

## Trade and Commerce in Mughal Period



### History

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### ABSTRACT

*Akbar and Jahangir interested themselves in the foreign seaborne trade, and Akbar himself took part in commercial activities for a time. The Mughals welcomed the foreign trader, provided ample protection and security for his transactions, and levied a very low custom duty (usually no more than 2½ percent ad valorem). Furthermore, the expansion of local handicrafts and industry resulted in a reservoir of exportable goods. Indian exports consisted mainly of manufactured articles, with cotton cloth in great demand in Europe and elsewhere. Indigo, saltpeter, spices, opium, sugar, woolen and silk cloth of various kinds, yarn, asafoetida, salt, beads, borax, turmeric, lac, sealing wax, and drugs of various kinds, were also exported. The principal imports were bullion, horses, and a certain quantity of luxury goods for the upper classes, like raw silk, coral, amber, precious stones, superior textiles (silk, velvet, brocade, broadcloth), perfumes, drugs, china goods, and European wines. By and large, however, in return for their goods Indian merchants insisted on payment in gold or silver. Naturally this was not popular in England and the rest of Europe, and writers on economic affairs in the seventeenth century frequently complained, as did Sir Thomas Roe, that "Europe bleedeth to enrich Asia." The demand for articles supplied by India was so great, however, and her requirements of European goods so limited, that Europe was obliged to trade on India's own terms until the eighteenth century, when special measures were taken in England and elsewhere to discourage the demand for Indian goods.*

### Introduction:

The manufacture of cotton goods had assumed such extensive proportions that in addition to satisfying her own needs, India sent cloth to almost half the world: the east coast of Africa, Arabia, Egypt, Southeast Asia, as well as Europe. The textile industry, well established in Akbar's day, continued to flourish under his successors, and soon the operations of Dutch and English traders brought India into direct touch with Western markets. This resulted in great demand for Indian cotton goods from Europe, which naturally increased production at home. Even the silk industry—especially in Bengal—was in flourishing condition. Bernier wrote: "There is in Bengal such a quantity of cotton and silk, that the kingdom may be called the common storehouse for these two kinds of merchandise, not of Hindoustan or the Empire of the Great Mogol only, but of all the neighbouring kingdoms, and even of Europe."

Apart from silk and cotton textiles, other industries were shawl and carpet weaving, woolen goods, pottery, leather goods, and articles made of wood. Owing to its proximity to sources of suitable timbers, Chittagong specialized in shipbuilding, and at one time supplied ships to distant Istanbul. The commercial side of the industry was in the hands of middlemen, but the Mughal government, like the earlier sultans, made its own contribution. The emperor controlled a large number of royal workshops, busily turning out articles for his own use, for his household, for the court, and for the imperial army. Akbar took a special interest in the development of indigenous industry. He was directly responsible for the expansion of silk weaving at Lahore, Agra, Fathpur-Sikri, and in Gujarat. He opened a large number of factories at important centers, importing master weavers from Persia, Kashmir, and Turkistan. Akbar frequently visited the workshops near the palace to watch the artisans at work, which encouraged the craftsmen and raised their status. It is said that he took such an interest in the industry that to foster demand he "ordered people of certain ranks to wear particular kinds of locally woven coverings an order which resulted in the establishment of a large number of shawl manufactories in Lahore; and inducements were offered to foreign carpet-weavers to settle in Agra, Fathpur Sikri, and Lahore, and manufacture carpets to compete with those imported from Persia." In the course of time, the foreign traders established close contracts with important markets in India, and new articles which were more in demand in Western Europe began to be produced in increasing quantities. Among the foreign inventions that excited Akbar's interest was an organ, "one of the wonders of creation," that had been brought from Europe.

### The detrimental outcomes of the trade on the Mughal Empire

Two and a half centuries of trade between India and Western

Europe led to the downfall of an initially agriculturally-oriented empire with strong military forces and tolerance towards its subjects and their different religious beliefs (with the exception of Aurangzeb). All three Islamic empires found either their collapse or a significant weakening by the 19th century. European countries, however, were growing, expanding, developing, coming up with new movements, intentions, technology. Even though they were essentially separated by the Ottoman and Safavid empire, the common interest, the trade, helped Europe to permanently settle into the Indian lands. The most comprehensive and clear sources about the Mughal empire were the factory records of the British East India company, which suggests that trade was the only way of communication between Western Europe and the Mughal empire. The trade was carried out by the same countries, only there were variations of the proportion of import for those countries, depending on what was going on at that time in Europe and on the alliances the countries tight themselves into. The pattern of Globalization and World's entanglement was traced in 17th century through trade. This way the European countries found their place in the Mughal empire, gradually gaining more power over the trade and, consequently, over the empire until the British colonized the Indian subcontinent in the 19th century. The European language was primarily spread amongst coastal regions, in particular large trading centres and sometimes throughout big commercial towns which were based inland.

