

*Mughal Nobles, Indian Merchants and the
Beginning of British Conquest in Western
India: The Case of Surat 1756–1759*

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This paper is about the small war that ended with the British conquest of Surat castle in 1759. This event brought about the establishment of English paramountcy in Surat, which, in turn, was the first step taken by the English on their way to empire along the Western coast of India. As such, the developments leading to the take-over of Surat castle represent a case study of some importance in the early rise of British power in India and the reasons behind it.

More specifically, it is hoped that the present paper—through a somewhat detailed examination of the relevant political and military events—will shed light on two themes. The first is the military relationship then existing between the English East India Company and the ‘country powers’. The findings presented in this paper confirm P. J. Marshall’s insight about the crucial importance that the wars between England and France had in making possible the English conquest of India.¹ The struggle for supremacy between those two powers resulted in the despatch outside Europe of forces well superior to those then available to the European Companies in Asia. These forces, while meant to challenge their European counterparts, by their mere presence in the Indian sub-continent dramatically altered the equilibrium then existing between the European Companies and the local powers.² That had been an equilibrium in which greater

¹ P. J. Marshall, ‘British Expansion in India in the Eighteenth Century: A Historical Revision’, *History*, LX (Feb. 1975), and *idem*, ‘Western Arms in Maritime Asia in the Early Phases of Expansion’, *MAS*, 14, 1 (1980).

² It is worth stressing that the changed equilibrium in favour of the Europeans was not such as to remain unchallenged. During the remainder of the century, some Indian powers either made use of their military assets in a more creative way, or completely reorganized their armies. This caused a quick escalation in the effectiveness of both English and Indian armies. Until the second Anglo-Maratha war, the outcome of the military contest between the East India Company and some key Indian potentates was far from being a foregone one. On all this, besides Marshall’s

numbers by the Indians had compensated for a somewhat superior military organization on the part of the Europeans. In the case examined in this paper it will be shown that the arrival in Bombay harbour of an English royal squadron—meant to fight the French navy then in the Indian Ocean—overturned the existing balance of power between the Bombay English and the Peshwa.³ This made possible a successful expedition against Surat, soon after a previous one had been aborted because of the threat represented by the Peshwa's army. Another finding presented in this paper, relevant for our comprehension of the extant military relationship between the English and the country powers, is that, in spite of the shift in the balance of force brought about by the presence of the Royal Navy, English victory in the Surat campaign of 1759 was in no way a preset conclusion. In fact, what played a decisive role in the outcome of the 1759 expedition was the internal divisions that crisscrossed the ruling Indian elites, and the willingness on the part of some sections of those elites to ally themselves to the English.

This brings us to the second—and possibly more important—theme of this paper, namely the nature of the linkages that were then forged between the English and some influential indigenous groups. Recently, a theory has been propounded, according to which the establishment of English paramountcy in Surat was made possible by a kind of special relationship then in the process of being built between the English and the Hindu and Jain section of the Surat merchant class.⁴ Contrary to this theory, this paper will show

articles quoted above, see the important paper by John Pemble, 'Resources and Techniques in the Second Maratha War', *The Historical Journal*, 19, 2 (1976). A synthesis of the views of the above authors can be found in Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution. Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), ch. IV. More generally on the problem of Western military challenge and Asian response see Gayl D. Ness and William Stahl, 'Western Imperialist Armies in Asia', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 19, 1 (1977).

³ The first modern scholar to point out the role of Pocock's squadron in the British conquest of the Surat castle has been T. J. Shejwalkar ('The Surat Episode of 1759', *Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute*, vol. VIII [K. N. Dixit Memorial Volume], 1947). This is a useful study, among other reasons because, although grounded on a somewhat restricted documentary basis (the author did not make use of the unpublished English records), it draws on some Maratha sources and offers some interesting insights on the role played by the Marathas.

⁴ Lakshmi Subramanian, 'Capital and Crowd in a Declining Asian Port City. The Anglo-Bania Order and the Surat Riots of 1759', *MAS*, 19, 2 (1985), pp. 210–12; *idem*, 'The Castle Revolution of 1759 and the Banias of Surat: Changing British–Indian Relationships in Western India', in Dwijendra Tripathi (ed.), *State and Busi-*

that, although some merchants did play a very important role during the last years of Surat as an independent city state, the merchants as a body (Hindus and non-Hindus) were totally incapable of governing their own destinies. Moreover, this paper will point out that, differently from what has been generally assumed, the Indian merchants were not particularly enthusiastic about the establishment of British paramountcy in Surat.⁵ In fact, the key allies who made it possible for the English to establish their power in Surat, far from being merchants, were influential members of the local Mughal aristocracy.

The Beginning of the Civil War in Surat

By the early decades of the eighteenth century, the illustrious city of Surat, a key metropolis and the main port of the Mughal Empire, fell upon hard times.⁶ While the once powerful polity built by the great Akbar crumbled under the blows of the advancing Maratha armies, Surat was left by itself, becoming in effect an independent city state. Under the ruthless sway of Nawab Tegh Beg Khan (1733–1746), the city somehow survived as an important centre of trade, in spite of the dislocation brought about by the political troubles that affected not only its hinterland but also its main traditional markets in the Middle East.⁷ This worsened soon after Tegh Beg Khan's death,⁸ as the internal peace of the city was broken by a long-drawn succession struggle among the late Nawab's heirs.

ness in India: A Historical Perspective (Ahmedabad: Manohar, 1987); and *idem*, 'The Eighteenth-Century Social Order in Surat: A Reply and an Excursus on the Riots of 1788 and 1795', *MAS*, 25, 2 (1991) [hereafter quoted as 'Reply'], pp. 338–42.

⁵ As far as the merchants of Surat are concerned, this theory was first suggested by the English conquerors themselves and readily accepted and reiterated by Richard Owen Cambridge. See his *An Account of the War in India* (London: T. Jefferys, 1762, 2nd edn.), pp. 287ff.

⁶ Ashin Das Gupta, *Indian Merchants and the Decline of Surat c.1700–1750* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1979), particularly the 'Introduction'.

⁷ In the late 1730s the turnover of the Surat trade could still be considerable. So, in 1739, the English noticed the arrival of two ships from Jiddah and Mocha, one owned by Ibrahim Chellabi and the other by Shaik Mahmud, carrying 'six lacs of rupees treasure, besides merchandize'. See *FRS*, 25 August 1739. For the insight that Surat, during the 1730s and 1740s, was still a place of considerable trade, see Indrani Ray, 'European Traders in Surat (1730–1750)', *The Calcutta Historical Journal*, VI, 1 (1981).

⁸ *FRS*, 28 Aug. 1746.

Tegh Beg Khan's elder surviving brother, known as Begler Khan or Azaret Khan, assumed the Nawabship. Continuing an arrangement that had already come into being in the latter part of Tegh Beg Khan's government, Azaret shared his power with his brother, Safder Khan. The new Nawab was himself an old man; at the beginning of the following year (1747), when he was eighty years old, he came to the end of his journey on this earth⁹ and was succeeded by Safder Khan. The new political set-up was not liked by Azaret Khan's widow, an ambitious and strong-willed woman, who was known by her contemporaries simply as the Begum. As Azaret had no male offspring, the Begum entered into a conspiracy with his son-in-law, Meah Atchund, who happened to be the Bakshi (namely the military paymaster and head of the troops), in order to make him Nawab of Surat. As a result, on 23 November 1747, Meah Atchund took Surat castle by surprise and staked his claim to the supreme power in the city.¹⁰

This was the beginning of a period of civil strife that was to be concluded only some twelve years later. Soon, the war started by Meah Atchund became something much more complex than the clash between two rival factions of the local Mughal nobility. Several other forces joined in. Four European nations—England, Holland, France and Portugal—had permanent establishments, or 'factories', in the city, all endowed with more or less extensive privileges, including extraterritoriality. The first two nations had long entertained ambitions of extending their power and privileges at the expense of the local Mughal elite. Now, both the English and the Dutch took the opportunity of the civil war to extend their influence either through mediation or by active military support to one or another of the warring parties.

Another external power that had long coveted the control of the city was the Marathas. Although Maratha forces were then engaged in their thrust to the North and the attempt to conquer the political control of the heartland of the Mughal Empire, both the Gaikwad and the Peshwa did sometimes turn their attention to Surat, if not for any other reason, because the warring parties there resorted more than once to the desperate remedy of asking for Maratha support.

⁹ FRS, 20 Feb. 1747.

¹⁰ FRS, 23 Nov. 1747. Besides the FRS for the relevant periods, my reconstruction of the antecedents and initial phases of the Surat civil war is based on DP, pp.

Another group of actors starring in the civil war—although most of them, most of the time, very reluctant players—was the one made up by the city merchants. Admittedly, the bulk of the merchants were mainly involved in what could be called an attempt, usually a fruitless one, at damage minimization and crisis management. The merchants stood to lose the most from a protracted civil war: military operations hampered their business and could damage their real estates and ships; besides, their wealth could be requisitioned to finance the continuation of the war or reward the victors of the latest round of fighting. Accordingly, the merchants as a whole had a vested interest both in finding a speedy solution to the conflict and helping to power the least destructive among the warring parties. Yet, the problem was that the Surat merchants' political clout was always trifling because they were rarely able to act as a body—as they had briefly done during the 'revolution' of 1732.

Standing in a class by itself were certain individual merchants, who were powerful enough, or skilful enough, to play—or hope to play—an important autonomous role in the unfolding civil war. These were men who, because of their wealth—which could and did sometimes translate into military strength—considered themselves as powers in their own right. In other cases, although they were not particularly wealthy, certain individual merchants enjoyed such an intimate connection with the extant powers that they were able to translate these ties into personal political influence.

At the beginning of the civil war, the most eminent among the Surat merchant princes was Salah Chellabi, a Muslim shipping magnate of Turkish origin. He was a direct descendant of that Hajj Mohammed Chellabi who, after having been active in the previous civil war of 1732, had been murdered by order of Nawab Tegh Beg Khan.¹¹ Now, as the new civil war started to unfold, Salah did not take part in it by leading his own troops, as Hajj Mohammed had done. Nevertheless, especially during the first years of war, his political weight was not questioned. He was considered an essential party to any would-be lasting political settlement,¹² and, in fact, was one of the very few who could criticize the ruling Nawab in an open *darbar*.¹³

cclxxivff, and the unfinished drafts on this topic written by Robert Orme, in Orme OV 147.

¹¹ Das Gupta, *Indian Merchants*, *passim*.

¹² E.g. FRS, 24 Oct. 1748.

¹³ E.g. FRS 30 June 1749 (letter to Bombay).

Another descendant of a main player in the 1732 civil war was Mulla Fakharuddin, third son and heir of the illustrious Bohra merchant prince Mulla Mohammed Ali. After his father's ruin, Mulla Fakharuddin had taken the path of exile. Later, he had been in and out of Surat. Eventually, soon after the beginning of the civil war, he judged the time ripe for reclaiming all the former power and wealth of his ancestors. He came back with a retinue of armed men, carrying the authorization by the Nizam to reclaim the riches that Nawab Tegh Beg Khan had confiscated from his father. Soon, Fakharuddin was actively involved in the war, and his small army took part in the hostilities.¹⁴

Two other merchants, Jagannath Laldas and Muncherjee Cursetjee—bound to figure prominently in the civil war—were continuing an old feud. Jagannath was, since 1732, the head of the most illustrious Bania¹⁵ family in the city, that of the descendants of Bimji Parak. In the 1660s, Bimji Parak had become Broker of the English East India Company, a position that carried with it both political influence and economic advantages. By the turn of the century, the post had become a bone of contention between the Paraks and the most powerful Parsi family in Surat, the Rustoms, who, during the late 1730s, gained the upper hand. The incumbent head of the Paraks, Jagannathdas (or, for short, Jagannath) Laldas, because of some debts allegedly owed by his family to the English Company, was deprived of his position as English Broker and imprisoned by his European masters. He had to make his escape from the city and take refuge under the powerful protection of the Peshwa. Meanwhile the post of English Broker and the remunerative charge of the Company 'investment'—that, at the time, went with it—fell into the lap of Manockjee Nawrojee, the head of the Rustoms, who had played a not inconsequential part in Jagannath's ruin.¹⁶ Yet, by the mid-1740s, in

¹⁴ FRS 6 Dec. 1748, for the participation of Mulla's men in the fighting. The best source on Fakharuddin's fortunes during the early phase of the civil war is DP, pp. cclxxx, cclxxxv–cclxxxvii.

¹⁵ The Surat Banias can be identified with the Hindu and Jain section of the city merchant class, and the term is utilized in this meaning throughout the present paper. The term itself is not without ambiguities, as it was used in the British records both in a functional meaning (as synonymous with broker) and in a castal meaning (a communal group made up of people belonging to the Hindu and Jain trading jatis). A fuller discussion of this problem is given below: see the section entitled *The 'head of the banias' and his followers*. Of course, when I say that Jagannath belonged to the most illustrious Bania family in Surat, I am making use of the word in its castal meaning.

¹⁶ The Rustom–Parak feud up to this point is analyzed in detail in Das Gupta, *Indian Merchants*, ch. 5. In later decades, the English 'investment', although still

an amazing turn-about of fortune, Jagannath was back in Surat. Once again he became the Broker of the 'Hon'ble Company'¹⁷ while Manockjee was forced by the Bombay Government to relinquish his charges and go into exile to Bombay. Yet Manockjee left in control of his remaining interests in Surat his manager and book-keeper Muncherjee Cursetjee,¹⁸ and the Parak–Rustom feud went on as briskly as before, involving the English patrons of both factions. On the eve of the civil war, Jagannath Laldas reaped what then seemed his final victory over the Rustom faction, thanks to the support of such a powerful protector as William Wake, the incumbent Governor of Bombay. James Fraser, Muncherjee's patron in the Surat Board and Jagannath's harsh enemy, was expelled from the Company and recalled to England. Muncherjee himself, deprived of the English protection by Governor Wake, was forced to find a haven within the Dutch factory in Surat.¹⁹

A man of great abilities, Muncherjee soon found his way to the top of the Dutch Company. He became the second Dutch Broker in

eagerly sought because of the prestige that it carried with itself, had become a scarcely profitable economic proposition. But, in the first half of the century, its management, far from being merely a matter of prestige, could procure great wealth. According to Dunjeeshaw Munjeeshaw—a Parsi merchant whose career is discussed below—it was the management of several consecutive investments that was the main cause of Manockjee Nawrojee's great wealth. See FRS, 1 Sept. 1772 (Dunjeeshaw Munjeeshaw's petition).

¹⁷ In fact, when the position of representative of the English Company was returned to Jagannath, he officially received the title of 'Marfutteah' (*Marfettah*, namely Agent). This was intended to underline that Jagannath's position was a lesser one as compared to what it had previously been, when the official title had been Chief Broker and, later, Vakil. On this, see Ashin Das Gupta, 'The Broker at Mughal Surat, c. 1740', in *Revista de Cultura* (Macau), nos 13/14 (1991), p. 179. Yet, the Surat factory records show that Jagannath went on acting as *de facto* vakil, namely representative, of the English Company *vis-a-vis* the Mughal authorities, the Maratha representatives and the other European powers in town. As a consequence, his *political* influence in the city was enormous and remained such up to his death. The situation did not change when his *functions* as Vakil were taken by his former assistant, the Parsi merchant Dunjeeshaw Munjeeshaw. Although Dunjeeshaw did not even get the official title of Marfutteah—he had to content himself with that of Assistant Marfutteah—his influence was such that he seems to have acted as a kind of uncrowned king of Surat up to the mid-1770s. After that date, while Dunjeeshaw's economic fortune was on the wane, the English decided to rein in his powers as representative of the 'Hon'ble Company'. In the later period the post of broker became a ceremonial one, without any real power attached to it. For Jagannath and Dunjeeshaw's political role during the concluding phase of the civil war, see below.

¹⁸ Mayor's Court, 1761: Muncherjee Bomonjee ... [contra] Muncherjee Cursetjee (IOR: P/417/17, pp. 2ff).

¹⁹ FRS, 11 Sept. 1747. The struggle between Jagannath Laldas and the Rustoms must be followed in FRS and Public for the relevant years. Another important source is represented by James Fraser's letters in IOR: E/4/461.

Surat—the first being Govindram, who was the fifth of his family to have filled that office during the previous one hundred years²⁰—and, in that position, he was able to emerge as one of the wealthiest merchants and shipowners in Surat.²¹ After the start of the civil war, Muncherjee became the principal Dutch political agent and a precious instrument in their shadow-boxing with the English. Not surprisingly, his arch-enemy, Jagannath Laldas, played an identical role on the English side.

One last character bound to perform a conspicuous role in the civil war was Sidi Hafez Masud Khan, the representative of the Sidi of Janjira and a veteran of the 1732 civil war, who, by the 1740s, had become one of the wealthiest shipping merchants in Surat and a shipbuilder.²² Soon after the beginning of the war, Sidi Masud, who, aside from being wealthy had a conspicuous military following, started to play a highly ambiguous role, disguising his political ambitions behind a mask of concern for his fellow-merchants.²³

By 1752, the war, after having gone through two successive phases, reached a decisive turn.²⁴ Some main actors had fallen out

²⁰John Splinter Stavorinus, *Voyages to the East-Indies* (London: G. G. and J. Robinson, 1798), vol. III, pp. 122, 151–4.

