

# Indian merchants and Eurasian trade, 1600–1750

STEPHEN FREDERIC DALE

*Ohio State University*



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa  
<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Cambridge University Press 1994

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception  
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
no reproduction of any part may take place without  
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1994  
Reprinted 1997  
First paperback edition 2002

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Dale, Stephen Frederic.

Indian merchants and Eurasian trade, 1600-1750 / Stephen Frederic Dale.  
p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in Islamic civilization)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0 521 45460 3

1. India – Commerce – Eurasia – History. 2. Eurasia – Commerce –

India – History. I. Title. II. Series.

HF3788.E83D35 1994

382'.095405-dc20 93-31404 CIP

ISBN 0 521 45460 3 hardback

ISBN 0 521 52597 7 paperback

# Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>		x
<i>Note on transliteration</i>		xiii
<i>Abbreviations</i>		xiv
1 An Indian world economy		1
The Indian diaspora		1
The Eurasian context		7
2 India, Iran and Turan in 1600		14
The economies		15
Commerce and the state		30
Intra-Asian trade		42
3 The Indian diaspora in Iran and Turan		45
Trade routes		46
Multan and the Multanis		55
Mediatory trade		64
The Multanis of Isfahan		66
Technology transfers		75
4 Indo-Russian commerce in the early modern era		78
The Uzbeks of the Franks		78
The Indian “guest-house” in Astrakhan		86
Borzois and gyrfalcons		90
The New Trade Regulations		95
Merchants and the state		98
5 The Indian diaspora in the Volga basin		101
The Indian community in Astrakhan		101
Patterns of Indian commerce		108
The Indian “firm” in Astrakhan		112
“Companies” and capital		121
Peddlers, merchants and moneylenders		126
		vii

viii Contents

6	Imperial collapse, mercantilism and the Mughul diaspora	128
	Multanis and Multan	129
	Indian entrepreneurs and Eurasian trade	133
	<i>Appendix</i>	139
	<i>Bibliography</i>	142
	<i>Index</i>	158

# Illustrations

## PLATES

1	Caravansarai and Akbar's fort at Attock (Atak-Banares)	<i>page</i> 40
2	Western entrance to the Bolan Pass	50
3	Bazar flanking the entrance to the <i>masjid-i-jami'</i> , Isfahan	68
4	Haveli, Indian merchant's house in Jaisalmir	136

## MAPS

1	India, Iran and Turan	17
2	Northwest routes: India to Iran and Turan	47
3	Iran	71
4	Eurasia	80
5	Russia	103

## CHAPTER 1

# An Indian world economy

Have we not Indian carpets dark as wine,  
Turbans and sashes, gowns and bows and veils,  
And broideries of intricate design,  
And printed hangings in enormous bales?

James Elroy Flecker: "The Golden Journey to Samarqand"

## The Indian Diaspora

In a discussion of the commerce and business classes of Safavid Iran (1501–1722), Mehdi Keyvani has remarked that the presence and proliferation of Indian “moneychangers” in several major Iranian cities during the later Safavid period is “an astonishing and unexplained episode of Iranian economic history.”<sup>1</sup> Keyvani would have been justified in adding that the increased settlement of these Indians in Iran has also remained an unexplained aspect of Indian economic history in this period when Mughul emperors ruled the northern half of the South Asian subcontinent (1526–1739). If no more than a few Indians had been involved their presence might justifiably be dismissed as an intriguing anomaly that had no fundamental significance for the economic history of either Iran or India, but thousands and perhaps tens of thousands of Indian businessmen lived and worked in Iran in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century. Some of these men were moneychangers and/or moneylenders, but many of the same individuals also worked as retail and wholesale merchants, commodity brokers and financiers. Taken as a whole they constituted an influential but rarely noticed trade diaspora that also encompassed the Uzbek khanates of western Turkistan or Turan (c. 1500–1920). In the early seventeenth century the diaspora extended its mercantile activities to include the Russian Caspian port of Astrakhan, the Volga basin and, for a brief period, Moscow itself. This expanding sphere of Indian mercantile influence thus represented far more than a transitory episode for Safavid Iran, far more even than an important moment in Mughul–Safavid

<sup>1</sup> Mehdi Keyvani, *Artisans and Guild Life in the Later Safavid Period* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 1982), 228.

## 2 An Indian world economy

economic relations. It was a climactic moment of an important phase in Eurasian economic history.

