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Continuities and Transformations in the History of a Port City

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Abstract

This paper traces the long-term development of Surat's urban landscape, examining its transformation from an early modern port city into a contemporary smart city. Rather than treating the emergence of the smart city as a complete departure from the past, the study highlights the historical continuities that have shaped Surat's urban structure and systems of governance. These continuities are closely associated with the city's maritime position, commercial networks, and ability to respond to changing circumstances. From the sixteenth century onwards, Surat became a significant centre in the Indian Ocean trade network, shaped by overseas commerce, migrant communities, and a well-established mercantile culture. These elements contributed to an urban character marked by connectivity, openness, and adaptability. The study examines key phases in Surat's urban development, including its expansion as a port city, periods of decline and instability, and its subsequent movement towards industrial and infrastructural growth. It also considers major disruptions, including the decline of maritime trade, colonial policies, disease outbreaks, and environmental pressures, together with the responses through which the city adapted to these challenges. Such experiences reveal enduring patterns of adjustment that remain relevant to contemporary urban planning and development in Surat. The paper further places the city's smart city initiatives within this broader historical trajectory, with particular attention to infrastructure, innovation, and sustainability. It argues that contemporary forms of digital governance and urban development retain connections with earlier practices of regulating trade, movement, and urban space, although these are now supported by modern administrative and technological systems. By examining both continuity and transformation, the study demonstrates that Surat's identity as a smart city has evolved from its historical experiences rather than emerging independently of them. In this way, the paper highlights the importance of historical perspectives in understanding contemporary approaches to urban development, sustainability, and innovation.

Keywords: Urban History, Port City, Maritime Trade, Urban Transformation, Smart City.

Introduction

Surat was strategically situated as the principal maritime trading hub of the Indian Ocean trading system in the seventeenth century and was the main port of the Mughal Empire. It was located on the Tapti River and could access the Arabian Sea through the Swally anchorage^{xxx}, thus making Surat the main maritime gateway to the Mughal hinterland, connecting north and central India to West Asia, Africa, Southeast Asia and Europe. Surat became a well-managed port town under Mughal rule, and especially since the end of the sixteenth century, imperial authority actively

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encouraged overseas trade by posting officials like the mutasaddi^{xxxii} to oversee customs, shipping and port revenues. Shireen Moosvi's statistical analysis of Mughal revenue records (c. 1595) suggests that a large percentage of Gujarat taxed in the trade, of which Surat alone figures an enormously high percentage, has a fiscal significance in the Mughal economy.^{xxxii} The export of cotton textiles, indigo, and other manufactured products underpinned the prosperity of the port, whose main production hinterland was very large, while bullion, horses, luxury goods, and European manufactures were imported. Surat was also a major pilgrimage port and, in particular, the port of departure of ships to Mecca (babul makka)^{xxxiii} adding further to its growing commercial importance.

In the seventeenth century, the city of Surat had developed a strong cosmopolitan character, reflected in the assortment of merchant communities such as Baniyas, Muslims, Parsis, Armenians, Jews, and an increasingly large number of European merchants. For instance, the presence of multiple sarais, used by merchants and travellers from India and beyond, reflects the cultural plurality and urban character^{xxxiv}. The English, Dutch and French East India companies were allowed to build factories in the city, which became a part of a growing global circuit of emerging early modern trade under Mughal domination. The records of traveling Europeans and companies invariably refer to Surat as an overcrowded, business-filled hub of inland and maritime commerce, supporting the image of Surat as the main portal into the empire. Meanwhile, the city of Surat and its business cycles were influenced by broader trends in Indian Ocean politics such as the rivalry between the European powers and the continued existence of the Asian merchant circles. Consequently, the port town of Surat (17th century) is a prime example of a place where imperial rule, regional systems of production and transoceanic trade came together and is therefore a key entry point in the economic history of early modern South Asia.

Modern discussions of smart city projects often depict recent urban reforms as highly technological in nature and essentially innovative; however, such viewpoints tend to be limited by insufficient attention to the historical trends of the cities being reformed. These perspectives may overlook the long-term impact of past systems of urban organisation and governance on modern planning activities. This paper attempts to correct this inaccuracy by placing the initiatives of the smart city of Surat in the context of the long history of the city as an economic hub and a maritime port. The research claims that the smart city stage of Surat can be perceived as an adjustment phase rather than a radical break with the city's history.

