

Changing Regional Identities In Trade: From Multanis To Shikarpuris

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Abstract– Indian merchants had a significant presence in Iran and Central Asia during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This paper examines the nature of their commercial activity and show how the Indian merchants constituted an important element of the economic life of the region. It also profiles the relationship between the Indian merchants' Diaspora and the rulers of Iran and Central Asia to find out the extent to which the business of the Indian merchants was facilitated by state policy. A varied number of commodities were exchanged between the two regions i.e. India and the Central Asia. This business was conducted by a number of trading communities, like Multanis, Lohanis, Khattris, Marwaris, Bohras, Shikarpuris, Armenians and Bukhara merchants etc. However, the main emphasis has been laid on the changing regional identities in the trade with specific reference to Multanis and the Shikarpuris.

Key Words – Central Asia, Indian Diaspora, Marwaris, Multanis, Shikarpuris.

I. GENERAL OVERVIEW

Relations between India and Central Asia started from the antiquity. Central Asian dynasties like Huna, kushanas and saka ruled India for the most part of time and as such transferred their social and cultural values to the sub-continent. It does not mean that central Asia was always giver and India the recipient, but Indian value system also transferred behind its borders to the areas like central Asia. For example due to the efforts of Mauryan Empire, Ashoka's buddhism was expanded to many areas outside sub-continent, where central Asia was no exception. This relationship was not confined to the cultural relations, however, trade and commerce always formed part of the relations as Indian rulers, though little, were dependent on central Asian horses. For example Kautilya in his Arthashastra has talked about chittar gumball horse which included cavalry as well. Similarly we have references which attest the fact that the early medieval dynasties of Gurjara-pratihara kept large standing armies which include cavalry as an important component. In a similar fashion central Asia which was mostly desert or semi desert was

also dependent on India for many varieties of goods. In ancient Sanskrit Literature, we found many descriptions about central Asian lifestyle, culture, civilizations, philosophy, scholars' etc. In addition to this different religious arts and culture have left its impact on each other. As for as Buddhism is concerned many central Asian elements are imbibed in it. According to Dr. M. Kh. Abuseitova spread of Buddhism in central under the Kushanas was accompanied not by blind acceptations of the idea of ancient Indian culture but by their understanding and combination with local cultural traditions.

The relations between the two regions became stronger during medieval period as the rulers of India of the said period had Central Asian origin and as such they could not forget their old homeland, thus, made it mandatory for them to establish even stronger relations. The medieval period in Indian history is usually represented by the rule of Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire. During Delhi Sultanate, there were strong cultural relations between India and Central Asia. However, trade relations, although, vibrant expanded more during Mughal Empire.

During Sultanate period, there were many political upheavals and insecurity created by Mongol onslaught. Despite these political upheavals insecurity, there has been a regular movement of people and commodities between India and Central Asia. This relationship expanded with the rise and growth of Mughal Empire on the one hand and Safavid Empire and Uzbek Khanates on the other, who ruled the region for almost three centuries. These neighboring states understood the commercial importance and its benefits to their respective regions as a result took several steps to ensure that trade must flourish. The Mughal rulers encouraged the merchants for the direct supply of the best horses to Mughal stables and many other commodities which were not available locally.

A varied number of commodities were exchanged between the two regions. Indian cotton textiles of varied range were exported from India to Central Asia. Indigo was another important Indian commodity transported by Indian merchants to Central Asia and beyond to Safavid Iran. Similarly, Indian imports from Central Asia included War horses, silk textiles, carpets and arms such as knives, shields, armours, bukhara bows, and a variety of fruits such as apples, melons, grapes, etc, and dried fruits such as almonds, raisins, etc.

This business was conducted by a number of trading communities, like Multanis, Lohanis, Khattris, Marwaris, Bohras, Shikarpurians, Armenians and Bukhara Merchant etc. Multani which was a blanket term used for all Indian merchants constituted Khattris and Lohanis as important components. Indian merchants who were doing their business in Central Asia originated almost from all over subcontinent. However, the dominance was from the northern parts of the subcontinent. Indian merchants established their colonies in several places in Iran, Turan and Russia and had a wide economic role. They not only focused on the buying and

selling goods but investing their capital in lucrative ventures like offering loans to agriculturalists, village industrialists and facilitating the collection of revenue in cash. Thus the present study is going to investigate important Indian trading communities, Multanis and Shikarpurians involved in Central Asian trade with a focus on their economic role and business practices.