The concept of a trade diaspora has been widely publicized by the African historian, Philip Curtin, who, along with Fernand Braudel, is also one of the few scholars who have alluded to the presence of Indian merchants in Russia.<sup>2</sup> “Trade diaspora” is a useful descriptive tool for the phenomenon of merchant migrations from one cultural zone to another, and in his book, *Cross-cultural Trade in World History*,<sup>3</sup> Curtin applies it to a multitude of examples that range from the Middle East in the fourth century BC to the “tightly controlled trade diasporas of the chartered European trading companies in eastern seas.”<sup>4</sup> By itself, though, the concept is not sufficient to convey the economic significance of this wide-spread dispersal of Indian merchants in Iran, Turan and Russia. This particular diaspora reflected an asymmetrical economic relationship in which Indians marketed agricultural products, textile manufactures and their own financial expertise throughout a broad region where they enjoyed a competitive advantage in both goods and services – or, in visible and invisible exports. In brief, the diaspora manifested in the persons of these merchants the Mughul empire’s stature as a regionally dominant economic power or, in Fernand Braudel’s phrase, a regional “world economy.”<sup>5</sup>

One of the best known and clearest examples of this type of regionally dominant diaspora in the early modern era, the sixteenth through the eighteenth century, is that of the western European economic penetration of Russia. The phenomenon is particularly obvious in this instance because these two societies had been largely isolated from one another before representatives of the nascent European world economy in the person of English merchants literally stumbled over the primitive Muscovite state while searching for a northwest passage to the orient. T. S. Willan has examined the early English phase of discovery and Jonathan Israel has written an exceptionally lucid account of the later Dutch phase in his overall analysis of their hegemonic diaspora, *Dutch Primacy in World Trade, 1585–1740*.<sup>6</sup> The settlement of English and Dutch merchants and entrepreneurs in Archangel and Moscow is particularly apropos since it represented virtually the same process as the nearly simultaneous extension of

<sup>2</sup> Fernand Braudel is the only scholar to hint at the economic significance of these Indian merchants. *The Perspective of the World*, Vol. III of *Civilization and Capitalism 15th–18th Century*, trans. by Siân Reynolds (London: Collins, 1984), 461.

<sup>3</sup> Philip D. Curtin, *Cross-cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 189.

<sup>4</sup> Curtin, *Cross-cultural Trade*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Braudel, *Perspective of the World*, 22, 24–45. See also Frederic Mauro’s rhetorical question about the relationship of merchant communities to the idea of world economy in his essay, “Merchant Communities, 1350–1750,” in James D. Tracy, ed., *The Rise of Merchant Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 286.

<sup>6</sup> T. S. Willan, *The Early History of the Russia Company, 1553–1603* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1956), and Jonathan Israel, *Dutch Primacy in World Trade, 1585–1740* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

Indian economic influence to Astrakhan, the Volga cities and Moscow. The significance of these two diasporas differed only in that western Europeans were just beginning their world-wide expansion whereas in retrospect it is obvious that the arrival of Indian merchants and financiers represented the western highwater mark of the Indian world economy. Unfortunately, it has been impossible even to guess at the scope and implications of the Indian diaspora because so little attention has been devoted to it. Until now more has been written about the Russian career of one Dutch entrepreneur, André Vinius (1605–1662/63), than about all of the Indian merchants in Iran, Turan and Russia over the entire course of the seventeenth century.<sup>7</sup>

The vestigial credit network of this Indian mercantile presence was still operating effectively in the early nineteenth century. Alexander Burnes, one of the best informed and precisely accurate British observers who visited northwestern India, Afghanistan, Turan and Iran, found out while visiting Kabul in 1832 that much of the trade of Central Asia was in the hands of Hindu merchants, who had “houses of agency from Astracan and Meshid to Calcutta.” These merchants offered to give him bills of exchange on Nizhnii Novgorod, on the upper Volga, Astrakhan or Bukhara.<sup>8</sup> Yet the magnitude and influence of the Indian diaspora has remained virtually unknown in modern scholarship because of well-entrenched Eurocentric biases in historical studies on Eurasian commerce in the early modern era, although the nature of available sources has also discouraged research on this topic.

