreements). In Radhvanaj there were three Matadars, two belonging to two segments of a Patidar lineage and the third to another Patidar lineage, and the headmanship rotated among the three lineages. The remuneration they received for their

services was divided equally among them. The headman or any other Matadar could also be a revenue contractor, and sometimes all the Matadars jointly undertook the revenue-contract of the village.⁽²¹⁾

In a senja village, when crops were ripe the village headman had to furnish the security of a Bhat. When the security was furnished the headman received permission to reap crops. If the security was not furnished it was taken for granted that the villagers wanted to pay revenue according to the principle of bhagbatai; an agent of the Desai would go to the village at the time of harvest and collect the King's share, usually one half of the produce. Such villages were however very few in number. Most villages paid revenue in cash and not ⁱⁿ kind. The Bhat's security was a guarantee that the villagers would pay the revenue in cash.⁽²²⁾

When crops were reaped, the village headman withdrew the security of the Bhat, and furnished another security, that of a moneylender (manotidar, lit., moneyed man). This security was given for a particular amount of money.⁽²³⁾ The system of manotidar security was a part of the entire system of state finance in Gujarat during the eighteenth century. On account of the unstable political conditions of the time, every ruler, the Gaekwad, the Peshwa or the Nawab, required money for military purposes and for the payment of tribute at any time during the year, whereas the peasants could pay revenue only after harvest, more particularly only after they had sold some produce. When a ruler required money he took a loan from a banker in the capital, Baroda, Ahmedabad or

Cambay, as the case might be, and authorized the banker to collect the amount from the Kamavisdars. For similar reasons, the Kamavisdars borrowed money from the bankers in their towns, and so did the Desais, the revenue-contractors of individual villages, and village headmen. At the time of the introduction of British rule and for more than thirty years after, the whole land revenue of Kaira District was collected generally from bankers or moneylenders. The general practice was for each revenue-collector to give a credit note for his village, which was convertible at Ahmedabad and Baroda and had to be negotiated by agents specially chosen by the Government.⁽²⁴⁾

The system of manotidar security was intimately related to the marketing of agricultural produce. A British official defended the system in the following terms: "The grains produced in Gujarat, being more than is sufficient for the want of its inhabitants, the demand depends on the necessities of foreign parts. This circumstance would render it impossible to find a favourable sale for the produce of the different villages if any system was adopted which forced the cultivator to the market without regard to the number of purchasers or demand for their commodity."⁽²⁵⁾ The system of manotidar security thus allowed the villagers to pay revenue at the appropriate time without selling their produce at a disadvantageous price. It is noteworthy that the manotidar was not only a moneylender but also usually a shopkeeper. The villagers kept accounts with him and he kept accounts with traders and bankers in the town.⁽²⁶⁾ All this shows a high degree of monetization in the rural economy of Gujarat.

How did the revenue-contractor or headman of a village assess and collect revenue from the villagers? This is a complicated problem. It seems the Marathas, unlike the Mughals, were interested in getting the revenue and not in the way it was collected. There were therefore no rules and regulations framed by the Maratha rulers for the assessment and collection of revenue. It seems revenue was assessed and collected according to customary rules prevalent in a village. But many of the customary rules must surely have been those derived from the preceding Mughal rules, particularly in Central Gujarat which was under the close supervision of the Imperial officials on account of its nearness to the capital city. Here we have three main difficulties. Firstly, a great deal of scholarly attention has been devoted to the agrarian system of Mughal India, but these studies seem to me to ignore regional differences, particularly differences existing within a province. Secondly, there is no adequate study of agrarian conditions during the Maratha period. Thirdly, the early British administrators made a number of statements about the agrarian system during the previous regimes, including the Mughal regime, but it is not clear how many of these statements were biased by their own views, concepts and categories, and how many represented actual facts. I proceed further with these reservations.

Let us first note an important feature of village administration which continued to exist from the Mughal time to the middle of the nineteenth century. Every village was a fiscal unit in itself; it had its own 'income and expenditure';

its common finances.⁽²⁷⁾ I have described in detail the income and expenditure of Radhvanaj from 1823 to 1825 in Chapter X. Here we may note only that the income of a village was derived not only from land revenue but also from other sources, and the expenditure included not only the money paid to the government treasury but also money spent in the village for a number of purposes. Even during the Mughal period the village accountant was an accountant on behalf of the village, and his records belonged to the village and not to the Imperial administration, although they were drawn upon for purposes of audit of the accounts of the revenue officials.⁽²⁸⁾

Let us assume that the ways in which the revenues were collected and the expenses were incurred in a village were closely supervised and controlled during the Mughal period, but during the system of revenue-contracts practised in the eighteenth century, the revenue-contractors must have acquired a great deal of freedom in manipulating both income and expenditure of a village. The contemporary records do not throw much light on the nature of manipulations, but let us see the problems raised by the statements of the early British administrators.

