

Indian Trading Community in Astrakhan in Context of Russian-Indian Relationship (1636–1725)

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Bear in mind that the commerce of India is the commerce of the world, and that he who can exclusively control it is the dictator of Europe. Will of Peter the Great, Article VIII¹

The history of European business activities in the regions of Asia and Africa in the early modern times has been among the basic themes of historical research for decades. Asian and African merchants' activities in the region of Europe in that period do not compare with the research degree. Except for selected studies devoted to Armenian merchants' activities,² the described research does not have more extensive character, moreover it has been carrying out in spurts so far. This characterization also applies to the subject of this study: The activities of Indian merchants who had been active in the region of Russia for two and half centuries. The research into this area gained relatively close attention of Soviet historians in their partial studies as early as in the 1930s, in the first place in studies by N. N. Pal'mov.³ Part of the documents, specifically records on Indian craftsmen

¹ Quoted by D. N. DRUHE, *Russo-Indian Relations 1466–1917*, New York 1970, p. 57.

² P. M. MANUELIAN, *Merchants from Ararat: a Brief Survey of Armenian Trade through the Ages*, New York 1979; E. J. SANO (Ed.), *Weavers, Merchants, and Kings: the Inscribed Rugs of Armenia*, Fort Worth 1984; V. BALADOUNI, M. MAKEPEACE (Eds.), *Armenian Merchants of the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries: English East India Company Sources*, Philadelphia 1998; S. CHAUDHURY, M. MORINEAU (Eds.), *Merchants, Companies, and Trade: Europe and Asia in the Early Modern Era*, London, New York 1999; V. BAIBOURTIAN, *International Trade and the Armenian Merchants in the Seventeenth Century*, New Delhi 2004; S. CHAUDHURY, K. KÉVONIAN (Eds.), *Les Arméniens dans le commerce asiatique au début de l'ère moderne*, Paris 2008; S. D. ASLANIAN, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: the Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa*, Berkeley 2011.

³ N. N. PAL'MOV, "Astrakhanskije Arkhivi", in: *Zapiski instituta Vostokovedeniya AN SSSR*, Vol. II, 4, 1934, pp. 161–182.

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in Astrakhan, got lost during World War 2 during the transport from Astrakhan to Leningrad. A critical review of Pal'mov's opinions was performed by a group of Soviet historians in the 1950s.⁴ An American female researcher, F. M. Kemp, also wrote an essay about Astrakhan colony that would appear then in a magazine *ISCUS* and a book *Bharat-Rus*. She worked in India not having Russian archives at her disposal, nevertheless, she had read all literature on the subject.⁵ To name other American authors, it is also David N. Druhe who partly dealt with this issue in his synoptic synthesis on Russian-Indian relationship in the 1970s, focused, however, primarily on the diplomatic relationships. This piece of work adopted many not too accurate pieces of data and incorrect interpretations.⁶

Two good-quality editions of documents of Russian provenience making available a huge amount of sources of information on Indian merchants' activity in Russia in the 17th and the 18th centuries appeared in the Soviet Union in the 1950s, later on added to by an edition on the 19th century Russian-Indian relationship. Long intervals between single issues caused that these remarkable works have escaped most historians' notice and the edition has not been used for historical studies to a full extent.⁷

⁴ N. M. GOL'DBERG, *Russko-Indiyskie Otnosheniya v XVII v.*, in: Ucheniye zapiski Tichookeanskogo Instituta, Vol. II, Moskva, Leningrad 1949, pp. 129–148; M. FECHNER, *Torgovlya Russkogo gosudarstva so stranami Vostoka v XVI v.*, in: Trudy Gosudarstvenovo istoricheskogo muzeya, Vol. XXI, Moskva 1952, p. 54; V. M. BESKROVSKIY, *Indiyskiye rukopisi napisannyye v Rossii*, in: Sbornik gosudarstvenoy publichnoy biblioteki imeni M. E. Saltykova-Shchedrina, Vol. III, Leningrad 1955, pp. 157–170; A. I. JUCHT, *Indiyskaya koloniya v Astrakhani*, in: Voprosy Istorii, No. 3, 1957, pp. 135–143; I. NIZAMUTDINOV, *Iz istorii sredneaziatsko-indiyskikh otnosheniy*, Tashkent 1969; N. B. BAIKOVA, *Rol' Srednei Azii v Russko-Indiyskikh Torgovykh Svyazakh*, Tashkent 1965; K. A. ANTONOVA, *Russko-indiyskie svyazy v XVII v.*, in: Materialy Pervoy Vsesoyuznoy Konferentsii Vostokovedeniya v g. Tashkente, Tashkent 1959, pp. 434–441; U. A. RUSTAMOV, *K Istorii izucheniya ekonomicheskikh, politicheskikh, kulturnykh svyazey mezhdru narodami Indii i Srednej Azii*, in: Trudy Instituta Vostokovedeniya (AN UzSSR), Tashkent 1956; SEID-ZADE, *Iz Istorii kulturnykh svyazei Azerbajjana s Indiyey v sredniye veka*, in: Izvestiya AN Azerbajjanskoy SSR, No. 1, Baku 1958, pp. 77–89; N. B. BAIKOVA, *K voprosu o russko-indiiskikh torgovykh otnosheniyakh v XVI–XVII v.*, in: Trudy Instituta Vostokovedeniya (AN UzSSR), Tashkent 1956, Vol. 4, pp. 75–94.