Institutional patterns formed in earlier times, especially those concerning the regulation of trade, circulation and urban space, continue to influence modern forms of governance despite changes in administrative machinery and technological tools. For instance, the Mughal system of customs regulation and market supervision in Surat finds echoes in modern municipal licensing and port authority controls. This historical approach also highlights the importance of continuity in interpreting processes of urban transformation. This analysis will begin by exploring the development of Surat as an early modern port city then trace later stages of disruption and transition, and finally assess the smart city efforts of Surat within the framework of this longer-term urban trend.

Research Questions

- How does Surat's Smart City development link with its earlier history as a port city?
- What facets of Surat's urban governance have continued from the past to the present?
- What role have repeated calamities played in shaping how Surat plans and manages the city today?

Research Methodology

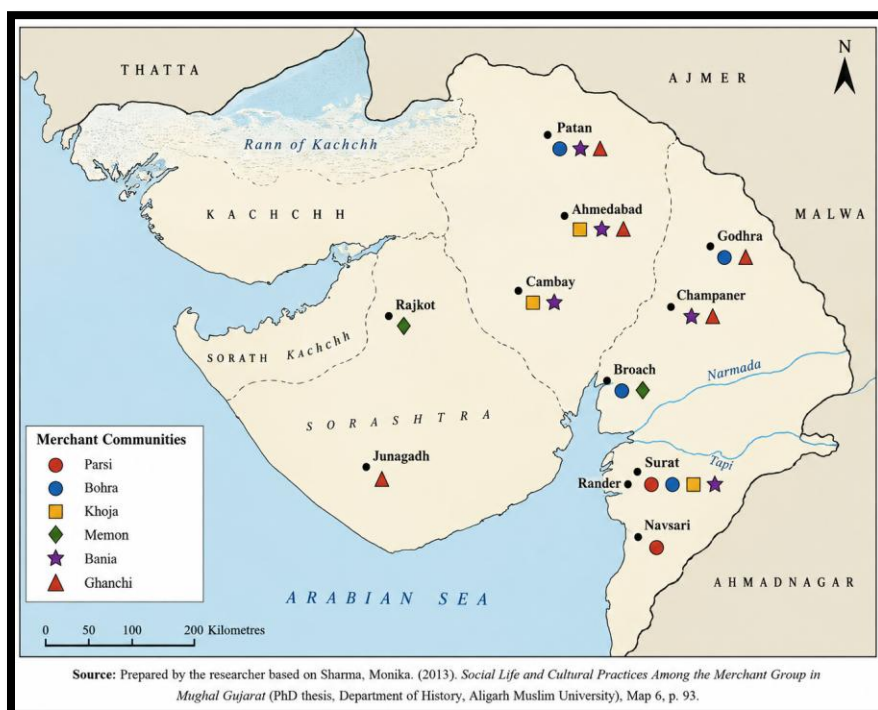
The research is based on a qualitative historical research design. Drawing on archival research, secondary literature, and field-based observation, it focuses on long-term continuities and transformations in Surat's urban development from the early modern period to its entry into the Smart City stage. The major focus is on historical documents concerning Surat's port economy, mercantile institutions, and urban administration in the Mughal and early colonial periods, as well as post-Independence municipal archives and up-to-date policy publications regarding the Smart City Mission. These sources include published archival records, urban planning documentation, local records, and city policy frameworks on urban infrastructure and governance. The secondary sources are academic articles on Indian Ocean trade, Mughal rule, the urban history of Gujarat, merchant communities, and commercial port towns, which provide explanatory context for the analysis. The fieldwork was carried out in Surat to observe the spatial coexistence of old architecture with new infrastructure. Some of the main locations were the Surat Castle, the old port, and the old market areas, commercial areas, and selected industrial areas. These notes were analysed to understand how the past spatial patterns of commercial centres, administrative centres, and routes of circulation still influence current priorities of urban organisation and planning.

