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Development of Indian Trading Community in Astrakhan in Context of Russian-Indian Relationship
(1725–1800)

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*To lead China and East India trade
route through Turkestan would result in
the promotion this empire could earn to
be a superior power to all other
empires in Asia and Europe.
Catherine II, personal comments¹*

This article is a direct follow-up to the author's study *Indian Trading Community in Astrakhan in Context of Russian-Indian Relationship (1636–1725)* published in this journal in 2012,² in which he dealt with the genesis of the Indian trading community in southern-Russian Astrakhan, economic and political roles it occupied in the Russian state in the 17th century and early 18th century, and a part the community played in the Russian state's attempts to establish trade and diplomatic relationship with India during the reign of Peter I. The study lead contained a summary of existing Russian, Soviet, Indian and American literature, as well as editions of documents devoted to this theme, so it has not been included in this article.

Today's contribution is devoted to qualitative and quantitative changes brought about by the 18th century in ongoing efforts of the Russian government circles to establish a direct contact with India, develop the Russian-Indian trade, and the role Indian trading communities had in the goods exchange between India and Russia. The study sets the mutual dependence of both phenomena in a direct context, and tries to show a cause of failure of the

¹ Quoted by R. B. OVCHINIKOV – M. A. SIDOROV, *Russko-indiyskiye otnosheniya v XVIII v., Sbornik dokumentov*, Moskva 1965, p. 8.

² M. WANNER, *Indian Trading Community in Astrakhan in Context of Russian-Indian Relationship (1636–1725)*, in: *West Bohemian Historical Review*, No. 1, 2012, pp. 115–131.

Russian side's effort, which had also partially affected prosperity and change of the Indian trading community in Astrakhan.

Attempts to Establish Russian-Indian Trade Relationship in 18th Century

The Russians had failed in all attempts to build the business and diplomatic relationship with India in the period of Peter I. Nevertheless, the Russian government did not give up these movements. The senate decree issued in 1727 included, e.g., an article saying to re-conduct the Astrakhan trade with Bukhara and Chiva. A certain Bukharian was deputed to arrange a large caravan expected to transport Russian merchants to Chiva and Bukhara, and to Samarkand, Tashkent or Kashgar, but mainly come into contact with “*especially Mughal border towns Lahore and Kabul*”. The expedition was expected to take steps to ensure the duty-free import of Russian goods to India, like it had been negotiated in the Persian Treaty of 1732 that guaranteed Russian tradesmen and their goods free transit through Persia if “*they go on trading trip to either India or other countries by land or sea*”. This several-time-made attempt, however, brought just a modest gain due to short-time outcomes, but having been frequent it resulted in a permanent, even though fluctuate trade.³

Despite these failures, the Russians managed to acquire a range of information on India also in traditional ways, such as questioning Indian merchants in Astrakhan, studying west-European literature, and paying foreign informers. While conducting a campaign in India, Kalushkin, a Russian resident in Persia, had his own sources, for example, in the encampment of Persian Nadir Shah. He would pass on information to a Russian consul in Isfahan in the late 1730s, depicting the local population, and wealth and treasure Nadir Shah had stolen in Delhi.⁴

³ P. N. KEMP, *Bharat-Rus, An Introduction to Indo-Russian Contacts and Travels from Medieval Times to the October Revolution*, Delhi 1958, pp. 62–63.

⁴ S. GOPAL, *Indians in Russia, Indians in Russia in the 17th and 18th centuries*, New Delhi,

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The most marvellous figure and the most valuable sources in the Indian Astrakhan community might be Marwari Sarayev. He would belong to a trading community Marwari that worked in Rajasthan. He got himself baptized and would use the name Peter Fyodorov. Throughout his life, he became one of the most respectable Indian tradesmen in Russia. He was a tradesman, usurer and estate owner.⁵