⁵ P. M. KEMP, *Early Contacts Between India and Russia*, in: Journal of the Indo-Soviet Cultural Society, Bombay 1954; P. M. KEMP, *Bharat-Rus, An Introduction to Indo-Russian Contacts and Travels from Medieval Times to the October Revolution*, Delhi 1958.

⁶ D. N. DRUHE, *Russo-Indian Relations 1466–1917*, New York 1970.

⁷ T. D. LAVRENTOVA, R. V. OVCHINIKOV, V. N. KHUMILOV, *Russko-indiyskie otnosheniya v XVII v.*, *Sbornik dokumentov*, Moskva 1958; R. B. OVCHINIKOV, M. A. SIDOROV, *Russko-indiyskie otnosheniya v XVIII v.*, *Sbornik dokumentov*,

Indian historiography was first restricted to the research on Soviet archives; the study was carried out in the second half of the 1960s by Surenda Gopal who published the selection of Russian sources in English in the 1980s.⁸ Later on, Purabi Roy translated that edition of Russian documents devoted to the Russian-Indian relationship into English.⁹ Virtually, this broad theme remains forgotten today, mentioned just marginally in some Russian synthesis and regionally aimed editions.¹⁰

Based on the study of the published archival sources, this study aims to reconstruct impact of part of Indian merchants' activities in Russia, that is to say the activities of the Indian trading community in Astrakhan, and set them in a wider context of the Russian-Indian relationship. This contribution is the first part of the study exploring the Russian-Indian relationship during the reign of Peter I.

First Contacts of Russian and Indian Merchants and Astrakhan Colony Establishment

The first contacts between Russians and Indians date back to the 10th century when Russian and Indian merchants would meet in the Volga Bulgaria, and close to, or in the central-eastern trade centres. What is also documented are relationships between The Delhi Sultanate and The Golden Horde. The places where the merchants would meet, more or less by chance, were Baghdad, the Transcaucasian towns, Tabriz or Egypt.¹¹ They would come into the direct contact in Cairo or Alexandria, or via Italian community that mediated most of the trade between India and Europe. Yet in the mid-16th century, for example, a Russian merchant Vasilii

Moskva 1965; A. A. VIGASIN, V. G. VOLOBNIKOV, T. N. ZAGORODNIKOVA et al., *Russko-indiyskie otnosheniya v XIX v.*, *Sbornik arkhivnykh dokumentov i materialov*, Moskva 1997.

⁸ D. KAUSHIK, *Materials of Indian Interest in Soviet Archives*, *Indian Archives*, New Delhi 1969; S. GOPAL, *Indian Traders in Russia in the XVII Century*, in: *Proceedings, Indian History Congress, Mysore Session*, pp. 460–468; S. GOPAL, *Indian Traders in Russia in the XVIII Century*, in: *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 5, No. 2, June 1968, pp. 141–148; S. GOPAL, *Indians in Russia in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, New Delhi, Calcutta 1988.

⁹ P. ROY (Ed.), *Russo-Indian Relations in the Nineteenth Century: a Selection of Documents: English Translation*, Calcutta 1999.

¹⁰ N. N. NEPOMYASHCHIY, *100 velikikh zagadok Indii*, Moskva 2010; V. V. ISHIN, I. V. TROPICYN (Eds.), *Astrakhanskiy kray v istorii Rossii XVI–XXI vv.*, Astrakhan 2007.

¹¹ *Afanasij Nikitin, Wedrówka za trzy morza*. Przelozyla H. WILLMAN-GRABOWSKA. Wstempem i objasnieniami zaopatrzyli W. JAKUBOWSKI, H. WILLMAN-GRABOWSKA, Wroclaw 1952, p. XLII.

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Pozdnyakov described Indian ships arriving at Egyptian seaports in the Red Sea.¹²

The Nikonov Manuscript says that an emissary of Mughal Emperor Babur who had been already dead by that time, arrived in Moscow in 1532 expressing interest in establishing the diplomatic contacts. Tangible results of that mission remain unknown. According to not too reliable Italian sources, Ivan the Terrible was interested in establishing business relationships with India as early as in 1553, but failed. At the turn of the 16th century, a merchant Leontiy Judin undertook journeys to Bukhara and India, however, no evidence has been preserved. What exists is a relation from the Indian side about a Bengali merchant who sent three ships loaded with silk to the Persian Bay aiming to import it to Russia. The expedition, however, resulted in failure as the ships sunk.¹³

The true origins of the Russian-Indian relationships date back to the first half of the 17th century when Indian merchants put down their roots in Astrakhan. They arrived there from the Transcaucasian Region and Iran, where numerous Indian communities in Kabul, Kandahar, Bandar-Abbas, Shiraz, Isfahan, Shemakha and Baku, but also Bukhara and Balkh had already existed since time immemorial. To give an example, an English merchant Anthony Jenkinson gave evidence about Indian merchants' activities in Bukhara: "*Indians are importing good-quality muslin that Tartars wind around head, and all other sorts of white fabric no matter they are made of cotton, wool or canvas, but they do not import gold, silver, precious stones and spices. I have found and understood that all trade /with these goods/ is done by ocean sea, unfortunately it is subject to the Portuguese. Indians import raw silk, red pelts, slaves and the like to Bukhara, but linen and fabrics alike hardly ever buy. I have suggested barter to the merchants from these countries who come from the furthest parts of India, even Bengali and the River Ganga, to get other commodities in exchange for linen, but they did not want to barter anything for fabrics.*"¹⁴

The merchants' active in these communities came mainly from Sindh, Panjab or Gujarat. In Central Asia or Kabul, they would evidently meet Russian merchants, who had worked there since the 16th century. Russians would buy from them Indian dyestuff, precious stones, silk or cotton fabrics, and clothes, they would rarely buy precious metal articles. In the 17th century, also large pearls known as "kichers" were imported

¹² LAVRENTSOVA, OVCHINIKOV, SHUMILOV, p. 6.

