SURAT: THE FIRST STEPS OF THE FRENCH ADVENTURE IN

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The French “comptoir” in the great Mughal port of Surat (1668-1778) tells the story of the first-enterprising steps of the French colonial adventure. Surat, one of the greatest port towns of both Indian Ocean and Indian History, presents a complex and fascinating socio-political picture which is repeatedly re-discussed. In this colourful debate, the French presence goes practically unnoticed. Yet its resonances in 19th and 20th century Gujarat demands to raise the question of the French presence in Surat and its meaning. In this light, it represents an extraordinary source of data which proved to be the core information of my study.

My residence at the Institut d’Études Avancées de Nantes offered me the opportunity to access this archive in excellent conditions. My topographical and archaeological survey done in Surat brought the missing elements to link the data extracted from the historical documents.

The French establishment in Surat was composed by two major set ups, a “loge” located in the heart of the city, and a “Jardin Français” situated by the French garden ("Jardin Français") situated outside the southern outer city wall. Two other plots were used by the French: a plot at Surali land called the French garden and another hand the written documents produced in the second half of the 18th century. On one hand are the maps created by the French and British administrations, on another hand the written surveys done by the French agents in the 1770s, that is, in the framework of the reshaping of the factory into a Consulate, and following the seizure of the Consulate by the British authorities. In these regards, the archival documents of the consulate (1773-8) conserved at the “Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes” represent an extraordinary source of data which proved to be the core information of my study.

The French colonial adventure in North-West India shifted from Surat to Mumbai during the late 18th and early 19th century. Surat remained a busy urban center which underwent multiple development phases. Very few remains from the glorious age of Surat are visible today, and the architectural elements of the French establishment in Surat were not spared by this modernizing urge. This infrastructural silence brings fuzziness around the meaning of the French presence in Surat. The plurality of terms used in archives regarding the French establishment contributes maintaining the misunderstanding concerning the reality of the French factory. The reason is that the French establishment was not a unique infrastructure, but a set of plots and buildings distinguished by complex jurisdictional realities. The French print on the surti cloth was a plot at Suvali. Two other plots were used by the French: a plot at Surali land called the French garden and another hand the written documents. Yet the French factory and consul of Surat laid the foundation stone of the construction of the CFIO in 1668. The French representative of the CFIO soon sensed the limits of their economic perspectives in Surat as late comers in an extremely complex socio-economic system. Their efforts pushed them towards other local and extra-regional litorals, to the benefit of other factories and settlements (with Perdicchery as the most successful enterprise). The French factory of Surat lost all major commercial activities within few decades after its foundation. It bitterly impacted the French economic and political expectations, and in Versailles, the question of Surat was a recurrent trouble spot. The French establishment (reshaped in 1773 into a Consulate) was forgotten soon after the takeover by the British in 1778.

Yet the French factory and consulate of Surat laid the foundation stone of the construction of the French presence in India, and in this light, it represents the first diplomatic and cultural encounter between France and India. Rather than questioning the economic and politic meaning of the French Factory in Surat, my study aims to reconstitute the reality of the French presence in the port town. What are the topographical and architectural traces of this presence in and around Surat? A pluridisciplinary study based on historical and archaeological evidences conducts me to reconstitute the picture of the French political and economical establishment. This reconstruction brings essential elements of understanding concerning the place and visibility of the French presence in Surat. It also opens the question of the cultural and infor- mative flow between the French nationals and other individuals and social groups from Surat.

Though the main economic activity of North-West India shifted from Surat to Mumbai during the late 18th and early 19th century, Surat remained a busy urban center which underwent multiple development phases. Very few remains from the glorious age of Surat are visible today, and the architectural elements of the French establishment in Surat were not spared by this modernizing urge. This infrastructural silence brings fuzziness around the meaning of the French presence in Surat. The plurality of terms used in archives regarding the French establishment contributes maintaining the misunderstanding concerning the reality of the French factory. The reason is that the French establishment was not a unique infrastructure, but a set of plots and buildings distinguished by complex jurisdictional realities. The French print on the surti cloth territory can be reconstituted with the help of historical documents produced in the second half of the 18th century. On one hand are the maps created by the French and British administrations, on another hand the written surveys done by the French agents in the 1770s, that is, in the framework of the reshaping of the factory into a Consulate, and following the seizure of the Consulate by the British authorities. In these regards, the archival documents of the consulate (1773-8) conserved at the “Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes” represent an extraordinary source of data which proved to be the core information of my study.
Europeans (directly located on the Gulf of Cambay, about 20 km East from Surat), and a cemetery near Katargam gate, the northern outer city gate. Additionally to these bases in and around Surat, a French agent or a merchant working with the CFIO was posted in each big market and manufacturing place of Gujarat, like Ahmedabad and Bharuch. This showed that the establishment, commonly referred to as the “comptoir”, was an institutional unit, but a split functional and territorial reality. By a reverse metonymy, the “loge” mentioned in the archival sources mostly refers to the institutional reality of the factory (le “comptoir”), and not to the place and building used by the French members of the CFIO in the walled city of Surat.

The “loge” was an architectural set rented by the CFIO (later the Consulate) within the city wall to accommodate the commercial and political activities of the factory. The Mughal authorities were refusing to give a plot in property to the Europeans within the walled city, in fear of militarization and questioning of the local political authority. Therefore the French, like other European companies, had to rent a place. They found a building on the northern side of the walled city, close to the French Capuchin mission and in the vicinity of other European establishments. The “loge” was a timbering building constructed in the local fashion. It included offices for the Director and other members of the council, as well as living spaces for them and those who had a family. It also had warehouses capable of storing the imported and to-be-exported goods. Finally the “loge” proposed necessary facilities for the economic activities and the daily life of the French community (a kitchen, a place for the “palasquin” or litter, a stable with carts and cows, and probably a well and/or a cistern and a bastu or bird mast). Few other French families and individuals lived on a permanent basis in Surat, most of them resided near the Capuchin church, The “Capuchin church – loge” set was therefore the core of French settlement in Surat. Its location, and that is confirmed by contemporary encounters, favored a specific interaction with the European nationals, while the members of the French community developed poor relationship with other merchants and local inhabitants.

The French history of Surat (1668-1778) is a quest of the French envoys Bebeber and La Boullaye le Gouz and to allow the French to start their commercial activi-