²¹For references to Muncherjee's ships and trade see, e.g. FRS, 13 April 1757, 12 May 1757, 28 Jan. 1758, 24 March 1758, 18 Nov. 1758, and Public 25 Nov. 1760. Muncherjee's status as one of the most affluent merchants in Surat was sanctioned by the grant of a *ma'afi*. This was a privilege bestowed by the Mughal Emperor, exempting a merchant from paying customs on goods amounting to a certain value. In the case of Muncherjee it was for Rs 100,000 per year. The *ma'afi*, was granted only to very few among the biggest merchants, in theory in order to increase the turnover of trade. By reading back a document of a later period, it can be inferred that, in the period under discussion (the 1740s and 1750s) the other Surat merchants—besides Muncherjee—entitled to *ma'afis* were Salah Chellabi (Rs 100,000) and Mulla Fakhruddin (Rs 200,000). A likely hypothesis is that Salah and Fakhruddin had inherited their *ma'afis* from their illustrious ancestors. But that was not the case of Muncherjee, who had started his career as a 'menial servant'. For the definition of Muncherjee as a 'menial servant but a few years ago' see Public, 2 April 1758 (letter from Mr. Ellis of 28 March 1758). On the *ma'afi*-holders in Surat see, e.g. FRS, 13 Feb. 1796.

²²For Sidi Masud's ships trading to Malabar and Mocha, see, e.g. FRS, 7 December 1741, and 16 March and 7 September 1744. He is described as largely engaged in sea trade and shipbuilding in Orme's first unfinished draft on the civil war. See IOR: Orme OV 147, p. 110.

²³On the Sidi see Orme's unfinished drafts on the civil war (Orme OV 147), and DP, pp. cclxxviii. See, also, FRS, 22 Oct. 1948.

²⁴The sources on which my account of the civil war is based have been already quoted in fn. 10. Here it must be added that, unfortunately, there are no good surveys of the Surat civil war. Those available in the *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency. Gujarat: Surat and Broach*, vol. II (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1877, pp.

of the picture or had been drastically cut down to size. Meah Atchund, after having grasped the supreme power and forced Safder Khan into exile, had himself been defeated and driven to the safe haven of Bombay. That same path had been trodden some time before by Mulla Fakharuddin. At first an ally to Meah Atchund, Fakharuddin, by his request to have his father's riches returned to him, objectively turned himself into too dangerous a presence for any ruling Surat Nawab, whoever he might be. Safder Khan tried to have Fakharuddin murdered, and Meah Atchund—a milder character than Safder Khan—imprisoned him. The intervention of the other main city merchants, including Salah Chellabi, together with the mediation of the English saved Fakharuddin's life, but not his family's wealth. Fakharuddin was forced to leave Surat once more, not to return until the end of the civil war.²⁵ In Bombay, in partnership with Governor Wake, he reverted from politics to trade, earning a not inconspicuous fortune in the following years.²⁶ On his part, Salah Chellabi, by the early 1750s, assumed a low profile and there is reason to believe that, politically, he aligned himself behind Sidi Masud.²⁷

Sidi Masud Khan as Prince of Surat

By 1752, Sidi Masud, then already old and physically frail,²⁸ emerged as the strong man in Surat. In this last phase of his life, the Sidi

123–7) and in 'Papers Presented to the House of Commons relating to East India Affairs (Paper no. 308)', in *Parliamentary Reports*, vol. XVII (1806), pp. 57–9 (Jonathan Duncan's minute of 13 August 1799, paras 5–14), are disappointing and confusing. Better, but still insufficient, is the survey available in Cambridge, *An Account of the War in India*, pp. 287–98. Cambridge's account, based on the English records, is reproduced *verbatim* in Stavorinus, *Voyages to the East Indies*, vol. III, pp. 31–49. Stavorinus provides some additional information, drawn from Dutch sources, at pages 50–8. Unfortunately his additions do not enlarge much on what is said by Cambridge.

²⁵ DP, pp. cclxxx, cclxxxv–cclxxxvii.

²⁶ On the business connection between William Wake and Mulla Fakharuddin see FRS, 16 March 1748. By the 1760s the latter was once again considered one of the principal Surat merchants. See, e.g. the closing of the merchants' petition in Public, 18 Sept. 1770.

²⁷ Spencer's 1st report, para. 5.

²⁸ In 1752, the English envoys—who were arranging a meeting with Sidi Masud—were forewarned that 'the Sciddee was a very old man, who could not bear being exposed'. FRS, 23 Feb. 1752. The next day, when they met him, they found him 'weak and out of order'. FRS, 24 Feb. 1752.

revealed himself to be a political leader whom Machiavelli would have liked. In fact, true to the Machiavellian model of the perfect prince, Sidi Masud showed himself to be both a fox and a lion. As a fox he schemed his way to power through the first years of war and, as a lion, he finally confronted Meah Atchund's patrons—the mighty English—in armed combat. In what came to be referred obliquely in the English records as 'Mr. Lambe's war', the East India Company was convincingly defeated.²⁹ The unfortunate Mr Lambe, the incumbent English Chief in Surat, conveniently turned into a scapegoat by those actually responsible of the defeat, namely the Bombay Council, died suddenly, according to an author, by his own hand.³⁰ After much wrangling, a peace was hammered out,³¹ and the English—in exchange for two lakhs of rupees, as reimbursement for their war expenditures—gave up all the political influence that they had acquired during their previous participation in the war.³²

²⁹ On 'Mr. Lambe's war' see FRS and Public for the period from 3 June 1751, when the English opened the hostilities against the Sidi by destroying his fleet, to 5 March 1752, when the articles of peace were entered in Public. Moreover, important information on the reasons for the English defeat can be found in the report by Francis Pym, William De La Garde and Titus Scott of 25 May 1752, entered in Public, 29 May 1752.

³⁰ This is what is claimed by George W. Forrest, in his preface to the *Selections from the Letters, Dispatches, and Other State Papers Preserved in the Bombay Secretariat*, Home Series, vol. I (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1887), p. XXIX. In the English records there is no indication that Lambe committed suicide, only that of his sudden death. On the other hand, the records leave us in no doubt that, during his last days, Henry Lambe was an extremely distressed man.

³¹ The English could easily blockade Surat from the sea, but that was a two-edged weapon, as even the 'Hon'ble Company's own trade would come to a standstill. Of course, this would not please the Directors in London, and their displeasure could be extremely dangerous for the Company officers in Bombay. On the other hand, an all-out war against the Sidi would be a difficult one, which, even if victorious, would be horrendously costly. Again, the Directors would be far from pleased with it. On his part, Sidi Masud, in spite of his earlier military victory, must have been well aware that total war with the English was a no-win proposition and that some kind of political settlement had to be made.

³² During the initial years of the civil war, the English had become the real power behind Meah Atchund, even if, lately, their relationship with him had turned sour. So much so that, when the Sidi challenged Atchund, the English were late in coming to his help. This, very possibly, was the main cause of the defeat of them both. Now, at the moment of the final peace with the Sidi, the English tried to preserve some political influence for themselves through the 3rd article of the treaty of peace. It stated: 'the two sons of Meah Atchund to have posts of considerable honour and credit under the [Surat] Government and granted at our [the English] desire' (Public, 5 March 1752). A few days after, Sidi Masud and Safer Khan agreed to give to Meah Atchund's two sons 'the post of Lord Mayor [*sic*]' (FRS, 23 March 1752). Yet the two princes were expelled from the city soon afterwards (DP, p.

Sidi Masud contented himself with the position of *Qiladar*, namely Governor the castle and, initially, shared power with Safder Khan, who had been recalled to the city and reinstated in the Nawabship. But, of course, gratitude is not something to be relied upon, especially in politics. Soon, Safder Khan, under the influence of his Naib (second to the Nawab) and principal advisor, Faris Khan, tried to limit Masud's power and, eventually, went so far as to enter into a league with the Marathas, aimed at expelling the Sidi from Surat. This evoked a devastating riposte by the Sidi: a successful *coup d'état* caused Faris Khan's removal from the city and put all the key positions in the durbar in the hands of men faithful to Sidi Masud. One of these loyal followers was Ali Nawaz Khan, who became the new Naib.³³ In his characteristically cautious way of doing things, Sidi Masud did not deprive Safder Khan of the nawabship, but now the real power in the durbar was held by Ali Nawaz Khan, who, while the Sidi lived, always acted as his faithful lieutenant. From then onward, even if the government of the city continued to be formally divided between two Governors, namely the *Qiladar* and the Nawab, the Surat polity was unified under the undisputed authority of one man only: Sidi Hafez Masud Khan himself.

After reunifying the control of the Surat polity in his own hands and somehow buying off the Marathas, Sidi Masud started a new policy aimed at containing European privileges in the city. Typically, he moved with both caution and cunning, usually acting through the durbar. Always ready, particularly when dealing with the English, to (apparently) give in, in order to defuse those situations of crisis that his policy was bound to bring about, he went on chipping away at English (and European) privileges. At the same time, he was somehow able to prevent major crises, maintaining an outwardly tolerably good relationship with the English, always kept off balance by the Sidi's sudden thrusts and just as sudden retreats.³⁴

ccxc). Accordingly, all that the English really got from Sidi Masud was his engagement to pay 2 lakhs of rupees. Yet, such was the delay in the payment of this sum that its last instalment was disbursed only at the end of 1758, namely some two years after Sidi Masud's death. See FRS, 19 Nov. 1758.

³³ FRS, 9 Aug. 1753, 22 April and 19 June 1754. Both Faris Khan and Ali Nawaz Khan were to play an important role in the events leading to the English conquest of Surat castle.

³⁴ Here it is worth stressing that this policy of containment against European privileges has been misread by an author as a systematic policy of victimization by the Surat government against the city merchant community (see Lakshmi Subramanian, 'The Castle Revolution of 1759', and *idem*, 'Reply'). Besides, according to the author just quoted, the East India Company—no doubt out of its goodness of

Ellis's Conspiracy

Sidi Hafez Masud Khan died on 19 January 1756.³⁵ He was replaced by his son, Sidi Ahmed Khan, a whimsical, aggressive and unintelligent drunkard, little loved by his own officers and his father's former friends and clients.³⁶ While some of the closer advisers to the old Sidi disappeared from the political scene, the unification of the Surat polity, previously brought about by Sidi Masud's political skill, came to a sudden end. Ali Nawaz Khan did not accept to consider himself as inferior to the new Qiladar, a fact that, by itself, re-established the bifurcation of power between the castle and the durbar. Reversing the previous situation, Ali Nawaz Khan, while disowning his allegiance to the castle, established a genuine partnership with the formerly powerless Nawab. It was with Safder Khan's full concurrence that Ali Nawaz Khan now began to arrange the Sidi's removal.³⁷

In this, Ali Nawaz Khan was favoured by the fact that the city inhabitants were, by and large, against the young Sidi.³⁸ Sidi Ahmed had soon come to be considered as 'a common enemy' to the interests of Surat, being suspected of having entered in league with those Kuli pirates who, coming down from the Northward ports, preyed on Surat shipping.³⁹ But the antipathy of the good Suratis, including—one can assume—most of the merchants, could not offset the two strong points enjoyed by Sidi Ahmed. The first was that he could count on Dutch support.⁴⁰ The second, and more important, was that Surat

heart—had taken up the defence of the aggrieved merchants. In fact, what happened was that, as part of his policy of reducing European privileges, the Sidi put pressure on the merchants under English protection. One of his favourite methods was that of disregarding the right of extraterritoriality enjoyed by the 'protected' merchants. According to it, the merchants under the protection of one of the four European Factories could be tried by the Surat Government only with the consent of the Chief of the Factory. Sidi Masud's main aim was less 'fleecing' the merchants than reimposing the political authority of the Surat Government on as much of the Surat merchant class as possible. This is a topic of some relevance, which I am planning to discuss in a next paper.

³⁵ FRS, same date.

³⁶ This was true even in the case of his military commander, Sidi Hilal, who had been one of the old Sidi's closest associates. See FRS, 23 March 1752, and Spencer's 2nd report, para. 14. Yet, in spite of the little love that he had for his new master, Sidi Hilal was to remain faithful to him up to the bitter end. See below.

³⁷ Secret, 28 Jan. 1757.

³⁸ With the notable exception of the Chellabis. See Spencer's 1st report, para. 5.

³⁹ At least, this was what was claimed by the incumbent English Chief, Brabazon Ellis. See Secret, 28 Jan. 1757 (letter from Brabazon Ellis of 20 Jan. 1757).

⁴⁰ Secret, 28 Jan. 1757 (letter from Brabazon Ellis).

castle, although by then in a fairly ruinous state, was too hard a nut to crack for the durbar forces, unprovided as they were of mortars and men with the right kind of expertise in siege operations.⁴¹

The rift between the castle and the durbar was observed with a keen eye by the incumbent English Chief, Brabazon Ellis, who tried his best to widen and exploit it on behalf of the East India Company. Ellis was a gifted man, who coupled a talent for business with a natural inclination for political intrigue.⁴² Now, in the situation of flux and political uncertainty created by the bifurcation of the Surat polity, Ellis started spinning a thick web of deceit and intrigue.

According to Ellis's own account, the situation prevailing in the city pushed Ali Nawaz Khan and the Nawab to start a secret negotiation with the Surat Chief to get English support to take the castle. That was something that Ellis was more than willing to offer, at a price. After some haggling—and after Ellis's proposal to turn the castle to the English was firmly rejected—the draft of a treaty was prepared. According to it, the East India Company was promised, in exchange for British military support, both the *tanka*—namely the stipend paid by the durbar to the Sidi, as Admiral of the Mughal Fleet—and the Sidi's personal properties in Surat, including his house, warehouses and ships. The same draft envisioned a drastic reduction of Dutch commercial privileges.⁴³

The draft and Ellis's advice concerning the timing and the strength of the military expedition were sent to Bombay in January 1757, where, with few modifications, they were accepted by the Select Committee of the Bombay Government. Yet, the Select Committee was unable to come up with a well-defined date for the proposed expedition, apart from the decision that, in any case, it had to be after September. The ongoing war with the French put Bombay in a vulnerable position and the Select Committee was afraid of a

⁴¹ Secret, 28 Jan. 1757.

⁴² He was one of the few dependants of the 'Hon'ble Company', then serving in the Bombay Presidency, who trod with success the path to great personal affluence thanks to his mercantile acumen (Public, 8 Oct. 1777). He put together his personal fortune while working as *supracargo* in the Company's ships. Then he became a ship-owner and, in the late 1750s, turned one of his ships to privateering against the French (Public, 17 June and 2 Aug. 1757). While his personal fortune grew, so did his position inside the Company. In the 1750s, he became member of the inner circle of the Bombay Government, that Select Committee for Secrecy that was in charge of all the most delicate and important political affairs of the Presidency. In 1755, he was chosen to man that most difficult and delicate position that the Chiefship of Surat had then become (Secret, 17 Sept. 1755).

⁴³ Secret, 28 Jan. 1757.

surprise attack on the island sometime in August or September.⁴⁴ Following Ellis's advice, the Select Committee put the Surat Chief in charge of entering into a formal alliance with Safder Khan and Ali Nawaz Khan. Under the terms indicated in Ellis's draft, the English would give the military assistance needed against the Sidi, 'after September'.⁴⁵

Yet, while Ellis was spinning his web, his intrigues had not gone undetected by that old enemy of the English, Muncherjee Cursetjee. At the time, the Parsi merchant prince was hampered by the fact that his connection with his employers, the Dutch, had somewhat weakened and he had been excluded from their inner councils. Yet, this did not prevent Muncherjee from having a better intelligence concerning English secrets than the Dutch themselves, as is shown by the fact that, somehow, he gained knowledge of Ellis's plans. In no time Muncherjee got in touch with Ali Nawaz Khan and convinced him that the alliance with the English was bound to strengthen the Nawab's position, thereby diminishing Ali Nawaz's own power in the durbar. Following Muncherjee's advice, Ali Nawaz Khan switched sides and aligned himself with the Dutch and the Sidi. At the same time he finally deprived the Nawab of any power, even if—as had been the case in the old Sidi's time—the latter was formally left to continue as the titular governor of the city.⁴⁶

The centrality of the role played by the Parsi merchant prince in this palace revolution was acknowledged by the fact that he emerged from it as 'all powerful'.⁴⁷ Muncherjee collected in his hands 'the entire management' of Ali Nawaz Khan's interests and, in Ellis's evaluation, was 'in effect Nabob as he is entrusted with collecting the revenues and everything also of any consequence'.⁴⁸

Muncherjee Cursetjee was a man of no small abilities. The influence he came to have on Ali Nawaz Khan is proof of the Parsi's diplomatic skills.⁴⁹ His economic capacity is shown by the fact that

⁴⁴ After that date, a French squadron, in order to attack Bombay, would be forced by the prevailing winds to come up from the South, bordering the coast of India. This would make it easy to detect its advance in time to concentrate all the available British forces in the island, readying Bombay for defence. *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 23, 24 Feb. 1757.

⁴⁶ Secret, 24 Oct. and 14 Nov. 1758.

⁴⁷ The definition of Muncherjee as 'all powerful' (*tout-puissant*) is given by Anquetil Duperron (DP, p. ccxciv).

⁴⁸ Secret, 29 Nov. 1758 [IOR, P/D/50, p. 189].