¹³ W. HUNTER, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol. VII, London 1876 (Reprint Delhi 1974), p. 95.

¹⁴ D. E. MORGAN, C. H. COOTE, *Early Voyages and Travels to Russia and Persia by Anthony Jenkinson and other Englishmen*, New York 1900, p. 88.

from Persia to Russia, which Russians would buy in bulk and imported to Arkhangelsk, where they were used over the whole northern coast for decorating fur hoods. Indians, vice versa, would buy slaves, horses, red pelts, ram fur, wool, bridles, saddles and wooden dishes.¹⁵

Originally lying close to an old centre Itil, the town of Astrakhan became the largest centre of the Indian trade. It took on importance as the Volga seaport in the 14th century and would be destroyed by Timur later on. It re-assumed importance in the 15th century. In 1554, after the Astrakhan Khanate defeat, all territory was annexed to the Moscow State. Since the second half of the 16th century, Astrakhan had been booming as a centre of the international barter, through which Russia would establish business relationships with eastern partners. Indian merchants settled in Astrakhan in the 1630s. Influenced by the Kljucharev Manuscript dating back, however, to the 1820 and the 1830s, Soviet scientists Pal'mov and Gol'dberg pointed out that a stone pub yard for Indian merchants should have been built as early as in 1625. Nevertheless, this account does not appear in Astrakhan sources.¹⁶ Yet it is possible that Indians were active in Astrakhan that time, as Adam Olearius, a secretary of Holstein legation to Persia, informed in 1936 that: *“Not only Russians, but Persians and Indians are in the town, having their own markets, as well as Bukharians, Crimean and Nogai Tatars, as well as Armenians, who are Christians and do lively trade in various merchandise, and craft, therefore the town is obliged to pay His Imperial Majesty Tsar a huge amount of money; just customs duties amount to twelve thousand rubles, that is twenty-four thousand imperial thalers”*.¹⁷

The first, relatively correct piece of information coming from 1647 contains a relation by an Indian merchant Sutor. It is the Indian merchants' request for building up that yard. Sutor interpreted the complaint from twenty-five Indian merchants settled in Astrakhan against a local clerk Devlet Abuiz Chan, and addressed it to the “Posolsky prikaz” (Foreign Authority). He stated that whereas the local Russian government had been polite to them, as they were interested in expanding the trade with Persia, the local interpreter had behaved improperly towards them, as he preferred the trade of his compatriots from Central Asia, and was a Muslim. Sutor threatened that if the clerk would not be removed, Indians would leave Astrakhan and the Russian state would not profit from customs duties. Vice versa, if he would be removed, Sutor gave promise that up to ten

¹⁵ M. Ju. JULDASHEV, *K Istorii trgovykh i posolskikh svyazey Srednei Azii s Rossiyei v XVI–XVII vv.*, Tashkent 1964, pp. 71–73.

¹⁶ PAL'MOV, pp. 161–162; GOL'DBERG, pp. 134–137.

¹⁷ A. OLEARIUS, *Moskowitzische und Persische Reise*, Berlin 1959, p. 198.

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thousand Indian merchants active in Persia would come to Astrakhan. Sutur's relation suggests that Indian penetration in the Russian market had systematic character, collective form, and was grounded on trading and banking activities arising out of family ties.¹⁸

The Governor of Astrakhan Fyodor Semyonovich Kurakin was given a command to remove the stated interpreter in Tsar Alexey Mikhailovich's letter of 20th May 1647, and to fulfil the Indian merchants' wish. The Voivode was expected to gather the Indian merchants and to ensure them that "*Us, Great Lord, have sympathized with them and offered them trading in all sorts of merchandise on Our territory in Astrakhan, and the barter in a profitable trade*" Kurakin should have invited them in order to inform other merchants that "*they may come to Our territory in Astrakhan also with their merchandise and are welcomed by their brothers among Indian merchants...*"¹⁹ The Indian yard (saray) in Astrakhan is documented as early as in 1649.²⁰

Indian merchants were coming to Russia gradually, first in small groups. The arrival of two Indian merchants in Moscow via Kazan and Astrakhan is documented in 1638.²¹ More arrivals that are documented are: Arrival of twenty-five Indians in Astrakhan in 1647,²² the journey of Indian merchant via Saratov to Moscow in 1649²³, and business activities of Indian merchants in Yaroslavl in 1650.²⁴

Position and Activities of Indian Trading Community in Astrakhan

The Indian merchandise was in ample demand on the Russian market. Indians would import cotton and silk fabrics, veils and counterpanes and shawls, Morocco leather, spices, drugs and medicines substituting the Dutch, English and other west Europeans merchants' import to a large degree.²⁵ Indians also exported Russian fur and pelts.²⁶ Unlike Armenians, who traded in silk of the Persian Shah, Indians always plied just private trade, but in bulk. What serves as an illustration is the fact that in 1648 a merchant Sutur bought for the Russian Tsar merchandise for a huge

¹⁸ LAVRENTSOVA, OVCHINIKOV, SHUMILOV, Doc. No. 33.

