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WP : 255

# Working Paper

WP255  
  
WP  
1978/255

IIM  
WP-255



**INDIAN INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT  
AHMEDABAD**

THE NAGARSHETH OF AHMEDABAD: THE  
HISTORY OF AN URBAN INSTITUTION IN  
A GUJARAT CITY

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W P No. 255  
Nov. 1978

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THE NAGARSHETH OF AHMEDABAD: THE HISTORY OF AN  
URBAN INSTITUTION IN A GUJARAT CITY

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In whatever manner the traditional division of Indian history into ancient, medieval, and modern periods might have helped the study of political history, it has positively hampered a proper understanding of the evolution of social institutions. This is because political developments - succession of kings and change of dynasties - had little effect on the day-to-day life of the common people. As such certain social institutions displayed a remarkable degree of resilience and continuity, untrammelled by political changes, which cannot be adequately appreciated without transcending the narrow limits of conventional periodization.

A case in point is the mercantile associations. As has been shown by R.C. Majumdar, A.S. Altekar, and others, traders' organizations, roughly comparable to trade guilds in medieval Europe, existed in India at least from the sixth century B.C. upto the end of the 13th century A.D.<sup>1</sup> Known variously as shrenis, sanghas, gugas, naigamas and mahajans in different parts of the country or

at different points of time, these organizations played very important part in the economic and social life of the country during the period. A typical city could have several guilds, each presided over by a headman known in most of the cases as shreshtin. The shreshtin was neither appointed by a superior authority nor was he elected. He owed his position to popular acknowledgement as a result of his economic and social standing on one hand, and his demonstrated concern for his community or occupational group on the other. This is why his position became hereditary.

What happened to the institution of trade guilds after the conventional terminal point of ancient period of Indian history, we do not know thanks to the lack of scholarly scrutiny into the phenomenon by the specialists of the subsequent periods. But if the experience of the Gujarat cities is any guide, the guilds continued and flourished well upto the end of the 19th century. Gujarat being, in the words of Jadunath Sarkar, "the gateway of India to the western world", its cities had become prominent centres of trade and commerce, and the wealth and prosperity of its merchants had made them into powerful pressure groups. Their associations, known as mahajans each headed by a shreshtha or sheth, continued to remain an integral and important part of the civic life in Gujarat.

Founded in 1411 by Sultan Ahmad Shah, Ahmedabad became the beneficiary of this tradition. Though it started as an administrative and military headquarter of the province, by the end of the

16th century it had become a great manufacturing and commercial centre. Its cotton, silken and woolen goods of various varieties as well as its gold and silver brocades were in great demand in India as well as abroad, and its gold and silver jewelleries were considered as the best specimens of craftsmanship and manual dexterity. Other flourishing industries included dyeing and bleaching, embroidery and needle work, and inlaying of precious stones. One of the principal commodities of Ahmedabad market was indigo which was produced in plenty in its vicinity, and the neighbouring town of Sarkhej (now a suburb of Ahmedabad) had emerged as a principal mart.

Another factor which invested Ahmedabad with great commercial importance was the fact that it was situated at major trade routes connecting it with other commercial centres like Multan in the north and Agra in the east, and principal port towns like Cambay in the West and Surat in the South. In fact trade routes connected the city, directly or indirectly, with every part of the country. As a consequence, the capital city of Gujarat gradually emerged as an emporium of goods from various parts of India and the world, and "there is not in a manner in any nation nor any merchandise in all Asia which may not be had in Ahmedabad..."<sup>5</sup> Thus Ahmedabad distributed not only its own productions and those of other parts of Gujarat, but also the goods produced in far off regions like Sind, Kashmir, Bengal, Malabar coast, and, to a certain degree, the imports from the countries of Asia and Europe.

Such a place naturally attracted to it merchants and traders from various parts of India and the world. With a view to recreating the lost glory of Anhilwada Patan, the erstwhile Hindu capital of the province, the Sultans offered various inducements to immigrant. By the end of the 16th century, therefore, the city had become one of the largest and most populous in the country with a heterogenous population and a rich and variegated mercantile class. As a result, it had become a veritable "confluence of most nations in the world".<sup>6</sup> The merchants immigrating into the city from other cities in Gujarat and other parts of the country brought with them the tradition of mahajans and this institution took firm roots in Ahmedabad at a very early stage. The mention of a "shresta" in a khatapatra or sale deed of 1627 clearly indicates that this institution had already come into being.<sup>7</sup> A Moghul farman of 1644 also refers to some mahajans implying that they had been in existence for quite some time.<sup>8</sup>

## II

In developing the institution of mahajans, Ahmedabad was simply replicating the experience of other urban centres, for, as we have pointed out earlier, practically all Gujarat cities had had these institutions from times immemorial. Ahmedabad went one step further. It evolved gradually the position of the nagarsheth, or the chief merchant of the city. There is some ground to believe that certain urban centres in ancient India did have positions comparable to the nagarsheth,<sup>9</sup> but even if it was so, the position had fallen into

disuse much before Ahmedabad came into being. For, none of the older cities in Gujarat is known to have had a nagarsheth or a comparable position before 1660 when, as we shall see later, the first mention of the position is made in the contemporary documents with reference to Ahmedabad.