To understand how this Indian world economy functioned it will be necessary to alter fundamentally some of the traditional approaches to and conclusions about Eurasian economic and commercial history in the early modern period. First of all it is essential to discuss Indian economic history as a provincial segment of a much broader South Asian–Near Eastern regional history. Such a regional perspective is a commonplace in cultural historiography of the region, but it is still rare in scholarly studies of the economic history of the Middle East and South Asia, which tend to be conceptualized in terms of modern political boundaries.<sup>9</sup> Thus no one who is familiar with Mughul or Safavid historiography would be surprised to learn that a recent Iranian publication, *Karvan-i Hind, The Caravan of India*, dealt

<sup>7</sup> For a summary of the career of Vinius see Joseph T. Fuhrmann, *The Origins of Capitalism in Russia* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1972), 55–91.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander Burnes, *Travels into Bokhara* (London: John Murray, 1835), II, 144–45. The operation of bills of exchange or *hundis* within Mughul territories is well known, but for a recent description of the practice in the seventeenth century see Irfan Habib, “The System of Bills of Exchange (Hundis) in the Mughal Empire,” in Satish Chandra, ed., *Essays in Medieval Indian Economic History* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1987), 207–21. It is quite typical of sources for the period that most of Habib’s information comes from English East India Company documents rather than Persian or other Indian language materials.

<sup>9</sup> This approach is exemplified, for example, by the *Cambridge Economic History of India* and the *Cambridge History of Iran*. Authors of chapters on commerce or economic history in both volumes tend to write with very little knowledge of regional commercial ties or the economic history of contiguous states.

with the emigration of poets from the Safavid to the Mughul court rather than the passage of prosaic camel caravans.<sup>10</sup>

The two most important exceptions to this narrow, politically defined historiography are the recent dissertations of Rudolph P. Matthee, "Politics and Trade in Late Safavid Iran: Commercial Crisis and Government Reaction Under Shah Solayman (1666–1694)," (UCLA, 1991), and Edmund Herzig, "The Armenian Merchants of New Julfa, Isfahan: A Study in Pre-Modern Asian Trade" (Oxford, 1991). Both Matthee and Herzig are nominally scholars of Safavid Iran, but they locate their works within the broader context of Eurasian economic history, and Professor Matthee's summary of his thesis characterizes both their approaches. "This study then views Iran as an early modern state embedded in a commercial network stretching from the Levant and the emerging Russian state to India."<sup>11</sup> Both too use a wide variety of European and Iranian sources that illuminate the economic relationships of a broad Eurasian region. Both scholars also understand the crucial nexus between government policy and commerce. Professor Matthee's work is especially important for the present study, because he appreciates that Mughul–Safavid commerce was a major factor in the economic history of both states, and his sophisticated knowledge of commercial and monetary history complements K. N. Chaudhuri's massive history of British East India Company trade in the Mughul–Safavid era.<sup>12</sup> Professor Herzig's pioneering study of the famous Armenian commercial community of Isfahan offers crucial new data on a mercantile diaspora that co-existed with that of the Indians in Iran and Russia. His research illumines aspects of Armenian merchant organization and practice that corroborates and supplements the available data on Indian merchants.

Throughout most of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries India's most important markets were located in the countries bordering the Indian Ocean and the contiguous land mass of the Iranian plateau and the Central Asian steppe. Equally important, the Mughuls were one of three major early modern Muslim dynasties, along with the Safavids and Ottomans, who established a fairly effective *pax Islamica* throughout the traditional civilizational centers of the Near East and South Asia. From the sixteenth century most rulers of these dynasties consistently implemented standardized political–economic policies that were designed to stimulate both internal and external trade. These policies, which will be discussed below primarily in terms of Mughul India's commercial relations with Safavid Iran and Uzbek Turan, were particularly effective in securing the overland routes between northern India and the Iranian plateau. By the early seventeenth century Mughul and Safavid monarchs had jointly created what were probably the most effective conditions for commerce that had ever existed in the

<sup>10</sup> Ahmad Golchin Ma'ani, *Karvan-i Hind* (Mashad: Astan-i quds-i razavi, 1991), 2 vols.

<sup>11</sup> Matthee, "Politics and Trade," xii.

<sup>12</sup> K. N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660–1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

history of the Indo-Persian region. This was an economic “conjuncture,” largely obscured by scholars’ traditional preoccupation with European maritime trade, that favored the steady increase of long-established trading patterns and the substantial expansion of the Indian mercantile diaspora.

The general assessments of Tapan Raychaudhuri on Mughul India and H. R. Roemer on Safavid Iran convey an impressionistic sense of conditions in these countries around 1600, although they are discussing different facets of Mughul and Safavid rule. After discussing the Mughul regime’s efficient land revenue extraction mechanisms Raychaudhuri writes:

If the Mughuls were ruthless in their expropriation of surplus, their rule beyond doubt brought a high level of peace and security. From the 1570s – by which time Akbar had consolidated his empire – for more than a hundred years the greater part of India enjoyed such freedom from war and anarchy as it had not known for centuries . . . The economy of the empire derived direct benefits from this altered state of peace and security. Substantial increases in trade, both inland and foreign, was rendered possible by this development. It would perhaps be an exaggeration to say that the Mughul age saw the emergence of an integrated national market. Still, the commercial ties which bound together different parts of the empire had no precedents.