¹⁹ Ibidem, Doc. No. 35.

²⁰ Ibidem, Doc. No. 38.

²¹ Ibidem, Doc. No. 12.

²² Ibidem, Doc. No. 33.

²³ Ibidem, Doc. No. 42.

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ Ibidem, Doc. No. 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 14, 19, 20.

²⁶ DRUHE, p. 31.

amount of money, four thousand rubles, and paid an advance of five thousand on the purchase of goods.²⁷

Indians, however, did not limit themselves to the Indian merchandise import, they were engaged as dealers in selling Persian and local products. They tried to create monopoly in raw materials later on, and mainly in Astrakhan exploited local tradesmen and wandering merchants, who supplied neighbouring villages and kin territories. The Indian community had special importance for Russians also because they would import foreign currency.²⁸

The 1647 Charter by Alexey Mikhaylovich shows the Russian Tsar's effort to create for Indian merchants as perfect conditions as possible. On the other hand, the Russian domestic merchants' growing influence resulted in lessening the Indian impact on Astrakhan. The so-called Trading Statute by Alexey Mikhaylovich issued on 7th March 1667 modified the import duties on goods in the Russian Empire. Here are first stated "...Indians, Bukharians, Armenians, Kalmyk people, Cherkessain people and Astrakhan inhabitants" in a fixed formulation before other foreign merchants. The document limited the trade of foreigners to borderline towns, and introduced special taxes for them paid partly in foreign currency. The measure was primarily designed against west European merchants, but affected also Armenians and Indians. The Indian community in Astrakhan was not large enough to be a threat to the Russian internal market development, and Russian merchants' economic and social boom. Last not least, what should be pointed to is the fact that the attempt to restrict the Indian trade to Astrakhan miserably failed.²⁹

Pointing out aged character of their privileges, but mainly a huge amount of money they paid to the Tsar's treasury, the Indian merchants delivered own petitions against the measure on 24th September and 29th December 1675.³⁰ The mentioned decision partially rectified the character of the Indian community's influence in Astrakhan. The Indian merchants were a bit less engaged in the import of Indian merchandise, and devoted their activities more to export of Russian products and to usury, or possibly to cooperation and financing other merchants trade.³¹ Evidence from the sources from the 1670s, however, proves both growth of the Indian community in Astrakhan, and their existence in Moscow, at St. Mark's market in Nizhniy Novgorod. Yet in Moscow was built stone

²⁷ LAVRENTSOVA, OVCHINIKOV, SHUMILOV, p. 11.

²⁸ KEMP, *Bharat-Rus*, pp. 72–73.

²⁹ LAVRENTSOVA, OVCHINIKOV, SHUMILOV, Doc. No. 35.

³⁰ JUCHT, pp. 135–143 (p. 136).

³¹ KEMP, *Bharat-Rus*, p. 74.

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yard for Indian, Persian and Armenian merchants in Granatnom pereulke (today Shusev Street)³².

More than twenty rich Indian traders gathered in Moscow in 1685, according to the same account seventeen to eighteen merchants with families were in Astrakhan that time.³³ They conducted heightened business activity towards inland Russian towns, Central Asia and Persia, but were also involved in both import of Oriental commodities into Russia and export of Russian or west European merchandise into the East. That time, it was mainly Russian cheap pelts, leather, honey, swan or goose feather, needles, colour cloth, mirrors, glassware and west European paper. What was imported from India were muslin, precious stones, varied Indian or Persian fabrics, including cotton fabric, safian leather, incense, rise, medicines. Vice versa, the most prized commodities in India were Russian sable fur, falcons and borzois. The merchandise, however, did not always arrive in India via Astrakhan.³⁴

The important position of Indian merchants in the Russian trade but also Russian merchants' fear of that strong competition can be documented from many petitions by Russian or Indian merchants, and from the so-called skazka (it means, the declaration of Moscow guests and documents of the "Posolsky prikaz") relating to the years 1684–1685. The petition of 7th November 1684 by Russian merchants addressed to Tsars Ivan Alexeyevich and Petr Alexeyevich asking them to ban the Russian merchants from leaving Astrakhan and travelling to Moscow and other towns serves as illustration. The document against alien merchants and "*all Indians, as they have been living in Moscow and Astrakhan for many years, without leaving, they delusively call themselves Astrakhan dwellers, despite they have wives and children over the sea in the Indian Empire, they are trading in all kinds of merchandise, they are dwelling in Moscow, selling varied merchandise and loaning money charging high interest*" was issued by nine Moscow guests and other merchants in the Russian Empire. The petition signers admitted that the merchants carried attractive merchandise in demand mainly, e.g. in Moscow among Russian west European merchandise middlemen, which they supplied to the East. This fact posed a threat to the Russian domestic merchants, who were rather passive and did not conduct trade as lively as strangers, so they asked the Russian government for protection in the form of the restriction of Indian influence on Astrakhan.³⁵ An opposite petition drawn up by Indian merchants

³² LAVRENTSOVA, OVCHINIKOV, SHUMILOV, Doc. No. 182.

