INTRODUCTION

The Arabian Sea trade with India is believed to have begun from the third millennium BC when the merchants from ancient Dilmun traded with the cities of the Indus Valley. During this period the European trade with India across the Mediterranean was carried through intermediaries. While the Phoenicians dominated the western section of the trade routes, the routes on the eastern side passed through the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. This concentration or “narrowing” of the great commercial pathways between the east and the west in the ‘Levant’ or the ‘Fertile-Crescent’ remained a unique feature of world commerce till the rounding up of the Cape of Good Hope offered an additional passage.

The discovery of monsoon in the early Christian era helped replace ‘Coasting’. It is this achievement that made sailing possible from ports of the east African coast and the Red Sea to the western coast of India.

The period from 13 BC to 96 AD witnessed the zenith of Graeco-Roman trade with India. Pliny (69-79 AD) assessed Rome’s trade with India at 125,000,000 dinari and the outflow for
Arabian and Chinese trade at 12,500,000 dinari. But after 300 AD the Roman Empire declined and its coinage depreciated. As a result, its Indian trade also began to decay. The Greek sea traffic in the Indian Ocean declined correspondingly. There is complete absence of Roman coins in India after Caraculla (212-217 AD), suggesting a practical closure of the Roman-Indian commerce.

Upon the decline of the Roman Empire, Byzantine inherited control over this important commerce, since both Egypt (commanding the Red Sea) and Syria (with its entrepots receiving goods from the Persian Gulf) became parts of the Byzantine Empire. However, despite various ups and downs the oriental wares did reach the Roman territories. Thus owing to declining of Roman influence, Abyssinia, extended its limits to the Nile and to the straits of Bab al-Mandab, imposed tribute on chiefs and protected sea-routes of crucial significance. It also took over Yemen and dominated the Red Sea trade. The Greeks who occupied a premier position in the eastern parts of the Roman Empire were now quite familiar with the various countries of the Indian Ocean, the markets of south-west Arabia, East Africa, Ceylon and Bay of Bengal, the mouth of Ganges as far as the 'Golden Chersonese'. The Arabian peoples who had served as
carriers and middlemen in the Indian trade with the Mediterranean during the period of the Roman Empire gained much from contacts with India and China, in the east, and Sabea and Egypt in the west. Arab settlements on the Indian shores seem to have already existed prior to the advent of Islam and these became more numerous on the coasts of Malabar and Ceylon thereafter. The author of *Christian Topography* in the 6th century AD comments on the rarity of visits by the Roman merchants at the entrepots of Eastern Commerce. Asian trade was by now shared mainly by Arabs, Abyssinians and Iranians.

From the establishment of Prophet’s power at Medina till the period of Caliph Muawiyah, the Islamic regime could not pay much attention to seafaring and maritime trade. Foreign ships cast anchor in the little Bay of Shoaiba. Occasional voyages can only be cited from the Jiddah coast which replaced Shoaiba as the port in the period of Caliph Usman. Muawiyah (661-80 AD) is said to have been the first Arab ruler to have built a navy, but it was mainly confined to the Syrian coast. The Arab Caliphate from the time of Umar brought Egypt and the Fertile Crescent under the control of a single power, almost for the first time since Alexander. The immediate result was not helpful to Indo-
Mediterranean trade; indeed, Henri Pirenne in his classic *Mohammad and Charlemagne* speaks of a closing of the Western Mediterranean. Though Pirenne's thesis might have been overstated, there does seem to have occurred a considerable decline in commerce between the western and eastern portions of the Mediterranean, and Alexandria also seems to have declined.

But if the trade with Western and Southern Europe decayed, the newly unified Middle East itself offered a vast market for Indian (and Chinese) goods. A new impetus to sea trade can be discerned soon after the establishment of the Abbasid dynasty in 750 AD particularly with the removal of the capital from Damascus to Baghdad in 762 AD. The ports on the Arabian coasts from which trade was conducted with Indian ports included Basra, Ubullah, Siraf in south-western Persia, Sohar, Muscat in Oman. By the mid 9th century, Muslim control over the Eastern and Central Mediterranean was firmly established and Byzantine fleet rarely ventured from its home bases. In the Indian Ocean, Arab supremacy was unchallenged.