Besides following the course of events, the Russian government would be repeatedly engaged in the Russian-Indian trade relationships. Ivan Kirilovich Kirilov, the chief secretary in the Senate, had a key role to play here as he had proposed to build a town – citadel, and a trading centre on the southeast border of the Russian Empire, which was expected to play a key role in the trade with Kirghizian hordes, Central-Asian khanates, Persia, Afghanistan, and India. What he had also planned to be built later was a series of fortified supporting bases protecting the whole southeast border of Russia. Kirilov's project was approved by Tsarina Anna Ivanovna on 18th May 1734. She also appointed Kirilov a leader of Orenburg expedition. Despite the expedition was fighting bloody battles with Kirgizians and Bashkirs to reach the destination, the town of Orenburg, the fort of Orsk, and later on a series of supporting bases of the Russian power would be founded in of 1735.⁶

This fact re-sparked the interest in building-up the relationship with India by caravan trade via Central-Asian khanates. Within next ten years, Orenburg would take on Astrakhan's role as a main centre of the trade exchange with the East. The Indian relations positively influenced the early development of the town, although no evidence of a permanent Indian settlement in Orenburg exists. The trade in Indian luxury goods in the town, more or less, was taken over by Kashmir and Armenian tradesmen, who ran shops in Moscow.⁷

Calcutta 1988, pp. 6–7.

⁵ Ibidem, pp. 7–8.

⁶ V. G. SEMYONOV – V. P. SEMYONOVA, *Gubernatory Orenburskogo kraya*, Orenburg 1999, pp. 18–26.

⁷ KEMP, p. 107.

What obstructed the trade was both unfavourable situation in Central Asia and attacks carried out by hostile Nomads on the Russian borders. To arrive in the town safe and sound, Russian caravans heading to Orenburg would often hire security troops of Kirgizians. The Russian authorities exerted effort to support the trade by building caravansaraies for Asian tradesmen.⁸

The Russian caravans went on their journey from Orenburg to Bukhara every year in January. However, just few of them arrived in Balch, Badakshan or Kabul. They exported cheap Russian brocade, which weakened the position of that Banarasi, and competed with English goods. Further on, it was also export of Russian paper, sugar, pelts, wax, iron, brass goods, and many more. Kabul, vice versa, was the place Bukharian four or five-camel caravans headed from to Chiva, and further to a market close to a village called Makaryev near the Zheltovodsky (also Troitsky or Makaryev) Monastery on the central Volga River, in today's Nizhny Novgorod, the region known in northern India as Makeria (that means St. Mark's Market).⁹ In Kabul, Russian paper, sugar, lace, textile and the like would be exchanged with Indian merchants for cochineal (crimson-coloured dye) or indigo dye intended for the Russian market. What played an important role was the import of gold, silver and precious stones to Russia, which began in 1748. One thousand eight hundred pounds of gold and one thousand and sixty-five pounds of silver "*formed mostly by Indian and Bukharian coin*" were imported in 1755.¹⁰

The trade, apart from some interruptions, was conducted throughout the 18th century, and according to some researchers it was expanding in the late 18th century and the early 19th century, however, documents confirm the boost after 1815.¹¹ Three routes ran from India to Russia, best depicted in a memorandum written by Orenburg military Governor N. N. Batchmechev

⁸ Ibidem, p. 106.

⁹ N. A. FILATOV, *Tri veka makaryevsko-nizhegorodskoy yarmarki*, Nizhny Novgorod 2003, pp. 146–147.

¹⁰ Quoted ibidem, p. 107.

¹¹ KEMP, p. 108.

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in 1800, that is via Kabul and Bukhara to Tashkent and Kazan; by sea to Basrah, further on via Isfahan and Shiraz to southern Caspian Sea Region, and then by sea to Astrakhan; finally to Multan and Kabul via Kandahar and Mashhad to Astrabad and then to the destination – Astrakhan. However, it was definitely a traditional route via Astrakhan, southern Caspian Sea Region and Persia that was vastly preferred.¹²

The trade, however, was restricted by the wars in Central Asia, and the fall of the Mughal Empire. The Indian subcontinent became a battleground for the Mughal Empire's succession states, the subject of strange raiders' attacks, and then a subject of British expansion. After 1722, Persia was undergoing a complicated development in which the Safavid Dynasty on the Persian throne was deposed by the Afsharid Dynasty, soon by Qajar Dynasty. All these factors had influenced the trade that became risky, therefore it was essential to find more stable organizational structure of the trade that would be able to face new challenges. The Russian government circles fastened on establishing business companies those times.