2. METHODOLOGY AND HYPOTHESES OF RESEARCH OF THE PRESENT WORK

Looking to the historical perspectives and the evidential literature made available in the earlier research, the envisaged research methodology for the purpose of this would be exploratory in nature cross connecting the historical facts traced and evidences gathered to satiate the findings within the scope of the entitled study. It would thus consist of following.

- Situational Analysis of the facts related to trade of Multanis and Shikarpurians,
- Assumptions converted to suitable hypotheses which would be tested within the ambit of the literature investigation.
- Acceptance or rejection of the hypotheses supported by the discussions on the facts of the historical perspectives.
- Examining available source material to identify how best the hypotheses are satiated and the methodological problems if any those may be encountered.

Hypotheses

- The Multanis were the Indian Diaspora consisting of Muslim merchants.
- Indian merchant Diaspora represented by Multanis had their presence in Isfahan the capital city of Safavid in the 17th and 18th centuries.
- Textile and money lending were the major economic functions of the Multanis owing to their heavy population in Isfahan.
- Shikarpuris were the independent Indian Diaspora other than the Multanis.
- The commencement of the nineteenth century witnessed changing regional identities from Multanis to the Shikarpuris.

3. REVIEWS OF EARLIER EXPLORATIONS

Presence of Indian Multani Merchants in Iran

Safavid Iran had a large population of Indian merchants residing in its cities. Several travelers have noted their presence. The Russian merchant Kotov, who visited Iran in the 1620's mentions that Multani merchants lived and traded in Isfahan. Some of them were Muslims while others were Hindus the worshippers of the sun. All of them wore white cotton cloths. He described their faces as 'bloodless and lean and dark [1]. According to the Englishman John Fryer, Jews, Banias and Armenians resided in all the cities of Persia [2].

It is not known as to when exactly did Indian merchants start settling in Iran though it is clear that they had been visiting its ports since at least the early medieval period [3]. Ibn Batuta refers to Indians being present in the port of Hunnuz in the fourteenth century [4]. Though Isfahan, the Safavid capital was the focal point of the Indian Diaspora, they were established in other cities too. Their colony at Shiraz was the second largest after that at the capital [5].

Around 200 Indian merchants resided in the northern city of Shamakhi in the late seventeenth century where they occupied the best sarays. A small number of them lived in the nearby city of Ardebil. Indian merchants were present in the city of Kazwin, famous for its silks and carpets, in the mid-sixteenth century [6]. They were also regular visitors to Kashan, which was described by sixteenth century English visitor as enjoying the best trade.

According to Le Bruyn, the saray occupied by the Indians in Kashan was large and beautiful [7]. Describing the trade of the city in the 1630s, Olearius says, there is in this city, at all times, a great number of foreign merchants and above all Indians, who are assigned there a particular place for their habitations and traffic [8].

That the Indian population in Iran had become very large by the seventeenth century is a fact mentioned by various sources. In a petition written to the Russian authorities, an Indian merchant who traded between Iran and Russia said that ten thousand of his countrymen lived in Iran permanently [9]. The French traveler Tavernier and the Dutch traveler Olearius mentioned that Ten to Twelve Thousand Indians lived in Isfahan alone while according to Thevenot the Indian population was Fifteen Thousand [10]. The commerce of the Indians was mainly based upon the sale of Indian textiles that were sold in the streets in a manner that an English factor described as un-merchant like [11]. The Saray allotted to the Indians in Shiraz was full of merchants with textiles. Multani Merchants were so closely identified with textiles that they were known as bazzaze, the Persian term for cloth merchant [12]. Another important aspect of the Indian merchant community's economic function was that of money lending. Tavernier praises the financial skills of the Indians and reported about them they all were like bankers and very knowledgeable in money. The greatest

part of the money of the Principal money'd man of Ispahan is in their hands for Improvements Sake. So that if you want a considerable sum, you may have it the next day upon good security and paying a severe Interest which those Baniyas will squeeze up sometimes up to 18% [13].

Many contemporary observers were critical of the money lending activities of the Indians. They used to draw all the gold and silver out of the country and send it to their own [14]. Another observer, writing in the 1680's noted that the tendency of the 'Baniyas' to monopolize and hoard money had led to shortage of currency available in the markets [15].

