

CHAPTER 1

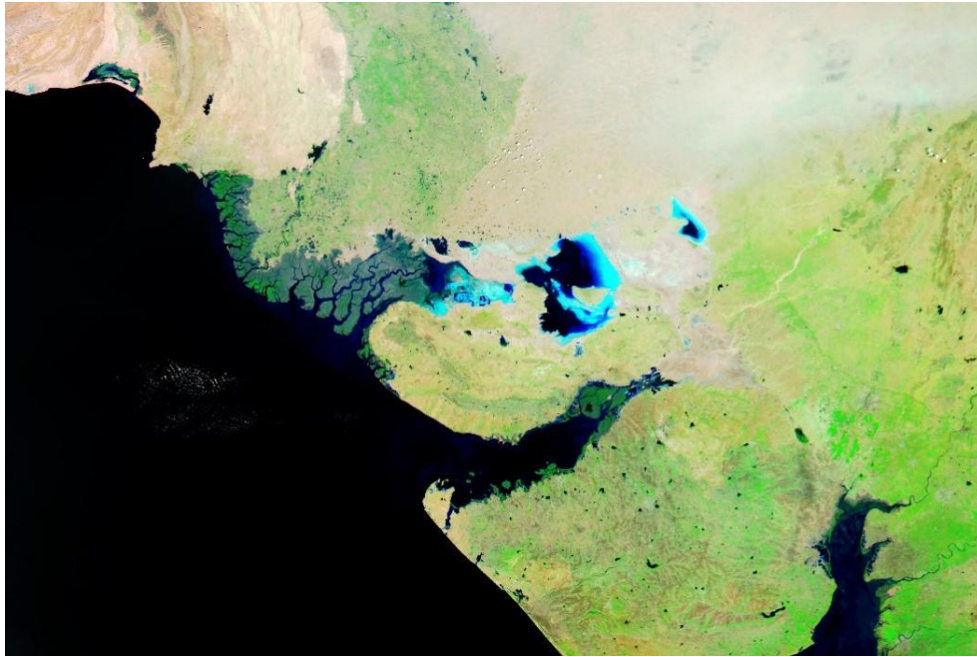
GEO-POLITICAL SURVEY OF KUTCH

This chapter discuss on the topography of the land, its people, and the factors that influenced the Geo-Political scenario of Kutch, starting from the earliest invasions, the rise of Jadejas, the annexations of the north-west frontier, and its integration into the Union of India. The purpose of this survey is to understand the political scenario of Kutch in the context of its contemporary rulers. In the present context, it is this scenario which led to the cultural development of its people which has profoundly altered the preferences of this land. Hence the brief introduction may suffice in forming a base for later chapters and further reading.

Geography: The Location of Kutch

Speaking of Kutch or Cutch (as the East Indian Company officers addressed), it is a land of rich antiquities, located in the north-western region in the state of Gujarat. Based on geological evidence, we know that the land was long submerged under the sea, and is believed to have surfaced as a result of the plate tectonic forces. Archaeological evidence of plant and animal fossils found at the fossil park near Nakhatrana proves the existence of life on this land which dates back to Tertiary period.

When traced on a map, this crescent-shaped marshy lowland almost forms an island, as the south and the southwest border is long shared with the Gulf of Kutch, and the north and northeast by the Great and Little Rann of Kutch. This unique topographical feature formed the passing for the invaders from the north and northwest, creating favorable and unfavorable conditions. The Gulf of Kutch had been a boon for its economy as the land celebrated an extensive maritime trade with its inlanders. It is this unique feature of the land that differs its history from the rest of Gujarat.



(Courtesy: NASA Earth Observatory, 2020)

The Land and its People:

The land of Kutch remained mostly arid, with a large ratio covered in salt-encrusted marshy swamp. The salt particles carried by the wind from this region are further deposited on good agricultural soil rendering it unfit for cultivation. This larger area which remained waste land grows shrubs, which was claimed by the pastoral tribes for cattle rearing. Only the remaining fifteen percent of the land was cultivable, yet could produce grains enough to be able to supply to Sindh.