Maganlal Vakhatchand's classical history of Ahmedabad, first published in 1851, attributed the origin of the position to an imperial order. According to him, Emperor Jehangir had conferred this title on one Shantidas Jhaveri and his descendants in perpetuity. Shantidas, the son of an immigrant merchant from Marwar,<sup>11</sup> undoubtedly was a great jeweller and a man of enormous wealth. He had extensive business dealings with the imperial court and occasionally helped the Moghul emperors with money in their hours of need. It is said that he won the title because of his services to the empire. This theory of the beginning of the nagarshethship in Ahmedabad has remained in vogue for more than hundred years. But a closer examination would indicate that it is of questionable validity.

Maganlal or his followers give no clue to the basis of their thesis. Shantidas has been mentioned as a nagarsheth in no contemporary document. It is significant that though a large number of imperial Moghul farmans, still in the possession of Shantidas's descendants, prove the grant of several favours of much lesser significance to Shantidas, there is none to back up the nagarsheth claim on his

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 behalf. Also, the title is never prefixed with Shantidas's name in Mirat-i-Ahmadi, a history of Gujarat in Persian completed in 1761, which almost never refers to Khushalchand, Shantidas's grandson, without the title.<sup>13</sup> We shall see later that Khushal's claim to the honour was based on solid grounds. It is also noteworthy that none of the khatpatras pertaining to the years before 1560 makes reference to any nagarsheth, though several of the subsequent years do so.<sup>14</sup> That the title was not hereditary to begin with, as the royal charter theory would have us believe, is clear from the fact that several individuals, not belonging to Shantidas's family, became nagarsheth after Shantidas's death. Supplementing these arguments of silence is the existence of a Gujarati document of 1633 which refers to one Udhavaji as the nagaradhyaksha, or the city chief,<sup>15</sup> challenging the assertion that Shantidas was occupying a similar place in the city on the orders of Jehangir who was dead in 1627.

The fact is that the position of nagarsheth was not a part of the Moghul bureaucracy, nor did it connote a purely honorific title the like of which the Moghul emperors used to confer on their favourites. As such it is extremely doubtful that such a position would have been created by an official fiat or would have been the creature of the pleasure of an emperor.<sup>16</sup> What seems more plausible is that the position evolved over a period of time in response to the peculiar conditions prevailing in Ahmedabad.



As pointed out earlier, the Ahmedabad population had become extremely heterogeneous by the end of the 16th or the beginning of the 17th century thanks to the influx of people to the city from various quarters and with different background. Of these two groups - Jains and Vaishnava banias - emerged the most prominent in the business field with Muslims as an important minority group. The various mahajans that sprang up in the city remained independent of each other and regulated trade matters in their respective spheres. There was no formal link between one another and there was no formal authority or agency to speak for the entire business community as a whole at least up to the middle of the 17th century. Of course, as mentioned above, one Udhavaji is referred to as nagaradhyaksha or the city president in 1633. But the fact that there is no reference to this position at all in any earlier or later document indicates that even if an attempt was made to institute a system of formal leadership, it seems to have made very little headway in the first half of the 17th century.

There is no doubt that during this period, the mercantile community of Ahmedabad accepted or at least acquiesced in the leadership of Shantidas Jhaveri. An Oswal Jain of Marwari origin, he was without question the wealthiest and the most influential merchant of the city. The English factory records speak of his great influence on the imperial court, and a series of farmans issued by Jehangir, Shah Jahan, Murad and Aurangzeb make it amply clear that the Moghul

rulers attached great importance to maintaining good relations with the Sheth. Shantidas had used his influence to win a series of privileges and concessions for his religion from Jehangir and Shah Jahan, and even Aurangzeb, whose bigotry had led him in 1645 to defile a Jain temple built by the Jain magnate in Ahmedabad, thought it necessary to reconfirm these concessions and grant new ones when he came to power.<sup>18</sup> Formally, Shantidas was the head of the jewellers' mahajan alone, but because of his unassailable position in the business world he acted as a link between the city as a whole, particularly the merchant groups, and the state. It is because of this that Aurangzeb after assuming power, but still seeking legitimacy for his imperial position, chose Shantidas, "the best among campeers" to convey his message of "conciliation and consolation" to all merchant mahajans, common inhabitants, and general residents" of Ahmedabad.<sup>19</sup> It may be appropriate to mention that in other Gujarat cities, too, at this time, the wealthiest and the most influential businessman acted as the leader of the entire city though without any formal authority. Virji Vora, for instance, was the undisputed leader of the business community of Surat without having ever been formally acknowledged as such.<sup>20</sup>

