

CHAPTER TWO

THE EMERGENCE AND ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF THE INDIAN MERCHANT DIASPORA

Introduction

From the middle of the sixteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century the lively caravan trade which had previously defined much of India's commercial relationship with its neighbors to the north and west was augmented by the commercial activities of thousands of Indian diaspora merchants. These individuals were agents of homogeneous caste-based family firms who had been assigned to extend their firms' business interests to any of the many dozens of semi-permanent Indian trading colonies in the distant markets of Afghanistan, Turan and Iran. Some of the more intrepid merchants even ventured to the Caucasus and the emerging markets of Russia where, for over two centuries, they maintained a diaspora community in Astrakhan, Russia's Caspian Sea port on the mouth of the Volga river. These merchants typically spent several years away from their homeland and families while they engaged in a variety of commercial activities and operated one of the most important merchant networks in early modern Eurasian history. The Indians' maintenance of this diaspora for over three centuries is a testament to their successful organization, their ability to quickly adapt to changing political and economic circumstances, their relentless quest for commercial opportunities, and the high value placed on their financial services by the state administrators of their host societies.

It is a central argument of this work that the several thousand Indian merchants who at any given time populated diaspora communities in cities and villages throughout Turan comprised the single most important facet of Turan's early modern commercial relationship with India. This is attributable to the commercial activities of the diaspora merchants, which differed from those of the earlier caravan traders in several important respects. A detailed discussion of this distinction is reserved for subsequent chapters. The present objective is to explore the diverse ethnic composition of the diaspora merchants, the vast majority of whom were originally identified by the more general

designation 'Multani.' Also, despite suggestions that the Multani diaspora had atrophied by the end of the eighteenth century, it is argued here that there is no qualitative difference between the early modern 'Multani' diaspora and the 'Shikarpuri' diaspora of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Ethnically, geographically and organizationally these two designations referred to merchants and commercial institutions of the same extraction. Before we turn to the specifics of the Indian merchant diaspora, however, it is first necessary to consider the recent and growing usage of the 'diaspora' concept and clearly define how it will be used in the pages that follow.

Defining 'Diaspora' for the Present Purpose

In recent years the term 'diaspora' has been frequently used to characterize peoples existing away from their homeland. Khachig Tölölyan, editor of the journal *Diaspora*, asserts that 'the term that once described Jewish, Greek, and Armenian dispersion now shares meanings with a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, [and] ethnic community.'¹ Others have even more broadly defined diaspora as 'that segment of a people living outside the homeland.'² Expanding the definition to include virtually any group of people living beyond the boundary of its perceived homeland has enhanced the term's utility for the emerging discipline of transnational studies by facilitating comparative studies and providing new topics of inquiry and a model for understanding such phenomena. However, the rather amorphous and potentially confusing nature of the term's contemporary usage risks diminishing its effectiveness, motivating a narrower definition for the present discussion.

The etymology of the word 'diaspora' can be traced to the Greek '*diasporá*,' derived from the combination of *dia*, meaning 'over,' and *speiro*, 'to sow,' as in scattering or planting. The term was probably first used in the third century B.C.E. by Greek-speaking Jews in reference to their exile from the

¹ Khachig Tölölyan, 'The Nation-State and Its Others: In Lieu of a Preface,' *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1, 1 (Spring 1991), p. 4. For further discussion, see idem, 'Rethinking *Diaspora(s)*: Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment,' *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 5, 1 (Spring 1996), pp. 3-36.