A keen promoter of this idea was a commander of the Orenburg expedition, I. K. Kirilov, who presented in 1734 and 1736 to the government two projects to be considered, both encouraging the trade exchange with India, and trying to attract Indian merchants from Central Asian centres to Orenburg.¹³ These plans would be certified and supported by Tsarina Anna Ivanovna.¹⁴

Kirilov soon died. His ideas were then pushed forward by his successor on the post of Orenburg Governor, I. I. Neplyuyev, who would develop a plan, in association with A. I. Tevkelev and a Russian scholar, P. I. Rychkov, to found a trading company in Orenburg supposed to conduct trade with Central Asian khanates and India.¹⁵

¹² N. N. NEPOMJASHCHIY, *Russkaya Indiya*, Moskva 2010, p. 86.

¹³ A. LYUSTERNIK A. – E. G. SHAPOT, *O nekotorykh proyektach organizatsiyi russko-indijskoy torgovli v XVIII. veke*, in: *Ucheniye zapiski Leningradskogo gosudarstvennogo instituta, Seriya vostokovednikh nauk*, No. 9, Leningrad 1960, pp. 21–22.

¹⁴ OVCHINIKOV – SIDOROV, Doc. No. 74, 75.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, Doc. No. 137.

The project was submitted to the government in January 1751, and certified by the Senate in March that year.¹⁶ The full execution itself, however, faced many obstacles. First, the 1751 expedition was robbed by Turkmen tribes. Next, another expedition in 1753 led by a tradesman Rukavkin from Samara arrived not further but to Chiva, where part of goods would be confiscated by a local khan. Finally, it had to dodge attacks by Nomads, and would not arrive in India. Under these circumstances, Russian tradesmen feared investing their capital in such a fairly risky venture. In February 1753, Neplyuyev asked the Petersburg municipal government for support expecting they would invite governments of large European Russia's cities to take part in this business. The chief municipal government complied the requirement, but the merchant society said "*they are against sending companies to the eastern countries in such a situation*".¹⁷

This attempt was accompanied by a series of events when a lot of similarly unsuccessful trading bodies would be founded, such as the Russian Commercial Company in Constantinople (1757), the Trading Company for Persia (1758), or the Company for Trade in Bukhara and Chiva (1760). The aim was to establish English East India Company-inspired monopolies, and take over colonies and trading bases in the East. What also proves a Russian government's plan for expansion to the East is a programme document prior to the Alliance Treaty entered into by Russia and Austria on 2nd June 1746 considering "*sending Russian troops into India, and Czech auxiliary troops into Persia*".¹⁸

Among other economic objectives the government of Peter III declared in the Manifest of 28th March 1762 was the trade with the East, mainly India, as one of possible ways to strengthen Russian economy, and achieve increase in wealth of people. Likewise many other neither this one would be accomplished, and remain just the declaration. The true follower of Peter

¹⁶ Ibidem, Doc. No. 139.

¹⁷ Ibidem, Doc. No. 151.

¹⁸ Quoted by D. N. DRUHE, *Russo-Indian Relations 1466–1917*, New York 1970, p. 62.

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I would be Tsarina Catherine II. According to her words Russia was supposed to serve as a middleman for European countries trade with China and India.¹⁹ During her reign, a greater awareness of India spread in the Russian society and trading circles. The interest in the movements in India at those times is well documented in the Russian professional or daily press.²⁰