The death of Shantidas in 1660 removed from the scene a very powerful figure. The city was left without a personality who, throughout his life, had been accepted as the spokesman of all the diverse groups in the city. After his death none was left to command

the acceptance of his leadership role that the great jeweller did throughout his life from the individual mahajans and their sheths. It is around this time that phrase nagarsheth came in vogue to signify the leadership of the entire city. In a khatpatra of 1660 Sundardas, Shantidas's brother, has been referred to as the nagarsheth.<sup>21</sup> This is the first mention of this position in any contemporary document. It is possible that Shantidas's powerful personality had prevented Sundardas from making any mark on the life of the city during the former's life time. The latter, therefore, needed this impressive prop to reach the position left vacant by Shantidas. It is also possible that the family feud, which had started during the lifetime of the Jain magnate,<sup>22</sup> led Sundardas to assume this title to denote the supremacy of his line against the direct descendants of his deceased brother. Significantly, none of Shantidas's five sons has ever been referred to as nagarsheth in any contemporary record.

Be it as it may, Sundardas's attempt to emerge as the leader of the entire community did not go unchallenged. The Vaishnava banias who had accepted, grudgingly or otherwise, the supremacy of Shantidas were no more prepared to continue playing a second fiddle in the affairs of the city. They, by this time, had become a prominent mercantile group themselves, and it was natural for them to aspire for the city leadership. The title of nagarsheth was still without much substance, but the fear that the lustre of the designation

gave unfair advantage to the Jains in their bid to retain their pre-eminence led the rival group to claim this position for its own members. This marked the beginning of a period of bitter competition between the two groups for the coveted position.<sup>23</sup>

The outcome of this conflict is by no means clear on the basis of available records. But it seems that after the death of Shantidas either the position alternated between the two rival communities or each recognised a separate nagarsheth of its own. We have already seen that in a khatpatra of 1660 Sundardas is mentioned as nagarsheth, but the khatpatras of 1677, 1678, 1685 and 1712 indicate that one Vanmalidas Tapidas bore this title at least from 1677 to 1685, and his son, Kika, was the nagarsheth in 1712.<sup>24</sup> The names of these persons suggest that they were Vaishnava banias. We do not know whether the Jains ever accepted Vanmalidas as their leader or recognized Sundardas or some other member of their community as the city chief, but there is little doubt that they increasingly challenged Kika's position as nagarsheth. For, according to Mirat-i-Ahmadi, one Kapurchand Bhansali, an Oswal Jain, was the nagarsheth in 1713 and continued to be so till he was murdered in 1719.<sup>25</sup> Kapurchand had his mansion (haveli) in Jhaverivada ward of the city where Shantidas's descendants lived and it is possible that he was in some way related to the great jeweller.

In the meantime, Shantidas's son, Lakshnichand who had succeeded to the family affairs after his illustrious father, was dead and his son Khushalchand had assumed charge. Able and ambitious, the

new head of the jewellers' mahajan decided to regain the position which his grandfather enjoyed in the city affairs. His opportunity came when the Marathas, taking advantage of the constantly weakening Moghul power after Aurangzeb's death attacked the city in 1724 in alliance with the former deputy governor Hamid Khan who had turned rebel following his ouster. The invading forces spread in every nook and corner of the capital city "like swarms of ants and locusts". Their presence created a great deal of consternation among the people and business came to a standstill. The Marathas needed money, and they were about to destroy the city when Khushalchand paid a huge amount as ransom to the invaders from his personal pocket and turned the greedy invaders back.<sup>26</sup> Khushal's gracious act won for him the gratitude of the city population, specially of the business class which was the hardest hit by the Maratha presence. To express their appreciation, therefore, the heads of "all the mahajans of the city of Ahmedabad" representing communities and trades resolved that henceforward Khushalchand and his descendants would receive in perpetuity a levy of a quarter per cent on all goods stamped in the municipal weighing yard.<sup>27</sup> This was a great compensation. More importantly, this was a virtual acknowledgement of Khushal's supremacy in the civic affairs by all the trading guilds. Significantly, after this incident Mirat-i-Ahmadi has seldom mentioned his name without the title of nagarsheth.