Roemer in depicting the achievements of the pivotal Safavid monarch, Shah ‘Abbas, writes:

At the end of the 10th/16th and the beginning of the 11/17th century, Shah ‘Abbas had mastered the crises which had shaken his country at the time of his accession . . . After security had been restored in the country ‘Abbas turned his attention to establishing an effective administration. In the development of transport routes, which he pursued with energy, particularly noteworthy is the network of caravansarais he created . . . These and other measures invigorated trade and industry so that the broad masses of the population also found that their standard of living was at first improved and ultimately reached a level never known up to that time.<sup>13</sup>

It is possible to paraphrase Raychaudhuri’s comments on Mughul India and apply them to both India and Iran so that they read: “It would perhaps be an exaggeration to say that the Mughul–Safavid age realized an integrated regional market, but the commercial ties which now bound these two empires together had no precedents.” By the second decade of the seventeenth century Muscovite Russia also became part of this market as its rulers aggressively stimulated foreign trade by encouraging the settlement of foreign merchants. The settlement of Indian merchants in Astrakhan was one of the results of this policy.

To understand the operation of this world economy it is also necessary to appreciate that the Indian merchants who conducted business throughout Iran, Turan and Russia were members of a sophisticated trading network that in most

<sup>13</sup> Raychaudhuri, “The State and the Economy: The Mughal Empire,” CEHI, I, 184 and H. R. Roemer, “The Safavid Period,” CHI, VI, 269.

respects mirrored the commercial and financial characteristics of the Armenian mercantile diaspora. European scholars have generally seen Indian and other Asian merchants as archaic commercial artifacts of the early modern world. The term peddler has frequently been used to categorize and implicitly denigrate the economic effectiveness of Asian merchants in this period.<sup>14</sup> As it is usually used, peddler represents a kind of economic orientalism in which Asian merchants are viewed as a quaint and ineffective commercial “other.” The implicit standard of comparison is, of course, the British and Dutch East India companies. It has been relatively easy for scholars to hold this view because there is a lack of data on non-western merchants before the twentieth century. Apart from S. D. Goitein’s monumental study of Middle Eastern commerce and Jewish society, *A Mediterranean Society*, there has been no study of Asian merchants that is comparable in biographic and economic detail to Sylvia Thrupp’s work, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London*, or equal to the voluminous, richly detailed literature on Italian Renaissance merchants.<sup>15</sup>

The data on Indian merchants in Iran, Turan and Russia is itself not strictly comparable to the relatively lavish sources that are extant for medieval and early modern Europe. This information is, however, remarkably full when compared to existing knowledge about India’s mercantile communities in the early modern period, whether within South Asia itself or in the broader South Asian commercial diaspora. The Astrakhan documents especially represent a unique collection of sources for a single community of Asian merchants, second only perhaps to the data that Edmund Herzig has obtained for the Isfahan Armenians.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to the records of the Dutch and English East India companies, which contain only limited data on Asian traders, these Russian sources were compiled by an autocratic regime whose representatives closely monitored customs transactions, recorded details of partnerships and other contracts, adjudicated commercial disputes and in census reports and taxation records offered insights into the cultural and social characteristics of the Indian Community. These data make it possible to see that apart from the exceptional case of the two great European companies, Indian merchants closely resembled their well-known European contemporaries – particularly those in Genoa, Florence and Siena. In

<sup>14</sup> The classic statements of the peddler thesis are the original formulation by J. C. van Leur, *Indonesian Trade and Society* (The Hague: W. van Hoeve, 1955), and the more recent restatement of van Leur’s ideas by Niels Steensgaard, *The Asian Trade Revolution of the Seventeenth Century, The East India Companies and the Decline of the Caravan Trade* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed., 1974).

<sup>15</sup> S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967–88), 5 vols., and Sylvia Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

<sup>16</sup> Analyses of pre-modern Indian firms have never really been attempted because of the scarcity of sources, but even the discussion about mercantile organization is still carried on at a fairly elementary level. For an introduction to modern studies of firms, see Oliver E. Williamson and Sidney G. Winter, *The Nature of the Firm* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), a book that contains a collection of articles by Ronald H. Coase and other scholars writing on Coase’s now famous essay, “The Nature of the Firm.”

fact, one of the secondary purposes of this study is to suggest that there was a common Eurasian mercantile type and characteristic Eurasian firm in the early modern era.