By the 9th century India's seaborne trade was monopolized by Arab sea-farers. But during the 10th century this monopoly of trade by the Arabs gradually weakened, especially in south-east
Asia, and from the 12th century when the Chinese, availing the opportunity, extended their navigations to the Malabar ports. The change partly reflected the decline of the Abbasid Empire in both political and economic terms.

During the Fatimid period the Jews based at Cairo had a large share in the Indian Ocean commerce. Alberuni (early 11th century) says that a Jew controlled the whole of the pearl fishery in the Persian Gulf. During the 10th century a group of Jewish merchants known as Radhnites obtained some prominence. Ibn Khurdadbeh (825-911) writes that this group of merchants carried merchandise from western Europe to the Near East and from China and India to the Mediterranean. The Radhnites, by and large, were engaged in luxury trade. Theirs was not a regular trade since they belonged neither to the Christian nor to the Muslim World. Voyages to India were made by Radhnites from Egypt through the Red Sea.

Driving away ‘unbelievers’ from the important trade of the Red Sea and giving encouragement to the extension of the Arab control over the Arabian Sea traffic, Salah al-Din (b. 532 A.H./1138 A.D.-d. 589 A.H./1193 A.H.) of Kurdish origin and founder of the Ayyubid dynasty) led to the rise of the Karimi merchants who were to play a prominent role in the mercantile
activity of the Indian Ocean. Like Salah al-Din his successor and nephew, Taqi al-Din Umar also gave encouragement to Karim merchants. The Karim’s commercial activities extended between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean during the 11th and 12th centuries. Simultaneously, the mercantile community on the west coast of India was widely engaged with the Middle East. Before 1147 the towns on the coasts of the Red Sea, Arabia and India were frequented by merchants from the larger cities of the Muslim West.

Aden in the 12th century was a small city, yet, strategically located was of great significance, a port in between the ‘both sea’. From Aden ships sailed to Sind, India and China.

Muslims and Jews acted in partnership in undertaking maritime commerce as the large business and banking houses were in Muslim hands in Egypt. There were also sleeping partnerships. The Meccan always kept his capital employed by this means. Merchants were also assisted by a fairly developed system of credit and finance found in all countries bordering upon Arabian Sea. A rudimentary system of banking existed in the Arab world by the 10th century. Moneylenders in Sind and other Indian ports advanced loans of thousand dinars to merchants. The late 13th
century saw the growing dominance of the Karimis in the Middle Eastern countries. They held a monopoly of Egypt’s trade with East Africa and the Far East. The Karim became so wealthy that they were capable of financing the Mamluk state. The organization of the Karim had its counterparts in the closely-knit caste or community of Hindu merchants in India. Ibn Battuta indeed compares the banyas of Deogir (Daulatabad) to the Karim.

During the 13th and 14th centuries the merchant guilds in South India were known as Virabalanja Sumaya or the Ayyavali, of these the collector guild or Sankarlu held considerable powers. They collected duties on exports and imports and paid a fixed sum to the government.

Indeed, when we examine the function of the guilds in South India we find that the amount of authority those guilds held was never enjoyed by the Karimis; nor do we have evidence that the Karim ever were authorised to collect taxes on the government’s behalf nor did they enjoy authority to exempt any dealer from paying duty. But on the Indian coasts conditions must have varied a great deal. It is quite likely that in area like Gujarat the more individualistic Muslim merchants provided a competing (and complementary) element to the strongly knit Hindu trading
communities. The details of this encounter and interaction — their rivalry and relationship has not been taken account of.

A feature of the trade organization of the time was that the mercantile community either owned ships or hired them. The owners of ships themselves were wealthy merchants whose ships carried cargoes of their own as well as others. In the 11th century the ship owners in the Middle East were largely Muslims except for a few Christians. Many ships were owned by the ruling class, such as the sultans, ladies of the ruling houses, governors, generals etc. and also by the wealthier merchants. Jews of Aden also owned ships. The prominent Jewish merchants in Cairo were actually termed nakhoda (ship-master) around 1200 AD. They earned this title, apparently because of their participation in navigation on the Indian Ocean.