The people of Kutch differ with respect to other parts of Gujarat. The people here predominantly speak the Kutchhi language, which is a dialect of Sindhi, has over the period borrowed few words from Gujarati, and has no script. The land was since ancient times largely occupied by the nomadic tribes like Kathis, Ahirs, and Rabaries. Most of the relatively recent settlers are the one who are believed to have immigrated chiefly from the north and northeast border, chiefly from Sindh and Marwar. The gold and silversmiths; Hindu and Muslim tapestry makers; and gardeners came from Sindh. Shoemakers', carpenters, barbers and bracelet makers from Gujarat. Tanners and blacksmiths from

Kathiawad. Washermen and polishers from Sindh. Coppermiths and cotton spinners from Marwar and gilders and shield-makers from Delhi.¹

The Kutchi pilots are known across the world for their adventurous nature and navigation skills at the sea. These pilots had a good understanding of reading a compass and steer their vessels by charting nautical tables to move in right directions. The aptitude of these sea pilots along with their long-established commercial skill with trade has always been the basis of this land's prosperity.

Kutch merchant class played a pivotal role in the economic structure of the state. Although their main profession were Trade and Commerce, many of these families, known as *Sahukars*, were largely involved in money lending business which was one of the most advance systems of banking indigenious to this region. These merchants were mostly engaged with business around the sea and developed sophisticated systems of banking for its merchant enterprise. The important trade centres were Mandvi, Mundra, Anjar, Jakhau, and Nalia. Mandvi was the main lifeline for the people of Kutch as it helped in maintaining contact with the outside world. Its land trade which was the Sindh, Marwar, and even up to Kashmir was carried through caravans.²

Geo-Politics:

Early Invasions-

The land of Kutch, like other parts of Gujarat, had been inhabited by men from pre-historic times. Evidence proves that ever since primeval times, this land has been well connected with the continents outside than with the people inside. The excavated ancient city of Dholavira dates back to 2600 BCE, is a testimony from the past, which demonstrates the importance of this land for trade and invasion from the beginning of Civilizations. It is believed that the bearers of the Civilization known as Harappa, had come to Kutch to establish traders across this region. Town planning, brick-built houses with stone

¹ Campbell James, Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency, Volume V- Kutch, Palanpur and Mahikandha, Government Central Press, Bombay, 1880, Pp 30

² *Ibid*, Pp 290

foundations, wheel-made pottery, writing with implied knowledge, and agricultural cultivation are some of the indigenous characteristics of this sight.

Leaping further during the second century BCE, both Sindh and Kutch- were open to strong influences from the north-west and beyond. In the first century BCE, the land was under the rule of Menander I, the Indo-Greek King, whose territory was spread from river Yamuna in the North to Kutch and Saurashtra region in the west. Around 120 BCE, the Greco Bactrian was overthrown, and Indo Scythians followed by Maurya Empire and Saka rulers established their rule in Kutch and other parts of Northern Gujarat.

The Political history of Kutch in the true sense begins with the Western Kshatrapa, Saka rulers³, who ruled the whole of western India including – Kutch, Saurashtra, Northern Maharashtra, and western parts of Malwa. The oldest stone inscription of the Kshatrapa period found from Andhau village (in the Banni region) is now on display at Kutch Museum, Bhuj. This stone is an important historical reference, as it dates to 89 CE, and has an inscription of ‘Chashtana’ the founder of the Saka dynasty. Yet another important inscriptional reference found from this region is of Abhira king, around the third century CE. By the fifth century, Maitrakas of Vallabhi took over the land, and from then probably initiated its close association with the ruling clans of Gujarat. Seventh century, the Chavda dynasty ruled over the eastern and central parts of Kutch, and eventually, by the tenth century, all came under the rule of Solanki dynasty. After the fall of Solanki, the Vaghela dynasty claimed control over this land for a brief period.