Surat: An Early Modern Port City

Surat played a central role in the maritime economy of western India in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as one of the largest ports that linked the Mughal Empire to the great trade systems of West Asia, the Red Sea world, and Southeast Asia. However, after joining the Mughal Empire in 1572, the city began to emerge as Gujarat's principal port for exporting textiles, indigo, and other goods towards the end of the sixteenth century. Indian merchant communities dominated commercial life in Surat, and organized long-distance exchange, funded maritime activities and maintained connections to inland sites of production, as well as those in international markets. These trade connections affected the spatial organisation within the city significantly because markets, warehouses, caravanserais, and neighbourhoods in residential areas arose in close proximity to port facilities and along major trade routes.^{xxxv} Since the end of the seventeenth century, though, commercial pre-eminence at Surat had been on the decline because of an interacting combination of factors, including the diversion of trade to newly growing ports, competition with centres dominated by Europeans, and growing political insecurity. By the first part of the eighteenth century, the volume of overseas trade transiting through Surat had significantly decreased, leading to a shrinkage of mercantile activity and a resettlement of the economic base and the city structure. This shows that the periods of Surat's growth and decline were intertwined with the destinies of the mercantile economy, which was the determining factor in the formation of the long-term urban structure of the city.

Mercantile culture and urban governance

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the urban governance of Surat emerged amid tensions between merchant dominance and a weakening Mughal administration. The weakening of central imperial power and frequent pressure from the Marathas after the 1720s created acute fiscal pressure on local authorities, including the mutasaddi and qiladar.^{xxxvi} Devoid of sufficient reinforcement by the imperial court, these officials increasingly sought revenues directly from the city's merchant community by forcing contributions, altering customs practices, and interfering with market transactions. Commercial institutions such as the customs house (farza), mint (dar-ul-zarb), and bazaars emerged as some of the most contentious places, as administrative demands altered long-held trading conventions and disturbed the confidence of merchants.^{xxxvii}



Map showing the distribution of merchant communities in 16-17th century.

Merchants reacted to these pressures by organising and acting collectively rather than through individual negotiation. Surat experienced a wave of organized agitations between 1723 and 1726 when merchants suspended their trade, closed the markets, abandoned the city and submitted formal petitions outlining detailed administrative grievances.^{xxxviii} These demands concerned tangible matters, among them equitable customs valuation, constraints on the actions of revenue officials, the retreat of troops from business regions, openness of books, and immunity against arbitrary seizure. On several occasions, the administration had to give in to such demands and officially reaffirm previous rules related to trade and taxes. These protests were successful, indicating that merchants still had considerable leverage over how urban governance was handled as they played the central role in maintaining the port revenues and commerce. The episodes show that authority in Surat was exercised by means of negotiation and accommodation as opposed to strict bureaucratic control. Urban order was based on collaboration among groups of merchants,

and where this relationship failed, there was disorder in the administration. The repeated cycles of extortion, resistance, and temporary resolution also indicate a broader structural crisis in the city government, which undermined its independence, further rendering it susceptible to external interference in the latter part of the century.

Decline, Disruption, and the Reordering of Urban Authority (c. 1730–1800)

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Surat had begun a long period of decline, which was marked by political unrest, economic contraction, and weakened urban authority. The slow disintegration of Mughal authority since the 1720s had a major impact on the administration and economic foundations of the city. Frequent Maratha raids into Gujarat disrupted the revenue collection system and reduced the capacity of the local authorities to uphold order and protect commerce.^{xxxix} As imperial power began to weaken, the administration of Surat was forced to use more extractive fiscal policies, which damaged its relations with the mercantile society and further destabilised urban governance.

There was a gradual breakdown of existing trading networks in Surat over the period. The foreign trade also declined as merchants redirected capital and transport to new ports, foremost among them Bombay, which had more security and institutional capacity under the company. As a result, the position of Surat as an important maritime center declined, and its trade became increasingly regional rather than international in scope. As the volume of trade declined, port revenues plummeted, as did the power of merchant groups, changing the economic pattern of the city and contributing to urban stasis.

The governance crisis peaked towards the mid-eighteenth century with the direct involvement of the British in the running of the city. The seizure of the Surat Castle in 1759^{xl} proved to be a major reconfiguration of the nature of urban power with the English East India taking over control of defence and governance. This did not represent a re-establishment of historical mercantile modes of governance; rather, it marked the establishment of a new political system that was based on military supremacy and centralised administrative power. The urban political discourse was becoming less a negotiated compromise between merchant elites and more a Company-founded entity, reducing the connection between trade and politics in fundamental ways.

The governing systems of Surat were more formalised and multi-layered under the administration of the Company, and security and the generation of revenue were prioritized over commercial flexibility. The city was no longer in a central location in the trade networks of the Indian Ocean even though it still served as a port. Surat was rather incorporated into a wider colonial-urban system in which Bombay developed as the major administrative and maritime centre^{xli}. This reshaping of urban power and resettlement of urban authority marked the end of the first modern period of Surat and laid the groundwork for its further change in the context of colonial and post-colonial realities.