The Medieval sea-borne trade confronted and suffered considerably from piracy. Piratical activities on the Western coast of India continued in the subsequent centuries too. Marco Polo condemns their depredations. Sultan Qala’un (1279-1290 AD) and his successor had enforced very severe rules against pirates and also robbers harassing caravans between Nile and the Red Sea. Sultan Qala’un made efforts to safeguard and enhance both trade
and commerce (Kitab al-Suluk, Vol. 1, pt. 2, pp. 581-2). Apart from this often merchant ships were seized by the governments, and confiscated the cargo belonging to persons who had connections with the shipowners.

Transactions in Arabian Sea commerce involved not only barter but large exchanges of uncoined metal as well as a variety of coins. In the Egypto-India trade of the 11th and 12th centuries the payment seems largely to have been made in kind. The orders for Indian goods were accompanied by payments in gold pieces, the international coinage of that period. Besides, metallic coins, countries of the Indian Ocean also used cowries as medium of transactions which were the particular export of the Maldives Islands. In Bengal, Ibn Battuta witnessed cowry shells being exchanged for rice. The Yemenites used them as ballast in their ships.

Merchants trading from the Arabian Sea ports suffered considerably from heavy taxation. The customs amounted to more than 10% of the value of the goods taxed. In some cases the government made trade a state monopoly.

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The main feature of the Indian trade with the Islamic and other countries during early medieval time had been generally that India exported spices, herbs and drugs and in exchange obtained gold and silver. India also exported iron and steel besides cloth, silk, indigo and other merchandise. Precisely, Indian cotton cloth and other textiles like *shali*, *makhmal*, *kamkhab* etc. were specially important items of export, particularly to South Asia and East Africa and even some reached Europe. These were carried by the Arabs to the Red Sea and from there to Damascus and Alexandria where they were distributed to the Mediterranean countries and beyond.

The nature of trade and commerce changed as changes in shipbuilding technology were evolved following the intrusion of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean. There seems to be all round improvement in shipping activity, with the use of varieties of sails, capacity of accommodating more cargo, evolution of round ships that replaced the older junks etc. Constant efforts began to cover longer distance in shorter time etc. Infact what was lacking was not technique but the spirit of innovation for which the Indian shipwrights were making constant endeavours. These efforts seem to have nearly been achieved only by the end of the 17th century.
Carriers of Arabian Sea trade used divergent routes for their shipping to various ports. The routes on which Arab-owned ships plied were mainly those from Malabar to the Red Sea. Those ships also plied from Malabar and Konkan to Hormuz and from the Gujarat ports to the Red Sea ports. The routes on which Indian-owned ships sailed were from Gujarat and Malabar to Malacca, from Gujarat (rarely Malabar) to the East African ports, from Gujarat to Hormuz; from Gujarat and Konkan to the Red Sea; and lately, coastal routes on which smaller ships were employed.

Before the discovery of the passage round the Cape of Good Hope the main outlets of Eastern commodities to Europe were Alexandria and Aleppo. The Mamluk Kingdom of Egypt thus stood astride the main channels through which traffic went from the Indian Ocean to Mediterranean Europe. Commenting on the significance of the discovery and its impact K.M. Panikar, wrote that “The real importance of the new ‘discovery’ (of the Cape route by the Portuguese) lay in the fact that it broke the monopoly which the Venetians and the Egyptians had so long enjoyed in the trade with India.”

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The term 'Moor' embraced the Arabs as well as the Gujarati and Malabari Muslims. The Portuguese on their arrival found the 'Moors' dominating the Indian Ocean from Madagascar to the straits of Malacca.

Till the Middle Ages the Arabs controlled a large part of the Indian Ocean commerce. They maintained a hold over shipping based on Hormuz where merchandize of the East of all descriptions could be had.