The Rise of the Jadeja Rulers-

During the eighth and ninth centuries, in the neighboring land of Sindh, the Khilji dynasty was annexing the western territories, forcing the Samma Rajputs (Hindu rulers of Sindh) to move southwards into Kutch. In no time these Samma Rajputs started occupying their authority over the western parts of Kutch. During the tenth century, a significant area was under their control and by the fourteenth century they started establishing their

³ The Western Kshatrapas rulers were contemporary to the Khushans, who ruled the northern part of the Indian sub-continent.

supremacy in the regions of Kutch. These Samma Rajputs in Kutch, re-identified their dynasty as the Jadeja clan of Rajputs, and ever since then it was the Samma-Jadeja Rajputs who established their rule over Kutch till it got integrated into the Union of India. Although the Islamic invasion of the later period, under the Sultans and Mughals, had a great impact on the political structure of this land which we shall outline further.

Jadejas' during the Gujarat Sultanate-

The political history of this land, like other regions, is built with interesting anecdotes that keep a historian absorbed, and one most frequently narrated event dates back to the Gujarat Sultanate time, around the sixteenth century. This very incident also narrates how the present clan of rulers gets the title 'Rao' from the Sultan of Gujarat. In about 1550's there was an internal rivalry between the Jadeja brothers- Jam Hamir and Jam Raval, which broke into a major fight. Jam Raval defeated Jam Hamir, whereupon Hamir's four sons had to take refuge in Ahmedabad. During their stranded stay in the city, Khengar, the second son of Jam Hamir showed bravery before Sultan Mahmud Begada by killing a tiger in a fight. Impressed by the valor of the fourteen-year-old boy, the Sultan in appreciation handed over the territory of Morvi within his dominions and conferred him the title of 'Rao'. As Rao Khengar was outraged by his uncle Jam Raval's ill-treatment of his family. He used Morvi as the base for operations to avenge his father's death and recovered his possessions over Kutch.⁴ Since then it was Rao Khengar's clan who rules over Kutch, and Jam Raval's clan who moves to rule Saurashtra after negotiation. Soon after this incident Rao Khengar makes Bhuj his new Capital and establishes a 'Bhayat system' of administration in his court. The 'Bhayat system' consisted of the descendent of the royal family who would own and govern a domain allocated to them, and occasionally report to the Rao at his court. Henceforth, Rao remained an independent ruler within the Gujarat Sultanate, by establishing a friendly relationship with the Sultans. As against the exclusion of tax tribute, an offer of 5000 horses was presented to the Sultans.⁵

Impressed by the Sultanate city of Ahmedabad, where Khengar spent his formative years, he tried to re-establish a similar potential town in Kutch. He realized that the towns

⁴ Patel G.D., Gujarat State Gazetteers, Government of Gujarat, Kutch District, Ahmedabad, 1971, Pp. 79

⁵ *Ibid*, Pp. 80

of Anjar and Bhuj could become such potential centres and hence improved their infrastructure, crafts, and agriculture. To improve its trade, around 1580's, he laid the foundation stones for the port of Rayanpur. His amiable relations with the rulers of Sindh, especially when he extended his offer to assist Gazikhan, a prince of Sindh, rewarded him the land in Sindh extending up to 'Rahim ki Bazaar'. In the year 1585, Rao Khengar-I died at an advanced age, having established an independent kingdom in Kutch. Peace and tranquility were ensured by the Sultans of Gujarat and Rao Khengar-I was succeeded by his son Rao Bharmal in 1585. The succession of position was according to the primogeniture since then are listed below for further reference:

Names of the Raos	Period of Reign
Rao Khengar I	1548- 1585 CE
Rao Bharmal I	1585-1631 CE
Rao Bhojraj	1631-1645 CE
Rao Khengar II	1645-1654 CE
Rao Tamachi	1654-1665 CE
Rao Raydhan	1665-1697 CE
Rao Pragmal I	1697-1715 CE
Rao Godh I	1715- 1718 CE
Rao Desal I	1718- 1752 CE
Mirza Rao Lakhat	1741-r.1752- 1760 CE
Rao Godh II	1760-1778 CE
Rao Raydhan III	1778-1786 CE 1801-1813 CE
Rao Prithviraj	1786-1801 CE
Rao Bharmal II	1814-1819 CE
Rao Desal II	1819-1860 CE
Rao Pragmal II	1860-1875 CE
Rao Khengar III	1875-1942 CE
Rao Vijayraj	1942-1948 CE

