This chapter outlines a range of social groups inhabiting Gujarat in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, mostly as viewed by the Europeans moving about the region. Coastal Gujarat during the period of our study was home to some of the most enterprising and commercially influential mercantile communities of the Asian trading world. The commercial prosperity of the area had opened numerous avenues of trade and commerce, making the cities and ports of Gujarat the hub of economic and trading activities along the west coast. Besides the mercantile communities, the region was also home to numerous tribal and localised communities which were engaged in activities ancillary to trade. So there were the mariners, artisans, ship builders and fishermen among many others. Then there were also sections of society engaged in menial jobs in the cities and its surroundings. Thus when the European companies established their factories in this geographically as well as commercially viable region, they were adding to the already complex population pool of the region.

The European observers writing about India, in this case about Gujarat, tend to divide the population and communities in the region on the basis of their religion and caste. They held religion as the primary criterion to classify the native inhabitants. This was especially true of the early Portuguese travellers to the region, who held Christians to be more ‘civilized’ as compared to Hindus and Muslims whom they saw as ‘gross idolaters’ and ‘barbaric’.

Again caste divisions among the Hindus, and the associations of certain castes with specific occupations made it easy for the European travellers and writers to divide the native population on lines of caste and religion for their readers back home. The prejudices of the European observers are clearly reflected in the following description given by Linschoten, where he clearly divides the Indian population on the basis of their religion and highlights the fact that they believed in superstitions in their religious practices:
The residents are mainly Heathens, moors, Iewes, and all strange nations, bordering there aboute with everie one of them using several custmes and superstitions in religion.¹

Pietre della Valle found the population of Surat to be ‘partly gentile and partly mahometans’, with former being greater in number.² John Fryer further divided the inhabitants of the country into five sects — Gentiles, Moguls, Portugals, Dutch, English and others, and the Parsis.³ An English officer writing around year 1672, from Surat (probably Stryensham Master) wrote,

India is inhabited with soe many several nations of people, all exercising their own way of worship that it is noe strange thing to them to hear of people of a different religion from themselves, for they esteem none the worse for that reason...⁴

**RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES:**

**THE MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN THE REGION:**

The Muslim population in the region was largely heterogeneous. On one hand it constituted of Mughal officials and nobles posted in the region, entrusted with the administrative and security responsibilities. On the other, there were the merchant — a category which itself

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encompassed the local Gujarati Muslim merchants as well as the foreign merchants of Arab and Persian origin, who had settled in Gujarat for their commercial pursuits.

Duarte Barbosa commenting on the composition of the Muslim population in the region says that 'most part of them are foreigners from many lands, Scilicet, Turks, Mamalukes, Arabs, Persians, Coracones and Targimoes; others come from the great kingdom of Dely [Delhi] and others of the land itself...'. Thevenot enlists all the 'Mahometans', 'Mogols', Persians, Arabians and Turks who were in the Indies as residents of Surat. Other than these, there were the artisans and workers employed in various crafts and other industries.

These travellers generally tend to identify the religion of the populace with the religion of rulers of the country. This is reflected in the remarks by Ovington,

Moors gets precedence over all the other sections of society, and are appointed to the most eminent stations of honour and trust, are appointed governours of the provinces, and are intrusted with the principal military, as well as, civil appointments...for religion, which puts a bias upon the mind, intitles them to court favours, when it carries a conformity to that of their prince.

General population of the region were the followers of the Sunni sect of Islam, which was also followed by the Mughal Emperor and most of his nobles. However the trading community of the Bohra Muslims, who had converted to Islam very early almost at the time of its introduction into sub-continent, were Shias. According to Mirat-i Ahmadi, Bohras, who were Shias, were in majority in and around the city of Pattan. However, during the reign of Sultan Muzaffar, the Shia Bohras of the town were converted to Sunni faith; whereas those in

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5 D. Barbosa, The Book of Duarte Barbosa, pp. 119-120.
6 S.N. Sen, Indian Travels, p. 21.
7 J Ovington, A Voyage to Surat, p. 140.
the neighbouring districts and villages remained Shias. The author of the Mirat further informs that there were seven sects within the Bohras, namely – Daudia, Sulaimania, Alia, Zaidia, Hajumia, Ismailia, and Nazaria. Fryer further informs his readers about the four prominent schools of law amongst the Muslims in the country, namely Hanoffi, Shoffi, Hamaleech, and Maluche.

HINDU SECTS AND CASTE DIVISIONS:

The Hindu population of the region has been variously commented upon by those writing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For the Europeans in India the culture and rituals of the Hindus were an attraction which they noticed and recorded. The customs and manners of Hindus were in stark contrast to their own understanding of things, belonging to a very different cultural and civilizational background. Thus almost every aspect of life associated with the Hindu belief and culture has been represented by the Europeans. These writings pick up Hindu beliefs, their idol worship, the idea of transmigration of soul, division of sects and castes, their eating habits, clothing and even on the marriage ceremonies.

Even the Hindu society of Gujarat was divided into various categories in these European records. According to Pietro dell Valle, the entire gentile [Hindu] population of the region may be divided into many sects or parties of men known and distinguished by the descent or pedigrees, and reckons that they may number around eighty four in total. John Fryer divided the 'gentile' population into Brahmmins, Rajputs, merchants, labourers, peasants and other menial classes. The author of the Mirat-i Ahmadi also gives a detailed description of the Hindu population residing in Gujarat. He divided Hindus into sects that became occupational

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9 ibid
groups, such as Brahmins, Shevras, Kshatriyas, Rajputs, Baniyas, Kayastha, Kunbis and Kolis; goldsmiths, fuller, oil makers carpenters, weavers, tailors, dyers, tanners and deeds.  

