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

Stephen Frederic Dale

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In this remarkable work of comparative economic history, Stephen Dale studies the activities and economic significance of the Indian mercantile communities which traded in Iran, Central Asia and Russia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The author uses Russian sources, hitherto largely ignored, to show that these merchants represented part of the hegemonic trade diaspora of the Indian world economy, thus challenging the conventional interpretation of world economic history that European merchants overwhelmed their Asian counterparts in the early modern era. The book not only demonstrates the vitality of Indian mercantile capitalism, but also offers a unique insight into the social characteristics of an Indian expatriate trading community in the Volga–Caspian port of Astrakhan.

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STEPHEN FREDERIC DALE

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## Preface

This work is a study of economies and trade routes, of merchants and their capital in Mughul India, Safavid Iran, Uzbek Turan and Muscovite Russia. It is, more particularly, a study of the characteristics and significance of the Mughul-Indian trade diaspora in Iran, Turan and Russia. The underlying purpose of the work is to use new evidence and employ a new perspective to amend radically the persistent Eurocentric bias that continues to characterize most research on Eurasian trade in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A remarkable number of articles and books have been published on this commerce in the last two decades, and many have focused on India, but nearly all of them have been primarily concerned with aspects of European maritime expansion. Two prevalent assumptions of this historiography have been that Indian commerce with its neighboring territories was comparatively insignificant when measured against European trade, and that Indian merchants themselves, to the extent that they ever had been involved in this trade in the first place, were by the seventeenth century in full-scale retreat in the face of European competition. As far as Mughul India's trade with Iran, Turan and Russia was concerned, these assumptions are incorrect.

I began this study in order to correct this erroneous, one-sided view of Eurasian commerce by examining the role of large numbers of merchants from Mughul India who lived semi-permanently and conducted business in Iran, Turan and Russia in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. I would not have attempted to do so had not an adolescent interest in understanding the angst of characters in nineteenth-century Russian novels at least left me with the ability to use more than eleven hundred pages of published Russian documents that illumine the business activities of a little-known settlement of Indian merchants in the Russian Caspian port of Astrakhan. These records provide a uniquely detailed insight into the commercial and financial activities of Indian merchants, not merely in Astrakhan itself, but in Iran as well. They offer the only means that I know to discuss specific Indian business practices in the diaspora in the early modern era, and they contain at least one set of data for evaluating the economic significance of the larger emigré Mughul-Indian merchant population. Unfortunately, I was not able to convince the Soviet government that I should be able to visit Astrakhan itself, but

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my disappointment in not being able to use the district and city archives there was somewhat diminished by the discovery of several fine historical studies of Astrakhan city and region by Soviet scholars. In addition I have benefited from a wide variety of other Soviet studies of the socio-economic characteristics of merchants and urban societies.

Anyone who studies commerce or mercantile life in the pre-modern era is quickly made aware of two inescapable realities. First, statistics are rarely available to document even long-term economic trends, and most conclusions about commercial life have to be tentatively apprehended from the braille of occasional coin finds, scattered records and anecdotal evidence. Basic customs and financial data are almost never available. These are problems too for most aspects of the economic history of India, Iran, Turan and Russia between 1600 and 1750, the century and a half during which the Astrakhan Indian community first prospered and then decayed. However, an exceptional number of administrative manuals, histories and travelers' accounts are extant for this period of Mughul and Safavid history, and in Astrakhan itself a significant number of customs records have been preserved. Second, just as it has been practical to write only about a relatively brief time span out of centuries of commercial interaction between Indian and adjacent territories, so too I have been compelled artificially to limit my study of expatriate South Asian merchants to those who emigrated from Mughul India to Safavid Iran, Uzbek Turan and Muscovite Russia. Yet Mughul India did not exist in a state of autarky within the South Asian subcontinent, and the diaspora of Mughul Indian merchants was not confined to these three states or regions. It extended throughout the Indian Ocean region, was highly visible in the Ottoman empire and penetrated into Chinese Turkistan. At the very least, though, this work will offer clues and analogies for understanding the significance of South Asian merchants throughout the wider diaspora and in so doing encourage the study of regional economic history of Asia in the early modern era.

I have an enormous intellectual debt to a large number of accomplished scholars who have written studies of commerce or merchant classes in India, Iran, Turan and Russia in the early modern era. For India I have particularly benefited from the writings of Christopher Bayly, K. N. Chaudhuri, Irfan Habib and his justly influential Aligarh school, Muzaffar Alam, Tapan Raychaudhuri and John Richards. I would also like specially to acknowledge the work of Surendra Gopal, the first non-Soviet scholar who recognized the potential scholarly importance of the Russian Astrakhan records. My understanding of Iranian history of the Safavid era has been especially influenced by the interpretations of Bert Fragner, Edmund Herzig, Mehdi Keyvani, Rudolph Matthee, R. Roemer and R. W. Ferrier. E. A. Davidovich, N. M. Lowick, R. D. McChesney and R. G. Mukminova have produced works that have been crucial to my understanding of the trade of South Asian merchants in the Uzbek states or appanages of Turan.