Jadejas' during the Mughals rule-

Rao Khengar-I was succeeded by his son Rao Bharmal-I who ruled till 1631. His reign saw the general administration of Gujarat pass from the Sultans to the rule of Mughal Emperors at Delhi. Emperor Akbar had appointed Mirza Aziz Kokah⁶ as the Governor of Gujarat at Ahmedabad. But unlike the rest of Gujarat, who were resisting and rebelling against the Mughals, the Rao's established a discreet political position. Infact there are many incidences noted when the Rao makes fair donations to impress the Emperor, and in return gains political independence in administrations. One such incident is noted during Rao Bharmal's (1585-1631) reign when Emperor Jahangir visited Ahmedabad, in 1617. This time Rao Bharmal paid his respect to him by presenting him with 100 Kutchi horses, 100 Ashrafis and 2000 koris.⁷ Impressed by his fair contribution, the Emperor in return gave Rao his own horse, a male and female elephant, a dagger, a sword with diamond studded hilt, and four rings.⁸ Jahangir further exempted Rao from the annual tax contributions, with the friendly interest to allow free passage to pilgrims to Mecca, and use its port for navigation. Jahangir also permitted him to mint and use his independent coins in Kutch.⁹ Around 1592, during Rao Bharmal's reign, Subahdar Mirza Aziz Kokah, foster brother of Akbar, seems to have visited Mecca using the Kutch port facility.

Rao Bhojraj (r.1631-1645) and Rao Khengar II (r,1645-1654) reign continued to celebrate the independence even when Emperor Shah Jahan (1628-1657) came to power at Delhi, and was aggressively expanding his territories in South Gujarat. In no time Emperor appointed his son Aurangzeb as Mughal governor of Ahmedabad for a brief period of three years. Followed by Dara Shikoh in 1648 and later prince Murad Baksh around 1654. The political stability with the Governors at Ahmedabad reflected a steady economic growth of the Kutch state, and hence trade flourished.

Rao Tamachi reign (r.1654-1662) saw the crowning of Mughal rule across Indian subcontinent under the headship of Aurangzeb. Murad Baksh allied himself with Aurangzeb and proclaimed himself to full power at Ahmedabad. In the meanwhile, Dara Shikho

⁶ Foster brother of Akbar, one of the leading nobles at the Mughal court during the Emperor Akbar.

⁷ Patel G.D., 1971, *Op,cit*, Pp.81

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ *Ibid*

retreated from Agra to Delhi, and then to Lahore. Dara Shikhos' next destination was Multan and Tatta (Sindh). From Sindh he crossed the Rann and took shelter under the Rao in a garden house known as Darawadi.¹⁰ But when asked for help to fight the Emperor, the Rao expressed his inability to help him with such a large force. At the same time, Shah Nawaz Khan was appointed Governor of Gujarat, at Surat, and he opened his treasury to Dara Shikoh to raise a new army against Aurangzeb which was also supported by Maharaja Jaswant Singh of Mewar. Unfortunately, all efforts failed before the accomplished Emperor Aurangzeb.

Rao Raydhan-I's (1662-1697) reign saw the infiltration of the Maratha rulers into the lands of Gujarat. In 1661 Aurangzeb replaced Inayat Khan as commander for Surat, who fought the battle of Surat with the Marathas which was led by Chattrapati Shivaji Maharaj. Meanwhile, the Mughals who were desperately in need of funds started sending their representative to collect revenue from Kutch. Qutb-ud-din Mohamad Azam Shah, the third son of Aurangzeb, was appointed Subedar of Gujarat and he sent Haider Quli Khan the Viceroy of Gujarat expressing his interest in collecting revenue from Kutch. In disagreement few expeditions were made by the Mughal army on Bhuj, but finally settled by the earlier agreement under which Kutch tribute was remitted. Saint (Oliya), Shah Murad from Bukhara, who then resided in Mundra, was instrumental in bringing about a peaceful solution to the impending war which was to take place between Rao Raydhan and Mauzzim Beg.¹¹

Rise of the Marathas-

First half of the eighteenth century, i.e. from the rule of Rao Godh-I (1715-1718) to Rao Desal-I (1718-1752), saw the withdrawal of the Mughals Empire and the territorial expansion of Marathas in Gujarat. By Rao Desal's reign, the Dabhade clan of Marathas, led by Khanderao Dabade had occupied several territories in Gujarat and laid the foundation for Maratha power at Vadodara. This was also the time when Rao Desal had to frequently face imperial forces by the Mughal Viceroys to collect revenue- once under Muazzim Beg

¹⁰ Williams Rushbrook L.F, *The Black Hills-Kutch in History and Legend*, The Shenval Press, Simson Shand Ltd, London, 1958, Pp. 122.

