

Social Life and Professional duties of the English East India Company's servants at Surat factory during the Seventeenth Century

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Abstract:

Trading activities of the Europeans have been discussed extensively. However, a very few modern writings are available on the daily life of these merchants. This paper offers a glimpse of English servants at Surat which was the seat of the trading activities of the English Company and others like- the Dutch, and the French. Living conditions of the English servants in Surat had varied based on their positions within the East India Company. Senior officials and merchants or servants had lived in relatively more comfortable accommodation within or near the factory premises. However, lower ranking employees, such as clerks and apprentice, lived in a modest accommodation. **They had quickly adapted to the local climate, food, and customs which presented both challenges and opportunities for cultural exchange.** Life for British servants in Surat during the 16th and 17th centuries was challenging and often marked by significant cultural and lifestyle differences. Many of these servants were involved in the trade of goods such as textiles, spices, and other commodities between India and Britain. Overall, the life of British employees in the Surat factory during the 16th and 17th centuries had marked by a mix of cultural adaptation, trade, and the challenges of living and working in a foreign land. In this paper an attempt is being made to have a glimpse of the social and professional life of the English servants and the other employees inside the Surat factory.

INTRODUCTION:

For the majority of learners, Clive is the person who started the history of British India. People who know a fair amount about the Company's history in the last hundred years often don't have a clear picture of the early struggles that led to its successful rise to the throne of the Great Moghal. However, this is more than just an interesting story, and the names of Best and Downton, Aldworth and Kerridge, and the other capable sailors and merchants who fought almost alone against the Portuguese's attacks and plans, as well as the much more deadly attacks of disease and famine, should be given more credit than they have received so far. The cornerstone of the British Empire in India has been referred to as the English factory located at Surat. It began as an experiment at a time when everyone believed that the Moluccas spice trade held the true key to the future of British business in the East.¹

Surat was the first headquarters of the Company in Western India. Its past is not very long. First, the factory was the hub of all the Company's trade in the East. As Bombay became more important, the factory lost some of its importance. Surat had many problems. It couldn't defend itself at sea because it didn't have a good Harbor, and the Marathas could easily invade it from the land. Because of this, Surat was never going to be the capital of Western India.²

The Treaty of Westminster ends a significant period in the Company's history. Following President Blackman's visit to England, the Commonwealth Government extended the Company's charter in 1657. A condition in the new agreement allowed them to fortify and plant in their communities and transport colonists. This marks the start of a new phase, anticipated by experienced Indian administrators. When Charles II acquired Bombay from Portugal, the Company had the chance to establish a permanent and independent port, similar to the Dutch. The transition from Surat to Bombay under Sir George Oxinden and President Angier

¹ British Beginning in Western India 1579-1657. G.H. Rawlinson. M.A. p. i.

² British Beginning in Western India 1579-165. G.H. Rawlinson. M.A. p. 2.

requires attention elsewhere. Meanwhile, this paper will trace the life of the English merchants inside the Surat before it was replaced by the current capital of Western India.³

Company ships docked at Surat in Gujarat in 1608. The company's first Indian factory was established in 1611 at Masulipatnam on the Andhra Coast of the Bay of Bengal, and its second in 1615 at Surat.⁴

In 1615, James I instructed Sir Thomas Roe to visit the Mughal Emperor Nur-ud-din Salim Jahangir (r. 1605–1627) to arrange for a commercial treaty that would give the company exclusive rights to reside and establish factories in Surat and other areas. In return, the company offered to provide the emperor with goods and rarities from the European market. This mission was highly successful, and Jahangir sent a letter to James through Sir Thomas Roe.⁵ Travelers to Surat disembarked at Suvali, also known as Swally Hole or Swally Marine. As previously mentioned, Sir Henry Middleton discovered this roadstead, which was preferred over the Tapti mouth for more manoeuvrability during attacks or squalls. All types of vessels were busy loading and unloading. Ashore, English, French, and Dutch businesses and god owns flew their national flags. The accommodations at Swally were basic, and the port likely closed during the monsoon. Fryer stated that the area had few nicer tenements than booths.⁶ The traveller would stop at one of the factory huts for a lunch before continuing on to Surat. English ladies did not frequently travel to the East in those days, but when they did, their carriage was hidden from view by chinks, or split bamboo blinds, and they were accompanied by an escort. After enduring a scorching journey of ten miles on mediocre roads through the valiant champion's territory, the traveller arrived at the shores of the wide and majestic Tapti River, which gently touched the walls of the city. At this location, the Company's barge was ready to transport him. If he arrived at sundown, he would be partially deafened by the loud noise of the drums and trumpets from the nakkarkhana at the castle. These sounds occurred both at night and in the morning when the Muslim governor was present. At this location, more coaches were present, ready to escort the guest to the factory.