² Walker Connor, 'The Impact of Homelands Upon Diasporas,' in Gabriel Sheffer, ed., *Modern Diasporas in International Politics*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986, p. 16.

holy land and dispersion among the Gentiles in the sixth century B.C.E.³ In this context the term refers to a situation in which a number of communities sharing a common national, religious, or ethnic identity exist apart from a common homeland. The term also implies that, over time, the communities maintain their distinctive identity, despite their existence as a minority living in a host society. A diaspora community may avoid assimilation through continued identification or interaction with its unique homeland, use of a specific language, identification with a socio-religious system other than that of the host society, the maintenance of a residence in a communal settlement separate from the host society, economic specialization, and the pursuit of bilateral relations with similar, geographically dispersed diaspora communities. Members of diaspora communities are, of course, susceptible to some cultural assimilation, and individuals may even leave the community and adopt the culture of the host society. In the present discussion, however, the use of the term 'diaspora' implies that the community in question maintains an identification with its homeland, an internal cohesiveness as an exclusive community, and continues to be perceived by members of the diaspora and the host society as a cultural 'other.' This follows Abner Cohen's use of the term as:

distinct as a type of social grouping in its culture and structure. Its members are culturally distinct from both their society of origin and from the societies among which they live. Its organization combines stability of structure but allows a high degree of mobility of personnel. It has an informal political organization of its own which takes care of stability of order within the one community, and the co-ordination of the activities of its various member communities in their perpetual struggle against external pressure. It tends to be autonomous in its judicial organization. Its members form a moral community which constrains the behaviour of the individual and ensures a large measure of conformity with common values and principles. It also has its own institutions of general welfare and social security. In short, a diaspora is a nation of socially interdependent, but spatially dispersed, communities.⁴

Multiple historical processes may motivate groups of people to leave their homeland and form a diaspora. These can most generally be divided into the

³ Cf. Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: an Introduction*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997, p. ix; André Wink, 'The Jewish Diaspora in India: Eighth to Thirteenth Centuries,' *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 24, 4 (1987), p. 351; Tölölyan, 'Rethinking Diaspora(s),' p. 11.

⁴ Abner Cohen, 'Cultural Strategies in the Organization of Trading Diasporas,' in Claude Meillassoux, ed., *The Development of Indigenous Trade and Markets in West Africa*, London: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 267. For further discussion, see William Safran, 'Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,' *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1, 1 (Spring 1991), pp. 83-84.

categories of provocation and attraction. Briefly, factors which would provoke the formation of a diaspora include social, economic or political coercion which motivate groups of people to leave their homeland in search of improved opportunities elsewhere ('victim diasporas'). Conversely, diasporas may also arise out of a group's attraction to a region promising greater recompense for their labor ('labor diasporas') or, as in the case of the present study, where they may be in a position to pursue lucrative commercial endeavors involving the mediation of cross-cultural trade ('merchant diasporas'). The latter process requires the individuals involved to physically relocate and regularly participate in the cultural arena of their host society. When their efforts prove successful, other individuals may be attracted to similarly profitable locations and, over time, form what has come to be known as a merchant diaspora: a network of interrelated communities established in locations strategic to their engagement in specific types of commerce and transregional trade.⁵ The early modern dispersion of Armenian merchant communities mediating cross-cultural trade across much of Eurasia provides a classic example of a merchant diaspora.⁶

In practical application, to some degree the dichotomy established above may prove to be a false one. That is to say, the motivation of communities to live a collective expatriate existence can sometimes be ascribed to more than just one factor. For example, the migrations of Armenian merchant communities are commonly attributed to commercial incentives stemming from the convenient location of their Transcaucasian homeland, situated on overland trade routes connecting Iran and Russia with Anatolia, Syria and the Levant.⁷ Armenians capitalized on their geography by actively participating in transregional trade and establishing merchant diaspora communities in numerous distant markets.⁸ Yet Armenian migrations were also known to have been motivated by factors of socio-political provocation, such as the Safavids' sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century resettlement of a large number of Armenians from their home in the Armenian town of Julfa to a dedicated

⁵ Philip D. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History*, Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1984; Christine Dobbin, *Asian Entrepreneurial Minorities: Conjoint Communities in the Making of the World-Economy, 1570-1940*, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Monograph Series, no. 71, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press Ltd, 1996.

⁶ Cf. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade*, pp. 179-206; Edmund Herzig, 'The Rise of the Julfa Merchants in the Late Sixteenth Century,' in Charles Melville, ed., *Safavid Persia: the History and Politics of an Islamic Society*, Pembroke Persian Papers, vol. 4, London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 1996 pp. 305-22.