¹¹ Williams Rushbrook, 1958, *Op.cit*, Pp. 123.

commandership and another time under Nawab Kesar Khan. Nevertheless, with the individual capacity of minister Devkaran, Kutch stood united and fought against all forces. As the Marathas were significantly interested in land-based territorial expanse, Kutch which was at the extreme west was not a major threat as much as the Mughals were. Hence during this period, the Kutch rulers could continue to celebrate their independent rule and improve upon their administrative policies which proved conducive to the prosperity of the region. During Rao Godh's time, the lands of Mundra, Kanthi, and Anjar were added to the reign which brought in an important increase in revenue. Towards the mid of the eighteenth century due to the incursion of Gaekwads and Peshwas in the Mughal territory many of the Viceroy's and officers sent by the Mughals were frequented by royals from Marwad courts. In the year 1752 Rao Desal I's reign came to an end along with the end of Mughal rule in Gujarat. The same year Ahmedabad- the capital of Mughal in Gujarat fell into the hands of the Marathas.

It is interesting to note that Rao's discreet and friendly political stand remained even as the Mughals lost their complete power in Gujarat, that in 1757 Rao Lakhpatt (1752-1760) presented Emperor Alamgir II with some Kutchi horses and bullocks, and in return received the title of 'Mirza' and in gift, the Mahi Maratib.¹² This insignia of Mahi Maratib is preserved, at Aaina Mehal Palace Museum, even to this day as memorabilia of Rao's good relation with Mughal rulers. Rao's diplomatic stand with the Marathas is also certain as the following year Rao planned an expedition against Tatta, Sindh, and was promised help both from Peshwa and the Gaekwad, but no active step seems to have been taken.¹³

Sindh Invasion-

Rao Godh-II's (1760-1778) reign was a period when more than the Marathas, Sindh was advancing to strengthen their hold on Kutch, taking advantage of the political scenario. This time the Afghan army of the Kalhora clan from Sindh, who was since long looking for a chance to meddle in Kutch affairs, took interest. In 1762, Gulam Shah Kalhora, taking into confidence one of Rao's ex-minister Punja raised an army of 70,000 men, and made a major expedition from Sindh. This Battle of Jara was followed by an attack and plunder on Tera

¹² Patel G.D., 1971, *Op,cit*, Pp.81, Watsons Gujarat, Mr Burgess Arch. Sur, Rep. (1874-75, 200) Pp. 148.

¹³ *Ibid.*

village, burning the residences into losses and many thousand slain. Gulam Shah's Army retired from Kutch on the condition that a matrimonial alliance with Kutch be built by taking in marriage Rao's sister. Although this matrimonial alliance was later compromised and settled by giving the daughter of Khakhar, a near kinsman of Rao. As against this insult Gulam Shah build a dam at Ali Bandar across the Kori mouth of the Indus, resulting in a loss that cost more than a war with Kutch.¹⁴ In the next three decades, under the rule of Rao Raydhan (1778-1813) and his brother Rao Prithviraj the administration of Kutch went from bad to worse. The condition was so bad that the council of Barabhayat led by Fateh Muhamad turned to take help from the British Government. Help was sent a few years later which is discussed in the following section.