What also exists are proposals to re-organise the Astrakhan trade penned by Soymanov in the 1760s, which the author based on the consultation with local merchants, with a great stress on Indians. Later on in his diaries he gave a detailed account of India and Bukhara's relations with Astrakhan, and an in-depth overview on the history of European experience with the Indian trade from ancient times to Russian exploratory attempts made those times, including the description of business trips to India from the Caspian Sea Region via the Siberia. Anyhow his description of India "*as a source of all wealth*" reflects the western experience, it still remains at the level of legend. What he suggested for this *El Dorado* exploitation was to establish an English or Dutch East India Company-inspired Russian company, if necessary with a state share. The company was planned to have its centre in Astrakhan, branches in Isfahan and Tiflis, and also minor agencies in Schemacha and Astrabad. The Absheron Peninsula was planned to be a seaport for Khorasan, Central Asia, or possibly India. First, the idea of a company alike was promoted by Armenian merchants in Astrakhan, however, the decision that was taken afterwards was to establish a Russian company controlled by the state that would use Armenian capital and experience only partially. A Russian company for the trade with Chiva and Bukhara arose in Astrakhan in 1762.²¹

The government of Catherine II investigated in 1763–1764 possibilities for developing trade relations with India via the Siberia.²² As early as in 1755,

¹⁹ OVCHINIKOV – SIDOROV, p. 8.

²⁰ A. V. ZAPADOV, *Indiya v russkoy literature i zhurnalistike XVIII stoletiya*, Izvestiya Akademii nauk SSSR, otd. literatury i jazyka, Vol. 15, Is. 2, Moskva 1956, pp. 110–121.

²¹ KEMP, p. 105.

²² OVCHINIKOV – SIDOROV, Doc. No. 170–174.

Mikhail Vasilyevich Lomonosov conceived a project aimed at a large naval expedition to explore a northern sea route in the text called “*The Letter about a Northern Route to East India by Siberian Ocean*”. In September 1763, he acquainted the Commission of Russian Navy Fleets with a semi-finished project called “*A Brief Description of Different Routes by Northern Seas and Presenting Possibilities of Crossing the Siberian Ocean to East India,*” in which he drafted the use of the northern sea route for the trade with China, Japan, India and America. Tsarina Catherine II signed in May 1764 a secret order for arranging arctic expedition “*aimed at a voyage and trade to the East*”. On 1st August 1764, a fleet of three ships called after their commanders “Chicharov”, “Panov” and “Babayev” set out from Arkhangelsk and would go on until 1766. Nevertheless, it turned out that establishment of the trade by northern sea route had been beyond those days’ technical possibilities.²³

The Russian Admiralty dispatched six Russian naval officers to England in 1763, whose task was to study practice on the English East India Company’s ships. The instruction handed in to the officers by an envoy to London, Count C. R. Voroncov, pointed out the importance of studying natural wealth of India, the condition of industry, agriculture and business. All pieces of information were regarded as essential for the development of the Russian trade with India.²⁴

The plan for a “*Caspian and Persian Trading Company*” was documented in 1779. It should have been a privileged associated company supported by the state. A German scientist, Peter Simon Pallas, also proposed a Russian privileged company at the end of the century, which was expected to take over the trade in silk jeopardised by Persian levies, and expand its activities to Kashmir, Tibet and India by caravan paths, penetrate to inland India with the aim to gain a better access to crimson dye, lacquer, diamonds, spices

²³ Ibidem, Doc. No. 178; N. N. NEPOMYASHCHY, *Russkaya Indiya*, Moskva 2010, p. 72; S. I. SHUBIN, *Pervyy geopolitik Rosii*, in: Michail Lomonosov, uchenyy-enciklopedist, poet, khudozhnik, radetel’prosveshcheniya, Moskva 2011, pp. 257–266, link pp. 261–263, quotation p. 262.

²⁴ OVCHINIKOV – SIDOROV, Doc. No. 175–177.

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and indigo dye. Vice-Governor in Astrakhan P. Skaryatin handed over to the government a project aimed to establish a company for the trade with Turkmen tribes, Afghanistan and India. He planned to build up a base on the shore of Gorgan Bay, on the territory hired from Persia.²⁵ What provides evidence of this plan development is a document by Senate General Prosecutor P. Kh. Obolyaninov to Paul I (1800),²⁶ and notes by Count V. A. Zubov “*General Inspection on the Trade with India*”.²⁷ All these plans, however, brought no fruit.