He arrived at the facility after driving across the city. This house in Surat was considered one of the finest. It was rented to the Company for £60 a year, but the rent was waived on the condition that it would be used for repairs. The building was a two-story structure that opened inwards, typical of the Muslim style. Outside was plain stone and timber with good carving, 'without representations'. The upper story floors and flat roof were made of solid cement, half a yard thick. The quadrangle was enclosed by cloisters or verandas. The bottom level housed the Company's commerce, while adjacent rooms served as shops and god owns, creating a bustling shipping season atmosphere.⁷ According to Ovington, brokers are recruited who are knowledgeable about the rates and values of various commodities in India. Although they were paid 2 to 3% for their work, they actually made much more. However, it was unsafe to investigate as the factors were unaware of the vernacular and were regularly exploited. The Company attempted to address this by rewarding native language skills and employing a pundit to teach novice writers, but with limited success. Ker ridge, Methwold, and Oxinden were among the few males who became 'linguists' or interpreters.⁸ The upper storey had living rooms. The President received a luxurious apartment with rooms for counselling and entertainment, tanks,

³ British Beginning in Western India 1579-165. G.H. Rawlinson. M.A. p.118.

⁴ Tracy, James D. (2015). "Dutch and English Trade to the East". In Bentley, Jerry; Subrahmanyam, Sanjay; Wiesner-Hanks, Merry (eds.). *The Construction of a Global World, 1400–1800 CE, Part 2, Patterns of Change*. The Cambridge World History. Vol. 6. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 249. ISBN 9780521192460. In 1608 an EIC ship called at Surat, the main port of Gujarat, and a good place to obtain the Gujarati cottons that had an established market in the Moluccas. But the English were not allowed to establish a factory here until 1615..."

⁵ The battle of Plassey ended the tax on the Indian goods. "Indian History Sourcebook: England, India, and The East Indies, 1617 CE". Fordham University. Archived from the original on 18 August 2014. Retrieved 5 May 2004."

⁶ New Account, ed. Crooke, i.211 ff.

⁷ a Op. cit., p. 401. Cf. Fryer, i. 217-18.

⁸ As Crooke remarks this disposes of the old myth that modern Anglo* Indians are less proficient in the vernaculars than their forefathers.

yards, and a Hummus for bathing. According to Ovington, the factors had a large dining hall and a chapel that was well-decorated to avoid offending the Moors, who were pleased with our worship's innocence.⁹

The President held a high position, overseeing English factories in Western India, Persia, and Bantam for a significant period. The President, typically appointed from England, may expect prestigious employment at the Company's headquarters upon return if they performed successfully. The individual signed a £5,000 bond for solid security and received a £500 annual pay.³ The typical term of office was 3 to 5 years. The President dined in his own chambers, except on special occasions, and traveled in a palanquin with guards, flagmen, and mace-bearers, while carrying an ostrich-feather fan, similar to the Moghal court noblemen. The next level of authority was the councillors, who received between £300 and £100 per year, based on their level of service. Of these, the senior member was the accomptant. He held a high standing in the Company, as he handled receipts for India, ranking next to the President. He served as the Company's East treasurer. Next, the warehouse-keeper registered European goods sold and received Eastern commodities, while the purser kept accounts of exported and imported goods, paid seamen, provided waggons and porters, and managed ship tackling and stores.

The secretary is responsible for consulting, writing letters, obtaining signatures from the President and council, maintaining the Company's seal, and recording and sending copies of transactions to the company.¹⁰ There were two more prominent figures at the factory: the chaplain and the surgeon. The Company provided the surgeon with an annual salary of £50, as well as drugs and a local helper.¹¹ The chaplain was a well-known figure. The first regular chaplain was appointed in February 1657 (8), replacing incumbents who had served intermittently as ship's priests or attended Sir. Thomas Roe.¹² Some of these did not lead very edifying lives. Hence, the Company sought qualified candidates at Oxford and Cambridge.¹³ They were given a £100 annual allowance, Dye accommodations, and several other privileges. Additionally, the chaplain had a carriage and a peon to assist him.¹⁴ One of the purposes of having chaplains was to mitigate the impact of the Portuguese Catholic priests.¹⁵ There was a plan to undertake a mission in India with the purpose of promoting and spreading the gospel.¹⁶ However, save from the conversion of a single atheist from the Mogul Empire in 1617, little more progress seems to have been made.¹⁷ The chaplain was kept very busy, as the Company's servants were stout Puritans who blend commerce with pompous devotion, before the Restoration's dissoluteness. An anonymous writer, perhaps Sir Streynsham Master, has written a detailed account of the chaplain's duties, including their manner of civil discourse and religious behaviour.¹⁸

