



STUDY OF LAND GRANTS IN GUJARAT: 1398 TO 1511

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Introduction

In this research paper I will be exploring the history of land grants in Gujarat. I have used two kinds of sources to examine land grants in Gujarat: the first types of primary source are the two chronicles of the Sultanate of Gujarat, namely, the *Mirat-i Sikandari* and the *Mirat-i Ahmedi* and the second type of primary source are the inscriptions of the Sultans of Gujarat which I have studied for the period 1398 to 1511 i.e. the period beginning with Timur's sack of Delhi at a time when Zafar Khan [the future Muzaffar Shah I (1407-10), the first Sultan of Gujarat] was still the governor of Gujarat on behalf of the Tugalak Sultan of Delhi and had not yet declared his independence from Delhi to the end of the reign of Mahmud Begarha (1458-1511), who, according to medieval Muslim chroniclers, was the greatest sultan of the Muzaffarid dynasty and his reign is described in the chronicles as the golden age of Gujarati history.

Firstly, I will give a brief background of the region in which I will analyze the continuities and disjuncture in the system of land grants under the Chalukyas, the Gujarat Sultans and the Mughals during their rule over Gujarat.

Secondly, I will describe the broader history of land grants beginning with the feudalism debate followed by an analysis of the arguments of Irfan Habib concerning agrarian property and land grants in the context of Mughal India and Samira Sheikh's study of the land revenue administration of the Gujarat Sultanate.

Lastly, I will try to problematize Irfan Habib's thesis elucidated by him in his classic work *The Agrarian System of Mughal India: 1556-1707* in the light of the two kinds of primary sources which I surveyed during the course of this research.

The study of Gujarat is relevant because the region has been a maritime state of immense importance since the ancient period and continued to remain so through the medieval to the modern period. It had trading links stretching from the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf regions to South-East Asia since time immemorial and with Europe with the coming of the European East India Companies. Cambay and Surat were the most important ports of the Gujarat Sultanate and the Mughal Empire respectively and the British East India Company sent Captain Hawkins to the Mughal court in 1608 to obtain royal favors from the Mughal Emperor Jahangir when they decided to open their first factory at Surat.

It is therefore not only conspicuous but at same time disheartening that there is no essay on the economic history of Gujarat and especially the Gujarat Sultanate even in *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Volume I: c. 1200- c. 1750 which is jointly edited by Irfan Habib and Tapan Raychaudhuri. I feel this because the Gujarat Sultanate was the only state in the entire history of India whose rulers had the vision to build a navy and it was owing to their naval power and with some help from the Ottoman Sultans that they were able to resist the Portuguese menace to their trade and inhibit



them for a long time from acquiring Diu (which was again one of the most prosperous ports of Gujarat which is why the Portuguese coveted it from the time they gained a foothold in India). This shows the economic importance of the Gujarat Sultanate in the larger context of the history of India.

The history of land grants in the Gujarat Sultanate is relevant because through the study of the two chronicles of the period the *Mirat-i Sikandari* and the *Mirat-i Ahmedi* I noticed that certain disparities existed in the pattern of land grants in the Sultanate Gujarat from the general pattern outlined by Irfan Habib for medieval India in his work.

Background of the Region

For the purpose of administration the Chalukyas of Gujarat divided their directly administered territory into *mandalas*, *vishayas* and *pathakas* followed by unions of villages in descending order of sizes.¹

The *mandala* was the largest unit of administration followed by *vishayas* and *pathakas* and unions of villages. The first Chalukya King Mularaja I inherited a system of administration in which the division of *mandalas* into *vishayas* was commonplace; however, it was later discovered that grouping of *pathakas* into *mandalas* was more advantageous so *vishayas* were discarded and transformed into *pathakas* which were composed of villages, unions of villages and towns. The lowest unit of administration was a union of villages.²

The king was the head of the administration and the central government was divided into several departments called '*karanas*' or 'secretariats' each headed by a minister called *Mahamatya*.³ "Besides the *mahamatyas*", writes A.K. Majumdar, "there were other officers called *mahamantrins*, *mantrins*, and *sachivas*, but our information about their status is very meager as they are only casually mentioned in one or two inscriptions".⁴

Regarding the provincial administration of the Chalukyas, the *mandala* was governed by governors called *mahamandalesvara* who were civilian officers and a *dandanayaka* who was an army officer. The governors of the provinces were frequently transferred⁵ which shows parallels of the Chalukya model of administration with the Mughal system where also the jagirdars were frequently transferred but a disjuncture with the administrative model of the Gujarat Sultanate where according to the chronicles the *Mirat-i Sikandari* and the *Mirat-i Ahmedi* hereditary jagirs existed.

There was a peculiar institution which pervaded the Chalukya administration from top to bottom called the *panchakula* which was a board composed of five persons amongst whom one was the president. All the members of the *panchakula* were nominated.⁶

There were several different systems of land revenue administration under the Chalukyas. According to two systems illustrated by Hemachandra and Abhayatilaka Gani respectively the village landlord

¹ A.K. Majumdar (1956), *The Chaulukyas of Gujarat*, p. 208.

² Ibid., pp. 208-212.

³ Ibid., pp. 212-223.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 223-224.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 225-227.