Dale has argued that the characterization of Indians as usurers who drained scarce capital out of Iran is a misrepresentation of the situation. In his view the two activities, money-lending and sale of textiles were inter-related with the profits derived from the latter being used for the former. He also suggests that the social disapproval of usury among Muslims might have prevented Iranian merchants from engaging in it whereas the banking and money lending activities of Indian traders were not discouraged by such inhibitions [16].

The credit drawn from the Indian merchant was often utilized by the English and the Dutch Companies. When the former required money in the early Eighteenth century in order to make payments at the court, they borrowed it from Indian brokers. The Indians of Isfahan also dealt in money-changing. Foreign merchants wanting to buy local goods had to convert their gold Ducats into silver mahmudis. The Baniyas, according to a Dutch Report, made profit by giving a low rate for the ducats bought. But when it came to selling ducats they asked for much higher rates [17].

The Safavid rulers granted to the Indian merchants freedom to pursue their religious

traditions. Kotov observed that the Hindus of Isfahan cremated their dead outside the city and scattered their ashes [18]. Tavemier recorded that the Baniyas were distinguished by a yellow mark made with saffron upon top of their forehead [19]. The Indian community was not the only one that was free to practise its religion without any restriction. Other minority groups like the Armenians and the Jews also enjoyed this privilege [20].

From the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century the political situation in Iran began to worsen. By 1715-16, the Afghan Ghilzai tribe, living in the region of Kandahar had thrown off their allegiance to the Safavids and had become independent. In 1722 they sacked Isfahan. The siege lasting for six months was disastrous for its inhabitants. In all 20,000 Isfahanis were killed while around 80,000 died of disease and starvation.²⁹ Those who escaped fled to India and Turkey. Depopulated and ruined, Isfahan's trade was reduced considerably [21]. One way in which the Indians responded to the situation was by migrating to Russia. Thirty one of them arrived in Astrakhan and Baku in 1741. According to them the insecurity of life and imposition of commercial restrictions had made them leave Iran [22].

Presence of Indian Multani Merchants in Central Asia

The area of Turan encompassed regions including modern Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and northern parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The encompassed area roughly corresponds to Central Asia today.

By the Sixteenth century Indian merchants had started settling down and owning property in the cities of Central Asia. This is proved by contemporary documents from Bukhara and Samarkand. A merchant by the name of Darya Khan Multani is mentioned several times in these documents. He was involved in the textile

business and he seems to have been quite rich as several craftsmen, also Multanis had taken loans in cash and kind from him. We also find mention of a Khwaja Ibrahim Multani who is described as owning property in Samarkand [23].

Indian merchants were also present in Tashkent. During the reign of Imam Quli Khan (1611-1641) Hindu traders occupied an entire sub-division of the city of Bukhara. The Uzbek state must have played an important role in the settlement of Indians in its territories. In the early nineteenth century when William Moorcroft visited the town of Yangi Arekh near Kondooz he noted that it had been founded in the latter half of the sixteenth century by Abdullah Khan the Uzbek ruler who had induced many Indians to settle there [24].

The presence of merchants from Multan in Turan is not surprising when one considers the city's long history of involvement in the long distance caravan trade. Even in the fourteenth century the Multanis were known to be significant players in the trade. Apart from the Multanis, traders from other parts of the subcontinent participated in the Central Asian trade. A reference has already been given in preceding section about the traders in Bokhara. Merchants from Deccan and the Gujarat also travelled to Khorasan, Transoxiana and Turkistan in the sixteenth century [25].

While merchants from the farther parts of the country may have visited Turan, they are less likely to have settled there. However, Marwari merchants, who are mentioned in the Russian documents as being residents of Astrakhan in the eighteenth century, may also have had settled in Central Asia.

During the seventeenth century Indian merchants had a significant presence in various Uzbek cities like Bukhara, Balkh, Qunduz, Samarkand, Taliqan, Tennez etc. But there is no

information on the numerical size of the Indian Diaspora in Turan during this period. Estimates of the number of Indian merchants living in Central Asia are available from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. According to the information provided to the Russian authorities by an Indian merchant in Astrakhan in 1736, there were three hundred Indians then living in Bokhara [26]. An early nineteenth century visitor noted that considerable number of Hindus lived in the city [27]. Mohanlal's remark that Hindus occupied most of Bokhara's sarays suggests that they were a large group. Burnes estimated the Indian population of Bokhara to be around 300 but he also noted that the strength of the Indian community had increased in the last few years [28]. The same figure is provided by Baron Von Meyendorff, who visited Bokhara in 1820 and described it as a populous town, carrying on extensive trade. He recorded that most of the recent Indian migrants to the city were from Multan and Kabul. He also mentions the Kashmiris as a separate group [29]. Moorcroft noted that settlements of Indian merchant existed in Balkh, Kholoom and Yangi Arekh but he has not provided information about their size [30]. Around the same period, Twenty Indians resided in the city of Khokand, situated in the Farghana valley. Several Kashmiri merchants were also settled there.