## The Eurasian context

Mughul-Indian merchants who migrated to conduct business in Iran, Turan and Russia operated in four different states, whose policies and structure directly or indirectly influenced the diaspora's prosperity and prospects for growth. All four states were successors of the Mongol-Timurid nomadic empires of the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Mughul India, Safavid Iran and Uzbek Turan were also immediate heirs to the administrative and cultural traditions of the Timurids, Timur's descendants who ruled in Turan from 1405 to 1506. Nevertheless, the legacies of these empires that Marshall Hodgson has characterized as "military patronage states" differed in each instance.<sup>17</sup> Rulers of Uzbek Turan were direct descendants of Chingiz Khan and their dynastic legitimacy appears to have been generally accepted by the Turco-Mongol inhabitants of that region who spoke Turkic dialects and shared their Sunni Muslim faith. Uzbek rulers inherited Mongol assumptions that territorial conquests belonged to and should be shared among clan members.<sup>18</sup> Unlike Chingiz Khan, though, the Uzbek grand khan, who normally ruled in Bukhara, rarely functioned as more than a *primus inter pares*, a first among Chingizid equals. With the exception of the last quarter of the sixteenth century Uzbek rulers usually functioned as a patchwork of agnatically related but largely autonomous appanages. Yet despite the fragmented structure of Uzbek polity it survived essentially intact from the time of the decisive Uzbek victories over the last Timurid rulers in Turan in the early sixteenth century throughout the early modern period.

The Mughuls were members of one of those Timurid lineages. Their founder, Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babur (1483–1530), had lost two battles to Uzbek forces that caused him to take refuge in the impoverished Timurid outpost of Kabul in 1504. He ruled from there until 1526 when he was able to reestablish Timurid

<sup>17</sup> It is difficult to see that Hodgson's concept of the "military patronage state" explains very much about the characteristics of the Mughuls, Safavids or Ottomans, although it is often used as a convenient label. Hodgson himself only tentatively suggested that there was a connection. He wrote: "what I have called 'military patronage state' never formed a single pattern, but at some point I think I can see common effects on such states [Ottoman, Safavid and Mughul] from the special circumstances of the age," *The Venture of Islam, III: Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 27. For a discussion of the diverse Timurid heritage of the Mughul, Safavid and Uzbek states see Stephen F. Dale, "The Legacy of the Timurids," in David Morgan and Francis Robinson, eds., *The Legacy of the Timurids* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press for the Royal Asiatic Society, forthcoming, 1994).

<sup>18</sup> The best introduction to Uzbek polity and political thought is R. D. McChesney's *Waqf in Central Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). For a political history of the Uzbeks in this period see the same author's article, "Central Asia, VI. In the 10th–12th/16th–18th Centuries," in E. Yarshater, ed., *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 5, fasc. 2 (Costa Mesa, Calif.: Mazda, 1990), 176–93.

fortunes by seizing northern India from a disunited Afghan dynasty.<sup>19</sup> Like Uzbek rulers Mughul emperors were Sunni Muslims, but Babur and his successors based their dynastic claims on Timurid rather than Chingizid descent. Unlike the Uzbeks, Mughul emperors were able to transcend their own appanage tradition that had previously doomed the continued rule of Timur's descendants in Turan. By the end of the sixteenth century they had established an indigenously tinged Perso-Islamic absolutism in northern India that for a century and a half enjoyed paramountcy over a diverse, predominantly non-Muslim population and a bewildering variety of regional and local rulers.

Based partly on the achievements of their Afghan predecessors, Mughul rulers were able to assert direct control over most cities and much of the agricultural heartland of the north Indian plains. The family's Timurid legitimacy, which exerted only modest influence in India, was reinforced by the Mughuls' significance as a Muslim dynasty among northern India's substantial but still minority Indo-Muslim population. Still, the acquiescence of many South Asian Muslims was tentative and conditional. Even if they were temporarily co-opted into the imperial system, groups such as the clan-centered Afghans never offered the Mughuls more than temporary cooperation. The loyalty of subordinate Hindu lineages was almost entirely pragmatic and temporary. Therefore, while weak Uzbek appanages survived in Turan, Mughul imperial rule weakened quickly after the death of the last great emperor Aurungzeb (r. 1656–1707). It virtually ceased to exist after the Iranian invader and heir to Safavid power, Nadir Shah, administered the coup de grace to the system when he sacked Delhi and seized the Mughul treasury in 1739.