⁶ Majumdar, *Chaulukyas of Gujarat*, p. 241.



collected both his share and the king's share of the produce while in the other system the revenue collectors directly appropriated the king's share of the produce.⁷

According to the *Lekhapaddhati* (LP) there were several other systems of collecting revenue than the two mentioned above. One of them was similar to the *ryotwari* settlement of British India in which an agreement between a private person and the government was made for payment of yearly revenue. Under this system any increase in rent was called *chatapaka* and there were other taxes to be paid by the cultivators, namely, the *malamargana*, when the whole village wanted to show respect to a particular man, the *mangaliyaka*, which was collected on auspicious occasions and the *chaturaka*, a tax for the maintenance of the police station.⁸

Further clauses in this settlement were that the peasants were required to pay the revenue in three installments and after each payment the *sri-karana* or the chief secretariat of the *mandala* or *pathaka* was informed as a check against dishonest collectors and revenue officials. As the Chalukya kings were under the necessity of moving troops from one part of the country to another and therefore wanted their roads in good condition so they imposed the obligation of maintaining roads in their area on the peasants.⁹

According to the LP, another system of revenue similar to the permanent settlement of British India was between a person and the *panchakula* under a *mahamandalesvara* in which the rent of a village was fixed and the villagers were free from having to pay any additional imposts other than the annual land revenue.¹⁰

“The LP records yet another system of land revenue”, writes Majumdar, “in which the government fixed different rates of rent for different types of land, depending on their productivity”.¹¹

As far as the method of payment of land revenue was concerned A.K. Majumdar writes: “that part of the land revenue such as *hiranya* (tax levied upon certain special kinds of crops which was of nature difficult to be divided into shares) and the grazing tax (*gochara*) were paid in cash and the rest of the land revenue in kind”.¹²

According to the *Lekhapaddhati* the peasants in Chalukya Gujarat were subjected to imprisonment and corporal punishment for failure to pay land revenue.¹³ This shows parallels with the condition of the peasants in Mughal India where they were meted out with the same treatment if they failed to pay the land revenue. However, the exception was that while the Mughals excused the peasants from payment of revenue in case of crop failure the Chalukyas did not do so which according to Majumdar was in order to protect the interests of the state.¹⁴ Hence the treatment of peasants in the Mughal system was more humane in comparison with Chalukya Gujarat.

⁷ Ibid., p. 242.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 242-243.

⁹ Ibid., p. 243.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Majumdar, *Chaulukyās of Gujarat*, p. 243.

¹² Ibid., p. 252.

¹³ Ibid., p. 253.

¹⁴ Ibid.



The feudatories of the Chalukyas and Vaghelas were similar in their behavior to the feudatories of the Sultans of Gujarat. Although they were obliged to accept the suzerainty of the Chalukya kings they tried to assert their independence whenever the opportunity arose. Moreover, while the Sultans of Gujarat succeeded in pacifying their feudatories by the latter half of the fifteenth century, the Chalukyas and Vaghelas could not do so and unlike the Gujarat Sultans were never able to win completely the fealty of their vassals. This is illustrated by A.K. Majumdar when he writes that in some of their inscriptions the feudatories omitted the name of their overlord. He thus concludes that the relation between the king and the feudatory was based absolutely on force.¹⁵ This was again unlike the pastoralist chieftains of the Gujarat Sultans in whose inscriptions I found the recognition by the chieftain of the overarching authority of the reigning Sultan.

A.K. Majumdar writes that though occasionally the feudatories did assist the Chalukya rulers in wars against their neighbors and the Delhi Sultans there is no epigraphic evidence to show that they were under any obligation to pay tribute. However, Majumdar also writes that the chronicles of Hemachandra and Abhayatilaka Gani show that they paid tribute in cash and kind.¹⁶

The administrative and revenue arrangements made by the Chalukyas were continued intact by their successors the Vaghelas.

Although the details of the land revenue administration of the Sultanate of Gujarat will be related later in this paper, I will highlight some of the continuities and disjuncture in the arrangements made by the sultans for administering Gujarat from that of the Chalukyas and Vaghelas.

Although the administrative divisions of the Sultans of Gujarat were similar to the Chalukyas albeit under different names, nevertheless the Gujarat Sultans divided their lands for the purposes of revenue collection into khalisa or crown lands and iqatas or assignments of land revenue assigned to military officers from which they were obliged to raise contingents of troops and maintain themselves.¹⁷ This constituted a break from the Chalukya model since the governors of the Sultans of Gujarat as well as the Mughals were military officers unlike the civilian *mahamandalesvaras* of the Chalukyas and they were given assignments of land revenue in lieu of salary. Thus under the sultans and the Mughals the administrative and military functions were combined in contrast to the Chalukyas. Moreover, under the sultans and subsequently under the Mughals a more or less uniform system of land revenue administration was established which marks another disjuncture with the Chalukya period.

A salient feature of the relations of the Gujarat Sultans with their feudatories is that unlike the feudatories of the Chalukyas there is overwhelming evidence to show that the feudatories of the Gujarat Sultanate did pay a tribute called *salami* and if they failed to pay this tribute the sultans conducted campaigns against them in order to extract the tribute called *mulkgiri* or country-seizing circuits meant to enforce the acknowledgement of suzerainty.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 254.

¹⁶ Majumdar, *Chalukyas of Gujarat*, pp. 254-255.

¹⁷ James McNabb Campbell (1989), *History of Gujarat (Ancient, Medieval, Modern)*, pp. 209-211.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 209.



The relations of the Mughals with their feudatories in Gujarat ran along similar lines since the Mughals also demanded tribute¹⁹ and conducted expeditions against recalcitrant *zamindars* and chieftains.²⁰ This shows continuity from the Gujarat Sultanate to the Mughal Empire.

