

GUJARAT'S LONG LINK WITH IRAN

Dr. Kersey Antia, Oct 11, 2019; updated Nov 10, 2019

It is important to view Iran's age-old relations with Gujarat in addition to what I have already noted about its link with the Silk Trade, for the Parsis' settlement in Gujarat is very informative. As *Encyclopaedia* (Volume XI, New York, 2003, pp. 38-67) notes "Persia's links with Gujarat by sea are very ancient. Overland communication would have passed through the Zabolestan region, but the physical barriers presented by the Thar desert and the Rann of Cutch were very formidable. Travelers on foot from Persia to Gujarat via Zabolestan who reached the Indus would find it easier thereafter to pass downstream to the sea and then skirt the Kathiawar peninsula by ship to the ports of Gujarat" In the time of Biruni the main overland route from Persia went via Moltan to Somnath or to Broach.

"Maritime contacts between Gujarat and the Persian Gulf region reach back to the period of the Indus Valley civilization (ca. 2500-1500 B.C.E.), with the site of the port of Lothal at the head of the Gulf of Cambay. "Meluhha" in Sumaerian and very likely Akkadian souces may well refer to Gujarat." Although Gujarat lay beyond the trans-Indus satrapies of the Achaemenid empire listed in Darius I's inscription at Naqs-e Rostam, there is a strong presumption of maritime trade between the Persian Gulf and the ports of Gujarat during the Achaemenid period, as well as of overland commerce funneled through Taxila. Certainly, by the time of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (perhaps between 95 and 130 C.E.), Gujarat had become the fulcrum of maritime trade on the Arabian Sea with the coins of the Indo-Bactrian kings, Appollodotus I and Menander, still circulating, in Bargaza (modern Broach) in the late 1st century C.E. The conquest of northwestern India by the Sakas during the 1st century B.C.E. extended into Cutch and Kathiawar and even as far south as Broach as did also the first-century Indo-Parthian kingdom of Gondophares. The subsequent rise of the Kushans resulted in the further dispersal of Saka principalities throughout Cutch, Kathiawar, Malwa, and the Narmada valley, the last conquered by Rudradaman in 150 C.E. These Saka chieftains continued to use Sanskritized Persian titles such as *ksatrapa* and *makaksatrapa*, had names of apparently Persian origin, and minted coins with debased Greek and Kharosthi characters. Throughout this period, Gujarat's ties with the Iranian world were maintained either overland via Arachosia (q.v.; Zabolestan) or Gandhara (q.v.; Taxila), or by sea. Evidence of western trade links has been confirmed by archeological discoveries, including, on thirty-three sites in Gujarat and Kathiawar, red polished ware imitative of Roman Samian ware."

“It is unlikely that contacts between the Persian Gulf and the Kshatrapa principalities in Gujarat and Kathiawar were interrupted by the rise of the Sasanians in Persia in 224 C.E. The case for the exercise of Sasanian political hegemony over the lands east of the Indus is still unproven, although Ernst Herzfeld was convinced by the Paikuli inscription of Narseh (293-303 C.E.) that, as a result of campaigns undertaken by Bahram II in 284 C.E., “Kacch, Kathiawar, Malwa and the adjoining hinterland of these countries” were part of the Sasanian Empire (I, p. 43). Others have argued in favor of an informal hegemony (Piacentini, pp. 136-48). Tabari recalled the tradition that Bahram V (420-32) returned from India with an Indian wife whose dowry was Daybol, Makran and parts of Sind (I. p. 868). Sasanian maritime trade is preserved in the fragments of Indian red polished ware, of predominately Gujarati or Maharashtra province, found on coast sites on the northern shores of the Persian Gulf and especially at Siraf (Whitehead and Williamson, p. 39). Data is lacking to confirm a Sasanian naval presence in Indian waters, although such may well have existed to police the coasts of Kathiawar and Gujarat (Hadi Hasan, pp. 65-76).” (This is surprising as I have already noted the Sasanian monopoly on the Silk Trade through Ceylon Sasanian diplomatic links with rulers in western India are confirmed by Tabari's account of an embassy, presumably traveling by sea, from the Chalukya ruler, Pulakeshin II (608-42), to the court of Kosrow II Parvex (Tabari, I. p. 1052) A hint of such exchanges is preserved at Ajanta in a fresco representing the god Kubera-Vaisravana and his entourage, formerly taken to be a Persian envoy being received by a Chalukyan ruler (Kroger, p. 444). Further evidence for Persian-Gujarati links in the Sasanian period is provided by the prevalence in Gujarat and Malwa of what are known as Indo Sasanian coin-types, although their precise significance remains to be explained. The invading Huns, having adopted Persian-type coinage early in their first encounter with Sasanian civilization, probably introduced it into India in the course of their conquest of the northwest.”