At another place the division is made into ‘Rashboots’ – ‘ancient princes, gentlemen and souldyers of the naturall Indian, Brahmans – priests to all the sevarall sects of Indians, Banians – merchants, tradesmen, and brokers, Gentoos – handicraftsmen, as carpenters, smiths, Taylors, Shoemakers, seamen, among others, Coolies – poore country peasants.’

Although the societal divisions mentioned in the writings of these travellers and merchants, consists of a combination of the traditional four-fold classifications of the Hindu society, and the division based on occupation. These divisions do bring forth the whole range of caste and sub-castes prevalent within the population inhabiting the region. It also reflects the close interaction between castes and occupational groupings within the social structure of the region. Pietro della Valle while referring to this inter-relation says,

> Every one of these (Hindu sects and sub sects) hath a particular name, and also a special office and employment within the commonwealth, from which none of the descendants of that race ever swerve; they never rise or fall, nor change condition: whence some are husbandmen, other mechanicks, as taylers, shoemakers and like; other factors and merchants such as whom we call Banians; but they in their language correctly Vania; other shoulders as the Ragiaputi; and thus every one attends and is employed in the proper trade of his family, without any mutation ever happening amongst them, or alliance of one race contracted with another.

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14 A Letter from Surat in India, p. cccix.

However this difference in employment in accordance with the caste was not followed in its entirety and strictness as Streynsham Master noted after detailing the caste divisions and traditional occupations assigned to them, he adds

...that severall of them are of one anothers and many of other professions then I have named, as there are bramans that are shouldyres and merchants soe as well as priests, and there are banians that are labourers, handicraftsmen (and soe well as merchants) and curer of herbs, and there are weavers of all sects, Moores, Hindooes and Parsees.  

THE PARISIS:

The Parsis originally hailed from Persia, and had settled in the region after many of them fled in wake oppression and persecution under the Arab rule, sometime in the beginning of 10th century A.D. The first settlement of the Parsis in the country was in the town of Navasari, from where they spread to other places in the country. The Parsis have been noted to have followed all professions except that of sea men, 'for they have hitherto held it unlawfull for them to goe to sea, for they must then pollute the element of water which they esteem holy, as they doe fire.'  17 The community has been identified in these sources as fire worshippers or as the sun worshipers: 'they keep among themselves the practice of fire worship.' 18 Streynsham Master provides us with a more detailed description of the community,

They have a great reverence for fire and many of them will not put it out, but let it extinguish for want of matter; they worship and acknowledge one god almighty and noe image or representation, but only the Sun they doe adore.  

16 A Letter from Surat in India, p. cccx.
17 ibid, p. cccxv.
18 Jadunath Sarkar, India of Aurangzeb, p. 63.
19 A Letter from Surat in India, p. cccxv.
Among the various customs and practices followed by the Parsis the most noted by the observers was the practice of disposing off their dead. Ovington in particular gives a graphic and detailed account of the last rites and the ceremonies associated with it. He records that 'the noblest sepulchre which they fancy they can bestow upon their deceased friends, is by exposing them to be devoured by the fowls of air, and bestowing their carcasses on the birds of prey.' He further enlists the ceremonies that took place prior to the burials and informs of practices such as making a dog eat a piece of bread from the mouth of the dead person, so as to determine the state in which he died. It was assumed that if the dog takes a bite of bread then the person died in happy state, and if not, then his state of death was very sorrowful.

**Occational Groups:**

**The Ruling Class and the Nobility:**

Amongst the various occupational groups in the area, the members of the Mughal nobility enjoyed considerable power for they were the principal aristocratic groups in the region. Mughal aristocracy in the region did not belonging to any particular religious or ethnic group. The nobility included such diverse ethnic stock such as Turks, Uzbeks, Afghans, and Rajputs etc.

The aristocracy in the region primarily consisted of the Rajput rajas and the zamindars who had gained such rights on their land over a period of time, specifically under the rule of the Sultans of Gujarat. Pelsaert holds the Rajputs to be the inhabitants of the hills, who were excellent soldiers, and says that they were bold and courageous people, determined and loyal. Tavernier counts the Rajputs along with the Khatris, as the second caste among the

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21 Ibid.
Hindus, and only one among the idolaters who are brave enough and distinguish themselves in the profession of arms.23

The Rajput rajas of the Gujarat region, discussed in detail in the Ain-i Akbari and other Persian chronicles such as Mirat-i Ahmadi, were subjugated by the Mughals in course of their campaigns in Gujarat in the latter half of sixteenth and the seventeenth century. However at the lower levels of administration they remained indispensable, for the local peasantry and population were loyal to them and their cause, by the ties of clan and land. They were the hereditary zamindars of the area and that was primarily why they were incorporated within the Mughal administrative framework at various levels. They joined the Mughals as ordinary soldiers in contingent, zamindars and even as important nobles entrusted with the administrative responsibilities of the province.

Pelsaert noticed the appearance of the Rajput men and wrote ‘the men are short in stature and ugly. Mounted on foot, they have no weapon other than a short spear, with shield, sword and dagger...’24 Peter Mundy describes the appearance of the Rajput whom he met on his way to Burhanpur from Surat, as to how he was ‘on horseback all well-armed and provided with guns, swords, lances, bows and arrows...’25

THE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES:

The region has different religious groups as a part of its social structure. This has been recorded by several European travellers.