Besides these initiatives developed by the Russians, also many other projects were designed in the 18th century, whose aim was to establish Western-European or East India Company-inspired companies, that would be handed over to the Russian government. Although some of them had been discussed in the board of foreign affairs, commercial board and the senate, they were rejected as too unrealistic, too expensive, technically unsuitable or due to possible political impacts. For these reasons the plans would not be handed over to the executive for implementation.²⁸

As to the Russians’ journeys to India, they had a random nature in the 18th century. Documents give evidence of Orenburg Tatars’s journeys: a merchant Abdul Khayalin’s shop guys in 1749–1752;²⁹ Siberian Tatars from the town of Tara; a merchant N. Tchelobitchik from Trubchevsk in 1760–1765;³⁰ or a merchant N. Kalustov from Astrakhan in the late 18th century.³¹

Russian ships began setting out on journeys to India in the 1780s under Tuscany, Sardinia or Genoa’s flags, and would go on until approximately 1796. Their break point was a harbour in Ostend. What is more, the first ship to appear in Mumbai in 1785 was that of a Russian wholesaler sailing under tsarist flag.

²⁵ Ibidem, Doc. No. 199, 200.

²⁶ Ibidem, Doc. No. 214, 216.

²⁷ Ibidem, Doc. No. 218.

²⁸ Ibidem, Doc. No. 61, 165–169, 195–197, 200–204, 209.

²⁹ Ibidem, Doc. No. 138, 139, 180.

³⁰ Ibidem, Doc. No. 188.

³¹ Ibidem, Doc. No. 193, 199.

Undertaken in that period were also Russian travellers Sergeant Yefremov (1786), and Gerasim S. Lebedev's successful trips to India. However, these casual voyages were not sufficient to ensure enough Persian and Indian goods for Russia, therefore Russia was still interested in Indian merchants' trade in Russia.³²

Indian Community's Life in Astrakhan in 18th Century

Fifty to a hundred Indian merchants lived in Astrakhan in the 18th century. A more precise count provides A. I. Jucht:³³

Years	1703	1727	1746	1760	1770	1784	1805	1810	1811	1815
Number of Indians	40	101	76	89	72	89	72	89	66	58

These Indians were engaged in selling goods from the Orient, and exporting Russian goods to Persia, but merchants also traded in many other Russian towns. According to one Indian merchant, Marwari Barayev's witness dating from the 18th century, two hundred people went to Russia every year, but this number dropped to eighty in 1735.³⁴ In the 18th century, the Indian merchants freely travelled to "Makaryev Fair", to the northern Caucasus Mountains, to Saratov, and from 1720 to Petersburg, after it had become the capital city of Russia where the court and foreign merchants dwelt.³⁵

The turnover must have been fairly high. The core of the commodity structure of business were Asian fabrics: Persian, Transcaucasian, Central Asian and Indian. According to the Astrakhan customs office, Geram Myratov exported to Moscow and Nizhny Novgorod goods amounting to

³² DRUHE, p. 67.

³³ A. I. JUCHT, *Indiysskaya koloniya v Astrakhani*, in: *Voprosy Istrii*, No. 3, 1957, p. 138.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, Doc. No. 64.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, Doc. No. 34.

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10,270 rubles in 1724; Adet Tchinyayev goods amounting to 8,852 rubles; Peru Galamov to 8,229 rubles; the Indians imported goods amounting to 104,000 in total.³⁶

Whereas in the West the Russian government carried out strict protectionist policy, products imported from the East – expensive fabrics, precious stones, and arts and crafts products were not tough competition for the young Russian industry. Moreover, it was more profitable for Russia to buy Oriental products from Indian or Armenian merchants than in the West, as there were a plenty of middlemen, which created impact on prices. Mainly for this reason the goods from the East were imposed a low tax (plus 10–13 % special levies) in Astrakhan, from the 1730s also in Orenburg. This resulted in massive increase in Oriental products import to Russia.³⁷