“The Factory has daily prayers before opening and after closing, with serious services and sermons on Sundays occurring twice a day and prayers at night. The President holds this office, and in his absence, the Council Chief or the next in the Factory if there is no Minister (or Padre). The factory minister performs duties similar to those in English churches, including catechizing youth on Sundays after evening service,

⁹Op. cit., p. 404.

¹⁰Fryer, op. cit., i, p. 217).

¹¹Ovington, p. 402.

¹²e.g. Henry Lord, 1616, author of the Discovery of two foreigner Seals, a work on Hindu and Parsi religion, and Copeland who came in the Royal James, 1618.

⁸Hall. Terry, who succeeded Hall as Roe's chaplain, had come out independently.

¹³Yule, Hedges' Diary, vol. ii (Hakluyt Society, 1887), p. cccli.

¹⁴Ovington, p. 404.

¹⁵Anderson, English in Western India, p. 25.

¹⁶Yule, Hedges' Diary, vol. ii, p. cccli.

¹⁷Anderson, English in Western India, p. 25.

¹⁸No doubt he paints the condition of the factory in rosy hues. He wishes to show that he and his companions have not been ' shaken ' by the ' Customs of the heathen Indians ', or ' Subtile insinuations of the Jesuits '. If this picture is true it compares very favourably with Calcutta (vide Yule, op. cit., p. cccviii ff.).

administering the Sacrament on major festivals, and burying the dead. These duties are exercised while adhering to Church rules.”

The chaplain had also the duty of visiting the subordinate factories in regular circuit, a challenging and even hazardous task in these days.¹⁹

In addition to these important individuals, the majority of the Company's employees can be categorized into three groups: merchants, factors, and writers. Additionally, a few Bluecoat boys have been taken on as apprentices for a period of seven years. Once their apprenticeship is completed, if they can provide a guarantee, they are eligible for employment. The writers are required to serve a period of five years, receiving a yearly payment of £10. They must also provide a bond of £500 to ensure good behaviour. During this time, they work under one of the aforementioned positions. After completing their service, they become factors and can advance in rank and responsibility based on their seniority or favour. At this point, they are required to provide a bond of £1,000 and their salary is increased to £20 per year for three years. Following this, they enter into new agreements and become senior factors. Finally, after three more years, they become merchants. From this group, chiefs of factories are selected as positions become available. These chiefs receive a yearly payment of £40 during their tenure with the company, in addition to being provided with accommodations and meals at the company's expense.²⁰ The reader is most impacted by the low salaries. Although servants cost two or three rupees per month and other expenses were comparable in 17th-century India, it is unclear what would motivate a "Bluecoat boy" to risk the perils and discomforts of Indian life for a £10 annual salary, rising to £20 in five years. Remember that, as Ovington states, the banyans

“once a year, which is their grand Festival season, called the Dually (Diwali) time, have a custom much like that of our New Years-gifts, of presenting the President and Council, the Minister, Surgeon, and all the Factors and Writers with something valuable, either in jewels or plate, atlases or other silks, according to the respect which they owe to every man's station. Additionally to their income, diet, and housing, young workers receive suitable clothing for the most of the year. These things prevent significant annual expenses and help to a joyful and easy existence.”²¹

Thus, they all have given them their diet and lodging gratis by the Company, besides wages', continues Ovington,

“The trade routes from China to Surat offer significant financial benefits, with profits often reaching 100%. In some cases, traders can make a profit of 50% by transporting silver and bringing back gold. Additionally, individuals with good reputation but limited wealth can borrow money from the Banyans at an interest rate of 25% for trading in China. This loan is only required to be repaid upon the safe arrival of the ship, meaning there is no financial liability if the ship is lost during the voyage. Their gains vary depending on the distance between ports and the commercial opportunities available.”²²

Even the chaplain earned significant income beyond his modest salary. In addition to gifts from merchants and shipmasters, Ovington also receives hefty payments for officiating at weddings, baptisms, and burials. The surgeon got high fees from wealthy natives for outside practice. One of Fryer's most captivating chapters involves his travel to Junnar to treat the wife of the Muhammadan governor, a fat, russet dame. After being bled, she spilled a golden shower of pagods on her extravasated blood.²³ William Bolts' Considerations on Indian Affairs states that **gomastas, or agents**, are employed by the gentleman's banyan at monthly charges. These are sent with a parwana from the Calcutta Governor or Subordinate Chief to the Zamindar of the desired purchasing district. The gomasta establishes a kachary, where he summons brokers and weavers to sign a bond for the delivery of goods at a specific time and price. He pays them a portion of the money in advance.²⁴ In this system, the Banyan or broker held a significant role. "Bolts states that he fulfils multiple roles, including

¹⁹Ovington, p. 404.