⁷ For a map of these routes, see 'Figure 1. Julfa, routes and silk producing areas ca 1600' in Herzig, 'The Rise of the Julfa Merchants,' p. 311.

⁸ Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade*, pp. 185-86.

suburb of Isfahan, named New Julfa.⁹ Furthermore, it is not unknown for diaspora networks that formed in response to factors of provocation to capitalize on their spatial dispersion by initiating long-distance, cross-cultural commerce between pre-existing communities.¹⁰

Merchant diasporas tend to differ from other types of diasporas in several important respects. Most notably, they are characterized by a higher degree of mobility, more communication between communities, and a higher degree of interaction with the indigenous population. Unlike other diaspora categories, merchant diasporas may even be peopled by a rotating, gender-specific population. A useful list of topics of inquiry relevant to the study of modern merchant diasporas is provided by Abner Cohen:

What are the criteria of distinctiveness and of recruitment? How is the demographic adjustment between the sexes and the ages achieved? What mechanisms for communication between the members of one community and between one community and another within the same diaspora are employed? How, when denied resort to the regular exercise of organized physical coercion, is authority organized? What kinds of power are mobilized to support this authority? What is the nature of the relationship of trust between the various types of businessmen operating in them? How is credit made possible and how is it regulated? What are the procedures underlying decision-making in communal affairs? What are the characteristics of the articulating ideologies employed and what are the mechanisms by which these ideologies are kept alive? How do structure and culture affect one another in the historical development of these diasporas?¹¹

It can be seen that a study of even a *contemporary* merchant diaspora is a difficult, complex endeavor. How is one to conduct a thorough analysis of a premodern merchant diaspora? The effort necessarily requires a nearly impossible wealth and variety of information unlikely to be found in archives or to have survived the centuries. Furthermore, considering the secretive attitude premodern merchants held toward their commercial transactions, especially those merchants vulnerably dispersed in diaspora communities, much of the information about individuals' commercial activities and the communities' social operations was either never recorded or was intentionally destroyed after it lost its usefulness.¹²

⁹ For a discussion of the deportation of Armenians from their Transcaucasian homeland by the Safavid Shahs, see McCabe, *The Shah's Silk for Europe's Silver*, pp. 35–66.

¹⁰ See Wink, 'The Jewish Diaspora in India,' pp. 349–66.

¹¹ Cohen, 'Cultural Strategies,' p. 268.

¹² A remarkable exception to this rule can be found in S. D. Goitein's study of the social and economic operation of medieval Jewish merchant diaspora communities operating out of Fustat, modern Cairo, in his *A Mediterranean Society*.

CHAPTER TWO

Without a comprehensive source of information providing insight into the activities of a single Indian diaspora community at a specific time, one must instead take a broader approach and extrapolate from information regarding related communities scattered throughout diverse sources. Although inadequate for a sociological study of a single diaspora community, this methodology embraces the sources' temporal and spatial inconsistencies and improves our ability to investigate the development of the diaspora and its transformation over the *longue durée*. In the context of the Indian diaspora communities in Turan, this approach is a useful one for gaining insight into the dynamics of early modern Indo-Turanian relations as they changed over the centuries, and it also illuminates several processes relevant to the general history of the region.

that the etymology of *bāb-i hinduwān* should be traced not to the presence of a merchant community in its vicinity, but to the large number of Indian slaves settled in that quarter of the town.²⁵ Regarding the citadel, Hafiz Tanish repeated a legend traceable to Firdawsi's *Shāhnāma* that the *qal'a-i hinduwān* was named after the great number of Indian masons responsible for its construction, brought from India by the mythical Kai Qubad's vice-regent, Luhrasp.²⁶ Although the citadel's date of construction remains uncertain, it suggests a significant Indian presence of some sort in Balkh prior to the eleventh century, long before Timur's invading armies destroyed the *qal'a-i hinduwān* in 1369–70.²⁷