One of the improvements highlighted by Sir James McNabb Campbell in Volume I, Part 1 of the *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*, that Akbar made in the land revenue administration of Gujarat which marks a break with the Sultanate period was the introduction of the survey of the land i.e. the measurement of the area under cultivation and the assessment of the estimated revenue (*jama*). Secondly, he decreed that the headmen or *muqaddams* of the villages should be paid for the services they rendered in revenue collection. Thirdly, he restored the *wanta* estates of the chieftains who had been deprived of them by Sultan Mahmud Shah III (1538-54) in 1545. All these duties were entrusted by Akbar to the revenue minister of the Empire, Raja Todar Mal.²¹

The second disjuncture between the Sultanate period and the Mughal period was the end of revenue farming which was introduced in the Gujarat Sultanate during the reign of Sultan Muzaffar Shah II (1511-26) and continued thereafter till the demise of the Sultanate. The end to revenue farming was brought about by Akbar after the annexation of Gujarat to the Mughal Empire.²²

A third disjuncture with the coming of the Mughals was the introduction of the frequent transfers of jagirdars and subahdars in contrast to the hereditary jagirs that existed in the Gujarat Sultanate.

Apart from the above disjuncture there was continuity in the essentials of the land revenue administration from the Sultanate to the Mughal period. The state demand remained at one-half of the produce under the sultans and the Mughals.

We have more information on the titles of revenue officials under the Mughals than under the sultans. However, unlike during the rule of the sultans when the treasury officer and the accountant were alternately a royal slave and a free man, during Mughal rule there was a single civilian revenue official (of course with subordinates under him) in charge of the revenues of the khalisa lands called the *diwan*²³ and he was a free man which shows that the institution of slavery was less prevalent in Mughal India than in the Sultanate of Gujarat.

The administrative framework also remained essentially the same under the Mughals as it was under the sultans. Gujarat was divided into administrative divisions on the same pattern as under the sultans albeit it now became from an independent kingdom a *subah* or province of the Mughal Empire administered by a *subahdars* or viceroys appointed by the Mughal emperor instead of being ruled by independent sultans. The terminology for the administrative divisions adopted under the sultans, namely, the *sarkar* or district, *pargana* or group of villages²⁴ were continued under the Mughals.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 221.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 226-227.

²¹ Campbell, *History of Gujarat*, p. 223.

²² Ibid., pp. 210-211.

²³ Ibid., p. 211.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 209-210.



History of Land Grants Feudalism Debate

The first conceptual definition of Indian feudalism appeared in 1956 in D.D. Kosambi's famous work *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* where he postulated the concepts of "feudalism from above" and "feudalism from below". Only two years later after Kosambi enunciated the concept of Indian feudalism, R.S. Sharma started publishing articles on the origins and development of feudalism in India which he compiled in his book which came out in 1965 entitled *Indian Feudalism*, which not only became the standard work on Indian feudalism but also the focal point of the feudalism debate.²⁵

R.S. Sharma and other exponents of the Indian feudalism school interpret the growth of regional kingdoms in the early medieval period as evincing the political disintegration of the Indian subcontinent. This phenomenon occurred according to R.S. Sharma and his adherents because of the proliferation of royal land grants which were first given to Brahmans as charitable endowments and later to secular officials in lieu of salary. From the post-Gupta period, the alienation of large tracts of land from royal control led to the fragmentation of political authority and eventually to the demise of strong centralized states. The land grantees turned into semi-autonomous feudal lords who oppressed the peasants and thereby produced a socially differentiated and less free society. Meanwhile, owing to the decline of trade the medieval economy witnessed the processes of demonetization and urban decay and hence, according to Sharma's thesis the growth of regional kingdoms was symptomatic of medieval India's regression into feudalism.²⁶

In his article 'Was There Feudalism in Indian History?' Harbans Mukhia has refuted the thesis of R.S. Sharma.

After thoroughly analyzing the various notions of European feudalism, Mukhia argues that feudalism emerged in Europe as a result of changes at the base of society in contrast to the attribution of the emergence of feudalism in India by its protagonists primarily to state actions in granting land. According to Mukhia it is highly debatable that "such complex social structures as feudalism can be established through administrative and legal procedures".²⁷ Mukhia argues that rather than being a part of the process of production, forced labor in India was more an accompanying expression of ruling class's political and administrative power.²⁸ Doubting whether serfdom was dominant in medieval India, Mukhia further argues that owing to the high fertility of India's soil, the Indian peasant was able to subsist at a lower level of resources than his European counterpart and that Indian history was characterized by a free peasantry. Moreover, according to Mukhia, because of high fertility of land, a low subsistence level and a free peasantry, Indian social and economic history was relatively stable and this equilibrium facilitated the state's appropriation of the peasant's surplus smoothly.²⁹

The argument that B.D. Chattopadhyaya makes in refuting Indian feudalism in his work *The Making of Early Medieval India* is that the social change that took place from the ancient to the early medieval period need not be necessarily interpreted as a breakdown of the early historical social order but as the shaping of regional societies. He elucidates the phenomenon of the crystallization and the making of regions and views the process of state formation in the regional context as continuity from the early

²⁵ Hermann Kulke (1997), *The State in India: 1000-1700*, pp. 7-8.

²⁶ Cynthia Talbot (2001), *Precolonial India in Practice: Society, Region, and Identity in Medieval Andhra*, p. 6.