Khushal's enemies, however, were not to accept defeat so

easily. Convinced that the popular opinion could not be turned against the Sheth soon after his great service to the city, they brought the power of the state on their side. During all these years since the beginning of the struggle for the nagarshethship, the imperial governors had stood scrupulously aloof. But the death of Aurangzeb heralded an era of political instability and intrigues and counter intrigues in high places. Taking advantage of this kind of environment, Khushal's rivals poisoned the ears of the provincial governor, Mubarizmulmul Sarbuland Khan, against him. The infuriated governor ordered the imprisonment of the Sheth in 1726 and appointed the head of the silk merchant mahajan as the nagarsheth.<sup>28</sup> This was an unusual step indeed. Perhaps, the troubled political climate offered a unique opportunity to the provincial governor, to throw all conventions overboard to bring the holder the prestigious title under his absolute control.

Gangadas whom Sarbuland Khan designated as the new nagarsheth was Khushal's cousin.<sup>29</sup> Most probably he belonged to the Sundardas branch of the family. This as well as the fact that prior to Khushalchand, another Jain, Kapurchand, held the position indicates that not only various communities - Jain and Vaishnava banias being the principal rivals - but also different individuals belonging to the same community were competing for supremacy. Be it as it may, by recognizing Gangadas as the city chief, the Governor ensured the assistance of a principal citizen in extracting illegally a large sum of money from the merchants and tradesmen.<sup>30</sup> Gangadas's cooperation

in Sarbuland's oppressive acts must have cost whatever little goodwill he might have enjoyed in the city.

Khushalchand, in the meantime, had bought his release and fled to Delhi. It was clear to him that the effect of Sarbuland's action in designating Gangadas as nagarsheth could be counteracted only by an imperial farman. He waited for his chance till Sarbuland fell from the imperial favours and was dismissed from his post because of his tyranny and oppressiveness. The new governor, Abhay Singh Rathod, easily suppressed the revolt of the incensed Sarbuland, and established his authority in the province. One of his first acts was to imprison Gangadas for his complicity in the misdeeds of the previous governor. Abhay Singh, however, emulated the example of his predecessor at least in one respect; he too appointed a nagarsheth of his choice in 1731. The new nagarsheth was a Muslim - the head of the Bohra community - whose name was Ahmad.<sup>31</sup>

A little later in 1732 Khushalchand, who had stayed in Delhi all along after his fall from grace, returned to Ahmedabad with an order issued in the name of the emperor by his Amirulumarah. Addressed to the Maharaja it said that Emperor Muhammad Shah had appointed Khushalchand as nagarsheth and instructed to return to Ahmedabad. The royal charter changed the new nagarsheth with the responsibility to "attend to welfare of the people, prosperity of the city, well being of the common-folk, and manage affairs with such diligence that persons may devote themselves with satisfaction to their respective work and satisfaction". It was not possible for Abhay to ignore the

imperial order completely. At the same time he did not want to eat a humble pie by disgracing his own appointee to the position. As a compromise, as it were, he recognized Khushalchand as the "nagarsheth of the Hindus"; Ahmad, too, continued to hold the title simultaneously. For sometime, Ahmedabad seems to have two nagarsheths.

For all practical purposes, the compromise tilted heavily in favour of Ahmad. During Khushal's absence, the Muslim nagarsheth had endeared himself to Abhaya's deputy and treasurer (bhandari), Ratan Singh. The new rulers of the state were in no way less corrupt than Sarbuland Khan, and their ways to extract money from the local population were in no way dissimilar. The Bohra chief was willing to be an instrument of illegal exaction in the hands of Ratan Singh as Gangadas was in the hands of Sarbuland's. Khushal, on the other hand, could not countenance such acts. Naturally, therefore, the ruling authorities threw their weight on Ahmad's side. Khushal's protests against illegal collections were ignored. So inconvenient did the Jain leader become to the deputy governor that he was inclined to put him in jail. But instead of doing so, Ratan Singh asked the Hindu nagarsheth to leave the city. An angry Khushal prepared for a fight, but was eventually persuaded to comply with the orders. Four years after this incident, Ahmad died and the period of dual nagarshethship came to an end.