⁴⁹ Still in 1772, Ellis remembered, in a letter written to the Bombay Governor, that Ali Nawaz Khan had been 'totally under Muncher's guidance'. Public, 16 Sept. 1772 (Extract of Mr Ellis's letter of 4 Feb. 1772).

he had become a merchant prince, from being a 'menial servant', in a period—the late 1740s and the 1750s—in which the economy of Surat was far from being particularly flourishing.⁵⁰ Besides, his interests and successes were not limited to economy and politics. In the late 1740s he had already emerged as the undisputed religious leader of the dominant group among the two in which the Parsi community was then divided.⁵¹

Yet, all these abilities did not make of him anything different from the average Surat merchant: once he acquired an almost unparalleled political power in Surat, Muncherjee behaved exactly as other Surat merchants had done in similar circumstances. He made use of his clout not in order to promote the interest of his own class, but to enhance his own and, at the most, that of his own clients and partners.⁵²

If the bulk of Muncherjee's fellow merchants did not have particular reasons to rejoice for the latest 'revolution' in the durbar, there were many members of the Mughal ruling elite who were positively offended at the thought that a Parsi and a merchant of humble origins was now their superior.⁵³ Ellis, who was far from being reconciled to the situation then prevailing, had more than enough political acumen to perceive the flaws in Muncherjee's—and therefore Ali Nawaz Khan's—position. Of course, now the prospects for an expedition against the castle were much less favourable than some months before. Even if one allowed that the Nawab would not honour his alliance with Sidi Ahmed Khan, the English could not hope to obtain any support from him, whereas the Sidi, almost certainly, could count on the active backing of the Dutch. On the top of it, those military forces for whose timely return Bombay had hoped in order to mount the Surat expedition were still tied down on the other side of India, engaged in the war effort against the French.

Yet Ellis, apparently undeterred, continued to pressure the Select Committee in Bombay to go on with the planned military expedition.⁵⁴ The only difference in Ellis's plans was that they were now becoming more grandiose. The aim of the expedition was now not

⁵⁰ See fn. 21.

⁵¹ For the religious divisions of the Parsis in the 1750s and the fact that Muncherjee was the religious leader of '*presque tous les Parses de l'Inde*' [practically all the Parsis in India], see DP, pp. cccxv–cccxvi, cccxxvi–cccxxvii.

⁵² Secret, Jan. 1758 (Ellis's letter of 22 Jan. 1758) [IOR: P/D/49, pt III, p. 24].

⁵³ Secret, 2 April 1758 (Mr Ellis's letter of 28 March 1758).

⁵⁴ Secret, 13 Dec. 1757, 12 Jan. 1758.

only that of obtaining the tanka for the 'Hon'ble Company', but the castle as well—and, of course, the revenues supporting it. That was not all: the Nawab had to be toppled and a man tied to English interest put in his place.

Given the persistent military weakness of the English in Bombay, one may wonder how Ellis could hope to convince the Select Committee to accept his grand plan and the means which he had in mind to accomplish it. The fact is that the Surat Chief knew the weaknesses of both his superiors in Bombay and his enemies in Surat and was perfectly capable of playing on them for his own ends.

In a letter written on 22 January 1758, Ellis gave the news that that same morning Safder Khan had suddenly died, after drinking a cup of coffee 'supposed to have been poisoned at the instigation of Ali Novus Caun'.⁵⁵ According to Ellis, the Nawab's disappearance had caused consternation among the merchants (or, in Ellis's own words, 'The tears are infinite, which his decease [*sic*] creates among all trading people of the place'). Such consternation, still according to Ellis, came 'from the known influence of Muncur (Muncherjee), which has of late been publickly [*sic*] directed . . . to the ruin of every individual who presumes to interfere with his interests or the political measures which he pursues'.⁵⁶ As, according to a previous letter of Ellis himself, Safder Khan had already become several months before a 'cypher' in his own durbar,⁵⁷ one wonders how his physical disappearance could have caused such pangs of fear in the city. But that these pangs were deeply felt was clearly shown by the continuation of Ellis's letter. Because of them, Ellis claimed, 'some very substantial shroffs' had become convinced that the seizing of the castle and the tanka by the English was 'the only event wherein they [the shroffs] have a prospect of any future security to their persons or fortunes'. These worthy—and affluent—gentlemen were so firm in this opinion, that they were ready to enter into a legal obligation, making 'themselves responsible for whatever deficiency shall happen

⁵⁵IOR: P/D/49, pt III, p. 24. This was nothing more than a malicious piece of gossip, which does not find confirmation in any other source. Several years later, Mir Hafizuddin Khan, then the ruling Nawab and a deadly personal enemy to Ali Nawaz Khan, when drawing up a list of all the unpleasantness of which his foe had been responsible, did not mention this particular sin. Had Ali Nawaz Khan been guilty of it or, more simply, had he been really suspected of it by people at large, this murder would have had pride of place in Mir Hafizuddin's roll. See Public, 3 Jan. 1771 (letter from the Nabob of Surat).

⁵⁶ Ellis's letter of 22 Jan. 1758.

⁵⁷ Secret, 14 Nov. 1757.

during the term of five years ensuing, if the revenues accruing thence to the Hon'ble Company in that time do not amount to the sum of 2 lacs of rupees per annum'.⁵⁸

Indeed, this was too enticing an offer for the Select Committee to turn down, as it guaranteed an income of one million Surat rupees, something more than 100,000 British pounds, in the next five years. Besides, Ellis did not limit himself to point out the advantages that the proposed move against Surat would secure to the 'Hon'ble Company'. In his private correspondence to the Bombay Governor, he did not neglect to mention additional advantages of a more private nature. The Hon'ble Governor, Richard Bouchier, was himself a merchant and a shipowner; no doubt—Ellis reasoned—the establishment of English power in Surat could easily be translated into the private control by the Bombay Governor of the rich trade led from Surat to the Middle East.⁵⁹

All in all, it is not so surprising that at this point, those generous gentlemen of the Select Committee suddenly found great merit in making an immediate stand 'to extricate them [the shroffs] from the distress with which they were threatened thro' this accident [Safder Khan's sudden death]'.⁶⁰ Happily, some ships were now at hand to steady Bombay's military strength and carry the intended expedition to Surat. Accordingly, the Select Committee ordered Ellis to get from the shroffs the promised written guarantee and, at the same time, started the necessary preparations to send an expedition against Surat.⁶¹

Soon Ellis wrote back, informing the Select Committee that the shroffs' written obligation was now in his hands. However, the shroffs, being prudent men, had insisted on two conditions. The first was that the bond itself 'should pass in no other hands than [Ellis's] own, nor the names of the subscribers be communicated to any other person' till the English possessed both the castle and tanka. The second condition was that the engagement was valid for two months only: if, by then, the promised expedition had not been carried out,

⁵⁸ All quotations are from Ellis's letter of the 22 Jan. 1758. See Subramanian, 'The Castle Revolution', p. 111 for her description of this same episode. In it 'some substantial shroffs' become 'the bankers of the city'.

⁵⁹ Parts of this private correspondence found their way into the official records when Ellis quarrelled with the Bombay Government. They are in Secret, 15 May 1758 (Ellis's letter of 8 May 1758).

⁶⁰ Secret, Letter to the Secret Committee of the Court of Directors, 7 Feb. 1758.

⁶¹ Secret, 28 Jan. 1758.

the shroffs' bond was to be returned to them.⁶² Both conditions were very reasonable—although the second very annoying for future historians—as Ellis's moneyed friends were risking their lives and fortunes. In fact, at the very moment in which the English Chief was writing his letter, people in Surat were already aware that Bombay was mounting an expedition, which was thought to be aimed against Surat.⁶³

Any possible doubt that the Suratis could have regarding the objective of the expedition was dispelled when Faris Khan arrived in Bombay. As we have already recalled, this fiery gentleman, one of Safder Khan's former officers and an active player in the civil war game, had been finally forced out of town by Sidi Masud Khan. Since then, he had been in the service of the Peshwa, who had toyed with the idea to send him back to Surat as his own representative. Some timely 'gifts' by Ali Nawaz Khan to the Peshwa and his officers had eliminated that danger. Now, Ellis, who was casting around for some suitable candidate for the job of English puppet playing the role of Surat Nawab, thought that Faris Khan would be the ideal option.⁶⁴ The Select Committee agreed with Ellis's choice and moved to implement it. After some preliminary negotiations through an intermediary, Faris Khan entered into a formal treaty with the Governor of Bombay, relinquished his job with the Marathas, and triumphantly arrived in Bombay on 7 May 1758, saluted by the guns of the Bombay castle.⁶⁵ The main thrust of the seven articles of the treaty was that Faris Khan would be Nawab, the English would acquire the Surat castle and tanka, keeping them on the same footing as the Sidi, and, finally, the new Nawab would take care that the cost of the expedition and an extra sum of two lakhs of rupees be paid into the treasury of the 'Hon'ble Company', 'instead of plunder'. Of course, Faris Khan did not own any riches apart from what he could have spared on the Rs 30,000 yearly stipend that he had received from the Marathas. Consequently, the people who were expected to foot the bill were the Suratis, 'city shroffs, merchants and inhabitants'.⁶⁶

While Ellis was so effective in enticing the Select Committee to follow the path that he had laid out, he was just as active in prepar-

⁶² Secret, Feb. 1758 (Ellis's letter of 11 Feb. 1758).

⁶³ Ellis's letter of 11 Feb. 1758.

⁶⁴ Secret, Feb. 1758 (Ellis's letter of 15 Feb. 1758).

⁶⁵ Secret, 21 Feb. 1758; Public, 7 May 1758; Secret, 12 March 1758.

⁶⁶ Secret, 12 March 1758 (Agreement between Richard Bouchier and Pharus Caun). The same document is available in FRS, 15 Feb. 1759.

ing the success of the Surat expedition on the ground. Since Togh Beg Khan's death, a powerful element in the local Mughal nobility had been made up by a number of Togh Beg's former slaves. Togh Beg, in his will, had not only freed them but shared his considerable fortune equally among them and some of his relatives.⁶⁷ The following years, these men—among whom one Sidi Zafar Yab Khan was particularly worth noticing—had occupied key positions in the *darbar*. Their switch on Sidi Masud Khan's side had been instrumental in making possible the *coup* that had ended Safder Khan and Faris Khan's ambition to topple the Sidi.⁶⁸ Now, these powerful men greatly resented the position of almost absolute power recently acquired by that Parsi parvenu, Muncherjee Cursetjee. Therefore their loyalty to Ali Nawaz Khan, Muncherjee's patron, was not above being tampered with, which was exactly what Ellis did. Although he did not immediately appraise the Select Committee of it—possibly for reasons of secrecy—the Surat Chief was successful—or so he later claimed—in gaining the allegiance of the former slaves. In fact he obtained their assurance that they would declare themselves for the English, 'once [the English] landed a force sufficiently strong'.⁶⁹

The Peshwa's 'Sudden Motion'

By 15 March 1758 the preparation for the expedition had been completed and the squadron carrying it dispatched. The English ships were already at Surat Bar,⁷⁰ when the whole operation was called off. What had happened was that, while the English were busy in organizing the expedition and plotting the destruction of both the Nawab and the Sidi, at least one of their intended targets had not remained idle. As soon as he had known that Faris Khan had left Maratha service and moved to Bombay, Ali Nawaz Khan, while enrolling additional sepoys in Broach, had invited the Marathas to take 'his person and government under their protection', offering to open the city

⁶⁷ DP, pp. cclxxiv–cclxxv.

⁶⁸ FRS, 22 April 1754.

⁶⁹ Secret, April 1758 (Ellis's letter of 28 March 1758).

⁷⁰ Public, 23 March 1758 (letter from Surat, 18 inst.). Surat Bar was the stretch of water marked by the sand-banks that crisscrossed the estuary of the river Tapi. Most ocean-going ships were able to go over these sand-banks and navigate up river only when the level of the Tapi was at its highest—which happened during the so called springs. Accordingly, the Bar played the role of a harbour (an admittedly dangerous one) before and after the monsoon.

gates to them in case of an English expedition against Surat.⁷¹ This piece of intelligence on Ali Nawaz Khan's offer to the Marathas, forwarded by Ellis on 11 March, reached the Select Committee on the 17th. Yet the honourable members of the Select Committee were unimpressed, as they were sceptical about any Maratha intervention.⁷² The next day, however, their mood brusquely changed, following an urgent communication from the Bombay Governor's personal agent in Pune. According to the agent, the Peshwa had moved with his whole army heading towards Bassein—namely the entrance door to Bombay—an action that the agent judged suspicious enough to justify his recommendation that 'a strict guard' be kept on the island.

The Peshwa's 'sudden motion' struck fear in the hearts of the English in Bombay: the military in the islands were down to a bare minimum and there were no ships in the harbour to shield Bombay from the possible onslaught of what was then, or appeared to be, one of the most redoubtable armies in India. The situation was such as to send a chill down the spine of the honourable members of the Select Committee. As they perceived the situation, there was just one thing they could do, and they did it: the whole expeditionary force was hurriedly recalled.⁷³

The one man who did not share the Select Committee view of the situation was Brabazon Ellis. He was unconvinced that the Peshwa's move was anything but a bluff, 'at a time when he never had more occasion than at present to court an alliance with us'. Besides, Ellis had a very low opinion of the Marathas' warring abilities. 'To imagine', he wrote, 'that our island as at this day fortified could be wrested in a moment from our hands, by such poltroons as his [the Peshwa's] whole army consists of, all this is really what my reason cannot reconcile'.⁷⁴ So much so that, in the following weeks, the Surat Chief was not totally successful in concealing his conviction that the whole decision to recall the expedition stank of corruption.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Secret (Ellis's letters of 11 Feb. and 11 March 1757).

⁷² Secret, 17 March 1758.

⁷³ Secret, Consultation without date, but between the 14 and 18 March 1758, and letter to Ellis of 18 March 1758.

⁷⁴ Secret, Letter from Mr Ellis of 28 March 1758.

⁷⁵ According to Subramanian's reconstruction of these same events, it was at this point that, 'while the debate between the two councils continued, the Sidi's clique got the upper hand [*sic*]. *Ali Nawaz Khan became nawab [sic] and Sidi Masud the qiladar [sic]*.' ('The Castle Revolution', p. 112).

Ellis's bitterness was quite understandable. The fact that the English had mounted an expedition and then, at the last moment, recalled it hastily, was an open secret in town. It effectively destroyed Ellis's previous patient work aimed at secretly rallying around the English war effort influential members of the city Mughal aristocracy and merchant class. As Ellis bitingly noticed, after what had happened, 'no person here [in Surat] will confide in us again on any like occasion'.⁷⁶ Apart from that, the English Chief's personal position in Surat had become intolerable, as his and the Company's Indian dependants had become the target of harassment by the durbar officers and the Sidi's soldiers.⁷⁷ Bitter and disappointed, Ellis, complaining of his ill state of health, had himself recalled to Bombay, with the declared intention to obtain leave from the Court of Directors to go back to England.⁷⁸

The 'Head of the Banias' and his Followers

At this point, we have to pause in order to look somewhat closer at our documentation, in the attempt to shed light on the role played in Ellis's conspiracy by some Indian characters, particularly two of them. Ellis's policy *vis-a-vis* the Mughal authorities had been carried out in consultation with the members of the Select Committee and, in particular, his President, Richard Bourchier. On the other hand, Ellis does not appear to have had any close co-operation with his English subordinates in the Surat Board. In doing this he was following the directions of the Bombay Government, which had sent him to Surat with secret instructions and the order to reveal them to the Surat Board only at the time he would judge the most opportune.⁷⁹ But, if this was the relationship between Ellis and his English colleagues, there are—available in the records—several hints pointing to the fact that the Chief acted in strict conjunction with two Indian servants of the Company, namely Jagannath Laldas, the Broker of the Company, and a younger man, Munjeeshaw Dunjeeshaw, Jagannath's assistant. Both of them appear to have had an important

⁷⁶ Ellis's letter of 28 March 1758.

⁷⁷ Public, 23 Sept. 1758 (letter from Surat, 16 inst.); *ibid.*, 24 Oct. 1758 (letter from Surat, 19 inst.).

⁷⁸ Secret, 14 Nov. 1758.

⁷⁹ FRS, 16 Jan. 1755.

role—although a somewhat submerged one—in the momentous developments set in motion by Ellis.

It has already been noted that Jagannath was the representative of the ‘Hon’ble Company’, or its *de facto* Vakil, even if his official title had been reduced, by the late 1740s, to the less exalted one of ‘Marfutteah’ (*Marfettah*, namely ‘Agent’).⁸⁰ That position entitled him to a mediatory role not only in the East India Company economic ventures, but, perhaps more importantly in the context of the ongoing civil war, in the Company’s political dealings. Yet, this was not Jagannath’s only role. In the English records, up to the early 1750s, he is sometimes styled—and appears to play the role of—‘head of the Banian caste’.⁸¹ It has been claimed by another author who has discussed the 1759 events that this ‘notable convergence of roles’—namely the fact that Jagannath was both ‘head of the Banias and English representative (Vakil)’—is a key factor for a correct understanding of the events leading to the establishment of English overlordship in Surat. According to this author, this convergence of roles, by itself, guaranteed the existence of a kind of special relationship between the English and the Surat Banias, namely the Hindu and Jain section of the Surat merchant class.⁸² This is an interesting

⁸⁰ See fn. 17. For the sake of simplicity, in the following pages the terms ‘Brokers’, ‘Vakil’, and ‘Marfutteah’ have been used as synonyms, even if, *in theory*, they were not identical.

⁸¹ E.g. FRS, 19 and 20 May 1752, and 19 Nov. 1752. On one occasion he is indicated as ‘head of the merchants’. See FRS, 4 March, 1748.

