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Non-Muslim Minorities in the Modern Afghanistan's Economy

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The territory of what will become modern Afghanistan has for centuries been the center of a vast, economically interconnected geographical area. This area includes, besides Afghanistan, the northern regions of India, Persia and the Uzbek khanates of Central Asia. It represented a market for economic trade in which valuable products from India found buyers in the courts and bazaars of neighboring territories. Mainly, two components of the Afghan society made this system work: Pashtun nomads and non-Muslim minorities. The first ones carried out the logistical work that allowed the goods to reach the various bazaars of the region where they are sold. The second ones (non-Muslim minorities) on the other hand, had many functions: intermediaries, bankers and traders. In this paper I will present the socio-economic context of modern Afghanistan, in which non-Muslim minorities have played a key role in allowing the country to remain connected to the trans-regional trade network that was part of northern India. The aim of my paper is to present the history of non-Muslim minorities in Afghanistan through a description of their socio-economic position and to highlight their fundamental role in the economy of the Afghanistan kingdom. In particular, I will try to frame their role in the trans-national and more general context of global trade that affects not only the territories already mentioned but also the Ottoman Empire and the Mediterranean sea.

Introduction

Part of present-day Afghanistan was, for almost two centuries, a province of the Mughal Empire. All of present day Afghanistan was under the control of foreign authorities between the 16th and the 18th centuries, who shared control over it. The first of the Mughals, Babur (r.1526-1530), fell in love with the city of Kabul, of which he sang the beauty and pleasures in his autobiography, to the point of making it the summer capital of the empire. Kabul enjoyed the presence of the Mughal court for some years. Babur's successors consolidated the dynasty's hold on the Indian subcontinent and moved the capital city several times as the empire's political and economic center of gravity shifted to northern India. Afghanistan thus found itself on the periphery of the Mughal Empire in an eccentric position in relation to the heart of the Mughal possessions. Nevertheless, the country was at the center of a vast region stretching from the plains of northern India to the steppes of Central Asia and the Iranian plateau, in which a vast and developed trade network enabled the agricultural and artisanal surplus

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of the Punjab to reach neighboring regions and contribute to the enrichment of northern India. Most of the trade between the different regions that made up this international trade network is concentrated in the hands of Indian merchants who act on behalf of large commercial enterprises originating from the Punjab, or in the hands of other non-Muslim minorities: mainly Armenians and Jews.

The Key Role of Hindu Merchants

In Afghanistan, Hindus have always been the most numerous and involved group in trade.[1] Their role as the keystone of the interregional trade system is attested from the 17th century, but their presence in the region is even older. The Hindu trade network is one of the most extensive and capillary, it's an essential tool for the development of trade in the region. By the 17th century the Mughal Empire was the center of a highly connected system that included the present-day territories of India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, China, Central Asia, Russia and the Middle East.[2] North India and the Uzbek khanates of Central Asia were highly connected territories and from the 16th century onwards the movement of goods and people suffered an acceleration that had never been recorded before and that went beyond the simple exchange of goods. The two regions influenced each other : educational, religious and political institutions circulated between them. Intellectual exchanges are constant and relationships between the two regions are fruitful.[3] In this context, merchants maintained friendly relationships with the states and the authorities that ruled them. According to Gommans, Indian merchants as intermediaries were essential to the success of the empire's economic policies. For Gommans: "[...] inter-regional roads and their trade provided the basic framework of the empire. It was only through the intermediaries along the routes that the cash nexus could be handled and the revenue could be remitted."[4] It should also be emphasized that it's thanks to the trade development policies of the empires that the trans-regional trade network was able to reach such a level of prosperity.

1. Vartan Gregorian, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Reform and Modernization, 1880-1946* (Stanford University Press, 1969), 62-63.

2. Jos Gommans, "Mughal India and Central Asia in the Eighteenth Century: An Introduction to a Wider Perspective," in *India and Central Asia: Commerce and Culture, 1500-1800* (ed.) Scott C. Levi (Oxford University Press, 2007), 39.