From the 1720s to 1740s, the Indian trade in Russia boomed. After 1727, Russia re-established business relations in Central Asia broken off after Count Alexander Bekovitch Tcherkaski's death in 1717. What also flourished was the trade exchange with Persia.³⁸ According to the customs office in Astrakhan, Indian merchants exported to Persia goods amounting to 311,400 rubles in 1737–1744, and exported from Persia goods amounting to 661,100 rubles, which comprised 11.5 per cent of foreign trade led via Astrakhan. Compared to extent of the trade conducted by an Armenian community in Djulfa situated close to Isfahan, the Indian trade comprised its minor part. Moreover, Russia offered the English to begin trade with Persia via Russia. A less known fact is that the goods to Persia were really sent by this way; in 1740 amounting to 1,325 rubles; in 1741 amounting to 17,500 rubles; and in 1742 amounting to 230,600 rubles. Between 1742 and 1744, the English exported to Persia goods amounting to 775,000 rubles in total.³⁹

³⁶ Ibidem, Doc. No. 62, 78.

³⁷ Ibidem, Doc. No. 56, 59, 62, 63.

³⁸ I. V. TOROPITSIN, *Po proshenyju astrakhanskogo bucharskogo karavan-saraya kupeckogo cheloveka*, in: *Astrakhanskiy kray v Istorii Rossii XVI–XXI vv.*, Astrakhan 2007, pp. 29–31.

³⁹ OVCHINIKOV – SIDOROV, Doc. No. 88–93.

All Indians and Armenians who had taken an oath of loyalty towards the Russian Tsar began being provided protection after Peter I's campaign to Persia, and they paid lower import duties imposed on goods in that country. However, only those who agreed to the condition on which they had to be registered in Astrakhan, and swear an oath of loyalty towards the Russian Tsar.⁴⁰ Some of them refused to be registered giving the reason they would not be sent goods from abroad. By the Russian government edict issued in 1744 all merchants from the East living in Russia gained the temporary rights of serfdom in order to enjoy the same privileges as Russian merchants had in Persia. Foreign merchants were allowed to leave anytime they wanted unless they had got married in Russia, had children, had built court or ran a shop.⁴¹

A competitive fight with Russian merchants continued in the 18th century. Russian merchants changed their tactic. Whereas they had tried to restrict the Indian merchants' trade to Astrakhan before, they were against their activities in retail now. According to tsarist *ukas* of 23rd May 1754 all goods were imposed a special ten-per cent tax on all goods the Indian would have sold beyond the town's limits. However, it was not of great importance as the Indians had been long selling through Armenian or Russian middlemen.⁴²

Moreover, Russian tradesmen had enforced many restrictions, especially those regarding commodities the Indians were not allowed to trade in. Also trips to Russia were permitted specifically, but were relatively frequent, however in the course of time full freedom would be achieved. Unfortunately, this is the reason of lack of pieces of evidence on the Indian merchants' activities in Russia. What has been better documented is the import of Russian products. The Indians exported pelts and furs, blowers, linen, grocer's goods and haberdashery, chemicals, metal products, foodstuff, and European and Russian cloth at those times. First to appear in the structure of export were

⁴⁰ Ibidem. Doc. No. 119, 124.

⁴¹ Ibidem, Doc. No. 107, 108.

⁴² OVCHINIKOV – SIDOROV, pp. 13–14.

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the early Russian manufactories' products. The Indians sold goods amounting to 916,622 rubles to Persia and the Transcaucasus between 1737 and 1745. In addition to that they broadly shared in the transit trade through Astrakhan.⁴³

In the second half of the 1740s the trade began to decline. One of the reasons was a close link of the colony to Indian colonies in Persia. After Nadir Shah had been killed, Persia entered a period of confusion, which blocked mutual trade and relations. The state of disorder and discord went on until 1760 when Karim Khan of Zand tribe re-united all country.⁴⁴ Part of the Indians fled from Iran into Astrakhan.⁴⁵ The direct trade was still conducted, however, there was substantial decrease in volume.⁴⁶