⁸² See Subramanian, ‘Reply’, pp. 338–41. The definition ‘special relationship’ is mine. Subramanian writes that ‘since 1752 he [Jagannathdas Laldas] was both the head of the Banias and the English representative (Vakil), a notable convergence of roles that has escaped Torri’s attention’ (*ibid.*, p. 340). Here, Subramanian makes reference to Michelguglielmo Torri, ‘Surat during the second half of the Eighteenth Century: What Kind of Social Order?’, *MAS*, 21, 4 (1987) [hereafter quoted as ‘Surat’], pp. 681–8. In fact, this problem had been commented upon, although briefly, in Michelguglielmo Torri, ‘Ethnicity and trade in Surat during the dual government era: 1759–1800’, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 27, 4 (1990), p. 379 (published before Subramanian’s ‘Reply’). It had not been touched upon in Torri, ‘Surat’, because, for the reasons that shall be detailed in the present paper, it had been judged unimportant. It has already been pointed out (see the section on the beginning of the civil war) that ‘the notable convergence of the roles’ alluded to by Subramanian did not start—as she claims—in 1752, but well before. In particular, Jagannath became broker of the ‘Hon’ble Company’ upon the death of his father in 1732. See Das Gupta, *Indian merchants*, pp. 80, 87–8. In 1737, because of his fall from grace, Jagannath lost the post of broker to Manockjee Nawrojee, but got it back in 1747, when—as noted (see fn. 17)—the official designation of the post became that of ‘Marfutteah’ (*Marfettah*), namely ‘Agents’. See Das Gupta, ‘The Broker at Mughal Surat’, pp. 174ff.

proposition, which deserves to be closely scrutinized.⁸³ In order to do this, it is necessary to explore two questions: the first is what the English intended when making use of the terms ‘Banias’ and ‘Banian Caste’; the second is what exactly the role of ‘head of the Banian caste’ entailed.

As I have pointed out elsewhere,⁸⁴ the term ‘Banian’, when used in the English records, is a confusing one, as it is employed both in the castal meaning—being the Banias people belonging to the Hindu and Jain Vaishya castes—and in the functional meaning—being the Banias people involved in brokerage, not necessarily Hindu or Jain.⁸⁵ If one goes by rule of thumb, it is possible to say that, most of the time—but by no means at all times—the English, when making use of the term ‘Banias’ in the Bombay and Surat records of the eighteenth century, meant the Hindu and Jain merchants belonging to the Vaishya castes, acting mainly, but not exclusively, as brokers. On the other hand, the English—and, we can assume, the inhabitants of Surat—did not consider the Khatri as being part of the Banian community. This is shown by the fact that in the records we find a ‘muckadam’—namely a *mukaddam* or headman—of the Khatri ‘caste’, who was not the same person as the ‘head of the Banian caste’.⁸⁶

⁸³ Even if it might appear to have been put forward to obscure a misstatement relating to the content of an important document. On this see Torri, ‘Surat’, pp. 683–5, and Subramanian, ‘Reply’, pp. 338–41.

⁸⁴ Torri, ‘Surat’, p. 680.

⁸⁵ Accordingly even Parsis and Muslims could be labelled by the English as ‘banias’ in the functional sense. So, for example, Sorabjee Muncherjee, a Parsi and a member of Manockjee Nawrojee’s family and business network, acted as ‘Banyan Broker or man of business’ to William Shaw (an officer of the English Company). See Mayor’s Court, 18 April 1782, p. 494. On the Surat Bohra Muslims, classified as banias in the functional sense by Bishop Heber, see Torri, ‘Surat’, p. 680, fn. 3. The proposition—originally put forward in ‘Surat’—that the term ‘banian’ is a confusing one has been harshly criticized by Subramanian, who thinks it to be ‘hilarious’ and ‘confusing’ (‘Reply’, pp. 322, and 333, fn. 8). Subramanian’s abundant discourtesy translates, sometimes, into misrepresentation (see, e.g. her suggestion that Torri implies that the Bohra Muslims belonged to the Banian Mahajan, *ibid.*, p. 323). Yet, discourtesy and misrepresentations apart, if one goes through Subramanian’s sixteen-page-long survey of the usage of the term ‘banian’ (‘Reply’, pp. 322–38), the conclusion is inescapable that it fully—if unwittingly—vindicates Torri’s original position. In fact, the ‘Reply’ proves beyond doubt that the term ‘banian’ is indeed a confusing one, as it is indifferently used in the sources in both the castal and functional meaning.

⁸⁶ In this way it is labelled ‘Saibrow’ or ‘Sait Row Tuckchung’ (Shivrao Teckchand). See Public, 30 June 1772 (petition from Ram Cusson Cuttaree), where Shivrao appears offering security for a man of his jati, who had been imprisoned by the Nawab. Shivrao is the same man who appears among a group of ‘principal merchants and shroffs’ who approached the English in 1752 to ask for their mediation

This, by itself, invalidates the notion that the Khatriis were represented, politically or otherwise, by the 'head of the Banian Caste'. Again, as far as I know, there is no hint in the English records that, particularly in the 1750s, when the English talked about either the 'Banias' or the 'Banian caste', they considered those terms inclusive of the small but wealthy and influential Nagar Brahman community.⁸⁷

All this seems to point to the fact that Jagannath was the leader of a section of the Surat merchant class that was both more limited and considerably less important than what has been claimed.⁸⁸ Although I am ready to concede that, in all probability, the Bania community was the most numerous among the several trading communities,⁸⁹ I hasten to add that it was not, by any stretch of the imagination, either the most affluent trading community in Surat or that characterized by the presence of most of the wealthiest businessmen in town.⁹⁰ Apart from this, and perhaps more important,

on a problem of taxes that Sidi Masud intended to levy. It is shown below that, in 1759, Shivrao acted in conjunction with Jagannath Laldas as go-between for the English Chief, John Spencer, and two Mughal nobles: Sir Zafar Yab Khan and Wali Ullah.

⁸⁷ Accordingly Subramanian is free to label Tarwady Arjunji Nathjee, a 'Bania banker' (e.g. 'Reply', p. 343), as long as she makes clear that Jagannath's title of 'head of the Banias', or, rather 'head of the Banian Caste' (as such is the definition used in the records), did not imply that Tarwady was one of Jagannath's supposed followers. Of course, this is exactly what Subramanian does not do. In fact such is the ambiguity and elasticity of the term 'Bania' as it is used by Subramanian (and on this see the following note too) that, to paraphrase a famous philosopher, it becomes a kind of night in which all cows are black.

⁸⁸ In 'Capital and Crowd', the Nagar Brahmans are classified by Subramanian as part of the Banias. In her 'Reply', the category becomes wider and, taking perhaps the cue from Torri's 'Surat', Subramanian stretches it to include the Khatriis. In fact, at pp. 340–1 of the 'Reply', she appears very near to give in to the temptation to include even the Parsis among the Banias. Certainly, in the 'Reply' she seems convinced that the Parsis as a whole were under English protection (she appears unaware of Muncherjee Cursetjee's political role and economic wealth) and that they made up a sort of political and economic continuum with the Banias.

⁸⁹ Still, even on this point we proceed on the basis of assumptions built on the impressionistic annotations of some travellers and on the reading back of the first city census (held in 1818).

⁹⁰ In 1752 a group of 'principal merchants and shroffs' approached the English in order to have their mediation in the dealings between the merchants and Sidi Masud Khan, aimed at raising a considerable sum of money, necessary to buy off the Marathas. This group of 'principal merchants and shroffs' included 13 persons, namely 7 Muslims (among whom Salah and Usman Chellabi), 2 Armenians and 4 Hindus. Among the Hindus, two were Khatriis. See FRS, 30 April 1752. No Parsi appeared in this group, as, at the time, most Parsis in Surat were under Muncherjee Cursetjee's influence. Not surprisingly, that die-hard enemy to the English chose

there is no reason to think that, politically or otherwise, the Bania community either acted as a unified body or, during the civil war period, was politically pro-English. Although both claims have been made, on close scrutiny they appear to be supported less by identifiable sources than by the continuous reiteration of the theory, strengthened by speculations hardly related with any hard piece of evidence.⁹¹ Indeed, what the perusing of the records makes clear is that not the Banias as a community, not even the bulk of the Banias, but some individual Banias—and not many of them, at that—were politically active. Quite interestingly, not all these politically active Banias appear to have shared the same political inclinations. So, for instance, we know that, during the civil war, Jagannath was unflinchingly pro-English, but that the same was not the case with a Girderlal Bania. Girderlal was a merchant and a shipowner, and his ship was hijacked by the English because of Girderlal's connections with the French and the Dutch.⁹² Not unexpectedly, in 1759, Girderlal was one of the merchants who organized the defence of Surat against the English.⁹³ We know that he acted in conjunction with a Laldas, himself a Bania, judging from his name. Another Bania who, certainly, was not pro-English, was Muncherjee's senior colleague as

not to be part of the group. If we add—as we most certainly should—Muncherjee Cursetjee to the above sample, we have that the Banias made the 14% only of the principal merchants and shroffs in the city. Of course, a group of 14 elements is too small a sample to be accepted as statistically sound. Still, there is no indication in the sources that the situation was radically different from the one that can be inferred from our sample.

⁹¹ The claim that, in the period comprising the late 1740s and the 1750s, the bulk of the Bania community became solidly pro-English and acted politically on their behalf is the topic allegedly explored by Subramanian in her 'The Castle Revolution'. Yet, a close perusal of the tale of the evolving relationship between the Banias and the English that makes up 'The Castle Revolution' soon reveals that, at any turning point (see, in particular, pp. 102–3, 104, 110, 111, 113), almost no sources are quoted. Besides, those quoted are in fact *misquoted* or quoted out of context. A readily verifiable example of this is the statement (p. 102) that, 'by 1730 the Gujarati *banias* were offering the most valuable freight for British shipping so much so that in 1731 they complained to the Bengal Nawab that they would be great sufferers from any interference with British shipping'. This is allegedly based on P. J. Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 79; in fact, Marshall refers to the 'Gujarat *silk merchants*'. It has been shown that the non-European silk merchants active in the Surat–Bengal silk trade were an ethnically mixed group made up, besides the Hindus, by Armenians—who were hardly less prominent than the Hindus—and Muslims (even if admittedly less prominent than either Hindus or Armenians). See Torri, 'Ethnicity and trade', pp. 387–90, 403.

⁹² Secret, 30 March 1757, and FRS, 23 Oct. 1757 (letter from the Dutch) and 24 Oct. 1757 (answer to the Dutch).

⁹³ FRS, 19 Feb. 1759.

Dutch Broker, Govindram, who, together with Muncherjee, seems to have played some kind of role in trying to spirit up his masters against the English in 1759.⁹⁴

In sum, it is safe to assume that, all in all, the hitherto available sources seem to point to the fact that the Bania community was far from being the most important section of the Surat merchant class, and, anyway, its members were far from being solidly pro-English. This, by itself, would make Jagannath's position as 'head of the Banias' not such a decisive proof that his being pro-English implied a similar stance on the part of either the Surat merchant class at large, or, more limitedly, a sizeable and influential sector of it. In fact, this becomes even less credible if we now look, as we shall, somewhat more closely at the powers that Jagannath's position of leadership gave him over his community.

The first point that deserves to be emphasized here is that the documentation available in the English records is such as to make it very difficult to understand what exactly was the position and role of 'head of the Banias'.⁹⁵ This is a fact that, by itself, strongly suggests that the role in question had little *political* and *economic* importance; on the contrary, the English, so attentive to the political and economic forces at play in Surat, would have taken note of it. Consequently, the hypothesis can be made that the role of 'head of the Banias' was less political and economic than *social* and, maybe, *religious*.⁹⁶ Anyway, by drawing on the available literature on the connection between political rulers and local society in South Asia and the Middle East, it is possible to advance the hypothesis that the 'head of the Banias'—like the 'head of the Khattris' and the 'head of the Arab merchants'—was a kind of official intermediary between the ruling political elite and a given section of the local society. In our case, in pre-1759 Surat, the 'head of the Banias'—just as the 'head

⁹⁴ Stavorinus, *Voyages to the East Indies*, vol. III, pp. 122–4.

⁹⁵ Even Das Gupta's close examination of the first 40 years of the century does not shed much light on this topic. In fact most of what Das Gupta says seems to be inferred from oral sources, which, at best, can be judged relevant only for a much later period. See his *Indian Merchants*, pp. 79–80, 87–8 and fn. 2. On the other hand, the same Das Gupta, with his usual scholarly aplomb, premises his treatment of this topic with the caveat that the situation was 'most probably' what he makes it out to be. For some information on the role of the 'head of the Banias'—both intriguing and open to different interpretations—see FRS, 30 July 1752. Further material is discussed below.

⁹⁶ The religious role played by the 'head of the Banias' in later periods can be inferred from the testimony of Dr Nabin Chandra Babubhai Nagarsheth, retold by Ashin Das Gupta in his *Indian Merchants*, p. 88.

of the Khattris' or the 'head of the Arab merchants'—was an intermediary between his community and the Mughal rulers. Needless to add, this position in no way carried powers comparable to those of either a feudal lord or the leader of a modern political party, since it was ultimately predicated on the acceptance of any given intermediary by both the fellow members of his community *and* the political rulers.

Taking our cue, once again, from what we know of these intermediaries, we can further hypothesize that they were initially chosen among those members of the community that, for one reason or another, were already pre-eminent. In turn, this pre-eminence was ultimately based on (social and/or religious) status and wealth. Now, in Jagannath's specific case, what made his position weaker than that of other community leaders was the fact that, while belonging to a well-regarded and long-established merchant family, in the period under discussion he did not belong to the inner circle of the very rich any more. By the 1730s Jagannath had lost practically all of the previous wealth of his family, which, in turn, had been one of the main reasons of his fall from grace at the end of the decade. His successful comeback in the 1740s had been made possible, among other circumstances, by the fact that he had convinced the Bombay Government that, only by getting back his former position of power in Surat, he could retrieve his lost economic fortune and repay his debts to the Company.⁹⁷ Yet, things went differently from what the Bombay Government had hoped for. No doubt, thanks to his diplomatic skills and friendly connections with the Marathas, Jagannath played an increasingly useful and important role in the political affairs of the Company in Surat, particularly after the beginning of the civil war. Yet, the worthy Vakil's economic fortunes remained at a very low ebb, and he went on trading only fitfully and being indebted to the Company.⁹⁸ His economic position was so persistently bad that, still in 1758 and 1759, he was not trusted with the management of the investment.⁹⁹ In spite of all the important political

⁹⁷ E.g. FRS, 29 Sept. 1741 (letter from Bombay of the 18th inst. and letter by Thomas Marsh to the Bombay Govt., same date), and *ibid.*, 16 April 1742 (letter from Bombay of the 7th inst.).

⁹⁸ On Jagannath's persistently difficult economic position in the 1740s and 1750s and his debts to the English Company see, e.g. FRS, 19 Jan. 1743, 19 Jan., 14 and 23 Dec. 1746; Public, 6 July 1750, 2 Jan. 1751 (list of debts outstanding), and 14 Feb. 1758.

⁹⁹ Public, 14 Feb. 1758, and FRS, 26 May and 23 June 1759.

services rendered by him to the Company, his grateful superiors—while large with him in the distribution of commendations and gifts of shawls—thought it only prudent to give the management of the really important economic business, such as the investment, to merchants of more solid economic standing than Jagannath's.¹⁰⁰ Still, the importance of Jagannath's political connection with the English East India Company is difficult to underestimate: my contention is that Jagannath's political clout as English Vakil had taken the standing of his former economic wealth as the element that made him pre-eminent among his fellow Banias. Accordingly, in the civil war period, Jagannath's role as head of the Banias was merely the shadow of his position as representative of the English Company.¹⁰¹

Jagannath Laldas as Faction Leader

In sum, what has hitherto been said, while recognizing the undoubted fact that Jagannath was 'the head of the Banias', does in no way imply that he was their *political* leader (a statement that holds true whichever way we define the Banias). Yet, if Jagannath

¹⁰⁰ This comes out quite unambiguously during the discussion in the Bombay Council, in connection with the farming out of the 1758 investment. In fact, in 1758 Jagannath's offer was actually the most convenient among those made by the various bidders. Yet, the Bombay Government preferred to farm out the contract to the previous contractors—namely Nasserwanjee Bomonjee and his partners—on their accepting the same terms made by Jagannath, which they did. The reason explicitly given by the Bombay Government for this unusual procedure was Nasserwanjee and partners' superior economic standing *vis-a-vis* Jagannath's. See Public, 14 Feb. 1758.

¹⁰¹ The relative importance of Jagannath's two charges is shown by an episode involving the Sidi, the English and Jagannath in 1752. The Sidi was then casting around for the huge sum of money made necessary by his engagements with both the English and the Marathas and, as usual in these cases, he tried to levy it from the merchants. Yet, true to himself, the Sidi tried to arrange things in such a way that the odium for the new levy would fall on the English. In order to do this, he decided to involve Jagannath in the dealings of an *ad hoc* council of merchants. By taking part in the proceedings of the council and being somehow made to acquiesce in its decisions, Jagannath would automatically make the English Company share responsibility for them, *precisely because of his status as representative of the English Company*. The problem, for the Sidi, was to entice the English into giving Jagannath licence to take part in the merchant council. This the Sidi obtained by convincing them that Jagannath's presence was necessary because he was the 'head of the Banian caste'. Eventually the English realized the Sidi's ruse and neutralized it just in time. FRS, 19, 20 May, 4 June, 4, 20, 25, 29 Nov. 1752. This seems to be the substance and the correct meaning of this episode, in spite of the radically different interpretation given to it by Subramanian in her 'Reply', pp. 340–1.

did not represent the Banias, there are reasons to think that he was something different from a simple agent of the ‘Hon’ble Company’. By putting together some clues scattered in the records, and reading back the somewhat more satisfactory information available for the 1760s, it is possible to advance the hypothesis that Jagannath was the leader of one—ethnically mixed—business network that, in the late 1750s, acted as a pro-English political faction. In a next section a further hypothesis will be made that Jagannath, as leader of this faction, played a role of some importance in the events leading to the 1759 expedition—although of a widely different nature from what has hitherto been claimed.