²⁷ Kulke, *The State in India: 1000-1700*, p. 14.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Kulke, *The State in India: 1000-1700*, pp. 14-15.



historical period rather than as a break with the ancient period as argued by the adherents of the Indian Feudalism School.³⁰

Although the feudalism debate which raged in the 1980s is now over its significance lies in the fact that it brought the issue of land grants which I am examining in this paper to the forefront of Indian history. The study of land grants in the context of medieval South Asia is important because different authors of different works who subsequently wrote on the subject, for example, Irfan Habib (in relation to Mughal India) and Samira Sheikh (in relation to the Gujarat Sultanate) have diametrically opposite views on the subject. I am going to examine the views of these two writers on the issue of land grants below.

Irfan Habib's Argument and its Context

Irfan Habib makes a number of arguments within the framework and context of the Mughal Empire on the question of the nature of land rights in pre-colonial India in his classic work *The Agrarian System of Mughal India: 1556-1707*. I am not contesting all his arguments most of which are true with respect to agrarian property in pre-colonial India. The only argument that I intend to contest is the one in which he makes a comparison of the position of the peasant in Mughal India in relation to land with his descendant under colonial rule where he asserts that modern landlordism or in other words hereditary land rights were created in India under British rule and did not exist before.³¹ For pre-colonial India he concludes that the peasant was a semi-serf and not a free agent and “that there was no exclusive right of property vesting in anyone; instead the system contained a network of transferable rights and obligations, with different claimants (the king or his assignee; the *zamindar*; and, finally, the peasant) to differently defined shares in the produce from the same land”.³²

The argument that Habib is making in the above statement is that unlike the observations made by the European travelers visiting India in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the subsequent assertion of the East India Company in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and of James Mill in his book *The History of British India* the king was not the owner of the land in pre-colonial India. Nor were the *jagirdars* or the *zamindars* the proprietors of the land and as far as the peasant was concerned while his right of hereditary occupancy was recognized (i.e. he could not be evicted at will from his land by the king or the *jagirdars*) it was counterbalanced by constraints placed on his mobility which means that he could not abandon the land in his native village where he was under compulsion to cultivate and pay the revenue.³³

Moreover, what this statement also means is that the lion's share of the surplus produce was appropriated by the king in *khalisa* lands and by the *jagirdar* in his *jagir* and only a secondary share of the produce was left for the *zamindar* and in *raiya* (that is, the areas where the peasants were unencumbered with any claims of *zamindars* over them) areas for the peasant. Furthermore, this statement also means that the *jagirdars* of medieval India who were the counterparts of the feudal lords of Western Europe were unlike the feudal lords who by the sixteenth century had become full

³⁰ B.D. Chattopadhyaya (1994), *The Making of Early Medieval India*, pp. 34-35.

³¹ Irfan Habib (2000), *The Agrarian System of Mughal India: 1556-1707*, p. 134.

³² Habib, *Agrarian System*, pp. 134-135.

³³ Nevertheless, Habib does make a mention of peasant migrations from one *sarkar* to another and calls such peasants who migrated from one *sarkar* to another to cultivate the land there as *pahis* or outsiders but he also writes that *pahis* could not be forced to cultivate the land unlike native peasants and many *pahis* were forcefully made to return to their native villages by imperial orders.



landowners of their manors and fiefs, transferred from their *jagirs* by the Mughal emperors and hence no hereditary land rights existed in India before the onset of colonialism.

Samira Sheikh's Study on the Land Revenue System of the Gujarat Sultanate

In her book *Forging A Region: Sultans, Traders, and Pilgrims in Gujarat, 1200-1500*, Samira Sheikh has done a brief study of the revenue and administration of the Sultanate of Gujarat.

According to Samira Sheikh, the apparent reason why Farhat-ul Mulk, the last governor of Gujarat before Zafar Khan was replaced by Muhammad Tugalak II in 1391 with the latter was that Farhat-ul Mulk had not remitted a single *dinar* to the imperial treasury from the khalisa lands of the Sultan and spent its revenues for setting down local roots. Zafar Khan's task was to urge Farhat-ul Mulk to remit what was left of the khalisa revenues and proceed to Delhi. However, Farhat-ul Mulk opposed Zafar Khan and fought a battle with him near Patan in which Zafar Khan was victorious and Farhat-ul Mulk was slain.³⁴ Thereafter, Zafar Khan reclaimed control over the khalisa lands of the Sultan, collected its revenues and succeeded in establishing a tenuous military control over most of urban eastern Gujarat. However, many of the chieftains of the region turned to plunder and robbery on being deprived of their lands.³⁵

When Ahmed Shah I became sultan in 1411 his first objective was to confirm the administration in its position and he took various measures for it. However, in order to pacify the rebellious chieftains who had turned to plunder and robbery he introduced an ingenious system of land tenure called *wanta*. "Wanta or part", writes Samira Sheikh, "was one-fourth of the land that the chieftain had formerly controlled".³⁶ This *wanta* or one-fourth of the land that the chieftain formerly controlled was restored to him out of which he was obliged to pay a tribute called *salami* to the Sultan. The other three-fourths under the denomination of *talpat* were adjudged crown property to be directly administered. In this way, Ahmed Shah rendered the chieftains submissive and gained a large portion of the captured territories to be directly administered. "The system", writes Samira Sheikh, "also ensured that the sultans had a loyal or contracted base in the countryside from which to draw military manpower".³⁷