Jadejas during the Company period-

Kutch ruled autonomous during the Mughal and Maratha administrations, that it continued to celebrate its independence even when East India Company was expanding and gaining control over western India after the Anglo-Maratha war. The Company exercised its power across regions of Gujarat by embarking a policy of offering Subsidiary Alliances to the state. Such a Treaty of Alliance was signed between East India Company and Kutch, after Rao Bharmal's reign. Although a special status of independence to rule, was guaranteed by Presidency at a maintenance cost. The major British intervention happened when the Council of Regency initiated their support by assisting minor Rao Desal II (r,1819-1860), as against the vacant throne, and looked after parts of administration in the state. In one such treaties, Rao's claim on Navanagar was lost. But this benefited further security with Kutch borders, from conflicting invasion from eastern Gujarat. The next major interventions were of a mutual administrative benefit, like eliminating piracy, preserve and protect Mandvi port in peace and tranquility. Although in relation, it had restricted the import and storage of arms and military in the territory from foreign vessels. The most strategic agreement was signed when the Kutch ports were made a 'Free Zone' for British vessels, and British port to Kutch vessels. Apart from political and economic benefits, there were social concerns that the Agents improved, by eliminating ill practices like female infanticide, sati and suppress slave trade in this region. Hence inspite of being a prominent

¹⁴ *Ibid*, Pp. 89.

princely state under the Bombay Presidency they were not directly governed by the British officers but a political agent would be sent to manage the state administration.

Rao Desal's II (1819-1860) reign was the beginning of British engagement in the administration of Kutch. Capitan Mac Murdo was the first Political Agent who was sent to Kutch from Bombay to head the council of regency. This period saw Kutch suffer from natural calamities and invasions from Sindh. The land was hit by a severe earthquake in 1819, followed by famine in the year 1823, 1825, and 1832 causing damage. Taking advantage of this situation, even the Maraudin band from Sindh, headed by Kesar Khan and Sher Buland Khan invaded. But Kutch remained stable under the efficient rule of Rao Desal. With the suppression of pirates in the sea even maritime trade with Africa, Omen and Zanzibar improved resulting in increased revenue. Slowly the industrialization of Kutch started to set in moving towards a modern time frame. From Rao Desal-II reign, Kutch enters a modern period of administrative functioning.

Rao Pragmal-II (1860-1875) was a wise and benevolent ruler. According to Rushbook Willams, his reign saw tranquility in common with the rest of India. During the fifteen years of his reign, he showed great enthusiasm for improving the social and economic management of the state. Shops of subsidized rates were open for the public to alleviate the distress of the famine affected. For the first time in the history of Kutch non-kutchies were appointed as ministers and officials to improve the administrative and judicial functioning of this land trade, commerce, and agriculture were encouraged for the prosperity of Kutch. He also set up a system of formal education. The first high school of Bhuj named the Alfred High school was built by Rao in 1870. Grants were given to promising students who wished to study outside. Financial assistance was given to build libraries in Bhuj Mandvi and Mundra. He was also a great builder. Work for Pragmehal palace designed by Colonel Henry Clair Wilkins began during his reign. Development of Mundra port and harbor work at Mandvi is attributed to him. He built roads and hospitals. An estimated expenditure of Rs 8 lakhs was sanctioned by Rao in 1875 for the construction of the Prince of Wales Breakwater.¹⁵

¹⁵ Patel G.D., 1971, *Op.cit*, Pp. 336.

Rao Khengar-III's (1875- 1942) reign marks importance as the regency council was dissolved by the British Government. Apart from maintaining an already-established system, he also initiated new aspects. He took great interest in improving the water storage system of Kutch. Encouraged girls' education. Opened Art school for stimulating the importance of ancient handicrafts and traditional industries. Built a port at Kandla. In a nutshell Khengarji and Rao Vijayaraj (1942-1948) succeeded to throw celebrated a centralized authority over the land. Literally and figuratively Kutch had entered a modern phase. In every sphere under administration- be it police, reduction of dacoits and raids, safeguarding the borders between Sindh and Kutch, improving the judiciary system, revenue, social reforms, education and medical facility every facility resulted in the welfare of its people. In no time like the rest of India's princely states even Kutch got integrated into the Union of India.

Here politically, we can see Kutch's geographical isolation from the mainland Indian sub-continent, often made it virtually an island inaccessible to the changing dynasties of the rulers in the past. At the same time gave Sindh invaders a potential benefit that they frequently attempted to invade Kutch. To study the political development of the Samma Rajputs with its neighboring rulers at a glance, a comprehensive chart alongside the neighboring contemporary rulers is attached on the following page.

SAMMA RAJPUTS AND THEIR COMTEMPORARY RULERS