The Safavids were also heirs to a common Timurid legacy, but they differed from the Mughuls and Uzbeks even more than these two states were distinct from one another. Originally leaders of a militarized *sufi* order, Safavid rulers succeeded in establishing a state that covered areas of eastern Anatolia and north-western Iran by 1501.<sup>20</sup> They largely relied for military power on Turkic tribes in the region who were known as the Qizilbash, or "redheads," after their distinctive headgear, who had been attracted to the Safavid cause by the family's quasi-Shi'i messianic preaching. In the following decade Safavid forces conquered much of the Iranian plateau and also began their systematic conversion of the population to Shi'i Islam. Their successful persecution of Sunni Muslims permanently altered

<sup>19</sup> For an introduction to the history of the Mughul empire, see J. F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Peter Hardy offers an insightful introduction to questions of Mughul legitimacy and sovereignty in his work, *The Muslims of British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 1–30; and for brief articles on various aspects of Mughul culture and administration see M. Athar 'Ali *et al.*, "Mughuls," *Encyclopaedia of Islam* new ed., VII, fasc. 119–20 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 313–46.

<sup>20</sup> The best introduction to various aspects of Safavid history is found in the various articles in volume VI of *The Cambridge History of Iran*. See also H. R. Roemer, *Persien auf dem Weg in die Neuzeit: Iranische Geschichte von 1350–1750* (Beirut: Franz Stiner, 1989), and Klaus Michael Röhrborn, *Provinzen und Zentralgewalt, Persiens im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1966).

the religious landscape and clerical organization of Iran, but Safavid military and political fortunes sharply declined after 1514 when they lost the battle of Chaldiran to Ottoman forces. Following this defeat Safavid Iran not only ceded most of its northwestern provinces, but the dynasty's charismatic authority was compromised and Qizilbash tribes increasingly asserted control over the state's remaining territories and periodically usurped the power of the Safavid family itself. The sixteenth century was the Qizilbash century in Safavid Iran, even if Iranian bureaucrats and *'alims* dominated the administration and the religious hierarchy.

The Safavid state experienced a genuine renaissance under Shah 'Abbas I (r. 1588–1629). 'Abbas reestablished dynastic control over the central government, reconquered lost territories and radically restructured the state. He transformed it from what had been almost a tribal confederation led by formerly charismatic Safavid shaikhs to a more traditional Perso-Islamic absolutism that was increasingly supported by a reorganized military system independent of Qizilbash leadership. Following 'Abbas' death, though, the Safavid state entered into an almost century-long period of stasis, a result in large measure of his policy of immuring potential heirs in the haram. This policy, which his descendants also followed, almost guaranteed that the pillars of a dynastic, patriarchal state, the princes, would be inexperienced or incompetent monarchs. Symptomatic of this problem was the shift in spending patterns of late Safavid Iran. Finances that had earlier gone for the army and such commercial infrastructure as caravansarai were diverted in the second half of the seventeenth century to construction of palaces and mosques for the increasingly powerful Shi'i clergy.<sup>21</sup> While the court managed to sustain much of its splendor and appearance of central authority throughout the seventeenth century, by the accession of Shah Husain in 1694 the decay of the dynasty had left the state vulnerable to the slightest external threat. In 1722 it dissolved almost overnight in the face of an Afghan revolt that inadvertently culminated in the conquest of Shah 'Abbas' splendid capital, Isfahan.

The Muscovite state of the late sixteenth century had emerged from Mongol vassalage only a century earlier, but unlike the Mughul, Safavid and Uzbek regimes it exhibited few long-term effects of its subordination.<sup>22</sup> The Mongols had ruled Russia's northeastern forest zone indirectly, so their administrative and cultural legacy in the Moscow–Novgorod heartland was slight. The most obvious permanent legacy was the tsars' assumption of the title "autocrat," which proclaimed their independence of the "Tatar yoke." Mongol rule has sometimes been blamed for Russia's autocratic character, but when compared with Mughul, Safavid or Uzbek polities it is impossible to discern, as many Russian historians

<sup>21</sup> Mathee, "Politics and Trade," 78–79 and 123.

<sup>22</sup> See Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), and for social and economic history, Jerome Blum, *Lord and Peasant in Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

have traditionally done, any specifically Mongol or “Asiatic” features in its governmental traditions, only the continuous development of an implacable absolutism. The success of one line of Muscovite princes in extinguishing the independence and then the autonomy of the area’s other princely appanages was virtually assured by the reign of Vassili III (1533–55), and it was climaxed by Ivan the Terrible’s extraordinary administrative and military policy known as the *oprichina*. Ivan (r. 1533–84) discernibly directed this reign of terror at potential princely opponents of his rule, but he also loosed a destructive and seemingly indiscriminate assault on large regions of the countryside that he evidently suspected of disaffection.