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24 F. Pelsaert, Remonstrante, p. 78.
**The Brahmans:**

The general image that the Europeans presented of Hindus was that of idol worshipers and superstitious, with blind faith in the words of their priests or the Brahmans. Tavernier called Brahmans, the successors of the ancient Brachmanes or philosophers of India, and says that the caste is the most noble of all among the Hindus because from amongst them the priests and the ministers of law were selected. Mirat-i Ahmadi further lists 84 classes of Brahmans, and says that they were best known of 100 classes. Streynsham Master notes that although most of the Brahmans, irrespective of the sects and opinions, were descendants from the Brahmans of the Ancient times, there were many of other tribes, but have been dedicated or made an offering to this office by their parents, and some out of their own voluntary will.

All these records agreed that their principal occupation was to make offerings to the deities of the temples for the Public in general and pray, bless and preach their doctrines of morality, as given in ancient scriptures to the general public. Tavernier also notes their role in the study of Ancient law books, observation of stars and predicting celestial events such as Solar eclipse. This was immediately connected to the superstitions common among the people. A Pesaert noted that as a result of the faith shown in these fortune tellers, even the poor of the city have begun to show blind faith in their predictions.

Many of them were also doctors, who due to their knowledge of herbs and medicines and texts related to these, were held in great esteem and their advices were sought by almost everyone in case of illness or injury. Ovington notes:

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28 *A Letter from Surat in India*, p. cccx.

29 Ibid, p. cccxii.


31 Ibid
...though theology is the profession of the Brahmins yet some of them are skilled in Arithmetick, Astrology, and physicks; and make pretensions to the prediction of events, the calculation of nativities and cure of diseases.\textsuperscript{32}

\textit{Fakirs or Mendicants:}

Other than these doctors, there were the mendicants or fakirs, who led a semi-sedentary life and were believed to possess extraordinary powers. European travellers were fascinated with such details and go on to write that they were held in great esteem and reverence, due to their performing feats of extraordinary magic, which the Indians thought could be the result of certain divine powers which were bestowed on them.

Tavernier identifies some of them as 'Musalman Dervishes', who move together in groups under the head of their leaders visiting various shrines and places of worship much revered by the people of the country, and performing acts of extreme penance and self-mortification, which have been found by the European travellers as 'quite unnatural in behaviour.' At another place he writes: '...curiosity led me to go to see this penitent in company...he remained seated like our tailors without changing his position either by day or night.'\textsuperscript{33} Other acts of penance noted by him, includes, those of a person who had spent many years without lying down either by day or night; or of a mendicant who never took his hand down, always keeping them raised towards sky, and in many other positions contrary to the natural attitudes of human body.

This image of Indians in Gujarat region fits in well with the 'barbaric' image that east had come to represent for the west. These accounts at times are full of exaggeration so as to defined India as opposite to the rationalised west.

\textsuperscript{32} J. Ovington, \textit{A Voyage to Surat}, p. 205.

\textsuperscript{33} J.B. Tavernier, \textit{Travels}, Vol. 2, p. 156. He also wrote of fakirs retiring into graves for more than 10 days and sometimes even a month without any food or water and with only a small hole in the ceiling for the light to come in.
MERCANTILE COMMUNITIES:
The powerful merchant community of the prosperous region of Gujarat was also described by the European travelogues on the basis of their religious affinities. So they would write about the Muslim merchants of the region as a powerful section within the Gujarati urban social setup of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This was obviously due to their pivotal role in the overseas commerce and their hold over the carrying trade of the region, especially in the late seventeenth and first three decades of the eighteenth century.

This community within itself was not monolith and consisted of local sections, like the Bohras and those of Arab and Persian descent. The prominent position of Bohra community in matters relating to trade was observed by Francois Martin. The most notable trader among the Muslim community in the early decades of seventeenth century was Mir Jaffar. Haji Zahid Beg was another prominent merchant of the rime, who also held the post of Shahbandar of Surat in 1629 A.D. His wealth and the amount recovered by Shivaji during his raid of Surat have been discussed in much detail by the English merchants and records. Abdul Gaffur is mentioned frequently in English records with regard to the damages incurred on his ships and profits by the European pirates. Ahmed Challaby emerges as another prominent merchant towards the mid-decade of eighteenth century, who was able to hold his own considerably in face of deteriorating political conditions in the hinterland and along the coast and increasing English competition in carrying trade to West Asia.

Another important mercantile section of the trading community of Surat, who was mentioned by mostly all European observers were the banyas. They were a group operating at different levels of mercantile activities – small merchants to big bankers and brokers for merchants, officials, nobles, princes and even for the European companies. Europeans in their writings mention stereotype of the Banya community as one of the most cunning and extortive.

