

## ENGLISH TRADE AND THE MUGAL EMPEROR (1556-1707)

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### ABSTRACT

*Much before the foundation of the English east India company, India had been visited by a number of English travelers like Thomas Stephens, Ralph Fitch, Newberry and Leeds. They were essentially adventurers and came with that spirit. However, in 1599, John Milden Hall came during the time of Akbar. His object was to try to negotiate with the 'Great Mughal' some kind of commercial treaty or understanding, which should be a basis for the English trade in India. He failed to secure any treaty with the king and returned unsuccessful. However, more systematic attempts to open up trade with India were made during the time of Jahangir, when Hawkins, the 'Envoy of the king of England' visited his (Jahangir) court in 1609. It is evident that none of the great Mughal Emperors had any constructive policy for encouraging or extending the commerce of India. There was no Endeavour to ensure commerce freedom from interference and the handicaps were innumerable. They incurred religious fanaticism, Zenana intervention official obstruction, fights of the kings, monopolizing this or that trade and the fixation of prices at this or that level, interference of the economic force working in the market and finally, the inclination of the Monarch to earn commercial profits for themselves.*

**Keywords:** *English Trade, Commerce Freedom, Religious Fanaticism, Official Obstruction.*

### Introduction

Much before the foundation of the English East India company, India had been visited by a number of English travelers like Thomas Stephens, Ralph Fitch, Newberry and Leeds. They were essentially adventurers and came with that spirit. However, in 1599, John Milden Hall came during the time of Akbar. His object was to try to negotiate with the Great Mughal' some kind of commercial treaty or understanding, which should be a basis for the English trade in India. He failed to secure any treaty with the king and returned unsuccessful. However, more systematic attempts to open up trade with India were made during the time of Jahangir, when Hawkins, the Envoy of the king of England' visited his (Jahangir) court in 1609. He came in during the third voyage of the English east India company in his ship Hector in 1608. Hawkins met the Emperor at Agra and was given every assurance, regarding trade facilities to be provided to the English. However, nothing substantial could be obtained due to Portuguese in-semination who frustrated the attempts of the English for any trade conclusion'. Therefore, the commercial position of the English was far from satisfactory during Jahangir's time. The conflict (1613) between Portuguese and English provided a suitable opportunity to the English which considerably helped them in coming closer to the Mughal king' and thus, acquired trade concession in India. By 1614, the factors opened the trade avenues at various places like Cambay, Baroda, Bharuch and Agra. The commercial position of the English was further strengthened by coming of Thomas Roe, an ambassador designates of the king of England to India. Thomas Roe was sent by the company in 1615 for concluding a commercial treaty. He stayed at the draft treaty. Though a failure so far as the treaty was concerned, he was able to raise the prestige of his country to a considerable extent by exposing and fighting against the corrupt officials of the Mughal Empire. His embassy was a landmark in the history of Indo-British Relations. However, Indo-British commerce was more or less regular after 1614, and was making steady progress. But what

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Thomas Roe, did not realize was his status or position in Mughal Empire. Their (English) status and privileges were greatly dependent on the favour issued by the emperors from time to time which were also alterable and revocable as the situation demanded. There did not arise any question of making an agreement or convention on terms of equality between the Mughal State and foreign merchants. Secondly, English had nothing to offer in return. Their goods were a few and expensive of them broadcloth formed the most important item which was hardly in demand in India. Mostly, the cloth and other goods brought by the English were often given as presents to the King and nobles in order to secure trade facilities. Even their presents, as compared to the Dutch or Portuguese. Even their presents, as compared to the Dutch or Portuguese were not very attractive and even returned some times. Moreover, Indian merchants also never showed any desire to buy English goods or share English trade. Therefore, the English soon realized that their demands would never be accepted but they persistently went ahead with their schemes and insisted upon the Mughal authorities to grant them free trade in India. Thomas Roe though not successful in signing a treaty with the Mughal Monarch, tried to control the Red Sea trade by capturing Indian Vessels and other belonging to the Mughal royalty. The underlying idea was to compel the Mughal authorities to redress their old standing grievances in India.

Since English goods were never in much demand in India to produce return cargoes', he thought of establishing a branch trade' between Surat and Red Sea.

Moreover, the English were facing considerable opposition of the Dutch in south East Asia, so they thought of finding new avenues and therefore, concentrated on Indian trade.