It is a remarkable feature of Russian history that their autocrats, however terrible, enjoyed a legitimacy of indisputable Russian princely birth that was bolstered by the almost unwavering support of the orthodox church and the ideological underpinnings of Roman and Byzantine absolutist precedents. Their success in creating a true absolutism that none of their European or Asian contemporaries could possibly hope to emulate was a reflection of Russia’s political and socio-economic primitiveness rather than its Asiatic sophistication. As Nicholas Riasanovsky has persuasively argued in his comparison of Lithuania and Moscow:

the principdom of Moscow arose in a relatively primitive and pioneer northeast, where rulers managed to acquire a dominant position in a fluid and expanding society . . . Lithuania, in contrast, always had to deal with different peoples and cultures and formed a federal, not a Unitary state.<sup>23</sup>

Absolutism and primitiveness are two features of the Muscovite state that must be appreciated in order to understand the situation of the Indian diaspora in that country, for they help to explain the Indian merchants’ initial success and partly account for their eventual stagnation.

Merchants from Mughul India who traded in Safavid Iran or Uzbek Turan operated within a broadly similar commercial and linguistic environment. While merchants in these states did not possess the urban autonomy that many of their western European contemporaries had achieved, they still enjoyed almost unrestricted freedom to carry on their trade within the general framework of Islamic contractual law.<sup>24</sup> What Goitein has said about mercantile life in the Mediterranean region from the mid-tenth to the mid-thirteenth century is also applicable to the conduct of commerce in Mughul India, Safavid Iran and Uzbek Turan in the early modern era. According to Goitein, “during the High

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 138–39.

<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, the unanswered question that is implicit in this statement, that is, did non-Muslims receive equal treatment in cases of contract disputes with Muslims, cannot be answered in any satisfactory way. For an introduction to the theory of Islamic commercial law see Abraham L. Udovitch, *Partnership and Profit in Medieval Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), and for discussions of the functions of certain officials who typically dealt with contracts, such as *qadis* and *muhtasibs*, Emile Tyan, *Histoire de l’organisation judiciaire en pays d’Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960).

Middle Ages men, goods, money and books used to travel far and almost without restrictions throughout the Mediterranean area. In many respects the area resembled a free-trade community.”<sup>25</sup> Edmund Herzig has written in a similar vein about the Armenians in the early modern period, observing that “From the Mediterranean ports of the Ottoman empire to the harbours of the Indonesian archipelago Armenians were free to travel and trade without obstruction.”<sup>26</sup>

Indo-Muslim merchants particularly were able to travel and conduct business almost as comfortably in Iran and Turan as they could within the Mughul empire. Virtually all of them knew Persian, which was the most widely used administrative and cultural language throughout the entire region, and Central Asian immigrants to the Mughul empire also knew Turkic dialects that were widely spoken in Iran and southern Russia as well as in Turan itself. While Chaghatai Turkish – or old Uzbek – may have been spoken by the majority of Central Asian inhabitants, the urban mercantile class in Turan, commonly identified as Sarts, also used Persian, as members of the *‘ulama* usually did when they recorded commercial contracts.<sup>27</sup> Nor were Indian Sunni Muslims subject to the kind of harassment or danger in Safavid territories that Iranian Shi’is could experience in aggressively Sunni Uzbek Turan. Shi’i–Sunni differences were never a significant issue in Mughul–Safavid relations, whose conflicts were almost entirely confined to military struggles for the control of the Afghan marches between their respective empires.

Most substantial non-Muslim merchants also knew Persian, a language that gradually became established as one of the principal spoken and written languages of the Panjab during Mughul rule.<sup>28</sup> If merchants had direct dealings with the court or its administrative apparatus, as many of them commonly did, they often absorbed aspects of Mughul court culture. At least two members of the large Khattri caste-group that dominated commerce in many parts of the Panjab and northwestern India became high-level Mughul officials and one of them thoroughly absorbed Indo-Persian literary culture.<sup>29</sup> Khattri merchants established especially close relations with Mughul provincial officials in the

<sup>25</sup> Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, 66.

<sup>26</sup> Edmund Herzig, “The Armenian Merchants of New Julfa, Isfahan: A Study in Pre-Modern Asian Trade,” unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Oxford, 1991, 27.

<sup>27</sup> For Chaghatai and “old Uzbek” see Ilse Laude Cirtautas, “On the Development of Literary Uzbek in the last Fifty Years,” *Central Asiatic Review* XXI (1977), 36–51. V. Barthold discusses the Sarts, *Four Studies on the History of Central Asia*, trans. by V. and J. Minorsky (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1962), 63. Examples of contracts can be found in Mukminova, *Social Differentiation*, 53–61.