Khushal, who had spent the period of his exile at several places in Gujarat, returned to the city. His return almost coincided with the fall from power of the Rajput governor and his deputy. The imperial authorities, unwilling to let their tyrannies continue any longer, dismissed Abhaya and appointed one Momin Khan in his place to take charge of the province. The Rajput governor and his bhandari of course did not give in easily. Momin entered into an alliance with the Marathas and yet the forces of the deposed governor held on to their position for nine months before surrendering to the allied army. Khushal had little problems with new rulers for some time, but after Momin's death in 1743, the Moghul-Maratha authorities, too, put him in jail and released only after he had paid them a considerable amount of money.<sup>34</sup>

The Jain leader, no doubt, had an eventful and stormy career. Successive Moghul governors irrespective of their caste and religious backgrounds illtreated him and extracted large sums of money, and he had to spend several years in exile. He, however, achieved what none of his predecessors had done. Thanks to his sacrifice and influence in the imperial court, he had established an undisputed claim to the nagarsheth position not only for himself but also for his descendants! By the time he died in 1748, the honour had definitely come to rest in his family. This is clear from the fact that none in the long line of subsequent nagarsheths belonged to any other family. According to the available information after Khushal, his eldest son Nathusha or Nathumalsha (1720-1793) became nagarsheth;

he was followed by his younger brother Wakhatchand(1740-1814), and after Wakhath came his son and grandson, Hemabhai(1785-1858) and Premabhai(1815-1887) respectively.<sup>35</sup> It is significant that though there was a division in the family after Wakhatchand, Motibhai, the founder of the splinter branch or his descendants never questioned the right of the main branch to the nagarshethship. There is no doubt that after Khushal, the position had become hereditary. However, the eldest son did not necessarily have a claim over it. On the contrary, from the time of Shantidas, the family had established a tradition of entrusting its supreme management to the ablest member<sup>36</sup> and whosoever was accepted in this role also inherited the title. None of the three nagarsheths following Khushalchand, for instance, was the eldest son of his parents.

It is clear from the above account that the development of the nagarshethship in Ahmedabad was nothing short of an innovation in urban institution. The evolution passed through three different stages. The first phase was symbolized by Shantidas Jhaveri, the most influential merchant, who was accepted as the informal spokesman for his class - in fact of the entire city - without having ever been formally anointed to the position. The word 'nagarsheth', to signify this kind of leadership, came to be used after the death of Shantidas in 1660 which marked the beginning of the second phase which continued upto 1725. This phase was marked by the conflict between various groups and individuals for popular acceptance

as the city chief. The political confusion and instability that came to characterize the Gujarat politics in the wake of disintegrating Moghul authority made the political power join this conflict on one side or the other. And this marked the beginning of the third and the final phase. The issue was finally clinched in favour of Shantidas's descendants when Khushalchand, aided by an imperial charter, won the title for himself and his descendants. What started as a purely informal institution was finally formalized and legitimized with aid of the state power.

### III

It is tempting to believe, as M.N. Pearson has done, that the nagarsheth was the head of a city-wide mahajan "on which sat representatives of all the occupational mahajans."<sup>37</sup> The fact, however, is that at no stage did a city-wide corporate organization in Ahmedabad on the lines of individual mahajans, come into being. No contemporary record refers to any nagar mahajan or a comparable entity. In fact the mention of the word sarva mahajan in the khatapatras definitely indicates that the individual mahajans never submerged their separate existence into any other corporate body. Referring to the situation as it existed in the last quarter of the 19th century, the Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency observed that the "phrase Ahmedabad Mahajan is a misnomer, there being no permanent aggregation of the guilds which can claim

to represent the whole of that city... The influence of the nagarsheth... can generally commend the adherence of all, but in such a case the various merchant guilds merely unite for a temporary purpose. They do not amalgamate into one guild...."<sup>38</sup>

Obviously, though the nagarsheth was seen as the leader of the city, he headed no corporate body except the guild of the trade to which he belonged. Being a principal merchant and the head of his own guild coupled with his acceptance as the spokesman of the city, however, he was in a better position than any other individual to consult other merchant leaders and important residents on the issues affecting trade or other matters concerning the city in general. As such he naturally became an informal link between the city and the state at a time when representative urban institutions were yet to develop.<sup>39</sup> He was frequently consulted by the ruling authorities about the affairs of the state and represented to them the grievances of the people. Kapurchand Bhansali, for instance, led a delegation to Delhi after a communal riot in 1713 to apprise the imperial authorities of the details.<sup>40</sup> Likewise when Raghunathrao Peshwa (Raghoba) occupied the city in 1753 another nagarsheth, Nathusha, accompanied by some other merchants discussed the problem of future administration of the city with the conqueror. But later in 1780 when General Goddard took possession of the city, the same Nathusha led a delegation to prevail upon the British soldier not to harm the city in anyway. Without beating about the bush, the Sheth candidly maintained that he and the

merchants supported the earlier government because they could not "in common honour act adverse to the ruling authorities" and, by the same logic, they had come "forward to pay their obeisance to the conqueror, not so much for themselves as for their fellow citizens ...."<sup>41</sup>