Reorientation and Commercial Resilience after the Port's Decline

The decline of Surat's maritime prominence in the eighteenth century did not signify the disappearance of the city as a commercial centre^{xlii}. Although political authority and imperial investment increasingly gravitated toward Bombay, Surat continued to operate as a significant

node within regional and indigenous trading networks. Rather than collapsing, commercial activity adapted, as merchants, artisans, and transport systems sustained the city's economic vitality well into the nineteenth century.^{xliii} This persistence complicates earlier narratives that have treated the rise of Bombay as synonymous with the immediate marginalisation of Surat.

Though the trading firms of Europe shifted shipping patterns and administrative duties, the pre-existing patterns of inland exchange, artisanal production, and consumption were firmly rooted in Surat. These activities still depended on Surati markets for the production of certain commodities and crafts because production systems and skilled labour were embedded in the city, and also because merchant capital was entrenched there. In most cases, traders had made it customary to ship merchandise via Surat though unloading was done at Bombay by sea, and this suggests that commercial choices were informed more by the established social and economic infrastructures than by those of the colonial administration. In this way, Surat remained a significant exchange, manufacturing and redistribution hub in western India.

The period can be better understood as a time of urban restructuring rather than absolute decline. Surat's ability to accommodate political realignments and changing trading geographies without abandoning economic activity indicated a deeper adaptability that had developed earlier during its port-city period. The survival of these native systems of commerce helps explain why the city remained relevant even after imperial power had shifted elsewhere. This historical trend of resilience is valuable in understanding the further stages of urban change, industrial growth and modern planning efforts.

Post-Independence Urban Expansion and Municipal Governance

Surat also passed through a phase of rapid urbanization in the decades following the independence of India, with industrial productivity accompanied by industrial migration and municipalisation. Building on its earlier commercial strength, the city emerged as a big centre of textile manufacturing and subsequent diamond processing and other activities that led to large-scale migrant labour both in the state of Gujarat and its neighbours. This population explosion strained housing, urban facilities, and infrastructure in Surat, transforming what had been an old trading town into a crowded industrial city. The municipal institutions played a dominant role in handling this growth. The Surat Municipal City by that point was the major authority in water supply, waste removal and road development, in addition to public health, marking a shift from a negotiation-based urban administration system to bureaucratized urban governance.



Self-clicked image: Surat Municipal Corporation office.

Although this institutional change occurred, many of the prominent urban issues remained longstanding. Congestion, drainage, waste disposal, and flood control were problems that had been experienced previously in relation to circulation and environmental vulnerability, particularly the Tapi River. Crisis episodes were a significant aspect of the change in urban governance during this period. The vulnerability of the municipal system became evident through public health crises and environmental disasters, which prompted administrative changes aimed at increasing coordination, surveillance, and service delivery. Surat's institutions had a long history of dealing with disruption through institutional rebalancing, and these crises strengthened them rather than representing examples of discontinuity. Urban governance became more concerned with efficiency, infrastructure improvements, and regulation, which laid the groundwork for further reforms. At the latter part of the twentieth century, Surat had acquired the reputation of an understanding administration and rapid recuperation following a disaster. This reform-oriented municipal culture also provides significant context for the city's selection under the Smart City Mission. Post-Independence urban growth is thus a critical transitional phase in the history of Surat that connects it with its past and present (conventional) commercial agility and its current-day disposition towards planned city restructuring.

For instance, Surat Municipal Corporation was the pioneer in implementing 43 automated dustbins with sensor technology and an automated lifter under the Smart City Mission. On average, every bin is capable of holding about 150 kg of rubbish and transmits real-time notifications to the municipal control center when it becomes full so that its collection routes can be modified to suit the situation.^{xliv} This system was put in place to improve hygiene, minimise surface congestion, and improve waste collection in high-density business and residential locations. Historically, this intervention reflects the long-term administrative concern with sanitation in Surat, which can also be seen in past sanitation-related upkeep and port-era regulations intended to avoid epidemics and safeguard commerce. What varies is the technological medium, not the governing priority: the administration of urban health and circulation through systematic and timely surveillance.

