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Stephen Frederic Dale

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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."¹ 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

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

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

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.² “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*,³ 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.”⁴ 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.”⁵

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*.⁶ 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

² 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.

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

⁴ Curtin, *Cross-cultural Trade*, 8.

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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.⁷

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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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

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

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 An Indian world economy

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

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."¹¹ 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.¹² 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

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

¹¹ Matthee, "Politics and Trade," xii.

¹² 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.¹³

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

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

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 An Indian world economy

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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶ 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

¹⁴ 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).

¹⁵ 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).

¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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

¹⁷ 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).

¹⁸ 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.

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Stephen Frederic Dale

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 An Indian world economy

fortunes by seizing northern India from a disunited Afghan dynasty.¹⁹ 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 1501.²⁰ 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

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ 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 Zengralgewalt, 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.²¹ 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.²² 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

²¹ Mathee, "Politics and Trade," 78–79 and 123.

²² 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).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-45460-5 - Indian Merchants and Eurasian Trade, 1600-1750

Stephen Frederic Dale

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 An Indian world economy

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.²³

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.²⁴ 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

²³ *Ibid.*, 138–39.

²⁴ 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).