But it soon became clear that Roe had underestimated the opposition of Surat merchants to his new venture. They (merchants) organized a general boycott of the English and stopped selling their goods, not a single Yard of calico would be sold to them. The principal merchants of Surat petitioned the prince (Khurram) not to allow the English to share that trade for if he did, they were all under and city beggared, having no other place to trade unite but the Red Sea which they were contended with.

The import of coral trade into India from "Red Sea" was again resented by the Surat merchants. As they thought, "this innovation was a gratuitous interference with their trade" and strong representations were made to the English and the Mughal Governor. The petitioners said, "they will not suffer it to be brought into Surat by strong hand". After four day's disputes, coral was warehoused at Render pending a reference to the court.

Roe could not implement his scheme of seizing Indian vessels in red sea before August 1619 when he had already left India. Much before the implementation of his (Roe's) policy, English had been indulging in piratical activities and capturing Indian junks in red sea. The first set of drama began in November 1619. The English fleet under commander Briskly captured a cargo vessel belonging to Surat merchants going from Sindh to Persia. As a result of the act of hostility against the Mughal Empire, Hughes and Parker, two servants of the East India Company at Agra were imprisoned by the orders of Asaf Khan and Sind merchants were ordered to be given Rs. 10,200 as a compensation to the grievous losses incurred by them. After a few days' confinement, both the factors were released from the goal.

The company soon found itself in big dilemma as it knew by this time that it would not be possible for a handful of company's servants to enter into combat with the Mughal authorities. As the Mughal authorities always took a serious view of the situation, so they never took it lying down. If they were not strong on sea, they were not weak on the land. They were not slow to react to the piratical activities of the Europeans and particularly those of the English. If a ship was looted by some Englishmen, the president of the East India Company had to face the difficult situation. The president was taken into custody and asked to make up the loss. Sometimes, even the other members of the Council had to feel the wrath of the Mughal authorities. The piratical activities of the English greatly jeopardized their commercial interests and their trade suffered. Naturally, the English would not resort to piratical activities, easily and would mostly avoid it. Even rumors of piracies sent a shiver through them as they feared to be kept fast and their goods seized upon. It, therefore, appears paradoxical that Thomas Roe who was strongly opposed to the view of English indulging in piracy as they served no useful purpose, would resort to such a recourse. He had on one occasion even warned the directors that "your goods and our persons" would have to answer for the nefarious activities of sea-rovers, "there must be no trader and consequently, your trade in India is utterly lost. In January 1616, Ilalas Khan, the Captain of Jahangir' approached Roe and requested him for the safe conduct of his ship to red sea. The English ambassador sent instructions to all English merchants to refrain from molesting the vessel and its mariners. Next month, Roe assured Siraj-ud-daula that English stood by their promise to safe conduct of Indian ships to the red sea. He was aware of the fact that the Mughal authorities would not able to resort

to retaliation as the strong position of the English on seas placed a powerful weapon in their hands. If on the one hand they could harass the Mughal ships, on the other hand, they offered dam protection on payment basis. The Mughal of an applied for safe conduct of their ships two different European Nations. Captain Willoughby, a factor, obtained a royal farman from Jahangir, then at Lahore, reached Surat on September 7, 1624. By this agreement, the Mughals not only allowed the English to have an access to red sea trade but the English secured the right to convey to Mughal junks from Surat to Mocha and back. The Mughal prestige and trade had suffered a great set-back and their monopoly of red sea was completely shattered. The English had to suffer in Agra as well, where they were kept in prison for ever five months, first in their own house and then in the common castle. It appears from a letter of Surat President that the Ahmadabad factors were in prison even in May 1622. He suggested that endeavors should be made by all possible methods including bribery to get certificates from the Governor in our favor. Therefore, the piratical acts of the English could not produce results which they were hoping as the Mughals were quite powerful on the land. They (the English) were subjected to severe punishments when caught, packed and stifled together into close and airless and unwholesome corners. The (English) therefore, could not stand any longer and their resistance collapsed. In last the factors gave their consent to come to an agreement with the Mughal Government. From the Surat merchants on condition that they should accept payment in goods on rates prescribed upon. Thus, the European and particularly English exerting pressure on the Mughals by capturing their junks did not always produce favorable results as the President and other factors had to bear the brunt at the hands of the Mughals in India. But still the Mughals could not deny them certain trade privileges due to the powerful naval positions of the English in India. The other methods besides looting the ships were adequate presents given from time to time to the Mughals. They always produced favorable results as the Mughal monarchs and the nobility had a big crease from the European goods. Jahangir demanded the presents straight from the English king James I, without showing least hesitation. However, the famine of 1630-31 had considerably effected the English trade in India and they had to close all their factories in the Deccan except Surat. The financial losses incurred by the slump were further aggravated by the attempts made by Shahjahan to monopolize the indigo trade. But the king had to dissolve the monopoly for the Europeans shoed a little desire to buy this commodity save at the prices agreed upon. Shahjahan had to remove the embargo on the indigo trade, but forbade the English ships to anchor anywhere except selected ports, and also the building of frigates in India.