Let us begin by listing the main members of the group headed by Jagannath. The first that we must remember is Dunjeeshaw Munjeeshaw, a Parsi. Whereas Jagannath was Broker to the English Company, Dunjeeshaw was, officially, his Assistant and, as such, took care of the private trade of the English servants of the Company in Surat.¹⁰² In Ellis’s time, he appears to have been a middling merchant and a shipowner, trading in partnership with a member of the Bombay Council.¹⁰³ Like Jagannath, Dunjeeshaw had reasons to be personally hostile to Muncherjee Cursetjee, the Dutch Broker. The Parsi community was badly divided because of a religious quarrel, and, whereas Muncherjee was the undisputed head of the majority, Dunjeeshaw belonged to the minority.¹⁰⁴ In conjunction with Dunjeeshaw, we can quote his grandfather, Nek Sat Khan, alias Sorabji Cawasji—a Parsi merchant who had received a title of nobility from the Mughal Court in Delhi, with which he still maintained some connections.¹⁰⁵ Last, but not least, there was Tapidas Laldas—

¹⁰² Secret, 14 Nov. 1757 (Letter from Mr Ellis).

¹⁰³ William De La Garde. See Mayor’s Court, 18 Jan. 1762 (Anne De La Garde’s petition) and *ibid.*, 16 Feb. 1762 (Dunjeeshaw Munjeeshaw’s answer).

¹⁰⁴ DP, pp. cccxv–cccxvi, cccxxvi–cccxxvii. In Duperron’s memoir the leader of the minority is indicated as a Darab, and Dunjeeshaw does not even appear. It is only in the 1760s that Dunjeeshaw, by then one of the wealthiest and possibly the most politically influential merchant in Surat, emerges as the head of the minority faction, engaged in a bitter clash with the majority. The majority, although headed by Muncherjee, included numerous and affluent merchants under English protection. On this see Public and FRS for the period from June to November 1768. The gap in the FRS collection for this period (both the IOR and the Maharashtra State Archives collections are incomplete) can be partly filled by reference to Orme OV 131.

¹⁰⁵ The fact that Nek Sat Khan was Dunjeeshaw’s grandfather surfaces in a letter written by Mir Naseruddin Khan in 1799. See FRS, 12 Aug. 1799 (Roca from Meer Nusseereddeen Khan Behadur to the Chief Daniel Seton) [IOR: G/36/78, p. 550]. On Nek Sat Khan see *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*, vol. IX, pt II, *Gujarat Popula-*

shroff who was 'the person of most substance and established credit' under English protection.¹⁰⁶

Now, let us bring together some hints pointing to the fact that, in the late 1750s, the above-mentioned men acted as part of a political faction. After the 1758 fiasco, Ellis appeared particularly worried about possible reprisals by the Mughal authorities against Jagannath, Tapidas and Dunjeeshaw.¹⁰⁷ What makes this revealing is that, at the time, the main economic business of the Company was in the hands of a group of Parsi merchants. Logically, they should have been the most exposed targets for the wrath of the Mughal authorities (and, as it were, they were among those targeted for harassment by the Mughal rulers). The fact that, on the contrary, Ellis was particularly concerned for Jagannath, Tapidas and Dunjeeshaw's safety suggests that the trio had been deeply involved with Ellis in the conspiracy against Ali Nawaz Khan. On the other hand, there are numerous indications in the available records that, in the years up to 1759, Jagannath and Dunjeeshaw played an important role on behalf of the English. For example, practically the last thing that Ellis did in Surat was to present Jagannath 'with a couple of shawls in the Hon'ble Company's name'. This was done 'as an acknowledgement for his fidelity in many secret services of singular importance', to the English, which had occurred during Ellis's chiefship.¹⁰⁸ Also, there are indications that a similarly important role was played by Dunjeeshaw. In a letter written from England in 1772, Ellis remembered that, during his chiefship, Dunjeeshaw had been his 'principal agent in all matters of importance'.¹⁰⁹ In fact, Dunjeeshaw himself claimed that he was the original author of Ellis's decision to organize the English takeover of Surat castle.¹¹⁰ This was a claim that was

tion: Musalmans and Parsis (Bombay: at the Government Central Press, 1890), p. 197, fn. 197. According to the *Gazetteer*, Nek Sat Khan had received his title from Muhammad Shah, in 1744, as a token of esteem by the Mughal Emperor for the Parsi's ability as watchmaker. Nek Sat Khan was to head the delegation that the English sent to Delhi, after the takeover of Surat castle, in order to obtain a grant by the Mughal monarch, legitimizing their conquest.

¹⁰⁶ Secret, 14 Nov. 1757 (Ellis's letter of 7 Nov. 1757).

¹⁰⁷ Secret, 14 Nov. 1757 (Ellis's letter); Secret, April 1758 (Ellis's letter of 28 March 1758). Besides, Ellis was particularly concerned about his own private broker, who, however, is never indicated by name.

¹⁰⁸ FRS, 19 Nov. 1758.

¹⁰⁹ Public, 16 Sept. 1772 (extract of Mr Ellis's letter of the 4 Feb. 1772).

¹¹⁰ Public, 29 May 1772 (Dunjeeshaw's memorial); Bombay Revenues Proceedings, 15 June 1781 (Dunjeeshaw's petition); *ibid.*, 20 June 1781 (Dunjeeshaw's [second] petition); FRS, 25 July 1781.

made several years after the events leading to the conquest of the castle; yet nobody among the Englishmen who had witnessed those events and were still in India ever came out to deny Dunjeeshaw's claim. On the contrary, at least an important testimony confirmed that the role played by the Parsi had been quite important.¹¹¹ Finally, in the case of Nek Sat Khan we know that, soon after the conquest of the castle by the English, he played a role in getting the royal patents by the Mughal Court that legitimized the new political situation.¹¹²

Interestingly, these same men appear as part of a business network that in the 1760s managed the English investment, namely the most important business farmed out by the English to the Surat merchants. In 1761, Jagannath got the management of the investment as head of a four-man partnership. Two of Jagannath's partners were Hindu merchants who appear never to have played any political role in the castle takeover, and the remaining one was Jagannath's own son, Narandas. Yet, by reading the documents, it becomes clear that, while Jagannath's health was failing, it was Dunjeeshaw Munjeeshaw who really took care of the management of the investment.¹¹³ Jagannath died before the completion of the procurement of the investment¹¹⁴ and it is not difficult to imagine that it was completed thanks to Dunjeeshaw. At the following bid for the investment, in 1763, the partnership of merchants who were successful in obtaining it was made up by Jagannath's son, Narandas—who was formally the head of the group, Dunjeeshaw, his son Cursetjee, and Tapidas Laldas.¹¹⁵ Again, in 1765, the successful bid for the investment was made by the same group, with the only difference that Cursetjee Dunjeeshaw's place was now taken by Nek Sat Khan, Dun-

¹¹¹ In 1781, the Broach Chief, who had personally known both Ellis and Spencer, officially stated that 'he has reason to believe he [Dunjeeshaw] was of service as to the two expeditions [that against Surat and that leading to the conquest of Broach in the early 1770s] and more especially on the first [that against Surat] as he has often heard Mr. Ellis, who was Chief of Surat at the time the expedition against that place was planned, and Mr. Spencer, who was Chief when it was executed, declare that he [Dunjeeshaw] was of material service to them both'. Bombay Revenue Proceedings, 4 Sept. 1781 (answer from Broach).

¹¹² FRS, 3 May 1760, and 24 May 1760 (letter from Bombay of 19 May). For a somewhat inflated account of the role of Dunjeeshaw's grandfather in the takeover of Surat see H. D. Darukhanwala, *Parsi Lustre on Indian Soil* (Bombay: Kokil & Co., 1963), 2 vols, vol. II, pp. 371–2 (Sorabji Cawasji Neksatkhan).

¹¹³ FRS, 14, 19, 20 Aug. 1759 and Orme OV 131, pp. 45, 46.

¹¹⁴ On the 27 Oct. 1761. See Public, 3 Nov. 1761.

¹¹⁵ Public, 15 Feb. and 7 March 1763.

jeeshaw's grandfather.¹¹⁶ For the remainder of the 1760s and well into the 1770s, the same network of merchants appears active, even if the place of Narandas is taken, after his death, by his son Luckmidas, and even if, beginning with the investment of 1766, the management of the investment is permanently lost to another partnership of merchants.¹¹⁷

Now, I am well aware that by marshalling the above clues, I am far from having given a water-tight demonstration of the existence of a trans-ethnic merchant network under Jagannath's leadership, actively engaged in promoting the English cause in Surat during the last phase of the civil war. Yet, my contention is that, all in all, the above evidence amounts to a convincingly enough presumptive case. Anyway, even if the hypothesis above made is not accepted, I am convinced that—on the basis of the available documentation—it is only fair to state that Ellis, Jagannath and Dunjeeshaw acted in concert and that what, in the previous pages, have been described as Ellis's decisions might very well have been the result of joint deliberations among these three men. As we shall see, particularly Jagannath went on playing an important role in the following months.

Meah Atchund's Comeback

Ellis left Surat on 21 November 1758,¹¹⁸ just when another key actor was appearing on the scene. He was that same Meah Atchund who, some eleven years before, had started the civil war. Since having been first defeated and then exiled in Bombay,¹¹⁹ the former Nawab had never given up his hope for a comeback. He still had a valuable connection in the city in the person of his mother-in-law, Azaret Khan's widow, the same woman who had convinced him to stake his claims to the nawabship. The Begum, as she continued to be called, was an energetic person, who, after her *protégé's* defeat, had gone on scheming in the hope to bring him back.¹²⁰ It is an easy guess that

¹¹⁶ Public, 26 March 1765.

¹¹⁷ Public, 6 May 1766; 19 and 30 May 1767; 4 Oct. 1768; 8 Aug. 1770; 13 Oct. 1772; 24 Aug. 1773; 27 Oct. 1774; 30 April 1776; 17 Feb. 1779.

¹¹⁸ FRS, 21 Nov. 1758.

¹¹⁹ After his defeat Atchund had sojourned for some time in Surat. That was an uncomfortable situation for both him and the Sidi. Accordingly, both of them had asked the English to allow the former Nawab to go and reside in Bombay, which happened at the beginning of 1753. Public, 7 Nov. 1752, and FRS, 7 Feb. 1753.

¹²⁰ DP, pp. ccxci, ccxciv–ccxcv.

the Begum provided Meah Atchund with first-hand information about the situation prevailing in the city. Therefore, the former Nawab must have had some clues of the secret designs entertained by Ellis (anyway, in Surat everybody seems to have had some hints about them). As a consequence, when Faris Khan arrived in Bombay, Meah Atchund must have guessed that he had been passed over by the English as candidate for the nawabship.¹²¹ But, at that time, Meah Atchund was not in Bombay any more. In the previous ‘three or four years, he had gone up and down the country’¹²² in the hope to mobilize the resources that he needed to carry out his plans of revenge. Eventually, he had ended up in Pune, where he had tried his best to get the Peshwa’s support and, more or less in coincidence with the Peshwa’s ‘sudden motion’, Atchund had eventually got what he wanted. Thanks to the favour of the Peshwa, he had put together a small army partly made up of men formerly in the Peshwa’s service and partly of disbanded sepoys who had been part of the French army in the Deccan.¹²³ He had then moved against Surat, getting some more men on the way from the Nawab of Broach.¹²⁴ Yet, while Atchund was nearing Surat, the Peshwa changed his mind and ordered the former Nawab to return to Pune. The reason of this about-face was, most probably, that by then Ali Nawaz Khan had ‘actually become a vassal of the Nana [the Peshwa], having put himself entirely under his protection’, which made Atchund’s expedition redundant.¹²⁵

¹²¹ When Ellis and the Secret Committee considered the possible candidates for the role of Nawab in Surat, Meah Atchund’s name never came up, in spite of the former Nawab’s previous connection with the English Company (see Secret: Ellis’s letter of 15 Feb. 1758 and Committee of 17 Feb. 1758). This is not as surprising as it could seem at first. Together with the unfortunate Mr Lambe, Atchund must have been saddled by the Bombay Government with the responsibility for the ‘Hon’ble Company’s’ defeat at the hands of Sidi Masud Khan. Of course, true to human nature, the fact that the responsibility for that fiasco was less Atchund’s than the Bombay Government’s must have made the latter particularly unforgiving towards the former.

¹²² DP, p. ccxci.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. ccxciv.

¹²⁴ He received 100 sepoys and one Arab Jemadar. After the successful completion of the enterprise, the Nawab of Broach was rewarded with the Vakee Nagaree (*wakianigar*) of the port of Surat. FRS, 13 Feb. 1795 (Roca from the Nabob). Formerly an office in charge of writing confidential reports to the Mughal Court on what happened in Surat, by Atchund’s time the *wakianigar* was a sinecure which entitled to a (hefty) stipend.

¹²⁵ FRS, 6 Nov. 1758 (letter to Bombay), for the quotation. For the Peshwa’s initial support to Atchund and later change of heart, see Shejwalkar, *The Surat Episode*, pp. 177–9.

Redundant, indeed, it could be from the viewpoint of the Peshwa, but not from that of Atchund. The latter disobeyed the Peshwa's orders and, realizing one of the several miracles that he was to perform in the following months, convinced his men—inclusive of a Kishen Rao, a relation of the Peshwa and the main financial support to the enterprise—to go ahead with the expedition.¹²⁶ Then, when Ellis was about to leave for Bombay, Atchund closed in on his former domain and the day after Ellis's departure, Randier, the twin city in front of Surat, capitulated to Meah Atchund's army (22 November 1758).¹²⁷

Soon it became clear that Ali Nawaz Khan was in a position of extreme weakness. In the previous weeks, his personal equation with the whimsical ruler of the castle had worsened once again, and now it became apparent that Sidi Ahmed was favouring Meah Atchund's attempt.¹²⁸ More dangerous for the incumbent Nawab, his military forces started to unravel as the result of a series of betrayals.¹²⁹

Here, one has the distinct impression that the trap prepared by Ellis had anyhow sprung on Ali Nawaz Khan, even if the English were now out of the scene. Ellis's conspiracy must have extended in depth among the principal officers of the durbar. Now, after the failure of the English expedition, these same men must have been extremely uneasy at the thought that their names could be discovered at any time—even admitting that Ali Nawaz Khan did not already know them—and that the Nawab could soon take his revenge. When Atchund appeared in front of Surat, the persons involved in Ellis's conspiracy must have thought that that was a God-sent opportunity to save their own skin and wealth. In fact, Atchund's appearance was so timely, that one cannot but suspect that it did not happen by chance and that Atchund was very well informed on the situation prevailing in the city. When, on 5 December, the Sidi

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* and Maharashtra State Archives: Selection of the Bombay Government papers, No 87 (1795): Report of the Committee . . . Read [on] 17th November 1795, pp. 20–1 (Chief's answer). The same document, consisting of the Nawab's justification of his behaviour during the August 1796 riot, is available in FRS 1795. In it the information can be found on Kishen Rao as the main financial support of Meah Atchund's expedition against Surat. Of course, this information must be treated with caution, as it appears in a document of a much later period. Yet, it seems to square with Shejwalkar's account, which, on this point, draws from Maratha sources.

¹²⁷ FRS, 22 and 23 Nov. 1758.

¹²⁸ Secret, 29 Nov. 1758. See also DP, pp. ccxciv–ccxcv.

¹²⁹ FRS, 4 Dec. 1758 and DP, pp. ccxcv–ccxcvi.

came out in the open, supporting Meah Atchund and helping him to enter the city walls, Ali Nawaz Khan's position was already hopeless: by 6 December he capitulated to Meah Atchund.¹³⁰ Accordingly, in one of those comebacks occurring so frequently in adventure novels and so rarely in history, Meah Atchund ascended once again to the Nawabship of Surat, some six years after having lost it. It is worth noting that, then, the new Nawab was able to perform another miracle. In spite of his tight financial situation, he was able to restrain his mercenary army from sacking the city.¹³¹

The Overturn of the Balance of Forces

While Meah Atchund was busy taking Surat and Ellis was about to reach Bombay, an additional event took place, changing completely the strategic situation of the West Coast of India. It was the arrival in the Bombay harbour of a powerful squadron of the Royal Navy, led by Admiral Pocock.¹³²

Pocock was in the Indian Ocean in order to fight the French. His stay in Bombay was to be as short as possible and for the express purpose to refit his ships, before going back to the East Coast of India, hunting for his real enemy.¹³³ However, as long as Pocock's squadron was in Bombay, the island was impregnable to any hostile attempt by the Marathas. Besides, Pocock, once prodded, went so far as to promise an escort of one or two of his huge men-of-war to the Bombay navy, should Bombay make another attempt against Surat.¹³⁴

In this changed situation, the Select Committee could once again try its hand at establishing English power in Surat. The members of that body, who were by then smarting under Ellis's reproaches and innuendos,¹³⁵ decided to launch a second expedition. Yet, Meah Atchund's unexpected appearance altered the situation once again. That was not seen as a major problem, because, as the honourable

¹³⁰ FRS, 6 Dec. 1758.

¹³¹ On Atchund's difficult financial situation see below. The fact that the city was not sacked is recorded in DP, p. cccxi.

¹³² Secret, 25 Nov. 1758.

¹³³ On this see the classic work by A. T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983; 1st edn. 1890), pp. 271–4.

¹³⁴ Secret, 5 Dec. 1758.