The transit trade, however, dropped to finally cease to exist. Whereas the average annual turnover of Astrakhan customs office reached 1,253,580 rubles on average in 1740–1744; 721,535 rubles in 1752–1756; it fell to 241,079 rubles in 1763. The petition signed by Indian merchants in 1750 clearly states that due to those events in Persia and the trade ban in Russia the community had been caught in *extreme poverty, debts and misery*". Therefore they demanded a permit to join the inland trade, but in vain. The Indians, therefore, moved to the trade with Central Asian khanates, but the volume would not reach that extent of the trade exchange with Persia. It was not until the 1770s and 1780s when the Indians imported a larger amount of cotton and Indian fabrics from Bukhara, wool from Tibet and Kashmir, occasionally also precious stones. Indigo dye was sometimes imported from Lahore via Persia.⁴⁷

Whereas only one document on usurious activities of the Indians in 1669 dating back to the 17th century exists, more documents on mutual money loans are available; from the 1720s onwards this type of business developed fully, and took on a mass character. The Indians would charge high, usually

⁴³ JUCHT, pp. 140–141.

⁴⁴ D. MORGAN, *Medieval Persia*, London, New York 1988, pp. 155–156.

⁴⁵ GOPAL, p. 9.

⁴⁶ OVCHINIKOV – SIDOROV, Doc. No. 161.

⁴⁷ JUCHT, pp. 140–142.

30-to-36- per cent interest for a loan, exceptionally even 50 per cent. They would loan money to Russian merchants, local Tatars or serfs, or mutually to themselves. The commercial success in business or usury seems to reflect a good organisation of the trade led by a group of enterprising veterans. The core was apparently formed by small groups linked by close relational or caste bonds, which facilitated obeying orders given by the older, and helped ensure social coherence essential for the community that worked far away from its home.⁴⁸

In 1745, the municipal government in Astrakhan lodged complaint against the Indians as many of them “*do not conduct the true trade, but became prominent burghers, that means bankers*”.⁴⁹ The documents show how many of those who had borrowed money got caught in the debt trap.⁵⁰ After one Indian merchant, Suchanand, died in Moscow in 1757, some 300,000 rubles and 26,500 rubles in unpaid bonds were found at his home.⁵¹

In case of disputes concerning debts the Russian government advocated the Indian creditors’ party. Despite the Astrakhan government’s request for the ban on the Indian usury this activity would still go on the next hundred years. The last 18th century document about the repayment of a loan to an Indian creditor dates back to 1798.⁵² What also exists are documents on a strong debt dependence of the local Tatars on the Indians.⁵³

In the last quarter of the 18th century and in the 19th century the Indians made attempts to take over the supplies of raw materials for silk and cotton manufactories. In the late 18th century the Indians began supplying silk manufactories, which went on also in the 19th century; they would also buy their products. Wandering Russian and Tatar merchants would act as

⁴⁸ GOPAL, p. 4.

⁴⁹ OVCHINIKOV – SIDOROV, Doc. No. 113.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, Doc. No. 115–118.

⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 14.

⁵² Ibidem, Doc. No. 205.

⁵³ N. OZERECKOVSKIY, *Opisaniye Koly i Astrakhani*, Sankt Peterburg 1804, p. 128.

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their commission agents in towns and villages, and in the Nomad steppes, sometimes for a third of sales profit, sometimes the trade was based on credit sale, and the repayment after purchase. The increase in raw materials prices resulted in the bankruptcy of many enterprises in that branch. Under these circumstances the Indians went out of the business, and began to concentrate on money loans.⁵⁴

In the 2nd half of the 18th century, Indian weavers worked in the local silk and cotton factories. The relations between these craftsmen and Indian tradesmen were strained, which might be accounted for by the relations between a growing-rich creditor and a growing-poor craftsman. The local factories' cheap production ceased the import of expensive fabric from Persia to exist, but the Indians took over the import of raw materials, and bought up the majority of the production. In addition to these weavers, also Indian masons, black smiths and carpenters are documented there.⁵⁵

A sort of decline began to occur in the 1790s. It seems that the Indian tradesmen began leaving the *saray* to build houses somewhere else in the town, doing trade on their own account, and to break off their previous relations. Only some forty merchants would remain in the *saray*. However, in the early 19th century the colony began being rebuilt by newcomers. Apparently, many of them had not been active in the *saray*. According to Pallas and Goldberg there were a hundred to two hundred people in the community, and in the Caspian Sea Region were some four hundred Indian tradesmen. Based on different guesswork dating back to the early 19th century it was some five hundred. The town's senate sold the *saray* in 1803 to the Indian trading community under the condition they would build a new seat. A new two-storey house was built in 1817, assessed at 60,000 rubles at that time.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ KEMP, p. 86.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, p. 91.

