

**SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ROLE OF SARAIS (INNS) IN MEDIEVAL
INDIA WITH ESPECIAL REFERENCE OF EUROPEAN TRAVELERS'
ACCOUNTS**

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Abstract

Security on the routes in Mughal India is a much discussed issue and various historians have discussed it in their own way. It appears from the existing sources that many routes were polluted with gangs of thieves' and robbers. Peace, stable conditions and the consequent expansion of trade and commercial activity brought more travelers and traders on the road, increasing the demand for services provided by sarais and so leading to the construction of new ones. No matter what the method of travel, rest after the day's journey was essential. This was taken at the excellent chain of sarais throughout the Mughal Empire on all essential routes, situated approximately twenty miles apart on well used routes. These inns served the purpose of rest house, where merchants and traveler could break their journey. This paper tries to bring out the reasons responsible for the establishment of sarais in Mughal India and gives the profile of their social and economic role, with especial reference of European travelers accounts'.

Sarais is a Persian word, meaning a place, an edifice but in Hindustani language a halting place. It was originally used by the tartarsⁱ when they began to build palaces. But the usual modern meaning in Persia, and the only one in India, is that of a building for the accommodation of travelers with their pack animals; consisting of an enclosed yard with a round chamber.ⁱⁱ The system of *sarais* or walled lodgings and store houses designed for the travelers was one of the important arrangements for safety on the routes throughout the Mughal Empire. The sarais were

divided into dwelling rooms and the chambers for the attendants' who dressed the victuals to the travelers if they pleased only paying nominal charges for both men and animals.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the reign of Akbar Father Monserrate came across a large number of thieves in his journey from Surat to Agra^{iv} Ralph Fitch recorded the presence of Bandits in the region of Patna.^v Abul fazl also mentions that many routes in the Deccan were unsafe. In the reign of Jahangir William Hawkins observed that "the country is so full of outlaws and thieves that almost a man cannot stirre out of doors throughout all his dominions without great forces".^{vi} William Finch in his journey from Agra to Ahmadabad found the route infested with thieves at several places such as at Bhadwar, Sunenarra, Sipri etc.^{vii} He also found the way between Surat and Cambay "thievish" also. Peter Mundy who visited India during 1628-34 presents a picture of Indian routes infested by robbers and rebels. In coming from Agra to Surat in 1633 he records several incidents of robberies and illegal exactions.^{viii}

Faced with such insecurity, merchants had to make different arrangement for their protections. Often they would take guards at their own coast. William Hawkins, in 1608, going from Surat to Agra took 'Pattan' (Pathan) soldiers.^{ix} Mundy hired some horsemen and footmen at various places during his journey from Agra to Ahmadabad. Mandelslo during his journey from Surat to Ahmadabad met an English caravan consisting of 12 English armed soldiers and as many Indians for conducting the caravan safety in view of the threat from the Rajput highwaymen who frequented the country and lived as robbers.^x

No matter what the method of travel, rest after the day's journey was essential. This was taken at the excellent chain of *sarais* throughout the Mughal Empire on all essential routes, situated approximately twenty miles apart on well used routes.^{xi} Since the era of She shah, the road was dotted with caravanserais (highway inns) at regular intervals. Building Sarais was regarded as beneficent activities of the imperial government, the nobles and the big merchants.^{xii} All along the routes Sarai were built, by the emperors and maintained by them for use by merchants and travelers.^{xiii} Others were constructed by prominent nobles, rich philanthropists and traders. These were constructed at an expedient distance. Regarding the Agra, Lahore road De Laet (1631) observes: "At distance of 5 or 6 cos there are sarais built either by the king or by the amount of great Men."^{xiv} Providing lodging for wayfarers, the *sarais* was an important Indian institution, having existed in one from other from time immemorial. These *sarais* were fortified places of shelters, where merchants and traveler could stay with full security. There was hardly a town which did not have one. They were meant for travelers and strangers and for all those who came for business in the town and had to stay overnight.^{xv} A *Sarai* could be built in the middle of the town or in a separate locality or in a *Pura*, besides the *Sarais* built on highways; it was usually built in the form of a square and like cloisters divided in to several cells.^{xvi} Sometime a *Sarai* was so big as to have a street within. Some of the *Sarais* were built of bricks and stone and looked like fortified places with bastions and strong gates,^{xvii} Other were mere walled enclosures with 50 or 60 huts covered with thatch within.