However, there were still several chieftains in the fifteenth century who had not been alienated from their lands and the territory controlled by such chieftains was called "gras" or "mouthful" from which the term "grasiya" or "garasiya" was used for chieftains before the sixteenth century popularity of the term "Rajput" was derived. Although these *garasiya* chieftains were also under the obligation to pay *salami* to the Sultan, it had to be extracted from these chieftains forcefully by the sultans by leading campaigns against them. "The sultans", writes Samira Sheikh, "did not interfere with internal administration within the chieftains' territories. The latter continued to collect revenues from the land, usually in kind, as well as other cesses and dues from trade and transit".³⁸

Administration of the directly administered territories was carried out in a manner similar to that of the Delhi Sultanate or the Mughal Empire. From Ahmed Shah's time, but more so during the reign of Mahmud Begarha, territories were assigned to nobles as military assignments or *iqta* from which they

³⁴ Samira Sheikh (2010), *Forging A Region: Sultans, Traders, and Pilgrims in Gujarat, 1200-1500*, pp. 186-187, p. 192.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 194.



were under the obligation to raise troops. Cities and strategic forts were assigned to paid officials who administered them and collected revenues with the support of troops sent from Ahmedabad. “In addition”, writes Sheikh, “military outposts or thanas were set up in charge of subordinate officers who were also responsible for raising local levies”.³⁹

In the khalisa territories a hierarchy of officials was assigned the duty of collecting the state’s share of the produce with the help of village headmen and other intermediaries. These officials also prepared reports on the collections which were sent to the treasury officer and accountant who were on the order of Ahmed Shah, alternately a free man and a slave so that they may not collaborate and stretch forward the hand of treachery and peculation.⁴⁰

In territories granted as iqta, the assignee was expected to support himself and his contingent of troops from the income of the land for a fixed duration. However, Samira Sheikh writes that with the passage of time these military grants or jagirs became long-standing holdings of the nobles and ultimately hereditary. She cites the example of Mahmud Begarha confirming the son of a deceased noble in his father’s rank and jagir. She also writes that the Sultans of Gujarat prevented the jagirdars from over-taxing the peasantry by appointing civil officials who also assisted in administration. “The policy of granting long-term iqtas and jagirs”, writes Sheikh, “encouraged courtiers to put down roots and develop economic interests in the regions under their control”.⁴¹

The above statements of Samira Sheikh not only problematizes Irfan Habib’s argument elucidated in the previous section that hereditary land rights originated in India only with the onset of colonialism when modern landlordism was introduced by the British East India Company but also shows that unlike the Mughals, the Sultans of Gujarat did not oppress their peasantry and took preventive measures in order to inhibit their jagirdars from doing so and thus adopted a more humane attitude towards the peasants. Moreover, it also endorses Bernier’s view that hereditary jagirs encourage the nobles towards long-term development of the areas under their control whereas frequent transfers of jagirs ruin the peasantry and destroy the revenue paying capacity of the area forever.⁴²

Problematization of the Thesis of Irfan Habib

I was looking to rebut Irfan Habib’s thesis epitomized in his work *The Agrarian System of Mughal India: 1556-1707* regarding the nature of land rights in medieval India but could only succeed in problematizing it to a certain extent given the contradictory evidence I got from the two kinds of sources that I used during the course of this research, namely, the two chronicles of the Sultanate of Gujarat, the *Mirat-i Sikandari* and the *Mirat-i Ahmedi* and the inscriptions of the Sultans of Gujarat from the period 1398 to 1511.

I will begin by examining the epigraphic evidence followed by the evidence from the chronicles and then collating the two highlight their significance.

³⁹ Sheikh, *Forging A Region*, p. 194.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Habib, *Agrarian System*, pp. 367-368.



Evidence from inscriptions

The evidence that I got from the study of the inscriptions of the Sultans of Gujarat was that the Gujarat Sultans and their nobility were in search of religious merit since most of their inscriptions record either the construction of mosques or step-wells. The construction of step-wells also implied a religious merit because providing water for the purpose of irrigation, drinking etc. was considered a religious duty by people of every religion in Gujarat. Only two epigraphs refer to land grants. One is a Sanskrit inscription dated 1457 AD from a village called Kansa in taluka Visnagar where a land grant was made during the reign of Sultan Qutbuddin Ahmed Shah II in the village itself.⁴³ The second inscription pertaining to land grants is a bilingual epigraph in Sanskrit and Old Gujarati from Mandvi dated 1497 AD from the reign of Mahmud Begarha where a person named Malik Sandal Sultani whose social status is not mentioned either in the epigraph or the chronicles made a land grant of two plows in Mandvi itself.⁴⁴

The significance of the inscriptions lies in the fact that they provide specific contexts of time and place lacking in the chronicles. Nevertheless, both the epigraphs of the Sultans of Gujarat and the chronicles cast the Gujarat Sultans in the mold of bygone heroes of the Islamic world.

The methodology of using inscriptions is that they have to be analyzed collectively and not individually. Only when we analyze the entire corpus of inscriptions can we extrapolate patterns which will help us in constructing the social and political history of the region. However, according to Cynthia Talbot, “Although they record certain past activities of interest to us, they do so in ways that were meaningful and useful to their contemporary audience. Inscriptions, just like medieval court literature, are forms of discourse containing representations of the self and the world. As such, the social and political aspirations they embody must be recognized along with the ideology they convey”.⁴⁵ This is very much true with regard to the epigraphs of the Sultans of Gujarat for they often disseminate the ideology and political culture of the Gujarat Sultanate which was essentially Islamic since virtually no Hindu temples were allowed to be built and mosques and madrasas proliferated during the period as is evinced by the number of epigraphs recording the construction of mosques which according to my findings are 23 out of the 40 epigraphs that I surveyed during the course of this research. However, the political culture of the Sultanate cannot be inferred to be a bigoted Islamic culture since water architecture in the form of step-wells also abounds in the epigraphs I surveyed in which many of the donors were wives of Hindu chieftains and merchants and sometimes Hindu merchants of the Nagar *vania* caste were also donors of step-wells although all of them acknowledged the overarching authority of the Sultans of Gujarat as their overlords and never failed to mention the “auspicious” reign of the Sultan during whose rule the inscription was commissioned.