Besides being a link between the city and the state, the nagarsheth performed several other roles. He could use his influence over disputes between various guilds or individuals, he helped the state authorities to raise funds in the city, and played some role in the collection of the town cess as indicated by the assignment of a part of the town duties to the nagarsheth family by all the mahajans. A Gujarati poem of 1725 indicates that probably he had access to the key of the city gates.<sup>42</sup> On occasions a nagarsheth's action was guided by his own sense of responsibility towards the city as Khushalchand's action in saving the city from the Maratha invaders in 1725 doubtlessly was. Sometimes he performed purely ritualistic acts. The Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, for instance, has pointed out that one nagarsheth led a batch of citizens pouring milk on the earth to propitiate the rain god when the monsoon failed.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, if a nagarsheth misused his position, as Gangadas and Ahmad indeed did, there was nothing anybody could do. But normally a sagacious nagarsheth performed such acts which legitimized rather than compromised his position.

The nagarsheth, in short, was a sort of a father-figure to the city. As we have seen successive Moghul emperors as well as the governors who ruled the state during the troubled days of the later Moghuls thought it prudent to woo or control them. The Marathas, too, continued the tradition of treating the nagarsheth with deference during their sixty years rule over the city after 1758. And when the city came under the British occupation in 1818, the new rulers seeking to consolidate their position, readily recognized all the privileges which the nagarsheth family had traditionally enjoyed. Perhaps the only ostensible change that the British effected was that they computed the nagarsheth's share of the octroi into an annual pension of a little more than Rs.2000/-.<sup>44</sup> Both Hemabhai and Premabhai fully supported the British and the new rulers in turn extended their patronage to them.<sup>45</sup>

The beginning of the British rule, however, marks the decline of the nagarshethship. Slowly and gradually, the position became incongruous with the new forces which the British generated. Two developments need particular mention in this connection. One, the new rulers who believed in more formal institution established municipal administration on modern lines the roots of which can be traced back to 1834, though in a more real sense the municipal government did not develop until the last quarter of the 19th century.<sup>46</sup> As the formal structure of the civic administration strengthened itself, the informal link between

the city and state, symbolised by the nagarsheth became superfluous. Simultaneously the emergence of an industrial leadership in the later half of the 19th century began to offer an effective though subtle challenge to the supremacy of the trading and commercial groups which the nagarsheth represented. It is no accident that the first president of the Ahmedabad Municipality was Ranchhodlal Chhotlalal, who had founded the first textile mill in the city and had risen to the most prominent industrialist. Throughout his life, Ranchhodlal's position in the business and governmental circles remained unrivalled.<sup>47</sup> This was a clear signal that the institution which had survived several centuries of vicissitudes was incapable of meeting the challenge of new political-industrial forces. The result was that the position lost all substance, though the title still continued as an irrelevant relic of the past and the reminder of an old order. The title, too, disappeared recently when the last holder died in 1977 and nobody could inherit it under the new dispensation of the government.

We do not know how many more cities emulated Ahmedabad's example in developing institutions like that of nagarsheth. There is no doubt that some did<sup>48</sup> but our knowledge about the forces that influenced the evolution and decline of such institutions elsewhere is scanty indeed. Further research may also reveal that, like the nagarshethship, several other social institutions survived political changes and upheavals. But a proper understanding of their rise and fall would require problem oriented rather than period-based enquiries into India's past.