India witnessed huge growth in Trade and commerce during the Mughal Rule. The Mughals required every article of luxury. There was a market of high consumption. There had been much wealth of Mughal aristocracy. There was therefore a large body of consumers who were willing and able to buy above the line of necessity. Towns and cities grew out of this spirit. There were quite a large number of them. Srinagar, Lahore, Thatta, Karachi, Cambay, Ahmadabad, Surat, Bombay, Poona, Goa, Calicut, Nagapattam, Kanchipuram, Madras, Masulipattam, Delhi, Agra, Lucknow, Murshidabad. Mughal traders could be divided into following categories in accordance with the nature of business in which they involved themselves. The traders of Mughal age who were involved in large scale business enterprises such as export and import controlling the entire business world of India.

The traders of the Mughal India who belonged to medium group. They had less capital compared to the traders belonging to first category. The traders own store houses in different parts of the country. Those store houses were located near the market places. They had transport business and they gradually became interested in transporting and sailing goods from one place to another.

**The small retail sellers and traders in the market places.**

Both Hindus and Muslims of Mughal India belonged to the traders of first category. The most prominent among them were a noted capitalist of Surat who became famous as Virsji Bliohra. Besides a few merchants from Gujrat, Chinna Chetti of South India and Jagat Seth of Bengal specially engaged themselves in export trade, transporting Indian goods abroad. They had their ships and other transport arrangements.

Inland trade and overseas trade also flourished during the Mughal regime. Inland trade, however, belonged to two prominent categories local and provincial. In the Mughal period there was no dearth of towns. Towns were thickly populated. Hence many markets were opened to meet the daily necessities of the urban community. Land and river transport systems were developed in order to carry on inland trade in different provinces. Roads were constructed, extended and enlarged. An important road constructed during the Mughal rule proceeded from Sonargaon in Bengal to Lahore in the north western part of India.

There were various sea ports in India. India had overseas trading relations with the Arab countries, Persia and Egypt. Besides they traded with various countries of South-East Asia and China. They mainly imported horses from West Asia, silver from Japan and gold from East Indies. There had been increasing demands for European toys and luxury items in India

**Internal and External Trade:**

India's foreign trade both overland and overseas was truly an international enterprise. Although the Arabs were the dominant partners in the India Ocean trade, they had been by no means ousted the Indian traders, viz. the Tamils and Gujaratis, both Hindu and Muslim.

The coastal trade and trade between the coastal ports and north India was in the hands of Marwaris and Gujaratis, many of whom were Jains. The Muslim Bohra merchants also participated in the trade. The overland trade with Central and West Asia was in the hands of Multanis, who were mostly Hindus and Khurasanis, who were Afghans, Iranians, etc. Many of these merchants had settled down in Delhi.

The Gujarati and Marwari merchants were extremely wealthy and some of them particularly the Jains, spent large sums for the construction of temples. Cambay was a great city in which many wealthy merchants live. They had lofty houses built in fine stone and mortar, with tiled roofs.

Their houses were surrounded by orchards and fruit-gardens which had many tanks. These wealthy merchants and the skilled craftsmen lived a luxurious life and were accustomed to good food and clothing. The merchants, Hindu and Muslim, were attended by pages bearing swords with silver and gold work. In Delhi, the Hindu merchants rode horses with costly trappings, lived in fine houses, and celebrated their festivals with great pomp and show. Barani tells us that the Multani merchants were so rich that gold and silver were to be found in abundance in their houses, the nobles were so spendthrift that every time they wanted to hold a feast or a celebration, they had to run to the houses of the Multanis in order to borrow money.

**Transport and Communication:**

In those days, travel was always risky due to robbers and dacoits and various marauding tribes. However, the royal roads were kept in good shape and there were many sarais on the way for the comfort and safety of the travellers. In addition to the royal road from Peshawar to Sonargaon, Muhammad Tughlaq built a road to Daulatabad. There were arrangements for the post being carried quickly from one part of the country to another. This was done by relays of horses or even more efficiently and quickly by runners who were posted every few kilometres in towers which were built for the purpose. The runner continually clanged a bell as he ran so that the man on the next relay may be able to see him from the tower and get ready to take his burden.

**Conclusion:**

Means of transport were cheap and adequate for their needs. Despite complaints by some European travellers, safety on the roads was satisfactory and could be covered by insurance. The means of travel with sarais at the distance of 5 kos on the principal highways was as good as in Europe at the time. The Mughals paid attention to roads and sarais which made communication easier. A uniform tax was levied on goods at the point of their entry into the empire. Road cesses or rahdari was declared illegal, though it continued to be collected by some of the local rajas.

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