²⁰Fryer, i. 216.

²¹Ovington^ pp. 401-2.

²²Ibid., p. 391.

²³Op. cit., i. 326.

²⁴1772, quoted by Ramsay Muir, Making of British India, pp. 89-92.

interpreter, head bookkeeper, head secretary, head broker, and the supplier and keeper of cash." 'He manages all the commercial transactions on behalf of his employer, making it challenging for any local residents to get entry unless they have a good understanding of the languages spoken in the region.'

Rising at morning, the factor would 'ease the stomach' with 'burnt wine'. At six, they had to attend the chapel or risk a half-crown fine for missing it. Following prayers, the factory gates opened, allowing Banyans and traders to enter. The courtyard remained chaotic until noon, when business was closed until four and all factors, except the President, retreated to the dining hall. Historically, an early dinner was a significant event. Despite being a chaplain, Padre Ovington still enjoyed the delights of the table and portrays it with zest²⁵.

"Each plate and cup were made of solid silver, heavy and robust. A peon took a huge silver ewer and basin for handwashing before dinner. To satisfy all palates, Indian, Portuguese, and English cooks prepared delicacies such as pularos, cabob curries with chutneys and relishes, and 'dump ked' poultry made with butter, nuts, and raisins. The meal was accompanied by a large Shiraz wine and arrack punch presented at the table."

During Sundays and festivals, the supper was prepared to be more lavish and extravagant, with venison, peacocks, and other types of game, as well as Persian fruits such as apricots, plums, and cherries. Additional European wines and bottled beer were included. The latter, specifically, aroused the curiosity of the locals. A prosperous Indian, who had a meal at the plant, provided tremendous entertainment by inquiring about the method of its insertion. Upon learning that the supper occasionally consisted of sixteen courses, the servants could understand the problem that the excessive consumption of meat and drink led to several fatalities and a significant amount of illness.²⁶ After dinner, everyone napped. Work resumed at four. At six, the factory gates were closed and outsiders were removed. The prayers were repeated again, followed by food. The President often attended informal suppers, generally situated in groves or gardens near the waterside, where guests enjoyed a cold drink and conversation. The porter enforced severe rules prohibiting entry or exit after supper. To 'lie abroad' without the President's permission was a serious offense, punishable by a forty-shilling punishment.²⁷ According to a contemporary writer, the factory was more similar to a college, monastery, or residence under religious orders than any other.²⁸ This was important for numerous reasons. The apprentices and younger writers faced temptations in an Eastern town, making it crucial to protect them. The risks they faced can be derived from Ovington's depiction of Bombay, where conditions were more relaxed. In that place, 'luxury, immodesty, and a prostitute dissolution of manners', along with other vices and the environment, caused disaster and led to the phrase 'Two monsoons are the age of a man'.²⁹ To avoid conflict with the native population, brawls were strictly prohibited and punished severely. If someone gets drunk or mistreats the indigenous, they will be imprisoned at the gate during the day and tied to the house post at night.³⁰ Before President Aungier, only privileged individuals could bring their wives out, and the Company aimed to prevent English from having relationships with native women, fostering degeneracy like the Portuguese in Goa.³¹ Ovington recounts an experiment conducted in Bombay where ladies were brought from England to serve as wives for the factors. However, it seems that the endeavour did not achieve significant success.³² Ovington publishes a resolution of the Company

²⁵Op. cit., pp. 396-9.

²⁶Strong drink and flesh is mortal . . . this is the true cause our Bombay bills of mortality have swelled so high ' (quoted in Anderson, English in Western India, p. 63).

²⁷G.H.Rawlinson, British beginnings in western India from 1579 to 1657. p130.

²⁸Sir Streysham Master, quoted above.

²⁹Ovington, p. 142.

³⁰Sir Streysham Master, quoted above.

³¹p. 18, supra.