I began my tutorials on Russian merchants by reading the articles and books of Samuel H. Baron and Paul Bushkovitch, but learned most about the particular subject of South Asian merchants in Russia by immersing myself in the uniquely

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valuable document collections that were carefully edited by K. A. Antonova, N. M. Gold'berg and others. My debt to N. B. Golikova will be especially evident in the notes, for her use of unpublished Astrakhan customs records has allowed me to make some statistically verified conclusions that could only be inferred from the published records. I have also benefited from the criticisms and suggestions of Thomas Allsen, Paul Bushkovitch, John Masson Smith Jr. and my colleague Alam Payind. I must also record my debt for the second time in my scholarly life to the exceptional scholarship of the late S. D. Goitein, whose work on the Cairo Geniza documents has incalculably enriched my understanding of pre-modern commerce in the Mediterranean and Islamic world.

Finally, I would like to thank Professor Tosun Aricanli for inviting me to present a paper at the "Workshop on the Political Economies of the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal States during the 17th and 18th Centuries," that was held in Istanbul, Turkey, 16–20 June, 1992. The final revision of this manuscript was influenced by several of the participants at that conference, particularly Suraiya Faroqhi, Ashraf Ghani, Edmund Herzig and Rudolph Mathee. While this manuscript was begun well before that meeting it is, in a way, a testimony to the wisdom of studying the early modern Islamic world from a comparative perspective.

Cindy Gray and Jon Fehrman helped with the design of the maps and Jon Fehrman prepared the final version of each map.

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## Note on transliteration

I have chosen to follow R. D. McChesney's sensible modifications of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* system of rendering the Cyrillic alphabet that he employed in his recent study, *Waqf in Central Asia*. I found it difficult to decide how to present Russian renderings of Indian names that were generally unfamiliar to their officials, particularly those who first encountered Indian merchants in the early seventeenth century. They rendered some names correctly and others are recognizable. Others, though, have been a matter of anguished speculation. After consulting with several Indian colleagues and getting as many variant suggestions for one or two names I decided to transliterate them from Russian without change. I have, however, usually placed the Russian personal suffix, -ov, -ev, etc. in parenthesis to enable others to more easily recognize Hindu and Jain names. Muslim names were not usually a problem. Not only were Russians more familiar with Muslims, but few Indian Muslims were present in the Astrakhan settlement.

## Abbreviations

AA	<i>A'in-i Akbari</i> , Abu'l Fadl 'Allami, trans. and ed. by H. Blochmann and D. C. Phillott, repr. (New Delhi: Crown Publications, 1988), 3 vols.
AN	<i>Akbar Nama</i> , Abu'l Fadl 'Allami, trans. by H. Beveridge, repr. (New Delhi: Ess Ess Publications, 1987), 3 vols.
Antonova, I	<i>Russko-Indiiskie Otnosheniia v XVII veke</i> , K. A. Antonova <i>et al.</i> , ed., <i>Sbornik Dokumentov</i> [Russian-Indian Relations in the 17th Century, A Collection of Documents] (Moscow: Nauka, 1958).
Antonova, II	<i>Russko-Indiiskie Otnosheniia v XVIII veke</i> , K. A. Antonova <i>et al.</i> , ed., <i>Sbornik Dokumentov</i> [Russian-Indian Relations in the 18th Century, A Collection of Documents] (Moscow: Nauka, 1965).
CEHI	<i>The Cambridge Economic History of India</i> , Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib, eds., I: <i>c. 1200–c. 1750</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
CHI	<i>The Cambridge History of Iran</i> , I, W. B. Fisher, ed., <i>The Land of Iran</i> ; V, J. A. Boyle, ed., <i>The Saljuq and Mongol Periods</i> ; VI, Peter Jackson and Laurence Lockhart, ed., <i>The Timurid and Safavid Periods</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965–86).
Golikova, <i>Essays</i>	<i>Ocherki Po Istorii Gorodov Rossii kontsa XVII–nachala XVIII v.</i> , N. B. Golikova [Essays on the History of Russian Cities from the End of the 17th to the Beginning of the 18th Century] (Moscow: Moscow University, 1982).
Mukina, <i>Social Differentiation</i>	<i>Sotsial'naia Differentsiatsiia Naseleniia Gorodov Uzbekistana v XV–XVI vv</i> [Social Differentiation of the Urban Population of Uzbekistan in the 15th and 16th Centuries] (Tashkent: Fan, 1985).