¹³⁵ Once back in Bombay, Ellis had automatically resumed his seat as member of the Select Committee.

members of the Select Committee haughtily declared, they did not think Meah Atchund 'a man of any capacity'.¹³⁶ They were, however, sensible enough men to realize the need of fresh information on the changed circumstances in Surat. As a result, John Spencer, the person who had already been chosen to succeed Ellis as Chief and who, until then, had been withheld in Bombay, was at long last sent to Surat.¹³⁷

Spencer's Conspiracy

As soon as Spencer arrived in Surat, he got busy, trying to tighten once again the unravelled threads of Ellis's conspiracy. He was favoured by the fact that the situation in the city was now bordering on chaos. By daring and luck, Atchund had conquered the nawabship, but he was in a position of extreme weakness. He was without any financial resources of his own, which made his hold on his own troops precarious at best.¹³⁸ Besides, the people who had played a key role in Ali Nawaz Khan's destruction had not done that out of any affection or friendship for the new Nawab. Their support for him was conditional at best and—what made things particularly arduous for Atchund—these magnates controlled not only a numerous retinue of armed men but considerable riches, which they could employ as easily to support the Nawab as to undo him.¹³⁹

In this position, the unfortunate Atchund was too weak to check Sidi Ahmed Khan. Clearly, the young Sidi had supported Atchund against Ali Nawaz Khan in the hope of bringing back the situation existing during the last years of his late father, when the real power was concentrated in the hands of the Qiladar and the Nawab was only a figurehead. Now Sidi Ahmed, usurping the powers that were the Nawab's, happily meddled in the administration of the city, and had no qualms about imposing his own nominees on the key charges in the durbar administration. This policy—which, on the surface, can appear not so strikingly different from that implemented by the old Sidi in 1753—now had completely different results. Quite apart from Atchund's willingness to play the role intended for him, the problem was that the young Sidi completely lacked those qualities

¹³⁶ Secret, 12 Dec. 1758.

¹³⁷ Secret, 18 Dec. 1758.

¹³⁸ Spencer 1st report, para. 10.

¹³⁹ On this see below.

of clarity of vision, strength of character and, in particular, great diplomatic skill that had characterized his late father's policies. Accordingly, far from smoothly wielding full control over the city government, Sidi Ahmed, 'being most commonly in liquor', did not even succeed in keeping his troops under proper check. His military, taking advantage of the brittleness of the new Nawab's hold on the city, made themselves guilty of acts of violence and outright murders against the good citizens of Surat. In this situation—worsened by the rumour that the Nawab was thinking of turning the city over to the Marathas—'several people of substance' left the place, 'being apprehensive of being plundered by one or another party'.¹⁴⁰

As noted, soon after the aborted expedition of some months before, Ellis had bitingly remarked that no person in Surat would confide in the English ever again on any like occasion,¹⁴¹ an opinion that he had hammered home once he was back in Bombay.¹⁴² Now, the situation of political uncertainty and social disorder prevailing in the city seemed to accomplish the miracle of resuscitating an English party. Accordingly, a few weeks after his arrival in Surat, Spencer was able to send to the Bombay Council a long and optimistic report on the political and military situation in the city. The report included some rosy news, related to both the encouragements allegedly received by Spencer from the Surat merchants, and Spencer's confidential dealings with some extremely influential Mughal nobles.

The content of this report has been already discussed elsewhere, apparently even in too much detail.¹⁴³ Yet its further examination is imperative, as it will shed new light on the real connections between the English and their Indian allies.

Spencer wrote to the Select Committee that 'the whole body of merchants' were 'desirous' that the castle should end up in the hands of the English, and had 'expressed such their wishes to me through Jaggernaut [Jagannath]'. As Spencer assured his colleagues in Bombay, the anguished Surat merchants were convinced that English intervention was 'the only step' that could 'procure a lasting

¹⁴⁰ Spencer's 1st report, paras 1–2, 4.

¹⁴¹ Secret, Ellis's letter of 28 March 1758.

¹⁴² During one of the bitter exchanges that he continued to have with his Bombay colleagues, he once again claimed, no doubt with a trifle of exaggeration, that 'when the expedition was first urged by him, all the trading body of Surat was in our [English] interest, with near half of the sepoy's in Ali Novus Caun's [Ali Nawaz Khan] pay, whereas at the present juncture we are utterly destitute of that advantage'. Political, 8 Dec. 1758 (Questions answered in writing by Mr Ellis, indisposed).

¹⁴³ See Torri, 'Surat', pp. 683–6, and Subramanian, 'Reply', pp. 338–9.

tranquillity to the place and security to their persons and effects'. So much so that—as Spencer confided to his colleagues in Bombay—'Jaggenaut assures me that from due enquiry he is convinced that the whole mercantile inhabitants would be for us on a sufficient force appearing to countenance them'.¹⁴⁴

Now, what is striking about this information is its overoptimism; after the fiasco of a few months before, and notwithstanding the fact that never before had the merchants sided *en masse* with the English, now they had made a complete about-face, turning pro-English, and all of them, at that. That the piece of information given by the worthy Jagannath was overoptimistic was somehow perceived by Spencer himself. Sensibly, just after giving the above quoted intelligence, the English Chief went on to say that in spite of Jagannath's conviction, he (Spencer) believed that the Chellabis might be an exception to this enthusiastic pro-English consensus. As Spencer remarked, they (the Chellabis)

have too great an interest at present in managing the young Sciddee as they please in their mercantile interests, to think that they would act with us, besides their jealousy that such an acquisition to us [namely the conquest of the castle] would have an ill influence on their freight voyages [to the Middle East] . . .¹⁴⁵

Here, one can see that Spencer had been sensible enough to see through Jagannath's overenthusiastic reports to the point of realizing that 'the whole body of merchants' did not include its most influential clan, namely the Chellabis (and, of course, Muncherjee Cursetjee; but this went without saying). Yet, once this is said, the next thought that comes to mind is: if Jagannath had been wrong on such an important point as the participation of the Chellabis in the pro-English party, what reason was there for Spencer to accept the remainder of the Vakil's information as accurate? After all, Ellis—an astute political operator and a man who had spent some three years in Surat—had left the city convinced that all his difficult and dangerous work at marshalling an English party had been destroyed. Now, on the basis of the intelligence gathered by a man—

¹⁴⁴ Spencer's 1st report, para. 5.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.* Of course, the Chellabis were absolutely right in being afraid that the English would make use of any new political power to impose their control on the profitable trade to the Middle East. For an introduction to this problem see Michelguglielmo Torri, 'In the Deep Blue Sea: Surat and its Merchant Class During the Dyarchic Era (1759–1800)', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, XIX, 3 & 4 (1982), pp. 272–5.

Jagannath—who had an obvious vested interest in the establishment of English overlordship in Surat, Spencer—a newcomer in the city—believed that the pro-English party among the merchants had been suddenly resuscitated. Here, the pertinent question that Spencer and the Bombay Council should have asked—and did not ask—is: if all this enthusiasm on the part of the merchants about an English intervention was real, where were those ‘substantial shroffs’ who had taken the famous bond, engaging them to finance an English expedition?¹⁴⁶ Significantly, those worthy and affluent gentlemen did not stir. With the benefit of hindsight, and taking into account the peculiar behaviour of the merchants once the second English expedition reached Surat,¹⁴⁷ one cannot but suspect that Jagannath’s evaluation of the standing of the merchants was totally unrealistic. As Jagannath was far from being a simpleton, it is logical to suspect that he had wilfully misrepresented the actual political situation, pushing a self-assured Englishman, who did not have any in-depth personal knowledge of the city politics, along the path leading to war. Of course, the reason for Jagannath’s behaviour is not difficult to fathom. The Vakil was a man who had little to lose: an English defeat would not worsen his situation; English victory, on the contrary, would possibly make him one of the most influential men in Surat (which, of course, was exactly what happened after the successful completion of the 1759 expedition).

When all this is said, it must be added that, reading Spencer’s report, it is clear that, more than the expressions of goodwill of the merchants, what seemed important to Spencer was the openings by two key members of the durbar. In this case, interestingly enough, the connection between the English Chief and these men was established thanks not only to Jagannath but to another merchant, or, rather a merchant prince, that Shivrao Teckchand, who was the ‘head’ of the Khatris.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Or, to quote Mr Mondale’s immortal question to Mr Hart, during the 1984 nomination campaign for the democratic candidacy to the White House, ‘where is the meat?’. Yet, the fact that, at this crucial point, the shroffs who had taken part in Ellis’s conspiracy vanished into thin air is not regarded as in any way significant by Subramanian. Without the benefit of any documental proof, she goes on reiterating that the alliance between the shroffs and the English did in fact continue even after the fiasco of the 1758 expedition, and was crucial to the eventual success of the English takeover of Surat castle (‘Reply’, p. 342).

¹⁴⁷ See below.

¹⁴⁸ Spencer’s 1st report, paras 6 and 7. The fact that the secret connection between the English Chief and the two Mughal nobles was kept open by both Jagan-

The two Mughal nobles who contacted Spencer through Jagannath and Shivrao were Sidi Zafar Yab Khan and Wali Ullah. They shared between them the prerogatives of a Prime Minister and controlled much of the city administration. Besides, Sidi Zafar, who was extremely rich, had in his pay many of the sepoy who, in theory, were in the Nawab's service¹⁴⁹ and his power was such that neither the Sidi nor the Nawab could dispense with him. Yet, according to Spencer, in a city whose two co-rulers were short of money, Sidi Zafar felt unsure precisely because of the great wealth that he controlled. Still according to Spencer, the case of Wali Ullah was slightly different. He had played a crucial role in Ali Nawaz Khan's betrayal.¹⁵⁰ Certainly that worthy Mughal nobleman did not have any knowledge of Calderon de La Barca's remarkable play *La vida es sueño*, but, somehow, he must have come to share the insight there available: a traitor becomes useless after the betrayal is carried out and it can be good politics to get rid of him before he makes use of his skills against his new master. At least that was what Spencer thought, although of course, not being a man of letters, he did not quote Calderon.¹⁵¹

These two noblemen—who, in due course, acquired an ever-increasing likeness with Pinocchio's fox and cat (Sidi Zafar being the fox)—now became 'particularly pressing' with Spencer. Apparently, they had suddenly discovered the merits of having Faris Khan 'placed' in the durbar.¹⁵² As a consequence, they were most earnestly promising Spencer that, on Faris Khan's appearance in front of Surat with adequate English military support, 'they would raise such a party in the place as should soon accomplish the purpose we want as well as their own and that they would join heartily in procuring the Castle and Tanka to us'.¹⁵³

Clearly, Spencer found it extremely difficult to resist the temptation to heed Sidi Zafar and Wali Ullah's promises. Yet, he realized that he 'had no other assurances of their being sincere than their bare words'.¹⁵⁴ Spencer was wise enough to suspect that those two

nath and the foremost Khatri merchant in Surat means that, even in this purely mediatory role, the 'Banias' did not enjoy any monopoly.

¹⁴⁹ On this particular point see Spencer's 2nd report, para. 4.

¹⁵⁰ On the role played by Wali Ullah in the betrayal of Ali Nawaz Khan compare Shejwalkar, *The Surat Episode*, p. 179, with DP, pp. ccxcv–ccxcvi.

¹⁵¹ Spencer's 1st report, paras 3, 6–7.

¹⁵² Of course, if not Wali Ullah, at least Sidi Zafar, as one of the principal 'slaves' in Surat, must have played a role in the *coup d'état* that, a few years before, had led to Faris Khan's fall from power and expulsion from Surat.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, para. 7.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Mughal noblemen were characters on whose word one could count only at one's own risk.¹⁵⁵ Accordingly, he left the decision on how to proceed to the Select Committee, to whom he sent a detailed relation not only of his *pourparler* with both merchants and nobles but of the military set-up in the city. Fortunately, the numerous forces belonging to either the Nawab or the Sidi were starved of pay and Spencer was having a field day—or so it seemed—at bribing many of their officers. Even better, according to Spencer the Dutch were in a position of weakness, with a ship at Surat Bar very poorly manned, which would be an easy prey to the fleet that the English were preparing in Bombay.¹⁵⁶

While Spencer was writing this report, the situation of the English in Surat was already becoming a little too hot for comfort. News of English preparations in Bombay were filtering back, sparking an additional rumour that the English Factory could be blockaded any-time as a counter-measure to any hostile attempt against Surat. Prudently, Spencer, on 2 February, namely before receiving news of the official decision by the Bombay Government to launch the expedition, left the city under the pretext of a party of pleasure. That same night, he reached some English ships which were already at Surat Bar. He brought with him the whole Council but one member, Mr Erskine, who had volunteered to stay behind, in charge of the Factory and the liaison work with the English partisans in town.¹⁵⁷

From Surat Bar, Spencer went on with his work of intelligence, subversion and disinformation. He was able to convince both the Nawab and the Sidi that his move was related to those insults that, in the previous months and still recently, had been received by some Indian merchants under English protection.¹⁵⁸ The guilty parties had been either soldiers in the Sidi's service or a city officer who, although acting under the Sidi's influence, was formally a dependant of the Nawab. Now, Spencer could pretend that his move had the limited goal of getting redress for these episodes and was unrelated to any wider hostile attempt on Surat. So convincing was he, while dealing with two agents sent by the alarmed co-rulers of the city,

¹⁵⁵ Spencer's doubts on Sidi Zafar and Wali Ullah's sincerity surfaced again in his second major report, written some three weeks later. See Spencer's 2nd report, para. 10. Later they seem to have been forgotten.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, *passim*, and para. 13 for the intelligence on the Dutch.

¹⁵⁷ FRS, 2 Feb. 1759.

¹⁵⁸ On the harassment of merchants under English protection see FRS, 30 Dec. 1758, 3 and 9 Jan. 1759.

that both the Nawab and the Sidi were 'lulled into an entire security'.¹⁵⁹ Besides, the English Chief was able to bring into his conspiracy the Head Sayyid of Surat, Sayyid Zein, who had some personal resentment against the Sidi.¹⁶⁰ At the same time, through Erskine, Spencer went on distributing bribes to the Sidi's officers and secretly recruiting mercenary forces, which were concentrated in the town of Pulparrah, near Surat.¹⁶¹

Yet, Spencer's waiting for the Bombay expeditionary force began to be uncomfortably long. The official decision to launch the expedition was taken only on 6 February, and only on the 8th did the Bombay fleet leave for Surat, together with two of Pocock's ships of the line. In fact, the dispatch of the expedition was so late that the English armada arrived in front of Surat Bar on 15 February, after those 'springs' that, each fortnight, raised the level of the Tapi, making it possible for something bigger than river barges to go over the sand banks blocking the estuary.¹⁶²

Sidi Hilal's Good Fight

The 'loss of the springs' by the Bombay fleet meant that the direct attack on the castle, which could have been mounted in one day or two, took almost a fortnight. While the two ships of the line were left to guard the Bar, the remainder of the fleet went beyond the sand-banks and moved up river. But things were slowed down because of the difficulty in navigating the ships in shallow waters, especially a bomb ketch that carried a huge 13-inch mortar, and which ran aground twice.¹⁶³

No doubt, the arrival of the English fleet was a brutal awakening for Sidi Ahmed Khan. Still then, a considerable uncertainty remained among the Suratians at large if the target of the English

¹⁵⁹ FRS, 12 Feb. 1759.

¹⁶⁰ Spencer's 2nd report, para. 12.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, paras 5–9.

¹⁶² Public, 6 Feb. 1759, 8 Feb. 1759 (letter to Surat); FRS, 12, 14, 15 Feb. 1759; Public, 22 Feb. 1759. See also DP, pp. ccxcviii–ccxcix.

¹⁶³ Public, 22 Feb. 1759 (letter from Spencer and Council) and DP, pp. ccxcviii–ccxcix. Pocock's two vessels—which, anyway, were too big to navigate the Tapi—played the crucially important role of checkmating the Dutch ships and a Maratha flotilla then at the Bar (see below and fn. 201). The Maratha squadron, which had originally been sent to support Ali Nawaz Khan, had arrived too late, namely the day after Ali Nawaz Khan's surrender. See Shejwalkar, *The Surat Episode*, p. 178.

expedition was the Sidi only or the Sidi and the Nawab. But, of course, in either case, the Sidi knew that he was doomed to play the role of the hare. Accordingly, and at long last, the young Sidi was jolted into action. He could count on a redoubtable military commander, Sidi Hilal, a veteran of 'Mr. Lambe's war',¹⁶⁴ and, no doubt thanks to the latter's personal skills, the Qiladar's forces were speedily marshalled and deployed for action.

In the following struggle the castle's troops showed conspicuous fighting spirit and tactical ability. Although outnumbered and outgunned,¹⁶⁵ Sidi Hilal's army did all the right things at the right time. In particular, it took over the French garden, which stood just outside the outer wall, on the riverside,¹⁶⁶ and made it its advanced defensive position. In order to prevent English ships from getting near enough to bombard it, the Sidi's troops drew a chain across the river. When the English were finally able to move their land forces and their ships up river, the Sidi's troops fought back vigorously, worsting their

¹⁶⁴ Already in the early 1750s, Sidi Hilal had been one of Sidi Musad's principal lieutenants. See FRS, 23 March 1752.