34 Ashin Das Gupta, Indian Merchants, pp. 94-133.
mercantile class ever encountered by them, and not that 'even the Jews would come to terms with a banya'. Tavernier talks of them as a people,

Who attaches themselves to trade, some being shroffs, i.e. money changers or bankers, by whose agency the merchants buy and sell.’ The members of this caste are so subtle and skilful in trade that...they could give a lesson of two to the most cunning Jews.35

Mandelslo describes Banyas as a hard working class, attached to trade and merchandise with an extraordinary devotion towards religious matters.36 Dr. John Fryer equates them with fleas, ’who like leaches, hang besides you till they have sucked both sanguinem and succum (money).’37 Describing them he writes,

As soon as you have set foot on shore, they crowd in the service, imposing between you and all civil respects, as if you had no other business but to guild; so that unless you have some, to make your way through them, they will interrupt your going and never leave till they have drawn out something for their advantage.38

Among other observations Geleynssen de Jongh, the Dutch factor at Surat wrote an interesting account of the social life, rituals, and religious practices of the merchant communities in Gujarat. Banya community from his account appears an organized and a well knit community engaged in money exchange business and lending capital to merchants on interest. Writing of the city of Ahmedabad de Jongh noticed,

36 M.S. Commissariat (ed.) Mandelslo’s Travels, p. 9.
38 Ibid, p. 84.
Money Exchangers who are all banyas live mostly in the city than any other place. They deal in exchange and fix rates of exchange against the bills of exchange. The discount will be more at one place than the other.\textsuperscript{39}

The author of the Mirat-i Ahmadi refers to the presence of 84 sub-castes of banyas in Gujarat.\textsuperscript{40} J. Ovington explains the social aspect, ‘Among the banians are reckoned 24 castes, who both refrain from an indiscriminate mixture in marriage and from eating together in common.’\textsuperscript{41}

Banyas played various mercantile roles, from money lenders and shroffs to bankers. However, the most conspicuous of all the activities they indulged in was that of their role as the broker in the Indian commercial system. John Fryer commented on their role as broker and the general manner of their trade as follows:

At the time of shipping they present themselves to the governor of Surat and obtain licence to open a mart here (Swally port), which they make the Europeans pay dearly for. Yet such is their policy that without them, neither you nor natives themselves shall do any business. Though they were worse brokers than Jew, if they be not spawn of them, the rechabites that would drink no wine. They generally are the poorer sorts, and set on by richer to trade with the seamen for the meanest thing they bring; and notwithstanding they take them at their own rates, gets well enough in exchange of goods with them. They are the absolute map of sordidness, faring hardly and professing fairly, to entrap the unwary; enduring several fowl words, affronts and injuries, for the

\textsuperscript{39} Jawaid Akhtar, ‘Merchant Communities of Gujarat during the seventeenth century, as described by Geleynssen de Jongh’, paper presented at \textit{Indian History Congress, 53\textsuperscript{rd} Session}, Warangal, 1992-1993

\textsuperscript{40} S. Nawab Ali & C.N. Seddon, \textit{Mirat-i Ahmadi, Supplement}, pp. 117-118.

\textsuperscript{41} J. Ovington, \textit{A Voyage to Surat}, p. 168.
future hope of gain. Experts in all the studied arts of thriving and insinuation, so that lying, dissembling, cheating, are their masterpieces. The whole desire is to have money pass through their fingers, to which a great part is sure to stick. For they well understand the constant turning of cash amounts, both to the credit and profit to him that is so occupied, which these banians are sensible of, otherwise they would not be so industrious to slave themselves. 42

European companies used the services of these brokers for every possible service they wanted to avail to. John Fryer again informs,

Out of the local banyas are the brokers for the company, and are allowed 2% on all bargains, besides what they secretly squeezed out of the price of the thing brought, which cannot be well understood for want of knowledge in their language. 43

Francois Martin talked about the hold and influence of Bora brothers who acted as brokers of the French company:

These were the merchants powerful enough who by shear strength of their commerce and influence over local mercantile and producing communities as well as over the Mughal officials to a certain extent, commanded the respect of the local community as well as of the European companies. 44

The Parsis like banyas, formed closely knit units. The leading Parsi merchant in the seventeenth century was Rustamji Manekji, who was the broker of the Dutch before 1681, and then figured prominently as broker to the Portuguese and the New English Company.

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Another leading broker belonging to the community was Bhimji Parekh, who was given a medal and a chain for his services to the Company. Francois Martin notes the dealings with him, in order to break a deal with the Mughal government, for relaxing the custom duties of the European companies, which had been risen to 3\% from the previous of 2\%. Parekh promised the companies to bring about an agreement and asked for an amount of twenty one thousand rupees to break the deal.\textsuperscript{45}

Virji Vora, the leading Parsi merchant of the region exercised considerable influence over the commercial life of Surat during greater part of the seventeenth century. English Factors at a consultation held at Surat on 8\textsuperscript{th} April 1634, noted that,

> The potency of Virji Vora (who had been the usual merchant and is now the sole monopolist of European commodities) is observed to bear such a sway amongst the inferior merchants of this town, that when they would often times buy (and give greater price) they are still restrained not daring betray their intents to his knowledge and their own sufferance, in so much that time and price is still in his own will and at his own dispose.\textsuperscript{46}

The factors were so perturbed at the time by the stronghold of Virji Vora over the markest of various goods at Surat, that they advanced it as one of the main reasons behind their appeal to the Court of Directors to transfer the presidency from Surat to Ahmedabad.