Smart City Initiatives in Historical Perspective

The fact that Surat has joined the Smart City Mission is the latest development in a long history of urban adjustment and is not a discontinuity in its historical evolution. As it has been demonstrated earlier, the urban structure of the city has continued, and will continue, to respond to various dynamic transformations in trade, political authority, environmental stressors, and demographic demands. The smart city model is therefore not revolutionary but an updated expression of long-standing priorities that Surat has continuously pursued: planning, infrastructural responsiveness, and administration. Superimposition between the smart city and the city: Unlike newly planned urban centres, the smart city strategy in Surat has been aimed at retrofitting and modernizing the existing infrastructure in a closely and historically interconnected urban setting. The programs relating to mobility, drainage, waste management, surveillance, and service delivery are all focused on the areas where commercial and industrial activity is already a long-standing reality. This focus relates to a comparable earlier form of urban management in which officials devoted their attention to the control of circulation and congestion instead of extensive spatial overhaul. In this regard, the digital platforms and data-driven systems can be seen as the continuation of long-standing administrative concerns addressed through different technological means.

The primary element of the Surat smart city plan will consist of the creation of the Integrated Transport Mobility Administration Centre (IT-MAC), which will be supported by the central Smart City Centre, serving as a real-time monitoring and coordination centre.^{xlv} It is a system that brings together the traffic police, the city buses, BRTS services, emergency response divisions and the regional transport office on a single digital platform with the aid of automated traffic lights, GIS-based planning tools, and cashless fare-collection mechanisms. The system was constructed to address the issue of congestion in the commercially crowded areas, especially around the textile markets and transport hubs, as a modern-day solution to the perennial issues of traffic and overcrowding. In earlier centuries, the same sort of administrative care had been directed towards bazaars, port roads, and caravan roads to keep urban movement efficient and orderly in the cities. The IT-MAC model therefore expands previous ways of controlling movement and trade facilities to a digital space of governance.

One of the core themes featuring in the present-day planning agenda of Surat is environmental vulnerability particularly in terms of flooding, sanitation and disposal of waste. Such difficulties are not new but reflect historical pressures associated with the city's riverine setting and its role as a port and industrial centre. Long-term urban responses to ecological constraints thus underpin the city's smart-urbanization practices concerning resilience and sustainability, rather than representing an entirely new planning logic. In the historical perspective, the identity of Surat as a smart city can be regarded as an extension of a broader trend of continuity based on a process of adapting to change. Across its days as a Mughal port and commercial hub, periods of abandonment, refocus, and reorientation, later phases of industrialization, and post-independence reform of municipal systems, the city has repeatedly adjusted its urban systems to changing needs. The ongoing smart city phase builds on this experience, further supporting the view that Surat's modern smart transformation is related and linked to this historical process.

Conclusion

Through this, Surat becomes a sort of palimpsest written repeatedly through a myriad of revisions. Surat as an urban history demonstrates how a city passes through a chain of adaptation processes, which are characterized less by abrupt shifts than by constant change and re-creation. From its evolution into one of the largest trading centres in the Mughal Empire to its present form as a smart city, Surat has kept adjusting itself to the evolving economic pressures, political pressures, and ecological forces. Issues that have remained similar across centuries include trade, circulation, and governance, although their management has changed. The decline of Surat's maritime significance during the eighteenth century did not spell an end to its urban utility. Instead, it led the city to reorient towards regional trade, craft industry, and later industrialisation, through existing systems of professionalism, labour and capital. The subsequent growth and urbanization of the post-independence era also extended this pragmatic mode of government, shaped by crisis, experimentation, and learning in governance.

Viewed from this longer-term perspective, the smart city phase is not a departure from the past but rather a continuation of Surat's capacity to respond to disruption and restructure urban formations. It helps us understand the smart city as a tool of transformation, yet instead of utilizing the argument of technology as the central statement of transformation, we could view the smart city through the perspectives of history as the latest tool that is utilized to serve the outdated interests of the city. Digital governance, infrastructural upgrading, and sustainability initiatives reflect older modes of movement management, spatial containment, and responses to environmental constraints. The present has left its impression of the past in Surat that makes us understand that urban futures are often built on the shapes that we do not build but which we get handed down. In identifying the modern urban growth in a long historical frame, this study also draws attention to the significance of historical approaches to the modern city. Surat's story reveals that it requires stamina not only to reinvent oneself but also to be capable of change and at the same time remain attached to the experience of residing in the metropolis. In that respect, the smart city does not represent a conclusion but a further stage of a continuous and ongoing urban process.

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