¹⁶⁵ According to Erskine, the Sidi's troops amounted to some 2,000 men (FRS, 14 Feb. 1759). Of this force, 150 Rajputs, under the leadership of a Maulji Chaura, had been suborned by the English (Spencer's 2nd report, para. 6) and actually sided with them in the final phase of the campaign (see below). Of course, considering the fact that the Sidi and the Nawab were 'so divided amongst themselves and so very suspicious of the intention of one another' (Spencer's 2nd report, para. 1), part of the Sidi's forces had to be kept as garrison for the castle and could not be deployed in the fight along the Tapi. On their part, English land forces amounted to 800 Europeans and 1,500 sepoy, 'exclusive of His Majesty's detachment of artillery' (FRS, 15 Feb. 1759), which amounted to an additional 200 men (FRS, 4 Dec. 1758). To this must be added that Spencer had suborned some hundreds of people belonging to either the Sidi or the Nawab, who were supposed to intervene after the beginning of the campaign (Spencer 2nd report, paras 6, 8). Yet, only Maulji's 150 Rajputs finally honoured their engagement with the English. Besides, Spencer had recruited 200 Marwaris and Erskine had been put in charge to raise an additional mercenary force of at least 1,000 men (*ibid.*, paras 7, 9). It is not clear from the records if Erskine was successful in his task, but, even if he failed, English land forces added up to 2,700 men, compared with the Sidi's 2,000 (inclusive of Maulji Chaura's 150 Rajputs, who, as recalled, in the final phase switched to the English side). Besides, the English must have had a better train of field artillery. Alongside this, it must be remembered that, according to Spencer, Meah Atchund had some 4,000 sepoy in his pay, 'but except those he brought into town with him they are not esteemed such good sepoy as the Sciddee's' and, besides, could not be fully relied upon because short of pay (Spencer's 1st report, para. 10). As we shall see, Atchund and his forces, strictly inactive during most of the campaign, finally switched to the English side.

¹⁶⁶ The position of the French garden can be seen in the sketch of the plan of Surat made by Robert Orme, and preserved among his papers. See Orme OV 336, p. 33.

adversary on a couple of occasions. Yet, by the 25th, the English took the French garden and, from there, bombarded the castle, which stood just beyond the inner wall. On the 28th and 29th, with a combined action from land and river, the English broke through the outer wall. Yet, the Sidi's troops were able to retreat behind the inner wall in good order, while the English paid for their advance with heavy losses. At that point, the English offensive simply ran out of steam and the military outcome of the whole expedition hung in balance.¹⁶⁷

Of Warriors, Puppets and Puppet-masters

In the lull of combat which lasted from the evening of the 1st to the morning of the 4th of March, Spencer, with his troops grounded on the riverside between the two walls of Surat, was under the threat not of one, but several Damocles's swords. The first was that Pocock's ships were supposed to leave Bombay early in the month.¹⁶⁸ Their departure would bring back the military balance of power that had caused the failure of the first expedition and remove the main deterrent to the Dutch helping the Sidi. The second was that the Marathas were hovering around the city.¹⁶⁹ Although Spencer had good information that they had orders not to intervene, had they decided otherwise, any offensive action on their part would be catastrophic for the English.¹⁷⁰ The third possible threat could come from the Nawab. Until then, while he had put the city in a state of defence, he had observed a strict neutrality *vis-a-vis* the English and given Erskine secret assurances that no harm would come to the English factory. Even before the arrival of the Bombay fleet, Atchund had been informed of the English plans and intentions concerning Faris Khan. Accordingly, while secretly offering his help against the Sidi,

¹⁶⁷ On the military operations see the FRS for the period from 18 February onwards, and DP, pp. ccxcixff.

¹⁶⁸ Public, 8 Feb. 1759 (letter to Surat).

¹⁶⁹ For the bumbling policy followed by the Marathas since Atchund had escaped from the Peshwa's control, see Shejwalkar, *The Surat Episode*, *passim*.

¹⁷⁰ In the FRS of 1 March 1759, it is written that "The Chief is advised from good authority [that] these people have Nana's [the Peshwa] orders not to obstruct us in any shape, but that there is no trusting to such fellows, but that *at best they are arrant poltroons, so that no harm can happen from them, however they are played off*" (emphasis mine). My own impression is that, as far as the emphasized part is concerned, Spencer was boasting in order to keep up the sagging spirit of his followers.

Atchund had asked for a written engagement, confirming his position as Nawab. Once his station was guaranteed—Atchund had made clear—he had no qualms about the English giving any other charge to Faris Khan.¹⁷¹ This was a quite advantageous offer for the English, but Spencer had turned it down, in spite of the latitude given him by the Bombay Government to place Faris Khan as either Nawab or Naib. In order to deceive Atchund, the English Chief, instead of returning a flat no to the Nawab's openings, had answered with such evasive letters that poor Erskine, in charge of translating them into Persian, had been left 'nonplussed' as to how to get along with his translation work.¹⁷² While the English plodded along, Atchund, seemingly undaunted, had gone on with his inconclusive negotiations with Spencer *via* Erskine. But now, with the English army precariously perched on the riverside, between the two walls, it was fully possible that an exasperated Meah Atchund, turning to the lesser of two evils, could unite his forces to those of the Sidi's, frustrating English designs on Surat for good.

In such an awkward situation, the only way out for the English appeared to be a timely succour from 'Faris Khan's party', namely the fifth column organized by Spencer during the previous months. After all, it was an impressive enough force that, as we have seen, included three main notables (Sidi Zafar, Wali Ullah and the Head Sayyid), and several of the Sidi's officers. No doubt, the English had set much store on the help of this fifth column. This is made evident by the instructions given by the Select Committee to Captain Maitland, the leader of the land forces sent to Surat. Maitland had been warned that it was 'uncertain whether there may be any occasion for the troops to act'.¹⁷³ Nevertheless, once the English expeditionary force appeared, these rosy expectations turned sour. In spite of the many and abundant bribes, the prospective traitors either were neutralized or, in most cases, did not stir. Even more worrying was Sidi Zafar Yab Khan and Wali Ullah's behaviour. Still on the eve of the arrival of the Bombay fleet, Sidi Zafar in particular—who, in fact, was the real leader of the supposedly pro-English party—had appeared quite active in disinformation activities at the Sidi's durbar and prodigal in encouragements to the English.¹⁷⁴ Yet, soon after the arrival of the fleet, Sidi

¹⁷¹ FRS, 8 Feb. 1759 (letters from Erskine of the 6, 7, 8 inst.), FRS, 11, 14 and 16 Feb. 1759.

¹⁷² FRS, 19 Feb. 1759 (letter from Erskine).

¹⁷³ Secret, 17 Jan. 1759.

¹⁷⁴ Spencer's 2nd report, para. 1, and FRS, 18 Feb. 1758 (letter from Erskine).

Zafar and the fifth column that he headed suddenly became so 'shy' that they seemed to have disappeared into thin air.¹⁷⁵

At first, Spencer and Erskine, being men of the world, assumed that what they, quite improperly, called Faris Khan's party was keeping a low profile, waiting for the moment when English forces would invest the outer lines of defence of the Sidi.¹⁷⁶ Yet, while the English were attacking the French garden and Spencer was growing increasingly impatient, the fifth column did not move. Still when the English broke through the outer wall of the city the situation did not change. The several exhortations, made 'in the strongest terms' by Spencer to Faris Khan as to 'the necessity there was for his partisans to exert themselves', were made to no avail. It was not that Faris Khan was neglecting the task of calling his supposed partisans to arms. Simply, these calls were falling on deaf ears.¹⁷⁷

The inaction of the fifth column, together with the grinding to a halt of the English offensive, created an extremely dangerous situation for the English expeditionary force. Spencer, after further furious requests to Faris Khan and threats and exhortations made to his supposed followers through Erskine, finally confronted one of the leaders of this strangely slothful fifth column. In the night between 1 and 2 March, the English Chief secretly conferred with Wali Ullah, who had come as representative of Sidi Zafar's. Spencer flatly asked why 'they [Sidi Zafar and Wali Ullah] had shown so little attention' to the English and Faris Khan's interests. To Spencer's complete amazement, Wali Ullah candidly answered that 'all the women of the family of the late Teg Bakht [Tegh Beg Khan] and Safdar Khan had of late so attached themselves to Atchund and his sons that both he and Jaffier [Sidi Zafar] were now desirous only of Farus Caun's [Faris Khan] coming as Naib to Atchund'.¹⁷⁸

Spencer was so incredulous in front of such an explanation that he sent the Mughal nobleman back, with the express request to return the night after with a direct message from Sidi Zafar. This Wali Ullah did, but Sidi Zafar's last word was in no way more comforting to the enraged and frustrated English Chief. Quite bluntly, Wali Ullah confirmed that 'Jaffier [Sidi Zafar] himself, and those of Farus Caun's [Faris Khan] partisans who invited him up, were rather desirous of seeing him Naib and the Nawabship in Atchund's

¹⁷⁵ FRS, 15 and 23 Feb. 1759.

¹⁷⁶ FRS, 27 Feb. 1759.

¹⁷⁷ FRS, 1 March 1759.

¹⁷⁸ FRS, 1 March 1759 (between 11 and 12 at night).

family'.¹⁷⁹ Even from the neutral and bureaucratic prose of the factory records one can detect the wrath which must have gripped Spencer. Quite undeterred, Wali Ullah 'urged that the government could better be carried on for the good of the town this way; and all, in any way attached to the families of the former Governors, were desirous of having it so, and that Pharus Caun [Faris Khan] should be Naib in its full extent'.¹⁸⁰

The Puppet-masters

At this point, having faithfully followed this intricate game of deception and counter-deception, one can legitimately wonder who were the puppets and who were the puppet-masters. Until the arrival of the Bombay fleet Spencer had seemed in full control of the game, happily pulling the strings which moved, one way or another, most city magnates. Then things had changed. The English had put down the sudden coldness of 'Pharus Khan's party' to the delayed arrival of the fleet. But the real explanation can well be different. Even if, at the end of February and the beginning of March, Spencer insisted that Sidi Zafar and Wali Ullah had changed horses by declaring themselves against Faris Khan being Nawab, the truth seems otherwise. Reading Spencer's own letter of 11 January, where he described his initial dealings with the two Mughal nobles, it comes out quite clearly that they had never had any intention to have Faris Khan established as Nawab. What they wanted was to have him as Naib to Atchund. Why?

Although a clear-cut answer is impossible, a hypothesis can be advanced. As I have already pointed out elsewhere, while Faris Khan was a violent and treacherous individual, whom the Suratis at large hated, Meah Atchund was a good man, unwilling to be harsh and vindictive.¹⁸¹ This is shown by the fact that he never condemned to capital punishment any of the would-be assassins who, in several occasions, made attempts on his life during and soon after the civil war. Clearly, from the two nobles' viewpoint, a diminution of the Nawab's power through the creation of a Naib was something accept-

¹⁷⁹ FRS, 2 March 1759 (late at night).

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ On Faris Khan and Meah Atchund's characters see Torri, 'Surat', p. 688, fn. 27.

able and even desirable, but the perspective of an all-powerful Faris Khan was far from being an exciting one.

In fact, here it must be asked why Sidi Zafar and Wali Ullah wanted Faris Khan at all. The possible answer is that the two nobles had decided that it was the necessary price they had to pay in order to entice the English to do the job that nobody else could do. Quite simply, the destruction of the Sidi was seen as the necessary precondition to the restoration of order in the city. The Governor of the castle was a kind of loose cannon, temperamental and unpredictable, and because of his follies, the city was sinking into a situation of anarchy. He had to be removed, but the problem was that Atchund and the other members of the city ruling elite—as Safder Khan and Ali Nawaz Khan before them—simply did not have the means and the know-how to take on the castle. Only the English were at hand, capable and willing to do the job. All that they needed was some little encouragement, which Sidi Zafar was not reluctant in giving them.

There is no way to tell if Sidi Zafar and Wali Ullah's conspiracy was hatched with the Nawab's knowledge. But even if, at the beginning, Atchund was unaware of it, he soon smartly inserted himself in the game. Already on 11 February, when Spencer was at the Bar and the Bombay fleet was midway between Bombay and Surat, the Nawab had sent the first hintings—through Erskine—that he was willing to strike an alliance against the Sidi.¹⁸² Soon after, Erskine realized that Atchund knew about English plans concerning Faris Khan and was offering his alliance on condition of not being deprived of the nawabship.¹⁸³ Erskine was quick to draw the right conclusion: already on 18 February he had become convinced that 'Atchund will never enter into any agreement for anything less than the government; and exclusive of that, Pharus Caun [Faris Khan] can get what he wants'.¹⁸⁴ More importantly, well in advance of Spencer, Erskine had realized that, should Atchund join his forces to the Sidi's the successful conclusion of the expedition would be at great risk.¹⁸⁵

While the English forces laboriously approached Surat, some kind of deal must have been struck among the members of the Mughal ruling elite. No doubt, the old Begum must have played a crucial role in it, as one can gather from Wali Ullah's hint that 'all the

¹⁸² FRS, 11 Feb. 1759.

¹⁸³ FRS, 14 Feb. 1759.

¹⁸⁴ FRS, 19 Feb. 1759 (letter from Erskine of the previous day).

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, postscript.

women of the family of the late Teg Bakht and Safdar Khan' had attached themselves to Atchund and his sons. Likewise, the final deal must have had the assent of the whole upper crust of the Mughal nobility in town. This, once again, is shown by Wali Ullah's warning that 'all, any way attached to the families of the former Governors' were desirous to have Atchund as Nawab and Faris Khan as Naib. Accordingly, on 1 and 2 March 1759, Spencer's conspiracy was finally exposed for the hollow affair it really was.

The Troubles of the Merchants

As we have seen, apart from Wali Ullah and Sidi Zafar's appeals, Spencer had received—or so he thought—those of the merchants. Yet, when the Bombay fleet had reached Surat Bar, the merchants had started to behave like ants in an overturned ant-hill rather than like John Ford's coach travellers, timely rescued by the US cavalry (which, after all, if one relies on Spencer's optimistic report of 11 January, was the role that they were supposed to play).

In fact, the merchants—Baniyas included—had every reason for being struck by fear, as the start of English military operations coincided—quite on purpose—with the crucial period when the ships to the Middle East were being freighted, causing all commercial transactions to come to a standstill. What was particularly worrying was that sailing ships, in order to be sure to reach the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, had to leave before mid-March. Otherwise, the monsoon would turn and push the ships back to the Western Coast of India. Of course, the 'loss of the season' on the part of the whole merchant fleet of Surat would be ruinous for the city. Almost as bad was the fact that additional ships were expected from the Middle East and that the English had not concealed their intention to seize them and their cargoes, impounding them up to the end of the war.¹⁸⁶

In this difficult situation, on 19 February, the Nawab convened a general council of merchants, which, in turn, decided to prepare the defence of the city. The council went so far as to send a rather threatening delegation to Erskine, headed by a representative of

¹⁸⁶ This was openly stated by Spencer to a delegation from town which was at the English camp on the funny errand of asking Spencer's permission in order to get hold of the English 'garden' and turn it over to the Sidi's army. FRS, 19 Feb. 1759.

Sayyid Idrus, the second Muslim religious authority in town, and two Hindu merchants, whom we have already quoted in this paper: Girderlal and Laldas. Of course, Erskine was himself suitably threatening, and the merchants did not dare to follow up their brave words against the English.¹⁸⁷ In fact, even those merchants who were closely connected with the Sidi started to distance themselves from him. This was the case of Salah Chellabi. He had been the Sidi's agent during the *pourparler* with Spencer in the days before 16 February.¹⁸⁸ Then, after the arrival of the Bombay fleet, Chellabi abandoned that role and never came back to negotiate with Spencer on the Sidi's behalf.¹⁸⁹ Later, when the Sidi tried to get certificates from the merchants, 'expressing satisfaction at his conduct', Chellabi was among those who did not sign.¹⁹⁰ Although strictly tied to the Sidi, Chellabi was in a very exposed position. Three of his ships—which were at the Bar, ready to be freighted for the trip to the 'Gulphs'—had been taken over by the English.¹⁹¹ Soon afterwards, the same fate befell another of his ships, just arrived from Basra.¹⁹²

If the English were making use of the stick against the Surat shipping magnate, they had not neglected to dangle a carrot in front of him. Chellabi had been one of the notables to whom Spencer had secretly written before leaving the city, disclosing English plans, and giving assurances that the old customs and privileges of the Surat citizens and magnates would be left untouched, unless, of course, they actively opposed the English. The letters themselves, left in Erskine's hands, had been distributed on 26 February, causing 'a good deal of noise in town'.¹⁹³

While Chellabi was taking a stand of strict neutrality, another shipping magnate, namely Muncherjee Cursetjee, was acting in a

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ FRS, 8 and 9 Feb. 1759.

¹⁸⁹ FRS, 13 Feb. 1759. On that date Chellabi was supposed to resume his negotiation with Spencer, but he never showed up.

¹⁹⁰ Neither did the Sayyids. FRS, 27 Feb. 1759.

¹⁹¹ FRS, 22 Feb. 1759.

¹⁹² FRS, 27 Feb. 1759.

¹⁹³ FRS, 2 and 27 Feb. 1759. The letters were aimed at those influential men or social groups which occupied a middle ground between the English and the Sidi. This section of the population, by shifting its weight behind either party could play a decisive role in the outcome of the war. The letters were addressed to the 'house of the Chellabys', to Sayyid Abdul Idrus, to 'the principal officers and inhabitants of Surat', to Meah Atchund, and to 'Appajee and Mandrow, the Maratta agents'. Of course, there were no letters addressed to Sidi Zafar, Wali Ullah and the Head Sayyid, as they were already part of the pro-English party.

sharply different way. At first, Ali Nawaz Khan's overthrow had seemingly pushed out of the political scene the Parsi merchant prince, who had found a refuge in the Dutch factory. The English themselves, however, did not anticipate that he would be out of the way for too long a period and, in its instructions to Spencer, the Select Committee had devoted a fairly long paragraph to advise the new Chief on how to tackle with the Parsi. It is significant that Muncherjee was the only Surat merchant that those honourable gentlemen in Bombay had judged worthy of such a honour.¹⁹⁴

They were right in worrying about Muncherjee as, soon after Spencer's arrival in Surat, the Parsi swung back into action. He made his peace with the Sidi and acted as his *vakil* in trying to convince Ali Nawaz Khan to come out from his forced retirement and take the side of Muncherjee's new patron. Wisely, the former Nawab—who, after all, had been betrayed by the same Sidi Ahmed only some months before—declined the honour.¹⁹⁵ Undeterred by this failure, Muncherjee went on in his diplomatic efforts, trying to bring about a defensive alliance between the Sidi and the Marathas.¹⁹⁶ Here, the problem was that the Peshwa had already decided not to stage a direct military intervention against the English. Possibly he considered the 'Hon'ble Company' too dangerous an enemy in a moment when the bulk of Maratha forces were engaged in the grand attempt to take over the heartland of the vanishing Mughal empire (the third battle of Panipat was only two years away). Accordingly, the Peshwa was limiting himself to the attempt to extract as many concessions as possible from the English, by offering his unwanted help.¹⁹⁷

On his part, Spencer got in contact with Muncherjee¹⁹⁸ and, although the content of his communication to the Parsi has not been preserved, it is not difficult to imagine that it must have consisted of the usual mixture of blandishments and threats that, those days, made up the stuff of the English Chief's messages to his Indian adversaries. These threats were promptly fleshed out by the fact that, on the night between 26 and 27 February, soon after the arrival of

¹⁹⁴ Secret, 18 Dec. 1758 (instructions to John Spencer).