<sup>28</sup> Prakash Tandon, *Punjabi Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), 14–15.

<sup>29</sup> The best known of these Khattri officials was Todar Mal (d. 1589), who became *diwan*, or chief revenue officer, of the emperor Akbar, who is, though, well known for adamantly remaining an orthodox Hindu. Less well known is Iklas Khan Iklas Kish (Kishn Chand), who served under the last great Mughul emperor, Aurungzeb, and his successors and wrote a Persian biography of the emperor Farruksiyar and a *tazkirah*, a biographical dictionary of Mughul poets. T. W. Beale, *An Oriental Biographical Dictionary*, repr. (New Delhi: Manohar Reprints, 1971), 176 and 223.

Panjab.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, in linguistic terms at least Khattris and other non-Muslim Indian merchants could extend their commercial operations to Iran and Turan almost as easily as non-Muslim merchants. Hindus and Jains may have experienced petty harassment on caravan journeys, encouraging them to use intermediaries for the transport of their goods, and they were occasionally persecuted or even attacked in these predominantly Muslim countries in times of economic hardship or political chaos. However, Hindus or Jains apparently never suffered as much as Jews and Armenians in Iran.<sup>31</sup> Hindus may not have suffered official religious persecution because they wielded so much economic power, and/or because they were not regarded as Iranian citizens.<sup>32</sup> The one Hindu merchant whose complaints about Iranian treatment of Indian merchants have been preserved never suggested that Hindus had been singled out for abuse or excessive duties.<sup>33</sup>

Conditions in Russia were different for all mercantile groups. Turkic speakers enjoyed a decided advantage in dealing with the predominantly Turkic population of the former Astrakhan khanate,<sup>34</sup> and Armenians were granted special privileges because of their uniquely influential role as marketers of Iranian silk. Otherwise Iranian, Central Asia and Indian merchants were linguistically and legally on an equal footing. Unless they knew Russian, which many long-term residents did acquire, they had to use the mediatory services of local translators, who were usually local Turks, and each community enjoyed the same legal rights as members of ethnically defined, semi-autonomous mercantile corporations. Merchants of all communities could depend upon judicial authorities to enforce the letter of their commercial and financial contracts. They did so even to the extent that other Russian officials in the city sometimes complained that Indian merchants in particular contributed to depopulation and a lowered tax base in the city when they attempted to enforce their agreements against defaulting Turks, some of whom fled into the steppe if they were pressed for payment.<sup>35</sup> While

<sup>30</sup> Muzaffar Alam has provided important evidence and thoughtful discussions of the Khattris' relations to Mughul officials in the Panjab in the early eighteenth century in his book, *The Crises of Empire in Mughal North India, Awadh and the Punjab, 1707–1748* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986); see especially pp. 169–74.

<sup>31</sup> Edmund Herzig usefully observes of Shah 'Abbas, "It is surprising that 'Abbas I, generally remembered as the Protector of the Christians, was in fact responsible for more instances of anti-Christian persecution than any of his successors." "Armenian merchants," 83.

<sup>32</sup> For the situation of Iranian Jews see Vera Basch Moreen, *Iranian Jewry During the Afghan Invasion* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1990) and *Iranian Jewry's Hour of Peril and Heroism* (New York: American Academy for Jewish research, 1987). Professor Moreen specifically mentions that none of her seventeenth-century sources alludes to persecution of Hindus in Iran, even though Jews and Armenians were certainly being mistreated. I am indebted to her for these references. The question of suffering monetary extortion is, of course, a separate issue.

<sup>33</sup> Antonova, II, 1647, 84–85.

<sup>34</sup> B. Spuler briefly describes the history of the Astrakhan khanate. "Astrakhan," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960), I, 721–22. See also Golikova, *Essays*, 7–35 and V. P. Nikitin, *Astrakhan' i ee Okrestnosti* [Astrakhan and its Environs] (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1981), which has numerous pictures of what used to be a closed city.

<sup>35</sup> Antonova, II, nos. 109–11, 204–5.

merchants undoubtedly welcomed Russian enforcement of their contractual rights they were not pleased to have to accept relatively strong centralized monitoring and control of their own commercial affairs. All aspects of foreign merchants' life in Astrakhan would have reminded them that they were no longer operating within the *laissez faire* economic atmosphere of early modern Islamic empires. Mercantilism, not free trade, was the hallmark of Muscovite economic policy.