3. Muzaffar Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707-1748* (Oxford University Press, 1986), 64.

4. Gommans, "Mughal India and Central Asia in the Eighteenth Century: An Introduction to a Wider Perspective," 2007, 40.

The Political Situation in the Region

In the early 17th century, the Mughal and Safavid empires created a stable and peaceful political environment that was an essential condition for the further development of trade in the region. This economic environment favored long-distance trade and the expansion of the Indian trading diaspora. Tapan Raychaudhuri pointed out that: "If the Mughals were ruthless in their expropriation of surplus, their rule beyond doubt brought a high level of peace and security. From the 1750s - 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 known for centuries. The economy of the empire benefited directly from this altered state of peace and security. Substantial increase of trade, both inland and foreign was rendered possible by this development. It would perhaps be an exaggeration to say that the Mughal age saw the emergence of an integrated national market. Still, the commercial ties which bound together different parts of the empire had no precedence."[5] The same remarks can be made about the reign of Shah 'Abbas II in Persia and, to a lesser extent, about the situation of political stability that the Central Asian khanates also experienced. The Indian merchant network, already sophisticated and active for centuries, found itself operating within a political framework that could only stimulate interactions between regions. The empires, with their strong armies, controled and secured the trails taken by caravans and merchants; the sovereigns launched campaigns for the construction of infrastructures whose objective was to increase the use of trade routes (construction of caravanserais, maintenance of roads and development of mountain passes, etc.). The Indian merchant diaspora can be considered as the counterpart in Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent of the Armenian diaspora in Persia and the Mediterranean, as Armenians enjoyed the freedom to travel and trade without any obstacle from the Ottoman ports of the Mediterranean to those of the Indonesian archipelago.[6] Indian merchants have the same freedom in their area of activity. The two groups shared the same characteristics in terms of composition and organization, both being subject to a very strong militarily central Muslim authority which could guarantee the development of their activities. Both groups were also perceived as intermediaries in the regions in which they operated and not as officials in the service of the empire. The political and economic situation at the time of Akbar's (1556-1605) and Abbas I's reign (1587-1629) was particularly favorable to trade

5. Tapan Raychaudhuri, "The Mughal Empire," *The Cambridge Economic History of India* (eds.) Dharma Kumar and Tapan Raychaudhuri (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 184.

6. Edmund M. Herzig, "The Rise of the Julfa Merchants in the Late Sixteenth Century," in *Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society, Pembroke Papers volume. 4* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 26.

and commerce. In the 17th century the demand for agricultural and manufactured products from India was very high in Persia and in Uzbek Turan. The imperial system of the Mughals is all the more important as it also contributed to the markets' harmonization in the different regions of the empire. It was able to integrate very different economies into a single prosperous economic system, thanks to the establishment of a single efficient administration, the alignment of the weights, measures and currencies of the empire and by providing all its territories with a uniform legislative apparatus. Mughal India's merchants who operated in Persia or in the Uzbek khanates, worked in a similar commercial and linguistic environment. Although they did not enjoy the same urban autonomy as European merchants at the same time, they could conduct their trade without restrictions, outside the limits imposed by Islamic contract law.[7] S. Dale makes a parallel between the environment in which Indian merchants operated and the mercantile environment in the Mediterranean between the 10th and 12th centuries. Quoting a passage from Shelomov Goitein,[8] Dale describes an area in which goods and culture traveled almost unlimitedly in what looked like a free trade community.[9]

Indian merchants could however enjoy a comparative advantage towards other merchant communities in the region. The factors that have benefited trade as well as agriculture and manufacturing have allowed them to access a common and integrated market where the technical barriers that could have constituted obstacles to trade had been eliminated. Thanks to this integrated market, India could play a predominant role in trade and take advantage of the quality of its products, but also of the material and human resources which greatly exceeded those of its neighbors to establish itself as the major player in the trans-regional economy. Some of the agricultural and manufactured goods produced in northern India were destined for export due to the wide availability of raw materials and workers that could be mobilized from the subcontinent. At the time, India mainly exported food products, but also luxury goods: among the most requested were the varieties of food (fruits and vegetables) which could only grow thanks to the Indian subtropical climate, and cotton, which since the times of the Roman empire represented the first product exported by India.[10] In exchange, Mughal India imported luxury goods, prized by the local aristocracy and especially horses bred in Central Asia, famous for their strength, resistance and beauty and necessary for the cavalry of the Mughal army. This trade only

7. Stephen Dale, *Indian Merchants and Eurasian Trade, 1600-1750* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 10.