Manucci says that the *sarais* were fortified where numerous people could stay there around 800 to 1000 persons with their horses, camels and goods.^{xviii} It shows that not only the travelers and merchants got profit of safety and security but animal also made it as their resting place. Tavernier has mentioned several *sarais* in his journey from one place to another with valuable merchandise quite safely. About the *Nurmahal Sarai* at Agra, Peter Mundy observes: It was a very fair one, built by the old queen Nurmahal for the accommodation of Travelers, in

which 2000 or 3000 people could be stay there. All were made of stone not a single piece of wood used in those *sarais* for construction.^{xix} The routes were not unsafe is testified from the example of Tavernier, who travelled from one place to another with valuable merchandise quite safely. Although there were some example of robbery, this does not mean that highway were altogether unsafe.

Akbar's concern for his subjects was manifested in the many measures which he took for their welfare and comfort on the road. Like his predecessors, he built new *sarais* all over his dominion,^{xx} and once orders that in the *sarais* on high roads, free food and lodging should be provided to those who could not pay their way. Jahangir in the first year of his reign issued many ordinances' among them an instruction to jagirdars to built *sarais*, mosques, dig wells which might stimulate the population, and people might settled down in those *sarais*.^{xxi} This ordinance proved by Edward Terry, who found so many recent building of *sarais*, as well as wells and tanks, constructed by wealthy men, during his stay in India (1616-19). Nicholas Withington (1612-16) found one every twenty miles between Agra and Ajmer. He says that the charge, including stabling, was not more than 3d. Per night,^{xxii} but at all *sarais* one had to use one's own bedding cook, and food.^{xxiii}

Sarais were usually of two types: in smaller and unimportant owns, or in villages, they were not luxurious, were mostly built of mud and straw, not well maintained and were mainly used for emergency overnight stays.^{xxiv} The duties of looking after of the *sarais* were permanently in the hands of resident couples and found even in the most remote parts of the country. The second type of the *sarais* was more spacious, and provided better facilities for travelers. One of its earliest examples still stands in Delhi, near Humayun's tomb, and is known as Arab *sarai*, built by Akbar's mother, Haji Begum, in 1560, which had the accommodation facility about 300 persons. Big *sarais* were like forts, with bastions, imposing gates, and a solid stone structure. Pelsaert states that Nurjahan, the queen of Jahangir, built many expensive *sarais* in all parts of the country.^{xxv} Peter Mundy gives the account in detail about *Nurmahal ki sarai* constructed by Nurjahan, two miles from Agra. He says that this is a fair and large establishment, built of stone, accommodating about 3,000 people and 500 horses. All the rooms were arched and each was roofed with several cupolas. There was a beautiful garden on either side.^{xxvi} On the same time he saw another magnificent *sarai* at Chapraghata, where atleast 1,000 men could obtain rooms each with a lock and key.^{xxvii} One more example by him, *Sarai* of Saif Khan, in Patna; its facilities resembled those of a modern hotel. Patna was an important meeting place of merchants of different nationalities, for whose convenience there was a cosmopolitan *sarai* (Saif Kahn's *sarai*). Here a traveler or merchant could rent a room according to circumstances of stay and luggage compartment was also available. This type of *sarai* was usually found in big cities, and was ideal for foreign travelers,^{xxviii} whereas *sarais* in some big towns usually accommodated travelers for the night only. The records of the first half of the 17th century refers to Portuguese, central Asiatic foreigners and North West frontiers merchants), Pathan, Armenian and Indian merchants including east Bengal traders.^{xxix} *Sarais* probably well suited for Indians better than Europeans. India's communal way of life made *sarais* more acceptable. Europeans, with their individualistic and independent attitude, found this difficult to accept easily.

Generally inns at Ahmadabad and in other cities of India were not like those of Persia and turkey; "one singular habitation, made in the form of great cloister, with abundance of lodging round about, separating from the other, for quartering of strangers". The Indian *sarais* were like

“whole great streets of the city destined for the strangers to dwell in” In them house could be got for hire. These streets were locked in the night for the security of goods. They were called carvan *sarais*.^{xxx}

Characteristically, Bernier was critical of Indian *sarais*, declaring them no better than barns where hundreds of human beings mingled with horses, mules and camels. Way of surviving was different according to weather conditions, because they were sometime too hot in summer, too cold in winter. But at one place he described in highly praised words about *Begum Sarai*, built by Jahanara Begum in Delhi. He was very much impressed by its design, utility and grandeur. There rich merchant could live in perfect comfort.