At the mouth of the Red Sea, Aden too remained important, its merchants being described as very rich by Ibn Battuta. By 1500 A.D. Arabs' commercial activity had extended to south-east Asia. Tom Pires mentions the presence of Arab merchants at Malacca from Cairo, Mecca, Aden, Abyssinia, East African States and various other West Asian countries (Suma Oriental, vol. 1, p. 174). The Arabs also traded with Japanese ports. They traded mainly in pepper and took it from Malabar to the Red Sea and to Hormuz in their own ships. The Arabs based at Cairo functioned as intermediaries between Europe and India. Commodities of Italy, Greece and Damascus brought by the Arab merchants to Cairo were taken to the Red Sea and thence trans-shipped in their own ships to Gujarat. Their Cargoes consisted of gold, silver, quicksilver, vermilion, copper, rose water, wools and brocades.
These goods at Cambay were exchanged with the indigenous cotton cloth and spices from Malabar and Malacca.¹

Gujarati merchants and navigators were also very prominent in the Indian Ocean trade c. 1500. Their ships were of larger size and had expert seamen to man them. Their pilots possessed much skill and did a great deal of navigation. After the decline of the Delhi Sultanate the only North Indian state that took keen interest in sea trade was Gujarat. Gujaratis were strong element in the trade of the Malay Archipelago. There were in Malacca in the early 16th century, at least, 1,000 Gujarati resident merchants and 5,000 “transient sailors”. It appears that Gujarati Muslims traded more on the Aden-Gujarat-Malacca line.

The Gujaratis maintained brisk trade with East Africa as well. The people of Sofala and the city states like Kilwa, Malindi, Pemba, Mogadishu purchased Cambay cloth in exchange for gold, ivory and slaves. The Gujarati merchants were trading with Hormuz long before the Portuguese intrusion in the Indian Ocean. These merchants brought horses from Persian Gulf. There were Gujarati Muslim merchants on western Indian coast. Albuquerque noted the Hindu “banyas of Cambay” trading with those parts.

Pearson is of the opinion that the crews of the ships owned by the Hindus, were largely Muslims. The Gujaratis often sailed on long-distance routes. They sometimes kept themselves away from their homeland for quite a long period. For instance the ships of Rander remained for years away from their home in Gujarat.

The Malabaris, both Muslim and Hindu, traded with Malacca, at that time major entrepot for the goods of Chinese and Spice Islands. They owned their own ships. At Calicut, the Arabs purchased goods brought by Malabaris from Malacca, while they also carried away pepper and other produce of Malabar. The position of Calicut in the 14th and 15th century was that of an emporium where everything could be obtained. Pepper grew all along the coast of Malabar. Zakariya Qazvini, a geographer in the 13th century, in his description of Malabar wrote that, “pepper goes from extreme East to the extreme West”. In a letter by Rashiduddin which contains a list of order for Indian commodities, we find a demand for 300 mans of pepper. The Malabaris traded extensively with Kathiawad and Gujarat, as well as the Coromandel Coast, Ceylon and Maldives Islands. From the description of European travellers it appears that the majority of the merchants in Malabar were Muslims. Nairs were often found

working with these Muslims as secretaries. Malabaris were very good sailors. Muslim shippers employed fishermen. Malabari collaborated with the Muslims in Sea commerce.

Stagnation of Hindu seafaring or for that matter the dominance of Arab shippers did not restrain Hindus to continue their navigational activities. Enumerating various reasons for such restraints as it is contained in the Dharmshastra A.L. Basham is of the view that the text probably only applies to the Brahmins.¹ The question arises whether there was any stagnation at all to sea-travel in the Indian Ocean seafaring. Even if Dharmshastra deemed it a pollution to travel overseas, Hindu merchants and sailors had established settlements abroad. The Cairo Geniza documents refer to the presence of a number of Hindu merchants at Cairo. The documents also record the sinking of the ship of one Patam Soami, driven to Berbera. There were a number of other small boats of the same person which safely reached Aden.²

Portuguese, successfully crossed the Cape of Good Hope. Their success was spectacular as an example of their 'Crusading Spirit' as well as a result of their expertise and technical superiority in navigational techniques over their adversaries. The

¹ A L Basham, Studies in Indian History and Culture, Calcutta, 1964, p. 162. see also Lakshmi Subramaniam, Medieval Seafarers, Lotus collection (ROLI BOOKS) 1999, pp 9-10
² S D Goitein, Studies in Islamic History and Institutions, Leiden, 1966, p 349
The ostensible aim was the “Search of Christians and spices” as king John II hoped, “for (the Kingdom of Prester John) would serve him as a way-station on the route to India, from hence Portuguese Captains would bring back those riches heretofore distributed by Venice.¹