³³ Ibidem, Doc. No. 225/VI.

³⁴ Ibidem, Doc. No. 66–73.

³⁵ Ibidem, Doc. No. 225/I.

on 9th December 1684 referring to the profits earned from Indian activities in Russia for the Tsar's treasury has been preserved too.³⁶

The attempt to isolate Indians in Astrakhan failed. To the contrary, in the last quarter of the 17th century evidence from documents proves them both in Moscow in 1677 and 1678, and also at St. Mark's Market in Nizniy Novgorod in 1684. They would travel across the Caspian Sea and "*from beyond the sea to Astrakhan, and from Astrakhan to Moscow*".³⁷ They were admitted to Moscow, against the universal phenomena, "*because an enormous profit will be added to the great rulers' treasury, and duties will double.*"³⁸ Amounts of money were really huge; just in Astrakhan in 1684, Indian merchants paid eight thousand rubles for duties, four thousand rubles in Moscow for imported merchandise, and another six thousand rubles on customs duties on the Russian and west European merchandise intended for export and amounting to eighty thousand rubles.³⁹

The Charters sent in 1685 to Kazan, Simbirsk, Saratov, Caricyno, Cheboksary and Astrakhan prohibiting Oriental merchants from trading with foreigners, with the exception of Persian Armenians, prove Russian merchants' futile effort to limit activities of Indians to Astrakhan, as well as a two-pronged approach of the Russian state apparatus.⁴⁰ In 1689, a follow-up letter urged the Voivoda of Astrakhan to respect the trade curb to the town. Nevertheless, yet it was a vain order as evidence from documents proves further complaints about strange merchants' activities including Indians.⁴¹

Exactly the same re-appears in depictions of Indian settlements and the saray in Astrakhan or in Persia in the 17th century. The traders are called "banyanas" or "multans". It seems they freely followed their customs and religious practices. Many traders came from Panjab or Sindhu, as may be judged according to "multans", the term used for all Indians. What we know from a few accounts is that the community had mixed ethnic composition. The religious and social practices were mostly followed alongside, nevertheless in the community were people from different castes. What holds the interest is that Indians conducted trade in Persian language or Tartar dialects, but spoke Russian. The minutes from Astrakhan court suggest they did not speak through interpreters, even when testifying or giving written statements.⁴²

³⁶ Ibidem, Doc. No. 225/II.

³⁷ Quoted ibidem, Doc. No. 225/II.

³⁸ Quoted ibidem, Doc. No. 225/VI.

³⁹ Ibidem, Doc. No. 225/II.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, Doc. No. 226.

⁴¹ Ibidem, Doc. No. 242.

⁴² KEMP, *Bharat-Rus*, p. 102.

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The Indians in Russia enjoyed the religious liberty, the tsar authorities did not interfere in their family, religious or social life. They were mostly Hinduists, just one residence of Indian Muslim Mament Abubekov was documented in 1649.⁴³ Rarely was documented the presence of Sikhs in Astrakhan.⁴⁴ Most of the community belonged to Vishnu-centred sects, and worshiped Krishna in the temple furnished with all necessities carried from India.⁴⁵ Many of them would bring priests from home to help them follow this practice. The community was regularly visited by pilgrims, such as Brahmins, Sanyasis, or Ascets, who collected alms there, and respected the custom to cremate the dead. The local clerks' complaints about this practice would remain ignored by higher posts.⁴⁶

Most traders had spent in Russia many years, if not most of their life. The long residence in Astrakhan far away from home affected the local Indians' life style. The situation is best depicted in a fairly late relation by George Forster, one of the aptest agent in the English East-India Company, who undertook an overland journey from northern India to Europe in 1798: "*They are neither steady residents, nor bring their wife to the town; after they have accumulated certain wealth, they go back to India, but are replaced by other adventurers.*"⁴⁷

Some Indians, however, married local woman; their descendants became called "agryjan".⁴⁸ The women were either Tartar roots or came from Buddhist Kalmyks. They lived with them in the Indian yard, where according to evidence separated rooms existed, in later accounts it is said about the agryjanian yard.⁴⁹ Their position in Astrakhan was described by Avril in the mid-17th century: "*Those, who undoubtedly contribute to the town flourishing are Indians or bankers-financiers like Kalmyks, whose daughters they marry, since they cannot bind neither local Christians nor Muslims*".⁵⁰ Such marriages, however, were just temporary, or a form of debt bondage.⁵¹

Some existing records document that some of them tried to convert to Christian religion, however, such accounts are rare. What we know is that the Governor of Astrakhan alone baptized one Indian in 1651. He

⁴³ JUCHT, p. 138, note 20.

⁴⁴ V. S. VOROBYEV-DOSJATOVSKIJ, *Concerning Early Contacts Between India and Russia*, in: Journal of the Indo-Soviet Cultural Society, No. 2, Bombay 1955, p. 48.

⁴⁵ KEMP, *Early Contacts*, pp. 32–49.

⁴⁶ KEMP, *Bharat-Rus*, p. 90.

⁴⁷ Quoted by DRUHE, p. 65.