NOTES

1. R.C.Majumdar, Corporate Life in Ancient India (Calcutta, 1918), 1-35; A.S. Altekar, A History of Important Towns and Cities in Gujarat and Kathiawad (Bombay, 1926), 52-53; Radha Kumud Mookerji, "Economic Conditions" in R.C.Majumdar(ed.), History and Culture of the Indian People (Bombay, 1960) II, 601-602; U.N.Ghoshal, "Economic Conditions" in Ibid (1962), III, 603-605; IV (1964), 605-607; V (1966), 524-526.
2. Quoted in M.R. Majmudar, Cultural History of Gujarat (Bombay, 1965), 63 f.n.
3. An example of the power of the merchants in Gujarat is provided by an incident of 1669. The nephew of a famous merchant of Surat, Tulsidas Parekh, was converted to Islam and another bania committed suicide to escape conversion. To protest against the policy of religious coercion, about 8,000 banias left the city, and the mahajans ordered all their members to close down their shops. This action eventually led the government to revise its policy. For details see M.J. Mehta, "Some Aspects of Surat as a Trading Centre in the 17th Century", Indian Historical Review, I, no. 2 (September, 1974), 258; for a general discussion on the place of the merchant in Gujarat see, Majmudar, Cultural History of Gujarat, 188-189.
4. Altekar, History of Important Towns, 53.
5. Observation of German traveller J. Albert de Mandelslo who visited Ahmedabad in 1638. See M.S. Commissariat, Mandelslo's Travels in Western India (London, 1931), 26.
6. Observation of Nicholas Downton who visited Ahmedabad in 1615. See W. Foster (ed.), The Voyage of Nicholas Downton (London, 1939), 151. B.G. Gokhale, "Ahmedabad in the XVII Century" Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient, XII, pt.2 (April, 1969), 187-197 is a concise but excellent account on the subject. Ratnamanirao Bhimrao, Gujaratnun Patnagar Ahmedabad in Gujarati (Ahmedabad, 1929) is more comprehensive. For historical account see pages 23-185.
7. Khatapatra, no. 91 (1627). The original manuscripts of more than 100 of such documents are preserved in the B.J. Institute of Oriental Research, Ashram Road, Ahmedabad. Most of these are written in old Gujarati; only a few are in Persian. They record the sale and purchase of various kinds of properties. They have, mentioned among other things, the names of various officials and people holding important positions, including sheth and nagarsheth at the time of the transaction. This source is cited here as khatapatra along with the



appropriate number and the year of the document in question. The years given in the original documents are in the Vikrama era. The authors have converted these into the Christian era. For the historical value of these Khatapatras, see Hariprasad Shastri, "Vidyasabha Sangrahalaya na Marathakalin khatapatra" in Gujarati, Buddhiprakash (March, 1978), 121-124.

8. M.S. Commissariat, Imperial Mughla Farmans in Gujarat, Reprinted from Journal of University of Bombay, IX, pt.1 (July, 1940), 36-47.

9. Radha Kumud Mookerjee in his chapter on "Economic Conditions" in Majumdar (ed.), History and Culture of the Indian People, II, p.601-2 refers to the existence of the "Mahasevithi, the president of a commercial federation with numerous Anusetthis under him." According to U.N.Ghoshal, the north Konkan cities under the Rashtrakutas had "purapatis" or nagarpatis, but these positions were probably a part of official bureaucracy. See Ghoshal's chapter on "Political Theory" in Majumdar, History and Culture of the Indian People, IV, 246. Prof. J.N. Asopa of the University of Rajasthan mentioned to the authors, on the basis of epigraphic evidences, that some cities in ancient India had "prathamshreshthas".

10. Maganlal Vakhatchand, Amdavadno Itihas in Gujarati (Ahmedabad, 1977, reprint), 125-127.

11. Mohanlal Dalichand Desai, Jain Aitihisik Rasamala in Gujarati (Ahmedabad, 1908), 1; for career of Shantidas see, M.S.Commissariat, History of Gujarat with a Survey of Its Monuments and Inscriptions (Bombay, 1957) II, 140-149; Also see Ratnamanirao Bhimrao, Gujarat nun Patanagar, 733-737.

12. The authors have seen most of these farmans in original still in possession of Miss Priyamvadaben Nagarsheth, Ahmedabad. English renderings of some of these are contained in Commissariat, Imperial Mughal Farmans.

13. M.F. Lokhandwala, Mirat-i-Ahmadi: A History of Gujarat Translated from the Original Persian of Ali Muhammad Khan (Baroda, 1965), 210, 212, 213, 446, 447, 487, 708:

14. See, for example, the khatapatras no.84 (1660), 42 (1677), 23 (1685).

15. P.C. Devanji, "Three Gujarati Legal Documents of the Moghul Period", Journal of the Gujarat Research Society, IV, no. 1 (January, 1942), 26.

16. We owe the clarification of some of these issues to our discussions with Professor S.C.Misra of the M.S. University, Baroda.

17. William Foster (ed.), The English Factories in India, 1634-1636 (Oxford, 1906-36), 196-197, 238-59.

18. Commissariat, Imperial Mughal Farmans, 50-55. The earliest of Aurangzeb's farmans was issued in 1658 and the last in 1660.