The initial aim of the King of Portugal was to obtain monopoly of pepper trade in Europe by shifting the centre for pepper distribution from Venice to Lisbon by destroying the Levantine trade carried by Arab and Indian merchants. The main design of the Portuguese was to purchase pepper cheaply for Casa da India and to sell it almost at monopoly prices in Europe by extracting high profits. The Portuguese made payments in bullion, gold and silver. According to an estimate “120 to 150,000 tons of spices were bought (during the 16th century) almost without merchandise in return, for 150 tons of gold.”²

In order to establish an empire and to have control over the pepper producers, they adopted the strategy of subjugation of the rulers of the regions of Malabar in whose states pepper grew. These attempts of the Portuguese did not materialize in Calicut as

². Immanuel Wellerstein, op cit. p. 329
the Zamorin did not agree with the terms and conditions of Portuguese. In Cochin they succeeded in forcing the rulers to cooperate. Their attempts to monopolize the supply of Malabar trade, therefore, failed. The Portuguese also failed in their efforts to block the trade in spices carried by the Indian and Arab merchants. Hormuz was seized in 1515 and the Persian Gulf route was brought under their control but the Portuguese remained unsuccessful in taking Aden. We may infer from it that so long as Aden was not taken by the Portuguese the Arab and Indian merchants could not be eliminated. There is evidence to suggest that the Portuguese blockade of the Red Sea proved ineffective and the Arab and Indian merchants carried their trade undeterred. Moreover in 1570s the Portuguese confessed the futility of their blockade effort and discontinued it.¹

The Levant trade—the mainstay of Indo-Arab Commerce—retained its significance by and large throughout the course of the 16th century, in spite of disturbances created in the Arabian Sea by the Portuguese. The prosperity of the Commerce on this route increased during the 2nd half of the century and continued to be as important as the Cape-route. The data of pepper export to Lisbon

¹ M.N. Pearson, Merchants and Rulers in Gujarat, California, 1976, pp 40-47.
and to Levant, given by Jan Kieniewiez, supports such an assumption.¹

The royal Portuguese monopoly could not become a reality and the Levant trade continued. The Portuguese failed to overcome their basic economic weakness by their naval supremacy. Among other factors responsible for Portuguese failure, was the growing power of the Ottoman Turks.

The Portuguese tried to operate in Asian waters from a position of comparative dominance based on naval power. Their attempt was to destroy rivals particularly the Arabs and Indian Muslims by controlling and caring the trade. Yet, the Portuguese could never succeed in controlling fully the trade in Asian waters, and their prime object to ban all Red Sea trade was not successful. Panikkar is of the view that the gap created by the partial ouster of the Arab merchants, the Portuguese cartaz system was not filled up by the Portuguese themselves but was mainly by the Indian merchants who “were able to carry on their trade without competitions”. By 1530s the Turks became active again in the Persian Gulf and the Portuguese share in carrying trade started declining. By 1560, Alexandria was exporting as much spices to Europe as in the late 15th century.

¹ Jan Kieniewiez. 'The Portuguese Factory and Trade in Pepper in Malabar during the 16th Century', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 6(1), 1969, p. 62.
During the course of 16th century the trade in the Asian waters adjusted itself to the new realities imposed by the Portuguese. The Asian merchants had largely retained their existing trade owing to the inherent weaknesses in the Portuguese system.

The dawn of the 17th century was marked by the establishment of two north European trading companies. The English East India Company was established in 1600 and the various Dutch companies merged to form the VOC in 1602. Naturally the emergence of these companies affected the entire pattern of Arabian Sea commerce. The Dutch had naval superiority over the slower and bulkier Portuguese carracks, hence they struck at the weakest and most crucial spot of their hold.

The Dutch reached the Spice Islands by avoiding India. The interlocking nature of Asian trade, created an immediate impact on the Arabian Sea trade. The Dutch monopolised the Sumatran pepper, and by supplying it in large quantities to Europe they drove out the superior Malabar pepper from the European and even Ottoman markets.