⁴⁸ BAJKOVA, *Rol' Sredney Azii*, p. 4.

⁴⁹ LAVRENTSOVA, OVCHINIKOV, SHUMILOV, Doc. No. 63, 79; JUCHT, p. 138.

⁵⁰ Quoted by KEMP, *Bharat-Rus*, p. 89.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 102.

christened him Ivan, gave him a caftan amounting to five rubles, a piece of English cherry cloth, and five rubles in cash. Then he personally took him to Moscow. Another Indian, Djukki, underwent a religious conversion in November 1675. The baptism made it possible to acquire Russian citizenship and the rights alike Russian traders enjoyed.⁵²

The Indian yard, saray, arose close to Spassky Monastery in the mid-17th century. Indians were not allowed to trade anywhere. The yard was formed with a high wall. At the gates would stand guards who checked the merchandise import and export. The whole building was made of stone, without having external windows, supposedly looking like a monastery at first sight. In the yard were stone warehouses (from the fire reasons), which Indians shared with other traders. Inside laid “cells” with tipping roofs, where traders worked. In addition to these shops, also balances, shelters, warehouses, stables, barns, kitchens, dining rooms, bathrooms were situated there along with a temple, supposedly called “kumir-nica”, about which Foster wrote that “*they undergo catharsis there and prey without arousing just idle curiosity*”.⁵³ According to the evidence from the mid-18th century, there were 73–78 Indian shops there. The saray was reduced to ashes by the rebellion led by Stenka Razin in 1671–1672, but re-built in 1673. Indians were saved from death by Tartars then. Indian traders lived in their villages that time and the mixed marriages first appeared.⁵⁴

Every shop in the saray paid just single tax, twelve rubles yearly. Unlike all locals, Indians, were not obliged to obey a billet, which was terrible luck for the local dwellers.⁵⁵ Initially, Indians lived there with Armenians and Persians, and were likely to share building costs. Armenians moved later on to their own quarter where they built their own houses. Obviously, the reason for that were rather strict conditions in the saray.⁵⁶

Some merchants acquired tremendous wealth in the form of houses and adjoining fruit orchards. What is documented are examples of slaves purchase, both male and female, to do housework. De Bruin and more travellers write that Indians despite they have accumulated immense wealth lived a fairly modest life afterwards, and “*worked like slaves*”. The accumulated wealth allowed them to participate in charity work. The record exists that an Indian trader Amardas Moltanov moved by a tough situ-

⁵² LAVRENTSOVA, OVCHINIKOV, SHUMILOV, Doc. No. 145.

⁵³ Quoted by DRUHE, p. 65.

⁵⁴ JUCHT, p. 137.

⁵⁵ OVCHINIKOV, SIDOROV, Doc. No. 126.

⁵⁶ KEMP, *Bharat-Rus*, pp. 78–79.

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ation of inmates in a Moscow orphanage sent that institution a hundred rubles in December 1769.⁵⁷

It seems that the Indian colony consisted of several communities, which Russians called “companies” (kompanija), or traders’ families led by a special panchayat (assembly having initially five members) and the older of that group. In case of urgency, it was united panchayat that decided on all matters related to all. In the document of 1743 is mentioned one of the older or the leader of the Indian saray. This person was known as padhan. The Indian community would negotiate through him with the local or central government, in case of urgency it was him who would arrive in the capital city.⁵⁸

Interestingly, the Russian authorities in controversial cases, such as the law of inheritance, tried to leave the solution on the Indian community, often they had to make decision by themselves, since rivalry and competition existed among single groups or “companies”. But even in such a case they tried to respect the principles of the Indian consuetudinary law.⁵⁹

It follows from the negotiations with the local authorities that three main groups existed in the community, each of them had its own spokesperson, and had from ten to fifteen members. It seems that they were not just relatives. The trade was conducted either by individuals at their expense or partners or “companies”. Frequently, they were large traders and their assistants from the same “company”. They often hired Kazan Tatars from the Kazan trading community for that service.⁶⁰

Indians carried on credit business. They focused, however, on some areas. They never tried to buy arable soil, they did not initiate manufacturing establishment. At maximum, they would lend money those who conducted these activities by themselves and took risk. Documents reveal many complaints from Russian traders and Astrakhan citizens about unfair practises in that area. Evidently, it was the merchandise sold to other foreigners, which was banned, and participation in retail that goes for Indians. However in general, they kept to money lending, and lived in a relatively close community, therefore they did not become too much involved in the local life in Astrakhan.⁶¹

They maintained constant contacts with the Indian communities in all important towns in Iran: Teheran, Isfahan, Kazvin/Quazvin, and the like. The representatives of the Iran communities and the Indians from Astrakhan visited each other, did trade between them, mutually provided

⁵⁷ Ibidem.

⁵⁸ Ibidem, p. 80.

⁵⁹ Ibidem, pp. 81–83.

⁶⁰ Ibidem, p. 83.