> Here in Suratt all merchants, as well as town dwellers as those that come from abroad, are so over awed by the overgrown greatness of Verge Vora that, if it be a commoditie which he is accustomed or doth intend to buy, no man dares look upon it, not the broker (even our owne, which has sole dependence upon your businesse) dare not acompanie such a merchant into our house; from


\textsuperscript{46} William Foster, \textit{English factories in India, 1634-1636}, p. 24.
whence it comes to passé that although we sold the fine corall unto Tapidas almost two years. Since, which he not daring to avowch for feare of Verge Vora, continues still in our possession in our names, there hath not been in all this time one man that hath desired to see or buy it, but here it lies still unrequetted and unregarded.\(^{47}\)

This passage has the power of Virji Vora in the fine print. It can also be gauged from the fact that he was one of the chief signatories of the treaty signed between the Mughals and the English, dated 7 Sep 1624, establishing English trade at Surat in clearer terms.\(^{48}\)

**ARTISANS, CARRIERS, WORKERS AND OTHERS:**

A major part of the population of Gujarat comprised of workers and artisans engaged as carpenters, smiths, tailors, shoemakers, seamen, which were primarily industrial or commercial in nature. There were also many sections of the ordinary peasants variously styled as Kolis, Kathis and Kunabees, engaged in agricultural activities as sowing and harvesting of crops. Stryensham Master identified the peasants as Coolees', who were the 'poore country peasants that plough and soe, and gather corne.'\(^{49}\)

The composition of this particular section was heterogeneous too, especially when seen in terms of the different religious affiliations as it constituted of both Hindus and Muslims. Most of these were originally the native inhabitants of the region, converted to Islam over generations during the rule of Gujarat sultans and the Mughals. However, conversion did not always result in the person shifting to a higher social status and at times meant very little when it came to the everyday life. Streynsham Master noted that 'many of the Hindoos that

\(^{47}\) Ibid, p. 218.


have turned Moores retaine many of their idolatrous customes. He also identifies these communities as those belonging to the fourth or the fifth division of the Hindu caste based social division.

**SEAMEN OR LASCARS:**

The region with a concentration of such strong mercantile tradition was home to some of the most competent shipping communities in the subcontinent, proficient in navigating ships across Indian seas. These form the bulk of crew on board the Indian ships sailing for the ports of West Asia and towards Southeast Asia. De Laet informs us of the community of seamen residing in the town, of Rander called Naïtes. Ovington called the seamen by the name of Lascars. Alexander Forbes informs us about the ancestry of the seamen, who were residents at Gogha,

Its seamen, called Ghogarees, partly of Mohumedan faith, and partly Kolee, or Hindoo, the descendants of the navigators fostered by the King of Unhilwara...still maintain their ancient reputation, and form the best and most trusted portions of every Indian crew that sail the sea under the flag of England.

**CARRIERS OF GOODS OR BANJARAS:**

The carriers of goods across the country have variously been termed in our sources as banjaras or ‘Manaris’ as Tavernier called them. Describing them he says,

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50 Ibid, p. cccix.

51 Ibid.


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They never dwell in houses and take along with them their women and children. Some of them possess 100 oxens, others more or less, and they all have a chief, who acts as a prince.  

Peter Mundy called a moving assemblage of banjaras, a ‘tanda’, and adds:

These Banjaras carry all their household along with them, as wives and children, one tanda consisting of many families. Their course of life is somewhat like carriers, continually driving from place to place...there may be in such a tanda 6 or 700 persons, men, women, and children.

Regarding the community structure and organization within the Banjara community, Tavernier divides them into four tribes, each concerned with carrying a particular commodity:

In order to enable reader to understand this manner of carrying in India, it should be remarked that among the idolaters of this country there are four tribes, whom they call Manaris, of which each number around one hundred thousand souls. These people dwell in tents, as I have said, and have no other trade but to transport provisions from one part of the country to another. The first of these tribes has to do with corn only, the second with rice, the third with pulse, and the fourth with salt, which it obtains from Surat, and even from as far as Cape Comorin.

However Tavernier's statement on the caste and customs of these carriers cannot be taken on its face value, as one cannot say with certainty that all the banjaras were Hindus, and as Irfan Habib has shown that there were other communities, professing other religions also involved.

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56 Peter Mundy, Travels, Vol. 2, pp. 95-96.
in the profession. Moreover the carriers were not always restricting themselves to any particular commodities, and in fact anything that yielded profit was dealt with.58

**HALALCHORS:**

They constitute the lowest strata or ladder of the social structure of the region. Primarily employed as cleaner of wastes in the houses of other inhabitants and in the city, they were looked down upon and discriminated socially and were segregated from the rest of the community. However their importance in the city life of the region cannot be underestimated. Employed as the cleaners in houses, streets, carrying off dirt and dung, and in washing of dead bodies and conveying them to the place of cremation, their role can hardly be negated.59 Ovington tells us that the term Halalchors in Perisan meant Eat-alls or eaters at large.60 He also provides us with a detailed description of the social status of these people and of the extent of segregation they had to undergo during the period:

These despicable persons take all in good part, cringe and bow to all they pass by, eat whatever is offered them from hand, and go through with their drudgery without noise or concern. The Halalchors industriously avoids the touching of any person for fear of offence; he is separated from all the rest of the casts, as a thing unclean; for if he happens to come too near a banian, he defies him by his touch, and puts him to trouble of some purification, to wash off the defilement he contracted upon it. Therefore are they shunned by all, and endeavour to keep at a distance by all.61

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60 ibid

61 ibid
ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS AND MATERIAL CULTURE:

The environmental conditions of the area to a large extent determined the nature of the social structure and the material culture which had emerged in the region of Gujarat. This was also apparent in the case of medieval social and cultural formations, as discussed in the sections above. At another level we can see that the natural conditions played a determining role in shaping the cultural and religious makeup of the region.

HOUSES & SHELTERS:

The nature of shelters sought in a particular area was to a large extent determined by the availability of building material and climatic conditions existing in the region. Since climate for most part of the year remained hot and sultry houses were designed so as to aid the flow of the air and were constructed of such material as lime and stone quarried locally from the region.