⁵⁶ JUCHT, p. 143; It is still standing building known as the Indian merchant court (Indiyskoye togovoye podvorye) on the Soviet (formerly Indian) street in Astrakhan.

The colony in Astrakhan existed until the mid-18th century. Most of the merchants did not live in this trade house in the 1st half of the 19th century but in their new houses with gardens. Sabra Mogundasov, who had taken the Russian citizenship, is most likely to be the most significant representative of the Indian community in those times. He owned a shipping company, fishing area and conducted the trade with the eastern countries.⁵⁷

Finally, it was not the assimilation that resulted in the end of the colony in Astrakhan, but the development of the local economy. This town had diminished in importance owing to the decline of Astrakhan – as a seaport for eastern trade, and building-up the town of Orenburg – as a main gate of the Russian trade. Another reason behind was the effort of Russian and Armenian tradesmen to stifle competition. What is more, the relations to the Asians began changing in the mid-19th century. Although there is no evidence of direct repression against the Indians, what seems clear is conscious effort to suppress those old semi-oriental forms of trade, and giving the preference to Russian tradesmen and Russian capital.⁵⁸

Conclusion

The effort of the Russians to establish the direct diplomatic and trade relationship with India underwent a radical transformation during this period. It acquired the form of attempts to establish vary-composed trade companies whose task was to conduct the trade with India by road, and to develop it into a mass form. These attempts, however, would not succeed for long. The absence of the mutual borders, an enormous geographical distance, the fall of the Mughal Empire, and the British expansion in India, as well as complicated economic-political development in the countries situated between Russia and the Indian sub-continent caused the complication to establish the direct relations.

⁵⁷ KEMP, p. 143.

⁵⁸ Ibidem, p. 104

Michal Wanner

Development of Indian Trading Community in Astrakhan in Context of Russian-Indian Relationship (1725–1800)

The trade exchange in the form of long-distance caravan trade existed nearly in the whole 18th century, but brought limited volume of goods exchange. The favourable conditions for the establishment of trade companies did not begin to exist until the last decades of the 18th century, when the development of the interior trade and credit would considerably strengthen the Russian economy. Therefore what marked a turning point in the Russian-Indian relationship was the establishment of direct relations with India by sea in the 1780s, which was reflected in Fyodor Ivanovich Kruzenshtern's proposals aiming to arrange a Russian trade fleet, to build up the maritime trade with India and China, and to establish a Russian East-India company.⁵⁹

Therefore the failure in business penetration in India had been strengthening the position of the Indian communities in Russia for long, primarily the community in southern-Russian Astrakhan that was plied in this trade. Yet these communities had undergone a complicated development. The extremely successful period in the 1st half of the 18th century in commercial terms was followed by a slump linked to the long-distance trade depression in a vast area of Persia and Central Asia. The possible way to overcome the crisis was a shift in direction in the form of usury, bank service and industrial business, which is typical of the Indians' activities in Russia during the last quarter of the 18th century and the early 19th century.

Abstract

The contribution is devoted to qualitative and quantitative changes brought about by the 18th century in ongoing efforts of the Russian government circles to establish a direct contact with India, develop the Russian-Indian trade, and the role Indian trading communities had in the goods exchange between India and Russia. The study sets the mutual dependence of both phenomena in a direct context, and tries to show a cause of failure of the Russian side's effort, which had also partially affected prosperity and change of the Indian trading community in Astrakhan.

⁵⁹ V. M. PASECKIY, Ivan Fedorovich Kruzenshtern, Moskva 1974, pp. 20–21, 24–26

Keywords

Russian-Indian Relationship in the 18th Century; Indian Trading Community in Astrakhan, Russian Companies in the 18th Century