³²Op. cit., pp. 146-7

“That the Agents and Chiefs in factories must prevent profane swearing, cursed oaths, drunkenness, intemperance, fornication, and uncleanness. If found guilty after warning and reprehension, punishment will be in accordance with God's and the Kingdom's laws. If a person or group refuses to change after punishment, the Agent must send them back to England on the next ship to avoid dishonouring God, religion, our nation, and others.”³³

To achieve the same objective, the factory library was stocked with a broad range of educational publications. They sent the writings of the renowned follower of Christ, Mr. William Perkins, along with Foxe's Book of Martyrs and Mr. Hakluyt's Voyages, to uplift their spirits with a diverse range of historical accounts.³⁴ The Church's feasts and fasts were strictly followed following the Restoration. On Christmas, Easter, and Whitsuntide, we observe serious services, public feasts, and refrain from conducting business in the manufacturing house. Some individuals, including the President, observe weekly fasts on Fridays. Our fasts differ from Romanist and Church-directed abstention from flesh. The meal consisted of fish and relatively little meat until night, with only prayers and retirement.³⁵

Typically, these holidays were commemorated with excursions into rural areas.

“According to Ovington, the President often invites the workforce to a nearby garden on special occasions to enjoy shade and refreshment from tanks and waterworks. The President and his Lady are carried in palanquins by six peons, each carrying four at once.

A few distance ahead of him are two big flags or English Ensigns, accompanied by exotic Persian or Arabian horses of great worth and lavish attire. The expensive furniture on these and other horses, where factors ride, includes velvet saddles with intricate embroidery, solid worked silver headstalls, reins, and croupiers. The Captain of the Peons 2 stands on his horse and leads 40-50 others who walk alongside the President. The President and Council go in open carriages with silver knobs, carried by majestic oxen, but without their wives. The Company maintains coaches or hackeries or horses to transport their President and people during these periods or whenever they desire to travel. In this grand parade, the President travels through the city centre when travelling abroad.”³⁶

The purpose of all this magnificence was to shock the indigenous population, who were accustomed to the splendor and rituals of the Mughal empire. According to Ovington, this fosters respect among locals, fostering respect for the English in their interactions with them. It also fosters a sense of camaraderie and honor in our relationships. English probity and grandeur have brought the Presidency of Surat to such a high regard among natives that it has overshadowed their own government, encouraging injured and distressed Indians to seek relief from our President rather than their Governor.³⁷ After learning from Roe, the Company recognized the importance of maintaining their dignity to be respected. After death, key leaders of the factory were still respected for this reason. In his description of the European cemetery in Surat, Ovington praises the "magnificent structures and stately monuments" that are visible from afar and considered the city's main attractions.³⁸

We conclude our brief overview of the daily lives of the strong predecessors of the English in western India. The cornerstone of a huge empire was unwittingly laid in a rental cottage in Surat. Surat had lost its earlier splendor. A bustling native populace fills the bazaars and narrow lanes with carved wooden balconies. The river Tapti had silted up, allowing only small vessels to climb. The maritime traffic had moved to Bombay, leaving Swally Road empty save for occasional country craft. The President's melancholy air bath at Gopi Talao has long been drained. The crumbling castle walls peacefully overlooked the once-famous stream, while the abandoned graveyard's grand graves were the only remnants of the once-great location.

³³Op. cit., p. 407.

³⁴First Letter Book, p. 419.

³⁵Sir Streysham Master, quoted above.

³⁶Op. cit., p. 398.

³⁷Ovington, pp. 400-1.

³⁸Op. cit., p. 405.

Conclusion:

Based on the information provided here, it is evident that the factory resembled more of a College, Monastery, or a residence under Religious Orders, as described by a writer of that time. Based on the narratives that have been passed down to us, we can imagine daily life in Surat throughout the seventeenth century quite precisely. **They had quickly adapted to the local climate, food, and customs which presented both challenges and opportunities for cultural exchange.** Life for British servants in Surat during the 16th and 17th centuries was challenging and often marked by significant cultural and lifestyle differences. They lived in a different social and cultural environment compared to what they were used to in Britain. The British employees in Surat often faced **harsh living conditions, including the challenges of living in a tropical climate, exposure to unfamiliar diseases, and the general difficulties of life in a foreign land.** They also **had to navigate complex social and cultural dynamics**, as they interacted with local merchants, officials, and residents. It's important to note that the social experiences of British servants would have varied based on individual personalities, roles, and the specific historical context. Personal diaries, letters, and official documents can provide valuable insights into the social aspects of their lives. Researching the writings of individuals from that time can offer a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and experiences they faced in both their professional and social lives.

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- (vide Yule, op. cit., p. cccxviii ff.).
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