The Khulasat-ut Tawarikh informs us that most of the houses in the region were generally made up from bricks and lime, with tilled roof, while some were also made on broad stone foundation, with broad passages. It also adds that the buildings were covered with lime and mortar in such a way that pure and clean rain water enters into caves which has been made like tank, to be used latter for drinking and other purposes for the rest of the year.\(^{62}\)

With the exception of some of the buildings which were constructed of lime, mortar, brick and stone, most of the houses were constructed of bamboo reeds and palm leaves belonging to common people. Fr. Manuel Godinho describes the houses in Surat as being mostly unpretentious and covered with Olai (interlaced Palm leaves).\(^{63}\) Ovington seconds the opinion with regard to the houses of the poor and described them as having walls only of bamboos,

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with reeds inter woven through them, with roof made of palm leaves. Due to palm leave roofs he calls such houses as 'Cajan Houses'. Writing of the houses in Ahmedabad, Edward terry described them in following words:

Their buildings are generally base, except it be in their cities, wherein I have observed many faire piles. Many of their homes are built high and flat on the toppe, from whence in the cold seasons of the day, they take in fresh ayrre. They have no chimnies in their houses, for they never use fire but to dresse their meate. In their upper rooms they have many lights and doors to let in the ayrre, but use no glasse. The material for their best buildings are bricke or stone, well squared and composed; which I have observed in Amadavar.

Thevenot concludes that the houses are generally built of lime and brick because stone was not easily available and timber used was generally brought down from forests southwards, around Daman, where the teak wood was available in plenty. However, many of the buildings and houses which belonged to merchants were rather ungainly in appearance. Ovington attributed such an affair to the attempts made by merchants to conceal their wealth, 'lest it should prove too powerful a temptation to the avarice of the Mogul.'

**DIETARY HABITS:**

The dietary habits of the various sections of the population in the region have been observed and laid out in detail by the European travellers, who tend to segregate and identify the communities according to their eating habits. Thus the Muslims or the moors were the people

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65 W. Foster (ed.) *Early Travels*, p. 300.


who had no problem in eating flesh, with only exception being pork. To quote John Fryer on the eating habits and styles of the Muslims:

These eat highly of all flesh dumpoked, which is baked with spice in butter;
Pillow a stew of rice and butter, with flesh, fowl or fish; fruits, achars or pickles, and sweet meat. 68

Similarly the Hindus, Parsis and Jains were identified and sometimes confused with belonging to a single community and having a common religious identity, due to their adherence to vegetarianism, and the respect they showed towards living beings. Within the Hindu population there were many castes and sub groups who had no problem in eating meat, except that of cow, and this thus for many observers formed the basis of segregation between a Brahman, Rajput and banya:

The Rashboote will generally eat flesh of goates, and henns and fish and many of them drink wine, but esteem a great and unpardonable offence to kill a cow, or to eat any such flesh as beef or vrale, the Bramans many of them will doe as the Rashbootes, but there be many of them that are alsoe very severe in dyetts and habits, will eat noe thing that has lived in it, nor drink wine or any intoxicating thing, nay some there are that will not eat corne because it hath the seed in itself, and will produce it like, soe they feed only upon milke, which they esteem the most innocent of al foods, and for that reason have the cow in soe very great reverence. 69

On the nature of food eaten by Indians, Ovington comes up with extremely detailed remarks. He discussed various sorts of fruits and delicacies that were savoured by the Indians in accordance with the climate of the region, which for most part of the year remained hot and

sultry. He mentions of fruits like grapes and mangoes which were eaten in vast quantities by
the Indians and the Europeans, as well for the security of their health as for the pleasure and
delight.\textsuperscript{70} He also mentions cucumber, ‘which was so prepared and digested by sun’s heat,
that the banians without endangering their health will feed upon them as plentifully as we do
upon apples.’\textsuperscript{71} Ovington also makes remark on the tea, taken for revival of spirits, during any
part of the day.\textsuperscript{72} Another preparation which interested him was Dahi, and he describes it, he
wrote:

Dye is a particular innocent kind of diet fed upon by the Indians for the most
part about noon. It is sweet milk turned thick, mixed with boiled rice and sugar,
and is very effectual against the rage of fevers and of fluxes...early in morning
or late at night, they seldom touch it, because they esteem it too cool for their
stomachs and nocturnal delights.\textsuperscript{73}

Another diet quite common amongst the Indians was ‘Kitcheree’ or a preparation made by
boiling small round pea or ‘dol’ and rice together. Jahangir in his memoirs made particular
reference of this dish and the manner of its preparation; and informs of his liking towards it
and that he ordered it to be served to him daily during the days of abstinence.\textsuperscript{74} The
Europeans found it to be very strengthening a food, although not very savoury and the sailors
feed upon this once or twice a week to get over the exhaustion and illness they had suffered

\textsuperscript{70} J. Ovington, \textit{A Voyage to Surat}, p. 179.
\textsuperscript{71} ibid
\textsuperscript{72} ibid
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid, p. 183.
\textsuperscript{74} Jahangir, \textit{Tuzuk-i Jahangiri}, Vol. 1, p. 419.
over long voyages; and such days of abstaining from having meat and eating Kitcheree were named by them as 'Banian days'.