The president of East India Company was kept in close confinement and was not allowed to leave the city and the English trade with Thatta or Cambay was completely banned. Their goods were also seized. Their goods were restored, but they were forbidden to carry arms. However, President Method showed his ignorance about the capturing of Indian junks and he was therefore, pardoned and a farman was issued for the furtherance of English trade in Bengal.

The year 1641 was signalized by an important change in Government of Surat. Mir Musa, the Governor of the Surat had through corrupt practice had amassed a huge wealth from the Surat mint and custom house, it was roughly 72 lakhs of mahmudis per annum. Therefore, he was summoned to Court explain matter and the emperor decided to abandon the system of farming the post and appoint salaried officials to receive the revenue and pay it into the royal treasury. His transfer was heralded by Surat merchants and equally by English merchants. Mir Musa was a typical product of his age and fairly representative of the character of Mughal district administration, especially in commercial policies, during the last year of Shahjahan. There was a practice of farming out important posts in Mughal Empire and the payment of bribes for continuance in them.

For instance, in trade of Coral, he fixed its price in such a way as to extort higher duty and as for lead, he takes into his own hand and at what rate he pleases. This was not an isolated example as the decline in administrative standards appears to have stated from 1630 onwards. The royal monopoly over certain selected items of trade created serious problems like finding transportation, quicker release of commodities through customs and securing a fair return on business venture. To make matters worse, Governors like Muiz-ul-mulk, Shaista Khan, Asaf Khan and many more had their own extensive interests which naturally took the precedence over the interests of the merchants to the detriment of general mercantile community.

In the time of Aurangzeb (1661), the English trade was shaping very well and they (the English) were doing lucrative business. There was apparently a change in the working of English factories in India, all the Bengal establishments were made subordinate to the Presidency of Madras which turned out to be important like that of Surat. The Bengal trade grew rapidly. Subordinate factories were opened in Malda in 1676 and Dacca in 1668. But, however, the English came in confrontation with the Mughal

authorities in Bengal. The English had their grievances against the local agents, who took bribes under the name of rahdari, presents (Peshkash) were also taken by the Mughal officers very frequently. Moreover, the English also complained that their packages of goods in transit were opened and goods taken away. Certain Governors tried to enrich themselves by seizing goods at low prices and then selling them in the market at normal prices. This deal was termed as Sauda-i-Khas.

In western India also the English traders complained about their suffering from the vexations and illegal interference and greed of the local officers to the emperor. These instances clearly reveal that the English in spite of frequent complaints about difficulties encountered by them so far as trade was concerned, they had achieved a significant degree of economic penetration in various parts of the country in the 17th Century.

It is well known that the economic life during Aurangzeb's time, was greatly, effected due to Maratha raids and plundering. From the Factory Records, it becomes clear that even persons like Virji Vohra and many others in Surat suffered great losses in the hands of Shivaji. To make the matters worse, Aurangzeb's fanaticism and irrational trade policies and continuous were posed serious problems in the country. As compared to Indian merchants, the English and Dutch were given Valuable concessions by the Mughal Monarch. This preferential treatment also placed the English in a very favorable position. Piracy also did a considerable damage to Indian shipping and transferred the sovereignty of the seas to the English. A dynasty like that of Moghuls whose traditions were all the fighting and conquest of land, never learned the lesson of Sea power and the commerce was permanently at the mercy of European navies that commanded the coastal at different times.

It is evident that none of the great Mughal Emperors had any constructive policy for encouraging of extending the commerce of India. There was no Endeavour to ensure commerce freedom from interference and the handicaps were innumerable. They incurred religious fanaticism, Zenana intervention official obstruction, fights of the kings, monopolizing this or that trade and the fixation of prices at this or that level, interference of the economic force working in the market and finally, the inclination of the Monarchs to earn commercial profits for themselves.

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