Mirat-i Sikandari

The *Mirat-i Sikandari* was written by Sikandar bin Muhammad who was an official of the Gujarat Sultanate and was an eyewitness to its demise at the hands of the Mughal Emperor Akbar in 1573. He was a disciple of the Bukhari Sayyids of Vatwa who were a prominent Sufi sect of Gujarat.

⁴³ H.G. Shastri (1979), *Historical Inscriptions of Gujarat* (hereafter *HIG*), Vol. 4, p. 19, No. 8.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43, No. 19.

⁴⁵ Talbot, *Precolonial India in Practice*, p. 15.



After the Mughal annexation of Gujarat, Sikandar settled in Ahmedabad and wrote the history of the Sultans of Gujarat which he called the *Mirat-i Sikandari* or the Mirror of Alexander which he completed in 1611.

Although Sikandar claims to write an impartial history of the Sultans of Gujarat, his history is in no way an impartial account of medieval Gujarat and while going through the chronicle I found an extreme veneration of the Bukhari Sayyids especially Burhanuddin Qutb-i Alam and his son Shah Alam to whom he attributes miracles of all sorts and partiality towards the sultans, Ahmed Shah I (1411-42) and Mahmud Begarha whom he depicts as the Defenders of Islam and the destroyers of infidelity in Gujarat.

Given the brief background of the author and his chronicle mentioned above I will now proceed to outline what the *Mirat-i Sikandari* says on the question of land grants in the Gujarat Sultanate and the significance of the source in this regard.

The pioneer in the organization of the land revenue administration of the Gujarat Sultanate was Sultan Ahmed Shah I and the later sultans improved upon it by building superstructures on the foundation laid by Ahmed Shah I. The arrangements made by Ahmed Shah can best be described in the words of the chronicler Sikandar as follows: “He also settled the emoluments of the military in this manner that half the pay of the soldiers should be defrayed by grants of land and half by money; because, if the pay were fixed to be all in money it would not be lasting and the soldiers would be badly equipped and careless in protecting the country; but if half their pay were given by a grant of land (*jagir*) from that grant they would obtain grass, firewood, milk, and butter-milk, and if they engaged in agriculture and building houses they would derive profit and would strive to protect the country with their heart and life. He also ordered that they should receive the money portion of their pay monthly without delay or hindrance, wherever they may be posted so that, wherever they might be, they would have always to be present, at their posts and if on any occasion they should be called on active service they would not be obliged to borrow money whether the expedition be a distant or a near one. It was also possible that on a distant expedition the income from the *jagir* would not reach the soldiers on account of the roads being closed in time of war, when they would draw the half share of their pay in money from the Royal Treasury, or in case of the want of weapons of war they should not be in difficulties and obliged to borrow money, and would not be anxious on account of their families as they would be maintained from the produce of their *jagirs*. It was also ordered that the treasurer should be one of the royal slaves while the paymaster was a free man in order that they may not combine and stretch forward the hand of treachery and speculation. The same arrangements were made with regard to the Amils or revenue officers of the districts. These arrangements lasted intact till the time of Sultan Muzaffar, the son of Sultan Mahmud Begarha.”⁴⁶

“After that”, writes Sikandar, “changes and innovations were introduced and rules and regulations all laid aside. Abuses crept in and great disturbances arose...”⁴⁷

The above evidence shows the ingenious organization of the army and the land revenue administration of the Gujarat Sultans since neither in the Delhi Sultanate nor in the Mughal Empire were soldiers

⁴⁶ Sikandar b. Muhammad (1990), *Mirat-i Sikandari* [henceforth MS] trans. F.L. Faridi, pp. 20-21.

⁴⁷ Ibid.



granted jagirs in perpetuity which shows why after this organization there was an absence of revolts in the Gujarat Sultanate among the nobility and wars of succession were not fought till the time of Sultan Muzaffar Shah II. Wars of succession and internal revolts were an endemic feature of the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire. Wars of succession and internal rebellions arose in the Sultanate of Gujarat only after the death of Muzaffar Shah II when the regulations laid down by Ahmed Shah I were set aside.