**MANNERS OF DRESSING:**

The clothes worn by the inhabitants of the region were definitely a marker of the social status and economic position. However the fabrics used were to a large extent determined by the climate of the region. The sultry and hot conditions of Gujarat did not allow men and women to wear cloths made of heavy stuff, as the heat at times got unbearable. This was one of the principal reasons for the Europeans to adopt the dressing habits of the Indians.

**DISEASES:**

The common diseases in the country reported in the records of the period were dysenteries, fevers and venereal complaints. John Fryer writing on the diseases peculiar to the region informs us that the diseases reign during according to the season and elaborating further, he wrote that the dry season was good for health as no fever entrench itself in body and the season generally was good for digestion and excretion. In the variable seasons such diseases as 'coughs and catarrhs, tumours of mouth and throat, rheumatisms, and intermitting fevers rage.' He also informs us that small pox also was a dreaded disease, particularly for youth. During seasons of extreme heats, 'the Cholera Morbus, inflammation of the eyes by dust and

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76 Joannes de Laet, *De Imperio Magini Mogolis*, p. 85.
78 ibid
79 ibid
fiery temper of the air can be caught off, and in rainy seasons one must be careful of fluxes, apoplexies, and all distempers of brains and as well as stomach.\textsuperscript{80}

Ovington again provides us with information on the common diseases, which infected the Englishmen who visited the country, if they were not used to the harsh climate or immune from the diseases peculiar to India. He lists fevers as the most common problem that destroys the most in India, and to which the Europeans were especially prone.\textsuperscript{81} Cholera or Mordechine as he named it was caused by excessive eating particularly of meat and fish together.\textsuperscript{82} The most peculiar distemper which the Europeans were affected in the region was 'Barbeers', or a kind of paralysis caused by sleeping in open, or due to over exposure to the Northeast winds. The infected person becomes incapable to use or move his limbs. The exposure to cold moist winds of the night, particularly along the coast, and negligence is securing oneself from the mist, while sleeping in open, were the chief causes for the disease.\textsuperscript{83}

Amongst some of the most peculiar diseases recorded in the region, we must mention the Bubonic Plague. Its first outbreak in the country was recorded in 1616 A.D. when the disease caused a number of deaths and panic in the region and even Jahangir’s camp was not left untouched. The year 1682-83 also saw an occurrence of plague in Surat, which saw a number of people succumbing to death. Ovington records an instance when on a single day about hundred gentiles were carried off the gates to be cremated, and he puts the mortality rate to about 300 per day.\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{80} ibid

\textsuperscript{81} J. Ovington, \textit{A Voyage to Surat}, pp. 204-205.

\textsuperscript{82} ibid

\textsuperscript{83} ibid

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid, p. 203.
ENVIRONMENT & CULTURE:

The continuous engagement of the local inhabitants with their natural environments such as the Ocean, winds, rainfall in the region resulted in considerable influence of the natural forces on the local cultures and rituals as well as on the religious outlook of the local population.

The urban areas were primarily a commercial society, with majority of inhabitants engaged in commerce and oceanic trade, especially at the ports. The influence of ocean on the lives of the inhabitants of the region was considerable. The constant concern for safety of ships and merchandise on high seas from storms, winds, and other dangers reflected itself in some of the rituals that came to be a part of everyday social life of people of Gujarat region. The primary purpose behind these was to request God to pacify the sea and ensure safety of their ships, merchandise and kinsmen who were on high seas, engaged in commerce and trade. Francois Martin records the rite of offering coconuts into the river Tapti by the Hindus, marking the beginning of the sailing season. He also informs that the practice continues to take place annually with many leading banyas with their ships on high seas joining in, despite an injunction against it by Aurangzeb. 85

Travellers to this area have pointed out various practices adopted on native ships to ensure favourable wind conditions for those on long voyages and for their safety from sea storms. Abbe Carre travelling on a native Muslim ship from Surat to Bandar Abbas noted the various rituals and ceremonies and acts of superstitions performed at behest of the nakuda of the ship, so as to please the god to send a favourable breeze. 86

There were also prayers and rites undertaken to ensure normal monsoon rainfall for prosperous agricultural and industrial production and growth. The whole pattern of life, the


subsistence base and the trading activities were dependent on the monsoon winds and rains. This is evident from the discussion above and in such a scenario the monsoon rains were venerated and given eminent place in customs and manners of the times. Thus we come across several references to customs and rites being performed and observed with the aim of pleasing the rain god for timely arrival of rains. Abu'l Fazl records an instance or ceremony being performed in the town of Mul Mahdeo on the coast of Kathiawar some distance from Porbandar:

Every year on a certain day before the rainy season, a bird called Mukh appears. It is somewhat smaller than pigeon, with a coarser beak and piped in colour. It alights on the temple, departs itself for a while, and then rolls over and dies. On this day, the people of the city assemble and burns various kinds of perfume and from the proportion of black and white in the plumage of the bird, the calculate the extent of the coming rainfall, the black meaning rain and white meaning draught. 87

The faith reflected in such perceived supernatural occurrences by the inhabitants of the region, and their curiosity for gaining a prior knowledge, regarding the occurrence and extent of rainfall, does brings into focus the extent to which the rains have influenced the lives of the people in the region. Streynsham Master records a procession that was taken out in the city of Surat under the leadership of the governor and the genera, during which fasts were kept by the inhabitants of the city. This was to pray for rains if it was a bad year:

Upon a great dearth or want of raine, I have known the governour of the towne appoint a day for a general fast and prayer for raine, and then he had all the moors of note in the towne have gone in a procession barefoote almost a mile out of the towne to a saints tomb, and there have II very solemnly said their

prayers and returned, the very cattle being alsoe forced to fast and not suffered
to goe out of towns gates for some hours, neither to feed nor water.  