The Portuguese did not only face the Dutch onslaught, a number of other forces, too combined together to hasten their
passing away. The Turko-Persian conflict resulted in the decay of the silk trade through Aleppo, therefore, Hormuz declined. The Safavids’ attempts to develop Bandar Abbas (Gombroon) also contributed in the decline of the significance of Hormuz. In 1622 the Persian and English joint forces captured Hormuz from the Portuguese. The seizer of Muscat by the Arabs in 1647 completed their rout in the Persian Gulf.

For the Dutch the Arabian Sea area was a zone of secondary interest, whereas to the English East India Company it turned out to be of primary concern, during the 17th century. They turned to the Mughals for a hold in the Arabian Sea, and established a permanent English factory at Surat in 1613.

One of the major sources of early conflict between the English and the Indian merchants and the Mughal authorities originated in their attempts to participate in Gujarat’s trade with the Red Sea. This the Mughals would not agree to; and the conflict led to English plundering Indian ships calling at Red Sea ports in 1612 and causing considerable though temporary loss to the Gujarat trade.

To keep the English out of the Red Sea trade the Gujarat merchants resisted them in Mokha as well and were powerful
enough to succeed at least temporarily in their endeavour in 1610. In 1618 they (the English) had succeeded in procuring a farman from the Pasha of Sanaa allowing them trade with Mokha. In 1620s the Zaidi Imams of Sanaa ended the Turkish rule in Yemen, and the Imam's port of Mokha began to flourish at the expense of Aden which declined rapidly due to Turkish maladministration. The privileges at Mokha thus were very timely and provided the English with an opportunity to gain an edge over others in the Red Sea trade.

In 1621 the Dutch tried to follow the English example and captured Gujarat ships in the Red Sea, and forced the merchants to take licenses from them on payment. The troubles continued during 1622-23 when the English again started attacking Gujarat ships. Even the vessels that had the licenses issued by the English were not spared. The ships belonging to Tavakkal Ali and Shivaji Baniya were captured. In 1623, Ganjbar, carrying 100 Gujarat traders of quality on board was captured. But Mughals owing to their pre-occupation in suppressing Khurram's revolt were unable to take cognizance of these incidents.

However, the privileges enjoyed by the English at Mokha adversely affected the trade of the Indian merchants. This added
to the general set back suffered by Gujarat merchants' trade with the Red Sea as a result of the arrival of the Dutch and the English.

The fall of Hormuz in 1622 generally established the English strength in the Arabian Sea. But the Dutch too extended their trade to Persia in 1623 and having better financial resources and spices to sell in the Persian markets, they began to rival the English. The Gujarati merchants too gained by the disappearance of the Portuguese control. Persian merchants also started visiting Surat. The Persian port, Bandar Abbas (Gombroon) now replaced Hormuz.

In 1620s the hostilities between the Mughal and the Persian rulers provided a further fillip to Persian Gulf trade due to the stoppage of overland trade between the Mughal state and Safavid empire, much of the trade was directed to the Gujarat ports. When the Portuguese attacked the Gujarat shipping in the region, a short-lived alliance was formed between the Dutch and English and in 1625 they inflicted another defeat on the Portuguese.

The volume of Gujarat trade with Persia was so high that apparently the Gujarat shipping alone was not sufficient to cope with it. The Gujarat merchants forced the Dutch ships to unload
rice and cotton and carry their goods to Bandar Abbas. Similarly the English too were compelled by Hari Vaishya and Virji Vora to transport goods of Surat merchants to Gulf ports or to repay the loan of more than 30,000 laris the English owed to them. The English had to comply. The Gujarat trade with the Gulf flourished and the English had to face stiff competition from the Gujaratis at Bandar Abbas.

The Indian merchants' presence in the Persian Gulf in 17th century is an illustration of both their enterprise and resilience and the capacity of pre-modern systems of commerce for accommodation and adjustment. Their presence is also a reminder that one should not assume that pre-modern ideological and social systems that were necessarily hostile to trade and enterprise. The presence of Hindu usurers in an Islamic country like Iran is proof enough of that.