While describing the reign of Sultan Qutbuddin Ahmed Shah II (1451-58), Sikandar writes that during the reign of this Sultan, Sultan Mahmud Khalji I (1436-69) of Malwa invaded Gujarat and some Hindu clerks dismissed by the late Sultan Muhammad Shah II (1442-51) defected to the side of the Malwa Sultan and when Mahmud Khalji asked them they gave him a statement of the revenues of Gujarat which according to Sikandar was as follows: “Two shares of the country were divided between the Jagirs of the military and Crown lands and one share went towards charitable assignments to religious persons and institutions.”⁴⁸

This statement of Sikandar shows a striking similarity in the organization of land revenue between the Gujarat Sultanate and the Mughal Empire. In the Mughal Empire also *khalisa* comprised the crown land; there were jagirs for the military and *Madad-i ma'ash* grants for religious persons and institutions. According to Sikandar, Sultan Mahmud Khalji I is said to have remarked on such a meticulous organization of land revenue administration of Gujarat that: “To conquer Gujarat would always be difficult; for it has not only an army of soldiers to defend it, but an army of holy men to pray for its prosperity.”⁴⁹

The thesis of Irfan Habib epitomized in his work *The Agrarian System of Mughal India: 1556-1707* regarding the nature of land rights in medieval India is incongruous with the nature of land rights in the Gujarat Sultanate and the disparity arises from a paragraph in the *Mirat-i Sikandari* where Sikandar writes about the existence of hereditary jagirs or land rights in the Gujarat Sultanate from Mahmud Begarha's reign. Irfan Habib's thesis in his work is that there was an absence of hereditary land rights and private property in land in medieval India.⁵⁰ However, the following paragraph from the *Mirat-i Sikandari* from Mahmud Begarha's reign problematizes the issue:

“The Sultan ruled that the jagir of every Amir or soldier, who was slain in battle or who died a natural death, was continued to his son; if he had no son, half the jagir was continued to his daughter; and if he had no daughter, he settled certain allowances on the dependents of the deceased that they should have no cause of complaint against the Government.”⁵¹

Sikandar further writes that on a certain occasion, someone represented to the Sultan that the son of a certain deceased Amir was not fit for his jagir. The Sultan replied, “Never mind, the jagir will make him fit.”⁵²

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 33.

⁴⁹ Sikandar, *MS*, trans., p. 33.

⁵⁰ Habib, *Agrarian System*, pp. 123-135.

⁵¹ Sikandar, *MS*, trans., p. 45.

⁵² Ibid.



“After this”, writes Sikandar, “no one ever made such objections, and, in truth, the secret of the content of his subjects was that he never confiscated jagirs, except for oppression, and he never departed from the rules of Government.”⁵³

From the above statements it is clear that the nobles and subjects of the Gujarat Sultanate especially during the reign of Mahmud Begarha were happier than the nobility and peasantry of the Mughal Empire. This can be evinced from the fact that Irfan Habib himself in the last chapter of his book criticizes the system of frequent jagir transfers prevalent in the Mughal Empire which according to him led to the exploitation of the peasantry by the jagirdars and ultimately to the flight of the peasants from the land and even to peasant rebellions which ruined the Empire and led to its downfall owing to an agrarian crisis.⁵⁴

On the other hand, from the *Mirat-i Sikandari* we get evidence of two nobles of Mahmud Begarha, Abdul Latif Malik Mahmud Dawarul-Mulk and Malik Ayaz who held permanent jagirs of Morvi and Diu respectively which they made proverbially prosperous. Sikandar writes regarding Dawarul-Mulk that “he charged the cultivators of his estates only the small rates sanctioned by the Muhammadan Law, and not an iota above. People used to flock to his *jagirs* which became so prosperous that one of them excited the covetous desire of the Sultan’s son-in-law.”⁵⁵

Regarding Malik Ayaz, Sikandar writes that he not only made Diu a prosperous trading mart but also organized its defenses so well that the Portuguese who coveted Diu ever since their inception in India could never obtain a foothold on the island as long as Malik Ayaz was alive.⁵⁶

The above two examples endorse Bernier’s view that permanent and hereditary jagirs encourage the jagirdars towards long-term development of the area and the jagirs end up being proverbially prosperous and the peasantry happy whereas transferable jagirs impoverish the peasantry and ruin the jagirs and according to Irfan Habib can even lead to the downfall of an empire.

According to Sikandar, Mahmud Begarha cared so much for the welfare of his soldiers that he appointed a separate treasurer to advance loans to those soldiers who needed them and recovered them in a humane manner so that his soldiers never fell into the clutches of the money lender. Sikandar writes that the king used to say: “If the Musalmans borrow money at interest, how shall they be able to fight?”⁵⁷

This shows that the Sultans of Gujarat were able to maintain an army that was more loyally bound to the person of the Sultan than say the army of the Delhi Sultans or the Mughals and unlike the army of the Delhi Sultans or the Mughals the Gujarat army never suffered defeat till the reign of Sultan Muzaffar Shah II and its first defeat was in the reign of his successor Bahadur Shah at the hands of the Mughal Emperor Humayun.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Habib, *Agrarian System*, pp. 364-405.

⁵⁵ Sikandar, *MS*, trans., p. 82.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 84-86.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 47.



Thus, the picture that emerges from the *Mirat-i Sikandari* is that as long as the norms laid down by Ahmed Shah I were followed the army of the Gujarat Sultanate triumphed and the land revenue administration remained more stable and less exploitative than it was in the Delhi Sultanate or the Mughal Empire.

Mirat-i Ahmedi

The *Mirat-i Ahmedi* of Ali Muhammad Khan who was the last Diwan of Mughal Gujarat and witnessed the extinction of Mughal rule in Gujarat in 1758 and the ascendancy of the Marathas in the *subah* gives a more detailed account of the Mughal period of Gujarati history and the pre-Mughal part of his work is derived from the chronicles written during the lifetime of the Sultans of Gujarat and the *Mirat-i Sikandari*. Moreover, the account of the Sultans of Gujarat written by Ali Muhammad Khan is sketchy when compared to Sikandar's detailed account.