Alexander Forbes in his work had recorded many more of such beliefs prevalent among the
inhabitants of the region to induce rains. In fact he records a verse common in use among the
women of Gujarat to effect that if the rains do not fall in the first five day of Shrawan or rainy
season, a famine will most probably ensure:  

If in the first five days of Shrawun

The cloud-king do not begin to scatter his drops,

Husband, do you go to Malwa,

I shall go home to my father's house.

Forbes further adds that in case of failure of the rains, the Hindu population of the region
attributed it to the wrath of the rain God Indra and thence sought to pacify him with various
methods as leaving their habitat for a day as waste and cook their food outside their
settlement. Another superstition which he noted was the Hindus relying on the powers of a
person called 'Bhoowos', who were supposed to be inspired by the local devi; and behaved in
the manner as if performing meditation between the devi and the devotees; and if the rains
falls the devotees thought it to be inspired by the power of the devi. On such occasion
sometimes the Koonbee and Bheel women parade the streets singing songs devoted to rain
god inducing him to send rain:

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89 Alexander Forbes, Rasmala, p. 605.
90 ibid
91 ibid
The cultivator has abandoned the plough, O! Meyhoola,

In Pity to him do thou rain, therefore, O! Meyhoola

The good man has packed off the good woman home, O! Meyhoola,

Separated from her are her little children, O! Meyhoola

The stream is dry in the river’s bed, O! Meyhoola.

Other than praying for rains, Hindu beliefs in the region were also attached to other objects of nature, such as tree, earth, wind, among others. Streynsham Master wrote in 1672 that,

The Hindus were gross idolaters, and worship many inferior deities and representations of many things, which may be heavenly, or found on earth, in water, and even in those which may only be found under earth or water, for such monsters have never been seen on earth.93

Tavernier in his description of the various forms of idol worship rampant in various regions of the subcontinent, says that ‘the idolaters of India yields to creatures like cow, the ape, and different monsters and honours which are only due to the true deity.’94 At another place he says that in their gross and pitiable ignorance the idolaters like the ancient pagans, regard their gods as men, and even bestows wives upon them, thinking that they love the same things as those in which men take pleasure.95

Pietro della Valle gives an interesting account of one such instance of idol worship, and representations of gods and goddesses with such natural objects as banyan tree. He records:


95 Ibid, p. 150.
The gentiles of the country hold it (Pipal tree) in great veneration, for its
greatness and age, sitting and honouring it often with heir superstitious
ceremonies, as dear and dedicated to the goddess of theirs called Parvete,
whom they hold to be the wife of Mahadeo, one of their greatest dieties.

Of other things the reverence of a Hindu for a cow, and his strict belief in non-violence, also
attracted the attention of the Europeans who sometimes gave grossly exaggerated accounts of
the rituals attached with the cow, and the extent of belief in non-violence towards animals.
Duarte Barbosa in his description of the banya inhabitants of Cambay notes that 'the Banyas
buy live insects and birds from moors, who threatens to kill them in their presence,\textsuperscript{96} or they
shrink back while walking on seeing a swarm of ants crossing their way, so as not to harm the
ants\textsuperscript{97} Even that they refuse to light the lamps in their house during the night so as to avoid
the death of insects that swarm around the lamp.\textsuperscript{98} The extreme case cited by Barbosa was of
the hermits who let lice breed on their bodies, so that the heathens may be freed of guilt of
being forced to kill them:

If these men breed several lice they kill them not, but when they trouble them
to much they send for certain men, also heathens, who live among them and
whom they hold to be men of holy life; they are like hermits living with great
abstinence through devotion to gods. These men louse them, and as many lice
they may catch, they place on their heads and breed them on their own flesh,
by which they say they do great service to their idol.\textsuperscript{99}

\textsuperscript{96} D. Barbosa, \textit{The Book}, p. 23.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid, p. 112.
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid
\textsuperscript{99} ibid
The principal reason behind such a staunch belief in non-violence towards animals or any form of life has been sighted by the Europeans in their adherence to the belief in transmigration of soul:

They imagine or believe that, if they have lived well in this world, the soul, directly, after the breath has left the body, flies to another man or child of equal or higher rank, and is born again; but if a man has not lived well, the soul passes to a beast – bird, worm, fish, evil or good animal – according to the accorded punishment. This is the reason why they kill no animals, so as not to trouble or disturb the soul within, which would have to journey to some other animal, for they say: who knows but the soul of my father, mother, sister, or children, who may have died, may for their sins be in that animal?\textsuperscript{100}

Tavernier also cites a similar reason behind the belief in non-violence against animals and other forms of life.\textsuperscript{101}

These were the sets of opinions we get from the European sources about the social structure and the cultural set up of the Gujarat region. The way a society shapes up or as its culture comes to be, has centuries of tradition behind it. In this case a commercial hub, in internal as well as euro-Asian trade, Gujarat was thoroughly a mercantile social set up. Due to the pivotal role played by the monsoon winds and the rains, consequently, the effects of environment of the region on its socio-cultural ethos became clear. So much so, that the European travellers to the region did not fail to notice them.

\textsuperscript{100} F. Pelsaert, \textit{The Remonstrante}, p. 79.

\textsuperscript{101} J.B. Tavernier, \textit{Travels}, Vol. 2, p. 158.