At night an officer shut the doors. Before doing so he shouted a warning to residents to take care of their goods. In the morning, before opening the doors he would loudly ask everyone to examine their belongings. If something was missing, everyone was searched, and no one could escape from punishment. Under such conditions things were rarely stolen and the safety and security of both travelers and their goods well provided for.^{xxxii}

From Surat to Agra there were between eleven and eighteen well-known *sarais*,^{xxxiii} and on the Agra Patna route more than thirty, some of them grand and famous. The route from Agra to Lahore was also noted for its many good *sarais*.^{xxxiv} There were several *sarais* in each big city. In 1640 there were at least ninety in Agra,^{xxxv} where in 1666, Thevenot found more than sixty.^{xxxvi} Other big cities, like Surat, Banaras and Allahabad also had many *sarais*. Peace, stable conditions and the consequent expansion of trade and commercial activity brought more travelers and traders on the road, increasing the demand for services provided by *sarais* and so leading to the construction of new ones.

The *bhatiyarin* (inn keeper's wife) and *mihtarani* (sweeper's wife) were the stewards of the *Sarais*. The former to prepare meals^{xxxvii} and latter was as scavenger.^{xxxviii} Beside this, they looked after everything there. The expansion in number of *sarais* brought a new work-force into being- a class of sarai-keepers renowned in medieval India, the *Bhatiyaras*.^{xxxix} As long as animals were the main means of transportation, *sarais* played an important part in transport system. With the invention of modern means of transportation their number declined. Some still exist in upper India, and in remote areas *sarais*, or *bhatiyarkhanas*, entertain less sophisticated travelers. Most *bhatiyaras* no longer follow their hereditary occupation.

In the heyday of the Mughal era the *bhatiyara* lived with his family in the sarai. The larger *sarais* were run by more than one *bhatiyara*, each caring for three or four rooms, or for a section of the *sarai*.^{xl} The *bhatiyaras* were usually Muslims. Caste laws and taboos made it difficult for Hindus to prepare food for everyone, but Muslims were not included in such restrictions.^{xli} A sarai-keeper, the *bhatiyaras* sold firewood, tobacco and other articles. They would purchase any item a lodger required and further increased their incomes by hiring out bullocks and carts. As far as the duties were concerned, their wives, the *bhatiyarins*, cleaned the rooms, provided cool drinking water and warm water for washing; supplied cots, mattresses and sheets if they were needed; dressed and cooked meat, and waited on guests as if they were their own servants.^{xlii} Hindus usually paid those one or two pice per day and Muslims twice as much, because *bhatiyaras* cooked for them.^{xliii}

Sarais provided employment for artisans and people of other occupations, generating in season a constant demand for the services of barbers, washer men, furriers to shoe horses and oxen, tailors, musicians, dancing boys and girls, astrologers, physicians, and many others. These

were meeting places for people of many occupations- traders, the craftsmen listed above, adventurers, and sometimes thieves and cheats. *Sarais* provided opportunities to hear the latest gossip and news commercial or political, to settle deals or to develop new and potentially urgent contacts. The social and economic roles of *sarais* made them important institutions in medieval India.

Traveler's account of the early 17th century gives the impression that the *sarais* in Bayana became ruined and some of them had been accepted by local people for residence.^{xliii} In season, the inhabiting flow of caravans and other traffic must have the main *sarais* extremely busy. It is not easy to count the number of *sarais* in various parts of the country. Most have disappeared; some declined due to shifting of routes, other are now in ruins, or are used for some other purpose. However, we know that *sarais* were found in abundance on important and busy routes even when these were difficult and subject to political disturbance.

The experience of some travelers and merchants, like Manrique, Tavernier and Banarsidas etc. shows that journeys on the routes were not very dangerous. The routes passing entirely through the imperial land were safer in comparison to the routes passing through the region of the tributary chiefs and neighboring kingdoms.

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