¹⁹⁵ DP, p. ccxcii.

¹⁹⁶ FRS, 9 Feb. 1759 (letter from Erskine).

¹⁹⁷ For the Peshwa's Surat policy see Shejwalkar, *The Surat Episode, passim*. Some additional information can be gathered from W. S. Desai, *Bombay and the Marathas up to 1774* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1970), pp. 157–61. Unfortunately, both works, although useful (particularly the former), are far from being fully satisfactory.

¹⁹⁸ FRS, 12 Feb. 1759.

Chellabi's ship from Basra, another one, owned by Muncherjee arrived at the Bar. Of course, she was promptly seized by the English.¹⁹⁹

Already before the seizure of his ship, Muncherjee had started a double game, assuring the English of his good behaviour and even offering to liaise between Spencer and Erskine.²⁰⁰ At the same time he went doggedly on trying to push the Dutch to intervene against the English. But the Dutch knew better. Their military forces and artillery at their factory and *bunder* were considerably stronger than what had been estimated by Spencer. Yet, the presence of Pocock's ships at the bar was too much of a deterrent for them to move.²⁰¹

In sum, in spite of his relentless efforts, Muncherjee's action came to nothing. Meanwhile, the body of the merchants seemed unable to take any action which could affect the outcome of the ongoing struggle. It was only after the English breakthrough beyond the outer wall, that they sent two envoys to Spencer, purposely to arrange some kind of mediation between the warring parties. The representatives of the merchants arrived the morning after the final meeting between Spencer and Wali Ullah and, it has been claimed, the occasion served to stress the unshakable and politically determinant friendship between the Surat merchants and the English.²⁰² In fact, what happened was something quite different, and it is worth being discussed in some detail just in order to dispel any idea that some kind of entente between the English and the Indian merchants was at work.

Ominously, John Spencer opened his interview with the two envoys from Surat by complaining 'that he did not think the merchants had acted with the warmth expected or that they had given hopes of'. As an answer, the two representatives of the merchants 'pleaded their situation in regard to the Scyddee and the Nabob which had deterred

¹⁹⁹ FRS, 27 Feb. 1759.

²⁰⁰ FRS, 19 Feb. 1759 (letter from Erskine).

²⁰¹ Some twenty years after these facts, while relating them to the Dutch Rear Admiral Stavorinus, then visiting Surat, Muncherjee and the other Dutch broker, Govindram, claimed that the incumbent *Directore*, Taillefert, had been bought by the English. See Stavorinus, *Voyages to the East Indies*, vol. III, pp. 121–4. This charge, although convincing enough to be believed by Stavorinus, was totally groundless. The Dutch *Directore* never appears in the English records among those that the English tried to suborn. The real reason for Dutch inaction was the presence of Pocock's two ships of the line at the Surat Bar, which could easily have sunk or seized the Dutch vessels there. See Secret, 15 April 1759 (letter from Pocock of 29 March 1759 and letter of Spencer of 8 April 1759).

²⁰² Subramanian, 'Reply', p. 341 fn. 56.

them from making any stir' and went on claiming that, nevertheless, 'the hearts of the trading interest in general were with [the English]'.²⁰³ Of course these were pious platitudes that could be taken at face value only by a dimwit, which, in spite of his limitations, most certainly Spencer was not. Worse still, the two envoys, explicitly speaking on behalf of the trading community, 'insinuated that the Castle they believed could be delivered to us [the English], if we would secure to the Scydee the Tanka and fleet'. The Chief answered by demanding 'peremptorily' both the castle and the tanka. Then, he went on to claim in a threatening way that, while the final attack had been so long delayed waiting for the merchants' resolve, 'as for two days we [the English] had heard nothing from the place, orders had been given to throw bombs into the castle'. In fact the bombing had just begun as the two messengers from the merchants had arrived. At this point the two envoys 'desired they [the bombs] might be stopped which was not granted as it will hasten their resolve, but a merit was made of confining the shells to the castle only'.²⁰⁴

The messengers were dismissed and the bombardment continued at intervals during the whole evening. In this way ended the only effort made by the Surat merchants as a body to influence one way or another the outcome of the war.

The Takeover of the Castle

The unveiling of Sidi Zafar's real intentions and the attempted mediation by the merchants' two envoys came as so many cold showers to the English Chief. Their effect could not but be worsened by the fact that they took place at a moment when the English had just failed the attempt to bribe Sidi Hilal, the military leader of the young Sidi's army.²⁰⁵ That same day, namely on 3 March, Spencer decided to take stock of the military situation and convened a council of war. It was on this occasion that the military officers made it clear that, without a substantial support from inside the town, there was hardly any chance of a successful conclusion of the enterprise. On the morning

²⁰³ It is exactly this statement, quoted by Subramanian out of context, which in her opinion shows that Torri 'is quite incorrect' (*ibid.*) in claiming that the merchants were far from being enthusiastically pro-English.

²⁰⁴ FRS, 3 March 1759.

²⁰⁵ FRS, 2 March 1759.

of the 4th, the only 'loyal' traitor in Spencer's pay, a Rajput officer called Maulji Chaura, set open the Athwa gate. But, as the English council of war had correctly forecast, Maulji Chaura and his 150 men were not enough to tip the scales in favour of the British: the gate was soon retaken by the Sidi's forces.²⁰⁶

This last episode finally forced Spencer to face the unpleasant truth: the only way out of his predicament was to bend to Sidi Zafar's will and accept the offer of alliance that Meah Atchund had been making since 11 February. That same morning, this time with lightening speed, Spencer and Atchund, through Wali Ullah, came to an agreement. Atchund accepted to appoint Faris Khan to the naibship 'in its greatest extent' and engaged not to interfere with his future Naib's prerogatives. Besides, the Nawab accepted to become responsible for 'whatever articles Pharus Caun [Faris Khan] has given in writing to the Hon'ble Company'. Which, in plain words, meant that Atchund had to toss up, some way or other, the two lakhs of rupees promised by Faris Khan to the English as payment of the expenses for the expedition. On their part, the English guaranteed Atchund that the government of the city would be continued to him 'in full authority'.²⁰⁷

On the basis of this agreement, a gate was opened and, with the support of the Nawab's troops, the English entered the inner wall, surrounded the Sidi's house and the castle and moved to take hold of the strategic locations in town. At that point Sidi Ahmed sent a messenger to Spencer 'throwing himself in a good degree at [English] mercy'.²⁰⁸ But not even in this final phase did the English military talent shine in any appreciable way. English troops had subdivided in several columns that, entering the inner city, lost contact among one another. Some of the Sidi's troops, possibly unaware of their master's surrender, attacked them. As a consequence the English fell into utter confusion and only the timely intervention of the Nawab's troops salvaged the situation.²⁰⁹ This sealed the victorious conclusion of an expedition during which the English had hovered dangerously near to disaster.

The Aftermath

One could claim, as was done by a French witness, that 'never, as it were, an enterprise was worse realized than their [the English]

²⁰⁶ FRS, 4 March 1759.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁹ DP, pp. ccii-cciii.

march from the bar up to Surat' and that the whole expedition had been 'well conceived, badly organized, and even worse executed'.²¹⁰ This does not detract from the fact that, once the English seized the castle, they became the paramount power in the city. Only a European expeditionary force would possess the capability to blockade the Bar and retake the castle. In the 1770s, the French consul in Surat, Anquetil de Briancourt, dreamed about it.²¹¹ But, already in 1759, French power in India was on the wane and de Briancourt's dreams remained just that. Accordingly, when, on 5 March 1759, the English Chief made his official entry in town, accompanied by the Nawab's sons and the principal officers and inhabitants of the place, a new epoch initiated in the history of the city. In a very real way, 5 March 1759 marked the beginning of the colonial era in Surat.

Conclusions

The goal of this paper, as set out at its beginning, was to examine two problems: the military relationship between the English and their Indian adversaries, and the connections between the English and the dominant Indian social groups. As far as the first point is concerned, there is no doubt about the relevance of the English Royal squadron in checkmating both the Marathas and the Dutch. Once Pocock's ships were in the Bombay harbour, Bombay itself became impregnable to the Marathas, and, once two of his ships of the line were at Surat Bar, both the Maratha and Dutch ships riding there, far from being a potential threat to the English expeditionary force, became virtual hostages to Pocock's ships. Yet, once Pocock's role has been acknowledged, it must be stressed that, by itself, it did not make of the 1759 expedition a walkover. Far from appearing as an eighteenth-century replica of the sixteenth-century Spanish *conquistadores* of the Americas, the English conquerors-to-be of the Surat castle arrived late, moved slowly, were unable to pin down and decisively defeat an inferior adversary, and, finally, ran out of steam, stopping their forward push in an extremely dangerous position, which made them liable to a potentially devastating counterattack.

²¹⁰ DP, pp. ccci, cccii.

²¹¹ V. G. Hatalkar (ed.), *French Records relating to the History of the Marathas*, vols I & II (Bombay: State Board for Literature and Culture, 1978), particularly, vol. I, pp. 66ff.

This indifferent performance on the part of the English had two main causes. The first was the complacency and sloppiness of the Bombay Government, which, both in 1758 and 1759, never really expected to have to cope with a tough resistance. Significantly, not only in 1759, but in 1758 too, the English expeditionary force arrived at Surat Bar too late for the 'springs'. This happened in spite of Ellis's continuous warnings and, later, reprimands on the importance of a timely arrival of the Bombay navy. This caused the English expeditionary force to lose a crucial advantage. The situation could have been recouped had the English military leader been a man of more than average abilities, which, most certainly, Captain Richard Maitland, the military commander of the English land forces, was not.

In sum, the reason of the less-than-brilliant English performance was lack of leadership both at the political level (the Bombay Government) and at the military level. On the contrary, the reason of the military weakness of their Indian counterparts was the result of technological inferiority. This—although it did not show during the 1759 campaign, being compensated by Sidi Hilal's strategic skill and the fighting spirit of his men—played a decisive role in the unfolding of the events leading to the establishment of English overlordship in Surat. In fact, the inability to take on a fairly ruinous and weak (by European standards) old castle by the durbar forces was what made politically possible English intervention and, therefore, English victory.

Once this is said we can turn to the political aspect of the 1759 campaign. Since the eve of the expedition, the key allies on whom the English had relied, and indeed the key men in making possible English victory, were members of the Mughal nobility. As we have seen, the characters on whom the English counted were not always those who actually played the decisive role in making English success possible. Besides, those who supported the English did it, as it were, on their own terms.

In sum, the Mughal nobility, under the dual leadership of Meah Atchund and Sidi Zafar Khan, played their hand quite well, closely conditioning the events leading to the takeover of the castle. It is true that the Mughal nobles, by accepting British paramountcy, gave up their independence. But that—to make use of Yehoshafat Harkabi's categories—was a conscious choice between bad and worse.²¹²

²¹² Yehoshafat Harkabi, 'Choosing Between Bad and Worse', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, XVI, 3 (Spring 1987).

Sidi Zafar and Meah Atchund's choices prevented the reawakening on a grand scale of the civil strife that had prevailed between 1747 and 1752, and deflected for good that ever-feared event that was the Maratha takeover of the city. In fact, the principal Mughal nobles showed themselves, throughout the events of 1759, as collaborators whom the English could not easily dispense with. Significantly, after the conclusion of the expedition, they were rewarded by being allowed to go on wielding a great deal of power and a conspicuous share of wealth. As I have already noticed elsewhere, among them nobody did better than Meah Atchund, his family, and Sidi Zafar Yab Khan.²¹³

The case of the merchants is widely different. Some of them—who, for one reason or another, had patrons among the new English overlords—stood to gain from the new political set-up. In particular this was the case of Jagannath Laldas and the business network that he headed. After the conquest of the castle, Jagannath was at first rewarded only with the usual shawls and high-sounding commendations,²¹⁴ plus a post of assistant collector for his son.²¹⁵ But in 1761, a reluctant Bombay Government farmed out the investment to him and his partners. As in previous cases, the reluctance of the Bombay Government was related to its doubts on Jagannath's economic worthiness. This time, however, the Bombay Councillors' misgivings were outweighed by an official recommendation for Jagannath, coming directly from the Court of Directors.²¹⁶

Yet, that of Jagannath, his collaborators and some other individual cases that could be quoted²¹⁷ are just exceptions. As a group, the merchants had showed an utter inability to control the unfolding events and now, as it had already been the case in the past, they were presented with the bill of expenses by the victorious party.

²¹³ Torri, 'Surat', p. 691.

²¹⁴ FRS, 5 Dec. 1759.

²¹⁵ FRS, 10 and 28 April 1759.

²¹⁶ Letter from the Court of Directors to Bombay of 25 April 1760, para. 96 [IOR, E/4/996, p. 873], and Public, 24 Feb. 1761. The hypothesis can be made that Ellis, by then back in England, played a role in making the Directors aware of Jagannath's 'great use'. This supposition is strengthened by the fact that, still in 1772, Ellis intervened with a personal letter addressed to the incumbent Bombay Governor on behalf of Jagannath's business associate and political heir, Dunjeeshaw Munjeeshaw.

²¹⁷ Because of their connections with some powerful English officers, both Dadabhoy Manockjee, the last heir of Manockjee Nawrojee's fortune, and Mulla Fakharruddin were able to go back to Surat and, up to the early 1770s, greatly prospered under English patronage.

Accordingly, the first political decision taken by the English, soon after the takeover of the castle, was the imposition of a 1% extra custom on all Surat trade, in order to finance the payment of the 2 lakhs of rupees, originally promised by Faris Khan to the English.²¹⁸ It is possible that the merchants at large, but certainly not only the 'Banias', were *formally* consulted. After all, this had been the case more than once when, on previous occasions, the Nawabs had imposed new taxes on trade.²¹⁹ Yet, it is worth stressing that, even if this formal consultation occurred—which is far from being certain—the English found it so unimportant that, differently from what had been the case in Tegh Beg Khan and Sidi Masud's time, the event did not find its way into the English records. In fact, according to the Surat factory records, what happened was that first the Surat Chief and Council arrived at the conclusion that, to have the war expenses repaid, the most advisable means was the imposition of an additional 1% custom; then they consulted the Nawab and Faris Khan about the advisability of the new toll; finally, they got 'the Nabob, Naib and principal people of the Government' to execute the order imposing the 1% extra custom.²²⁰ Significantly, the wishes of the merchants (Banias or otherwise) do not appear to have ever been taken into any account by the new overlords of Surat. But, then, that is the destiny of the losers.

Abbreviations

DP

Discours Préliminaire, in Anquetil Duperron, *Zend-Avesta, ouvrage de Zoroastre*, tome premier, première partie, Paris: N. M. Tillard, 1771

²¹⁸ Here, it is unnecessary to dwell once again on the claim made in Subramanian, 'Capital and Crowd', p. 213, that the 1% war tax was 'volunteered' by the 'Banias'. On this see Torri, 'Surat', pp. 688–90.

²¹⁹ This happened in 1742, when a 0.25% custom was raised for the maintenance of the Mughal fleet (FRS, 27 June 1742); in 1744, when Tegh Beg Khan levied a 1% custom in order to finance the military expenditure made necessary by the defence of the city against another Mughal pretender (FRS, 2 Aug. 1744); and in 1752, when Sidi Masud and Safder Khan were casting around for the money necessary to pay both the English and the Marathas (see FRS, 19, 20 May 4 June, 4, 20, 25, 29 Nov. 1752; the episode is summed up in fn. 101). In the latter case, Safder Khan, after much dithering by the merchants, actually detained the most eminent among them in the durbar, intimating that they would not be released before deciding on the kind and amount of new taxes (FRS, 30 July 1752).

²²⁰ FRS, 4, 5, 27 Aug. and 28 Nov. 1759. See also Public, 9 Dec. 1759.

FRS	Factory Records: Surat
IOR	Indian Office Library and Records, London
MAS	<i>Modern Asian Studies</i>
Mayor's Court	Proceedings of the Mayor's Court, Bombay
Orme	Robert Orme Collection, IOR
Public	Bombay Public Proceedings
Secret	Bombay Political, Secret and Select Committee Consultations
Spencer's 1st report	John Spencer's letter of 11 Jan. 1759, Secret, 14 Jan. 1759, and Public, 6 Feb. 1759
Spencer's 2nd report	John Spencer's letter of 4 Feb. 1759, Public, 13 Feb. 1759

As a rule, the English records quoted in this paper are available both at the IOR and the Maharashtra State Archives, Elphinstone College, Bombay. They are quoted according to the date of entry to make it possible to check them in both archives. Only in some cases of long documents, or documents available in only one of the two collections, the indications of the location and page numbers are given. In this case, even if copies are available in both archives, references are given for only one location.

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