⁶¹ Ibidem, pp. 84–85.

themselves with banking services, and were sometimes in family relationship. The tsar government tried to ensure them protection at the court of other rulers, e.g. in Persia,⁶² which may be illustrated by a special provision in the Persian agreement of 1732 allowing Russian traders and their merchandise to travel freely through Persia.⁶³

Not once stated Indian merchants they had more privileges in Russia than in Persia or other eastern countries.⁶⁴ The trade was supported by Russian protective policy towards Indian or other Oriental merchants. The proof of that gives, e.g. the 1720 instruction of the senate to the Governor of Astrakhan Artemy Petrovich Volynsky urging him to help alien merchants settled in the town, and to provide them and their property with protection; he was also expected to *“treat them with kindness and helpfulness ... and ensure that nobody will do them any harm ...”*.⁶⁵ In October 1722, the deputation of Indian merchants led by Anbu-Ram visited Peter I, who was staying in the town, and were given a special ukase granting the Indian community in Astrakhan the right to resolve inheritance disputes concerning property *“by Indians alone, according to their rules, law and principles”*. This ukase became the general legislative standard for the property disputes of such a character to be in force until the end of the Indian business community existence. It was introduced in *“The Collection of the Laws of the Russian Empire”*, and was not amended until the mid-19th century, when the Indian community in Astrakhan ceased to exist.⁶⁶

Attempts to Establish Direct Russian-Indian Relationship under Reign of Peter I

The reason the Russian government supported the Indian community was effort to establish the direct business contacts with India. Russia was well informed on the development there via news spread from Persia and Bukhara, logically, the tsar government, however, did not regard just mere pieces of information sufficient. Following Portuguese and other west European traders and diplomats' lead, they endeavour to come into the direct diplomatic and business contacts. Therefore three legations in total were sent off to India in the 17th century.

The first legation was led by Nikita Syroyejin in 1646, next by Rodion Pushnikov and Ivan Derevyenskiy in 1651. Both resulted in fail-

⁶² LAVRENTSOVA, OVCHINIKOV, SHUMILOV, Doc. No. 57.

⁶³ KEMP, *Bharat-Rus*, p. 69.

⁶⁴ OVCHINIKOV, SIDOROV, Doc. No. 151.

⁶⁵ Quoted *ibidem*, p. 10.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, Doc. No. 48.

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ure, since envoys had to come back on half a way. In 1676, the last legation led by a Bukharian merchant Muhammad Jusuf Kasimov arrived in Kabul controlled by the Great Mughals that time. Emperor Aurangzeb, however, did not admit the Russian mission. Holding just a faint idea about Russia and its significance he was fully occupied in the rebellion in Delhi.⁶⁷

The development in the area of diplomatic relations, not successful to that date, continued more systematically during the reign of Peter I when another pillar of foreign relationships, the Caspian policy, as well as the relationship with other eastern empires, was evolving in addition to the traditional Baltic and the Black Sea policy. Peter I seemed keenly interested in Oriental antiques and collector's items. Collected on his orders, mainly samples of coins and letterings would form later on the core of the Asian Museum. During his era, also a foundation of Russian Orientalistics was laid. On the other hand, his dismissive attitude to envoys from weaker Asian countries was clearly demonstrated by the fact that he would expose his non-Russian vassals and Asian serfs at his court to the public ridicule and bizarre ceremonies.⁶⁸

What was taken in the late 17th century and the early 18th century is a series of steps towards the establishment of business and diplomatic contacts. Nevertheless, the instructions single missions were given show that the chief aim was to initiate the business contacts. The talks between Peter and Hannover resident in Petrograd, Fridrich-Christian Baber, held in December 1714, serve as the best illustration of Peter I's intentions in India matters, since he pointed out Astrakhan as a central spot of the trade with Persia and India.⁶⁹ He instructed a Russian envoy in Isfahan A. P. Volynsky to explore trade routes from Persia to India, the conditions of the local trade, and needs of the Indian trade.⁷⁰

What is worth mentioning is Semyon Malenkov's expedition in 1695. Malenkov arrived in Surat from Iran. He met Emperor Aurangzeb when he was commanding the Mughal Army against Maraths on Dakshin. Malenkov established the diplomatic contacts and gained Aurangzeb's ferman, unfortunately he died on his way back. His fellows, however, brought both to Moscow in 1699. Nevertheless, Malenkov's journey allowed Russia to begin the trade with India by land.⁷¹

In 1714, Peter I investigated the project developed by a courtier F. S. Saltykov who suggested using the northern sea route for the trade with

⁶⁷ LAVRENTSOVA, OVCHINIKOV, SHUMILOV, Doc. No. 49.

⁶⁸ KEMP, *Bharat-Rus*, p. 62.

⁶⁹ *Zapiski F. X. Bebera*, in: *Russkij archiv*, 1872, No. 7 and 8, p. 1341.

⁷⁰ OVCHINIKOV, SIDOROV, Doc. No. 8.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

China and India.⁷² Two years later, the senate examined two merchants' testimony about the use of navigable rivers in the European part of Russia for the trade with Japan and India. Peter I, however, preferred the traditional way across the Central Asian khanates. Here, the attempt to initiate the trade was complemented by the territorial expansion. The unsuccessful military expedition to Chiva led by Prince Bekovich Cherkassky in 1716–1717 was aimed at prospecting gold in the Amu Darya valley, exploring the river direction and trade routes to India. The aim was to establish the cooperation with khans, and to send out Lieutenant A. I. Kojin via Bukhara to India, where he was expected to explore water or other alternative routes, and to find out the conditions of trade in spices.⁷³