B. The Emergence of the Diaspora

Writing at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the young Timurid prince Babur reported that some ten to twenty thousand Indian merchants annually traveled in caravans to Kabul where they met with other caravans coming from 'Kashghar, Ferghana, Turkistan, Samarqand, Bukhara, Balkh, Hisar, and Badakhshan.'²⁸ Near the end of that century, in 1584, Hafiz Tanish similarly noted the presence of several caravans in Peshawar which had originated in the Deccan, Gujarat, Multan and other regions of India, and were transporting goods destined for Khurasan, Mā warā' al-nahr and Turkestan.²⁹ Whether these merchants traveled on to Turan themselves or exchanged their commodities in the frontier markets of Afghanistan and returned to India, these accounts suggest a strong Indo-Turanian commercial relationship. They do not, however, demonstrate the presence of an Indian merchant diaspora in Turan.

In his work on the Indian communities in nineteenth-century Central Asia, G. L. Dmitriev suggests that the earliest information available regarding

²⁵ Cited in Mukhtarov, 'Balkh in the Late Middle Ages,' pp. 27–28.

²⁶ Hafiz Tanish, *Sharaf-nāma-i-Shāhī*, II, p. 136 (fol. 178a–b).

²⁷ Cf. Mukhtarov, 'Balkh in the Late Middle Ages,' p. 19; Bartol'd, *An Historical Geography*, p. 26.

²⁸ Babur, *Babur-nama*, p. 202.

²⁹ Unfortunately, we have no information regarding the specific commodities involved, all of which were lost in a fire while the caravans were waiting for the route to open. Hafiz Tanish, *Sharaf-nāma-i-Shāhī*, fol. 451a–b. Cited in Nizamutdinov, *Iz istorii Sredneaziatsko-indiiskikh otnoshenii*, p. 47. According to the Indian chronicler Nizam ud-Din Ahmad, the fire occurred in 1586 and destroyed some one thousand camel loads of merchandise. *Tabaqat-i Akbari*, translated by B. De and Bains Prashad, 3 vols, Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1927–39, II, p. 602.

attract Indian merchants and moneylenders that he had moneychanging bazaars built in Bukhara and Samarqand.³⁴

The emergence and development of the Indian merchant diaspora in Turan in the years following the establishment of the Mughal Empire and the Bukharan Khanate is a product of the conjunction of several historical processes. These include increasingly active Eurasian commercial markets, the advancement of Indians' economic influence both inside and outside of the subcontinent, and a general intensification of Indo-Turanian cultural and commercial contacts.³⁵ Although one cannot make the argument that there was unobstructed, continual growth in the development of Indo-Turanian commercial bonds during this period, it was argued in the previous chapter that these commercial relations continued, in general, at an elevated level from the early sixteenth century well into the nineteenth century. This is related to increased state investment in improving and maintaining caravan routes initiated by Akbar, emperor of Mughal India (r. 1556–1605) and 'Abd Allah II, Bukharan Khan (r. 1561/1583–98), and also to the growing European control of maritime routes which pushed many indigenous traders to caravan routes.

The most notable result of this intensification was the growth and development in Turan of the Indian merchant diaspora itself. Thus, sixteenth-century sources mention Indian communities settled in the urban centers of Bukhara, Samarqand and Tashkent, as well as in certain cities in Iran. But, as the number of Indians willing to invest their time, effort and capital in commercial ventures throughout the diaspora increased, communities emerged in dozens of urban centers and villages throughout Turan and a number of other Eurasian regions.

Diaspora and Identity

A. The Multanis

Stephen Dale's discussion of the Indian diaspora communities of Russia and Iran from 1600–1750 clearly establishes that these communities were multi-ethnic, but that a dominant position was held by Indian merchant-money lenders

New Delhi: Sagar, 1971, II, p. 415. It is ironic that, although 'Yangi Ariq' is Turkic for 'New Canal,' Moorcroft and Trebek reported that the area 'remains sterile through want of irrigation.'

³⁴ Mukminova, *Sotsial'naiia differentsiatsiia*, pp. 119–20.

³⁵ The socio-economic circumstances surrounding the emergence of the Indian family firms will be discussed in detail in chapter four.