The *Mirat-i Ahmedi* being a derivative of the *Mirat-i Sikandari* in so far as the history of the Sultans of Gujarat is concerned largely repeats the same things in brevity regarding the pioneering enterprise of Ahmed Shah I in organizing the army and land revenue administration of the kingdom of Gujarat⁵⁸, the defection of the pen-men who had suffered at the hands of Sultan Qutbuddin Ahmed Shah II (the *Mirat-i Sikandari* says they were Hindu clerks who were dismissed by the late Sultan Muhammad Shah II) to the side of the invading Sultan of Malwa, Mahmud Khalji I and revealing to him the statement of revenues of the Gujarat Kingdom and the subsequent remark of Sultan Mahmud Khalji I regarding the difficulty of conquering a powerful kingdom like Gujarat are repeated verbatim.⁵⁹

So also are repeated the measures of Mahmud Begarha with regard to the confirmation of the jagirs of deceased Amirs or soldiers on their sons and if they have no son half the jagir should be given to their daughters and if they have no daughters then suitable arrangements should be made to look after the dependents of the deceased Amir or soldier in a manner that they have no complaint against the Government. The *Mirat-i Ahmedi* also takes note of the incident mentioned in the *Mirat-i Sikandari* where someone represented to Sultan Mahmud Begarha that the son of a deceased Amir was not worthy of his jagir and the Sultan replied that the jagir and wealth of the Amir will make him able and thus confirmed the jagir on the son of the deceased Amir. "After that", writes Ali Muhammad Khan, "no one dared speak a word in this connection before the Sultan."⁶⁰

However, Ali Muhammad Khan gives an example where jagirs of deceased Amirs and soldiers were actually conferred by Mahmud Begarha on their sons. He cites the example of the expedition that Mahmud Begarha led in order to chastise the Malabari pirates who were plundering the ports of Gujarat and causing disturbances to its trade. "He summoned sons of the amirs and soldiers who were martyred in this incursion", writes Ali Muhammad Khan, "or died a natural death assigned to them the jagir of their fathers; an amir who had no son, half of his jagir was granted to his daughter; anyone who had no daughter, he fixed means of livelihood for his servants."⁶¹ This example is sufficient proof of the prevalence of hereditary jagirs or land rights in the Gujarat Sultanate which was at variance with the practice of the Delhi Sultanate or the Mughal Empire and problematizes Irfan Habib's argument about

⁵⁸ Ali Muhammad Khan (1965), *Mirat-i Ahmedi* [henceforth MA] trans. M.F. Lokhandwala, p. 39.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 42.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 46.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 48.



the absence of hereditary land rights in medieval India made by him in his work *The Agrarian System of Mughal India: 1556-1707*.

Apart from this the value of the *Mirat-i Ahmedi* lies in the fact that its author, Ali Muhammad Khan refers to a fact revealed by the inscriptions of the Sultans of Gujarat also that Mahmud Begarha constructed a large number of mosques, madrasas, inns and sarais for travelers⁶², a fact omitted by Sikandar. Besides certain important details mentioned above that are omitted by the author of the *Mirat-i Sikandari*, the *Mirat-i Ahmedi* succinctly repeats whatever is already written by Sikandar and Ali Muhammad Khan's work in so far as the history of the Sultans of Gujarat is concerned is nothing more than an abridgment of the *Mirat-i Sikandari*.

Conclusion

Thus it will be seen that there are discrepancies between what the inscriptions tell us and what the chronicles narrate regarding the nature of land rights in the Gujarat Sultanate.

If one goes by the evidence from texts like the *Mirat-i Sikandari* and the *Mirat-i Ahmedi* one can safely conclude that Irfan Habib has generalized about the nature of land rights prevalent in Mughal India for the entire medieval period of Indian history in his work *The Agrarian System of Mughal India: 1556-1707* because the Gujarat Sultanate was an exception to the general rule where hereditary jagirs and land rights existed and Irfan Habib has definitely missed a point in making the generalization that there were no hereditary jagirs or land rights in medieval India. Hence the *Mirat-i Sikandari* and the *Mirat-i Ahmedi* evince a rebuttal of Habib's thesis.

However, when one looks at the inscriptions one is presented with a different story altogether where one finds only two inscriptions from the period 1398 to 1511 concerning land grants and no inscription of Mahmud Begarha, the Sultan associated with conferring hereditary jagirs, in which the Sultan is said to have conferred the jagir of a deceased Amir or soldier on his son as the texts tell us.

Thus, looking at the findings from the primary sources one gets a complex picture on the nature of land rights in the Gujarat Sultanate where the textual sources clearly rebut Irfan Habib's thesis whereas the epigraphical sources give a totally different picture which indicates that the Sultans of Gujarat were interested in acquiring religious merit by building mosques and step-wells instead of conferring the jagir of a deceased noble or soldier on his son. In other words, an epigraphical survey of the Gujarat Sultanate does not tell us about the existence of hereditary jagirs or land rights in the kingdom.

Moreover, since inscriptions are sources that are closest to the period as they were recorded on the spot when compared to the two chronicles, namely, the *Mirat-i Sikandari* and the *Mirat-i Ahmedi* which were composed much later in the Mughal period and in so far as land grants are concerned since no epigraph mentions the confirmation of a son in his father's rank and jagir the rebuttal of Irfan Habib's thesis is nullified even though the two chronicles and Samira Sheikh's work make a mention of the existence of hereditary jagirs in the Sultanate of Gujarat. We can only problematize Habib's thesis to a certain extent through evidence from these sources.

⁶² Khan, MA, trans., p. 46.



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