Peter I was not discouraged by not favourable results of these attempts but sent a legation of Florio Benevini, the secretary of the Oriental Expedition of the Department of Embassies, to Bukhara to explore the local trade and relationships with India.⁷⁴

The Tsar by himself led the invasion to northern Persia in 1722. He explained his aims as follows: “*according to the published manifest it was declared that the aim is to protect allied neighbouring state, Persia, though, in fact the main reason is to re-establish the Russian trade*”. In this connection the Tsar talked about the use of the Caspian routes to India, and about the importance of the East Indian trade. Related to that was launch of building forts in 1724 on the south coast of the Caspian Sea and in Astrabad, which was occupied by Russians that time “*just because of Bukharian and Indian trade.*”⁷⁵

Later on, Peter I was considering the naval expedition to India. Encouraged by the information on negotiations between Madagascar pirates and the Charles XII, King of Sweden, he initiated an expedition commanded by Admiral David Whilster on 5th December 1723. The expedition was expected to leave with two frigates for Madagascar, to offer the local king protection, then to head to India with a letter to Padishah about establishing the permanent business contacts between both states.⁷⁶ Whilster really set out in December 1723, but met with a serious accident, so he was forced to enter the port in Reval (Tallinn). Delays in repairing the ship and the information on the changed situation on Madagascar, the destina-

⁷² Ibidem, Doc. No. 7.

⁷³ KEMP, *Bharat-Rus*, p. 61.

⁷⁴ A. POPOV, *Snosheniya Rossii s Chivoyu i Bucharoyu pri Petre Velikom*, Sankt Peterburg 1853, pp. 34–36.

⁷⁵ Quoted by KEMP, *Bharat-Rus*, p. 62.

⁷⁶ Quoted by KEMP, *Bharat-Rus*, p. 62.

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tion, resulted in finishing the expedition. Peter I's death definitely killed the whole project.⁷⁷

The effort to find the route to India affected also the Astrakhan trading community. In the early 18th century, the good knowledge of geography and business opportunities encouraged an Indian trader Anburam (Atmaram) Mulin and his partners to deliver a petition to Tsar Peter I in January 1723 asking for permission to go to Moscow, Novgorod, Arkhangelsk, to initiate the naval trade, and to trade with China across the Siberia.⁷⁸

The investors in the Armenian company, who had already asked at the time of Aleksey Mikhaylovich for the possibility to visit Arkhangelsk and to begin the direct trade with Persia and German centres via Russia, submitted the similar petition in 1711. It might have served as precedent; but whereas Armenians had intended to use the routes and markets occupied by someone else, the Indian request was aimed at an unexplored field, so it had better chance to be accepted. However, it is not clear what is the answer the merchants were given. On the other hand, the existence of the request suggests the good financial background in the Indian community, and the courage to explore less known routes. "Abduram" who signed the petition is most likely that one who had negotiated with the Tsar as the representative of the Indian community on the occasion of his expedition to the Caspian Sea in 1721 to 1722, when the Tsar talked to Indian, Persian and Russian merchants about their trading plans, trying to find out mostly details about the routes to India. Coming back with new information and fresh ideas, and perhaps with a plan to transform the southern Caspian regions into the base for operations in Central Asia, he called again "banijan Abduram" and re-questioned him. He described to the Tsar the conditions of the trade in silk during that time and set them in contrast with an amount of silk previously imported from Gilan and from elsewhere for the current prices. The mentioned Abduram is also mentioned in the Astrakhan legal documents as the person responsible for recording the decisions affecting the Indian communities or companies. He is also mentioned as the executor of the community members' last will, and he would appear before the municipal government where he would

⁷⁷ G. von HELMERSEN, *Beiträge zur Kenntniss des Russischen Reiches und der angrenzenden Länder Asiens*, 1872, Reprint Osnabrück 1969, pp. 219–229; A. ZAOZERSKIJ, *Ekspedicija na Madagaskar pri Petre Velikom – „Rossiya i Zapad“*, in: *Istoricheskiy Sbornik*, No. 1, 1923; M. WANNER, *The Madagascar Pirates in the Strategic Plans of Swedish and Russian Diplomacy 1680–1730*, in: *Prague Papers on the History of International Relations*, Prague-Vienna 2008, pp. 73–94.

⁷⁸ N. M. GOL'DBERG, *Russko-Indijskie otnoshenija v XVIII veke*, in: *Uchenyje Zapiski Tochookeanskogo Instituta*, 2, 1949.

speak on behalf of others. It seems he died in 1726–1727, for that reason the petition was not accommodated.⁷⁹

Abstract

The paper deals with the history of the Indian business communities in Russia in the years 1636–1725. It provides a critical review of existing literature and series of documents on the topic. In the overall context of the Indo-Russian trade relations describes the advent of Indian merchants in Russia and their impact on Russian cities. The core of the study consists of a description of the largest Indian community in Russia, the Indian community in Astrakhan. The economic, political and cultural status of this minority in Russia and its business activities is reconstructed based on the published records. In the final part, much attention is paid to the role of Indian traders in an effort to Peter I on the establishment of commercial and political relations with the Indian subcontinent.

Keywords

Indo-Russian Trade Relations, Foreign Merchant Communities in Russia, Peter the Great Foreign Policy, History of Astrakhan

⁷⁹ KEMP, *Bharat-Rus*, pp. 76–77.