One problem is that of the existence of distinction between private land and government land during the Mughal period. It is quite clear that the distinction was made between areas under the Imperial administration and areas under chiefs and princes called zamindars in the terminology of Mughal administration. Within an area under Imperial

administration, a distinction was made between zamindari villages and rai-yati villages; a village of the former category was the property of one or more individuals who collected revenue or rent from the peasants and paid a lump sum tribute to the Imperial authority, whereas in a rai-yati village the officials of Imperial administration collected revenue from each peasant separately.⁽²⁹⁾ Now, the problem is whether the same logic was applied or not within a rai-yati village, that is to say, whether a distinction was made or not between private land and government land within a rai-yati village. I raise this question because there are frequent references in the early nineteenth century records to what were called vechaniya (lit., sold) and gharaniya (lit., mortgaged) land, and the usual explanation was that these two categories arose as a result of sale and mortgage of sarkar zamin (government land) by the revenue-contractors in order to make up their losses or enhance their profits from revenue-contracts. The British administrators asserted that the revenue-contractors sold or mortgaged government land as the supposed agents of the Government. In theory, the government land was owned by the Government and cultivated by the tenants of the Government, and was given to the tenants by revenue-contractors on behalf of the Government. The problem involved in the vechaniya and gharaniya land was that the revenue-contractors sold or mortgaged government land for their private interest and not for the interest of the Government. But the British administrators thought that the revenue-contractors were not really the agents of the Government. If they really were, the Government did not check the activities of its agents.⁽³⁰⁾

In any case, the crucial question is: what was this government land in a senja or rai-yati village? We are told that the Mughal administration recognized and guarded the proprietary rights of 'permanent and hereditary occupants' of land.⁽³¹⁾ Does this mean that there were temporary occupants of land? Were there tenants of the Government? Or, was the non-cultivated land considered government land?

The British administrators also alleged that on the one hand the revenue-contractors exempted many individuals fully or partially from the payment of the assessed amount of revenue, and on the other hand levied higher amounts from others to make up the loss or to enhance profit. They levied taxes and cesses on ploughs and weapons, on artisans and craftsmen, on weddings and entertainments, and on a number of other things.⁽³²⁾ The Mughal officials also tended to levy such taxes and cesses (called abwabs) but were restrained by the orders (farmans) issued from time to time by the Mughal emperors.⁽³³⁾ No such restraints existed during the eighteenth century. Other powers that revenue-contractors assumed in course of time were the powers to grant land for charitable purposes, grant cash allowances from the treasury to religious and political personages, and to sanction ceremonial expenditure to create pomp around their own office.⁽³⁴⁾

The possibility of making money in revenue-contracts encouraged contractors to demand more and more from the peasants. To what extent they could do so depended of course on their influence and power in villages, but ultimately on the capacity of the peasants to pay. When the revenue demand

became too heavy for the peasants to pay, they either deserted the village and went to a village where revenue demand was less heavy, or turned turbulent and refused to pay revenue. ⁽³⁵⁾

V: Political Role of Patidars

An important development in Gujarat during the eighteenth century was the increasing role of Patidars in the politics of the region. As mentioned above, the narwadari system of revenue-collection seems to have been a political arrangement whereby the power of the dominant Patidar lineages was recognized by the ruling authorities. A large number of narwadars became Desais, Amins, and revenue-contractors. The Desais in such important parganas as Nadiad, Padra and Savli were Patidars. Both the Mughal officials and the Marathas cultivated their friendship. Folklore refers to friendship between Patidar leaders and Mughal emperors, including Akbar. The Patidars were the principal local supporters of the Gaekwads. Some Patidars had taken to arms, and a couple of them had established petty principalities. ⁽³⁶⁾ Even today one can see the eighteenth century palatial buildings of the then Patidar leaders in many villages and towns of Central Gujarat. One can also see a few fortified buildings. All this had led Patidars to claim the status of the Kshatriya varna and to adopt many 'kingly' customs and manners.

VI: Major Economic Changes

The eighteenth century was a period of economic decline in Gujarat. Continuous attacks by various political powers, particularly the Marathas, on commercial centres in Gujarat, particularly on Surat, Ahmedabad, Baroda, Broach and Cambay,

and absence of safety on roads, discouraged production of urban crafts and transportation of goods. In the very beginning of the century the East India Company transferred the center of its activities from Surat to Bombay, and closed down or very much reduced the activities of the inland 'factories' at Ahmedabad, Baroda, Cambay, Broach, Dholka and Ghoga. The beginning of industrial revolution in England altered the entire nature of foreign trade. The demand for indigo and other dyes, for cotton and silk textiles, and for many other goods, declined. The prosperity of the Mughal and other courts also declined. This period was the beginning of widespread migration of urban Gujaratis to Bombay, and to Poona and many other prosperous places in the Maratha empire. The population of most of the towns in Gujarat declined during this period. Ultimately all this meant less and less demand for agricultural produce and fall in their prices. The situation was only partially improved by the increased demand for some raw materials required for factories in England. (37)