19. Mirat-i-Ahmadi, 213.

20. M.N. Pearson, "Political Participation in Mughal India", Indian Economic and Social History Review, IX, no. 2 (June, 1972), 122-123; D. Tripathi and M.J. Mehta, "The Profile of an Indian Businessman in the 17th Century: Virji Vora" Case no. I-Eco.107(R), Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad.

21. Khatapatra no. 84 (1660).

22. That Sundardas was Shantidas's brother is mentioned in a representation made by Nagarsheth Premabhai to the British government in 1862. The same document also refers to the division in the family in the lifetime of Shantidas. A copy of this document is still available with Miss Priyamvadaben Nagarsheth, Ahmedabad.

23. There is a reference to the traditional "deep enmity" between the "followers of Vishnu" and the Jains in House of Commons, Parliamentary Paper no. 615 of 1853, pt. II (London, 1853), 1008

24. Khatapatra no. 31 (1677), 15 (1678), 23 (1685), 24 (1712).

25. Mirat-i-Ahmadi, 358-359; 398-399.

26. Commissariat, History of Gujarat, 420.

27. Ibid, 420-21. The original resolution of the mahajans is still available with Miss Priyamvadaben Nagarsheth, Ahmedabad.

28. Mirat-i-Ahmadi, 446.

29. Ibid, 487.

30. Ibid, 488.

31. Ibid, 489.

32. Ibid, 505. The farman makes no mention that the title had been conferred on any of Khushalchand's forefathers. In view of the fact that imperial farmans reconfirming certain privileges to the family normally refer to earlier grants, the 1732 order becomes yet another proof against the view that the nagarsheth title had

been earlier conferred on Shantidas and his descendants in perpetuity.

33. Ibid, 517.

34. Ibid, 621.

35. The khatapatras no. 39,57, and 17 of the years 1801, 1806, and 1813 respectively, mention Nathusha's grandson, Malukchand as nagarsheth. However, he has not been mentioned as such in any other contemporary document. It is possible that after the title became hereditary, it came to be loosely applied to prominent members of the family.

36. It is noteworthy that Lakshmichand, who came to the helm after Shantidas, was the third son of his parents. Khushal was the only son of his parents. The next nagarsheth, Nathusha, was the eldest son of Khushalchand and was followed by his younger brother, Wakhatchand.

37. Pearson, "Political Participation in Mughal India", 120.

38. Bombay Government, Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency. IV, Ahmedabad (Bombay, 1879), 112 f.n. This is cited henceforward as Ahmedabad Gazetteer; also see khatapatra no.87 (1710).

39. For a comprehensive discussion on this role of the nagarsheth see Pearson, "Political Participation in Mughal India", 113-131; also see Balkrishna Govind Gokhale, "The Merchant Community in XVIIth Century India", Journal of Indian History, LIV, pt.I (April, 1976), 138.

40. Mirat-i-Ahmadi, 358-359.

41. H.G. Briggs, The Cities of Gujarashtra (London, 1849), 211-213.

42. "Abhramkulina shlokovishe" Buddhiprakash (September, 1876), 194-200. It is mentioned in the poem that it was written in Samvat 1781 (1725 A.D.) and it was composed by one Shamalji Bhatt. The poem says that when the Marathas invaded the city they found that the city gates were closed on the orders of the provincial authorities. But it was Khushalchand who opened these gates.

43. Ahmedabad Gazetteer, 113-114.

44. Ratnamanirao Bhimrao, Gujarat nun Patnagar, 739.

45. For careers of Hemabhai and Premabhai see, Bombay Government, Representative Men of the Bombay Presidency (Bombay, 1900), 197; Maganlal Narottam Patel, Mahajan Mandal in Gujarati (Ahmedabad, 1896) 1016-1018; Briggs, Cities of Gujarashtra, 234-235; Ratnamanirao Bhimrao, Gujarat nun Patnagar, 739-741; Mohanlal Desai (ed.) Jain Aitihāsik Rasamala, 17-23.

46. For the history of Ahmedabad Municipality see, B.K. Boman Behram (ed.), The Rise of Municipal Government in the City of Ahmedabad (Bombay, 1937).

47. B.P. Badshah, The Life of Rao Bahadur Ranchhodlal Chhotalal C.I.E. (Bombay, 1920); on the rising challenge to nagarshethship from industrial leadership see, E.Washburn Hopkins, India, Old and New (New York, 1902) 169-179.

48. Poona, for instance, came to have a nagarsheth around the last quarter of the 18th century. Significantly enough, the position came into being after the Gujarat banias, who had migrated to the city, assumed great importance. For details see, D.R.Gadgil, Origins of the Modern Indian Business Class: An Interim Report (New York, 1959, mimeo), 28-29.