It adds, “Gujarat passed under the rule of the Maitraka dynasty (late 5th to the early 8th century) until its collapse under the attacks of the Arabs, whose invasion of Sind began in 92/711. The Maitrakas made their capital at Valabhi in eastern Kathiawar, on a site then much closer to the sea than now, to which it was linked by the Bhavnagar channel. This was the great international entrepot visited by Hiuen Tsang in 640 and which, according to Biruni was destroyed by the Arabs of al-Mansura in the 8th century. Thereafter Chalukya hegemony lasted from the middle of the 10th century until about 1304, first under the rule of Solanki and then the Vaghela clan, which made Anhilwara the capital of Gujarat. During these centuries, the presence in Gujarat of Middle-Easterners, mostly Muslims, but also Armenian Christians,

Jews, and Zoroastrians, is well-documented. Among Muslim traders, the majority would have been Arabs, but there is indubitable epigraphic evidence for the presence of Persians (see *EPIGRAPHY*).

It relates “an extraordinary story regarding the justice of Siddharaja Jayasimha (1004-1143) towards the Muslim community there, indicating that there was already a mosque in Cambay during that ruler’s reign,” which was rebuilt in 1218, by a Sapur Bami, a Persian Muslim from Bam in the province of Kerman. “Other surviving inscriptions from Cambay preserve the names of two other members of the same family, one of whom seems to have been a ship’s captain.”

In a shrine (*dargah*) outside Cambay are epitaphs of a man whose father’s name of Ardasir suggests a Persian background. Early shipping of pilgrims to the Hejaz from Gujarat and Kathiawar was well established. Various evidence confirms the existence of a flourishing community of Persians in Gujarat as well as in Kathiawar a century before the Khalji conquest.

“There was another community forming in Gujarat at this time which must also have included Persians. The Fatimid Caliph al-Mostanser (1036-94) had initiated the Isma’ili proselytization of northwestern India through the agency of the Sulayhid rulers of Yemen, with which Gujarat had long enjoyed close commercial ties. Among the *da’is* (q.v.) dispatched to Gujarat in 1083 was a certain Marzban b. Eshaq b. Mazban, whose name suggests a Persian origin. Throughout the 11th and 12 centuries, the work of proselytization continued, laying the foundations of the future Gujarati Bohra community. While the various Ismaili sects recruited converts from among the local Hindus, some Persians in Gujarat were probably drawn to this revolutionary doctrine, for the Fatimid *da’is* were already established in Persia itself. According to Nezari Khoja tradition, Satgur Nur or Nur-al-Din was the first Nezari *da’i* sent from Alamut to Gujarat, where he settled in Patan.

“Meanwhile, Gujarat had begun to experience Muslim military pressure from the north. In 1025-26, Sultan Mahmud of Gazna marched through Gujarat and sacked the Hindu metropolis of Anhilwara on his way to Somnath.” A subsequent raid into Gujarat in 1178 by Mohammad Guri may have ended disastrously. A Khalji campaign of 1304-05 led to the incorporation of Gujarat as a province of the Delhi sultanate.

Thirteen successive sultans ruled over the independent kingdom of Gujarat between the demise of the Tughluqids (1414) and the Mughal conquest in 1573. They formed a single family and were all of indigenous stock. They showed no particular fondness for Persians.

“Ahmad I (1411-42) may be regarded as the true architect of the independent sultanate both as a result of his successful pacification of local Hindu rajahs and his campaigns against his Muslim neighbors,

and also because he obtained a deed of investiture for himself from the titular 'Abbasid caliph in Cairo. He was also the founder of the city of Ahmeadabad, which became thereafter his capital.”

This overview suggests close links between Iran and Gujarat long before as well as long after the settlement of Parsis in Gujarat.