It appears that after the 1620s Gujarat and other Asian merchants re-asserted their position and were able to tide over the initial shock and setback to Arabian Sea trade. They were forced to concede some share to new rivals, the English and the Dutch, especially in carrying trade. On the whole a fairly large portion of the trade of the Arabian Sea was retained by the Indian shippers in spite of the flutter in the first decade of the 17th century.
It does not seem thus possible to agree with Neils Steensgaard’s thesis that the emergence of North European companies in the Arabian waters simply destroyed the trade of the Asian merchants, the so-called ‘peddlers’. According to Neils Steensgaard in 1620s the Dutch and English share in the Asiatic trade rose so much that the Asian peddlers were simply forced to give way for the new entrants. There was now a direct international trade through the Cape of Good Hope, which increasingly replaced the Levant route and an ‘Asiatic Trade Revolution’ took place. Our evidence, however, suggests that contrary to this assumption the trade in the Asian waters remained with the Asian traders; they only conceded some share to Europeans who were to depend on Gujarat merchants to a great extent not for the access to the market but also for credit facilities. The Arabian Sea trade thus only readjusted itself to new realities and no change meriting the designation of a revolution took place.

The Gujarat famine of 1630 adversely affected the Arabian Sea trade but the overseas commerce picked up quite soon. By 1633 the Gujarat ships were back again at Mokha. Zahid Beg and Shahbandar (Port Officer) of Surat too resumed their trading
activities. The re-emergence of Aden too helped in the recovery of Red Sea trade.

In the late 1630s the English resumed their piratical activities. This rekindled the hostilities between the English and the Mughal authorities. The disruption of links between Mokha and Cairo owing to Turko-Arab conflict further affected the Red Sea trade. But the Persian Gulf trade picked up as a consequence. In 1647 the Dutch attempt to monopolise Red Sea trade and their embargo on Gujarat ships, further disturbed the trade in the region.

The English faced rough weather in the Persian Gulf as well. The Dutch who were financially better off than the English and had a large number of ships in their fleet started outstripping their trade in the Gulf. The Dutch slashed down their freight rates at 1/3 of the freight charged by the English and drove away the British from the carrying trade. But the English carrying trade soon recovered owing to the Dutch attacks and embargoes on Gujarat shipping. In face of these attacks the Gujarat merchants preferred English shipping.

The troubles ensued during the 1660s as well. The English and Dutch refused to carry the cargo of Gujarat merchants as freight. The situation worsened so much that the Armenians and
Persians left Surat for Bandar Abbas. The Gujarat trade with Persia and Persian Gulf declined sharply.

The story of the Red Sea was somewhat different. Contrary to the decline of Gujarat trade in the Persian Gulf, the Gujarat merchants' trade with the Red Sea ports flourished during the 2nd half of the 17th century. After the closure of the English factory the Gujarat shipping picked up. The English themselves began using Gujarat vessels. In 1662 they hired a ship from Beni Das to transport their goods to Mokha. The ships belonging to Armenian merchants too were used by the English. The Red Sea market came back fully into the hands of Gujarat merchants in 1660s.

Trade in Mokha coffee developed particularly during this period. The Gujarat merchants brought coffee from Mokha to Surat. It was here coffee was bought and sent by the English East India Company to England.

During the 1680s the Dutch East India Company too followed suit, they too began buying Arabian coffee at Surat. After the closure of their factory at Mokha in 1684, they were totally dependent on Surat supplies for onward shipments to Europe. The demand was so high that the Surat merchants started also obtaining Abyssinian coffee though it was inferior to the Mokha coffee.
The Asian merchants in general and the Gujarat merchants in particular maintained their control over the Red Sea trade down to the early decades of the 18th century as they did during the subsequent period. Merchant princes such as Mulla Ghafur, Muhammad Saleh Chellaby and many others flourished. Mulla Ghafur who was a Bohra and came from a modest background achieved a runway success. At the turn of the 18th century he possessed a fleet of 21 seagoing ships. His successor Mulla Muhammad Ali owned 24 ships. He had a bitter feud with the Chellabis. This finally led to the ruin of the Mulla’s family in 1730. But were the great days of Surat’s trade over by the turn of the 18th century. Ashin Dasgupta, an eminent historian of maritime trade, is of the view that Surat whose prosperity was dependent on the stability of three empires namely the Mughal, Safavid and Ottoman Empire began to decline with the disintegration of those states.¹ But the ensuing account of Surat’s trade with the Red Sea suggests that the trade continued and might even have surpassed the volume of the previous century.