Presence of Multani Merchants in Afghanistan

As analyzed earlier Kabul was the focal point of the trade with central Asia. Babar's mention of Hindi being one of the languages spoken in Kabul suggests that there was an Indian presence in the city around the mid-seventeenth century. Thevenot noted that a large Hindu community resided in Kabul [31]. Indian merchants were also a common sight in Kandahar. By the next century, Hindu merchants had spread throughout the Afghan region. A large number of them were found residing in the towns where they were

engaged in trade, brokerage, banking, etc. Even small villages had a few Hindus dealing in the above mentioned professions and in money-changing and accounting [32]. In Kabul the financial matters of the government were entrusted to the care of the Hindus. They forwarded revenue from the provinces to the capital. Their other responsibilities included looking after the finances of the nobility. They also dominated most of the business of the city. Mohan Lal estimated that Two Thousand Hindus lived in Kabul. Unlike the case of Central Asia and Iran, here the Indian merchants lived by themselves. Those living in Kabul had brought their families along [32]. Burnes recorded that there were Three Hundred Hindu families living in Kabul [33].

According to Forster many families of Multanis and Marwaris were settled in late eighteenth century Kandahar. He praises them for their contribution in promoting the trade of the city. He adds 'the extensive range of shops occupied by Hindu traders, with the ease and the contentment expressed in their deportment, affords a fair testimony of their enjoying at Kandahar, liberty and protection. The Indians were also present in Ghuzni where they owned prominent houses.

The town of Herat, situated at the intersection of roads from India, Turkistan and Iran, had 100 Hindu families engaged in money-lending and commerce in the late eighteenth century [34].⁸² Captain Christie, visiting Herat in 1810, estimated the number of Hindus to be around 600. He noted that since they were the only community possessing capital, they enjoyed influence with the government³³ Arthur Connolly, who was present in the city in the 1830s reckoned the number of Indians to be around a thousand. He noted that a few of them lived in a saray owned by them while the rest dwelled in houses. Some of them functioned as shopkeepers while others were engaged in trade.

Most of the Indians were rich and were therefore disliked by the local people.

The Indian merchants enjoyed a fair degree of toleration in the Durrani Empire. Comparing their situation with that of the residents of British India, Forster said that they enjoyed under the Afghan government, a liberty and protection, little short of that experienced by the inhabitants of our Indian possessions. Elphinstone has mentioned that while the Hindus were not allowed to organize religious processions, they were free to pursue their religion in private and their temples were not harmed. The Hindus were, however, not subject to any ill treatment and the Afghans had no reservations in entrusting them with responsibility. Elsewhere, he writes that the Indians had given up their rigid notions of pollution and did not feel necessary to take a bath in case they happened to be touched by a Muslim. They also ate bread baked at a common oven and freely interacted with the Afghans although they were subject to ridicule due to their timidity, their craft, and their parsimony. Another testimony of the liberal conditions under which the Indian merchants lived in the Afghan state comes from Lewis Pelly, a mid-nineteenth century traveler who observed that the Hindus had held a burial-ground in Herat for the last 100 years [35].

4. FROM MULTANIS TO SHIKARPURIS: CHANGING REGIONAL IDENTITIES

It is evidential from the discussions and the view points of the earlier studies that the sources from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century refer to the Indians living in Iran and Central Asia as 'Multanis'. From the early nineteenth century, however, the designation 'Multani' is replaced by 'Shikarpuri' [36]. Markovits has suggested that there existed two separate networks, one centered in Multan and the other based in the town of Shikarpur, situated in Upper Sind. The latter became important from the time of the

incorporation of the city into the Durrani Empire around the mid eighteenth century. As Shikarpur lay on the Bolan Pass route connecting Kandahar, the Durrani capital with Northern India, its trade was encouraged while that of Multan suffered. He supports the view that the Shikarpuri merchants had financed Ahmad Shah's campaigns into Northern India and were subsequently rewarded with part of the loot. Markovits does concede that there was migration of merchants from Multan, and other places like Rajasthan, Gujarat, Afghanistan and Iran to Shikarpur [37]. It happened in the early nineteenth century that there was a large scale shift of merchants from Multan to Shikarpur as a result of the disturbed conditions of Punjab. The migration was promoted by Ahmad Shah's successor Timur Shah who assured the Hindu merchants that they would be free to conduct their business without any fear from extortion by the state. Merchants from the port of Thatta also relocated to Shikarpur in order to take advantage of the commercial opportunities available there [37].

The Indian Diaspora continued to operate as before from its new base of Shikarpur. Mohan Lal observed that its inhabitants, who were for the most part khattris, have spread themselves in almost all the regions of Central Asia, whence they return loaded with gains to their families at Shikarpur [38]. Bumes speaks of eight agency houses of the Shikarpuris located in Kabul. He also noted that agents of the Shikarpuri merchants were to be found from Astrakhan in the west to Calcutta in the east. The places where the Shikarpuri agents were stationed were Muscat, Bandar Abbas, Yezd, Mashhad, Astrakhan, Bukhara, Samarkand, Yarkand, Khokand, Kundooz, Kholoom, Kandahar, Kabul, Ghazni, Peshawar, Dera Ismael Khan, Dera Ghazi Khan, Muitan, Bahawalpur, Amritsar, Jaipur, Jaisalmer, Bombay, Hyderabad, Karachi and Kelat [39]. The Shikarpuri bills of exchange were negotiable in all these places. Shikarpur was mainly a

financial centre and was not of much importance as a manufacturing town. Mohan Lal writes that the trade between Bukhara and Multan was in the hands of the Shikarpuris and the Lohanis but he does not specify their exact role [40]. Thus, it is evidential from the above discussion that the regional identities of Multanis were absorbed into the identities of Shikarpuris in the earlier part of nineteenth century though the Multanis identity existed for nearly three centuries from sixteenth century till commencement of the nineteenth century.

5. TESTING OF THE HYPOTHESIS CONSIDERED IN THE PRESENT WORK

In view of the historical background tracked as above and the categorical viewpoints presented, the hypotheses formulated have been checked for confirmation or rejection. The result of the same is produced below. Based on it, the final results are discussed and concluded under subsequent sections of this study.

- The Multanis belonging to Multan were Muslim merchants: **Rejected**
- Indian merchant Diaspora represented by Multanis had their presence in Isfahan the capital city of Safavid in the 17th and 18th centuries: **Accepted**
- Textile and money lending were the major economic functions of the Multanis owing to their heavy population in Isfahan: **Accepted**
- Shikarpuris were the independent Indian Diaspora other than the Multanis: **Rejected**
- The commencement of the nineteenth century witnessed changing regional identities

from Multanis to the Shikarpuris: **Accepted**

6. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

A strong Indian mercantile presence characterized both seventeenth century Iran and Muslim Central Asia. The Indian Diaspora consisting of Multanis later on defined as Shikarpuris numbered in the thousands in Iran and in the hundreds in Turan. During the Seventeenth Century an Indian colony was also established in Astrakhan comprising mainly of merchants from Multan. The Diaspora, apart from Multanis and later on defined as Shikarpuris, also included Marwari and Muslim merchants. The commerce of the Indian merchants was based on the sale of large quantities of cotton textiles and other commodities like Indigo. They also engaged in money lending ventures and thus fulfilled a substantial part of the credit requirements of the local population. The success of the Indian merchants was facilitated by the policies of the rulers of Iran and Turan; the Safavids and the Uzbek Khans who realized the crucial role played by them in providing their kingdoms with much required commodities and capital.

During the first half of the eighteenth century the Indian merchants of Iran suffered a setback as a result of unsettled political conditions. But they managed to re-establish their position subsequently. Judging from early nineteenth century sources it appears that Indian presence was maintained without any disruption. After the incorporation of the region into the Russian empire, restrictions were imposed on the business of the Indians which led to their mass migration from the region. It is finally to be concluded that the Multanis i.e. the Indians right from 16th century to 18th century has occupied the Safavid Iran and the Turan which is probably is the entire Central Asian region. However, the Multanis in

the early 19th century were redefined as Shikarpuris and thus the identities were changed from Multanis to Shikarpuris.

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