8. Shelomov D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza, volume 1: Economic Foundations* (University of California Press, 1967), 66.

9. Stephen Dale, *Indian Merchants and Eurasian Trade, 1600-1750* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 11.

10. Ibid, 21.

disappeared in the 19th century, when the British authorities replaced the Mughals. The British army had its own supply network for its cavalry and the Central Asian market was definitively abandoned, radically changing the economic relationships and trade between India and Central Asia.

Trade Routes Through Afghanistan

Goods from or towards the Indian subcontinent used several trade routes to reach its destination. Among these roads, the best known is the road that reaches the territories of present-day Afghanistan through the Bolan Pass. This road was widely used by the Mughal armies committed in the campaigns for the defense or the reconquest of Kandahar city from the Safavids. It was the main guideline which linked Sindh (and in particular the city of Shikarpour) to the Iranian plateau. This path was rarely closed due to snow, but the cold between November and the end of February often discouraged caravans from using it during this period.[11] According to the British officer Henry George Raverty, the road was wide enough to allow the passage of the Mughal artillery which in 1653 was going to Kandahar in order to regain control of the city, under the orders of Prince Dara Shikoh, Emperor Shah Jahan's son.[12] The Sanghar Pass, located further north than the Bolan Pass, is the fastest land connection between the Iranian plateau and the city of Multan, capital of the Mughal province of Southern Punjab, via Kandahar. Less known than the other passes between the Indus Valley and Afghanistan, the Sanghar Pass was probably the most important in the 17th century, being the most direct route between Multan and Kandahar. Even further north is the Gumal Pass, which connects India to the Central Asian Khanates from the city of Dera Ismail Khan via Ghazni and Kabul through the Suleyman Mountains. This land route presented the most difficulties to the caravans that used it because of its length, the rising waters of the rivers that the road ran along and because of the attacks of the Pashtun tribes of the region. Babur himself, having followed the same path from Kabul to the Indian plains in 1510, was aware of the dangerousness of the route.

The position of the cities of Shikarpour and Multan is a key element for understanding the functioning of the merchant network of Northern India and its development. These two cities (and to a lesser extent Dera Ismaïl Khan and Dera Ghazi Khan) are the starting point of the trade routes towards Persia and Central Asia, as well as the native cities of most members of the Indian diaspora in the region. A large part of the Indian family businesses that composed the network linked to the diaspora originated from one of these two cities, or started their activity from one of these two cities to reach neighboring regions. The importance of Multan and Shikarpour in the organization of the Indian diaspora is such that

11. Ibid, 51.
12. Ibid.

European sources often use the words Multani or Shikarpouri in reference to the Indian merchants encountered between Kabul, Samarkand, Mashhad and Astrakhan. The role of the two cities and their leadership over trans-regional trade is still, today, a subject of debate. What is undeniable is the fact that Multan and Shikarpur were, during different periods, the cities where the great commercial companies were based which maintained highly developed commercial links with the main bazaars in the region, including that of Kabul and Kandahar in Afghanistan. Both cities are located in a geographical position of strategic importance. Shikarpour, located in Sindh, is near the Indus and on the trade route that reaches Quetta and Kandahar: a vital hub for trade by land and river. Multan is close to the roads to Kandahar and Ghazni, located on the plains of northern India; it's connected to the economic centers of Lahore and Amritsar and takes advantage of the waterways, being on the left bank of the Chenab River. From Multan and Shikarpour, Indian merchandise had to cross Afghan territories to reach the bazaars in which it was expected. To what extent has the Afghan economy been integrated into the trans-regional system? What are the benefits that the strategic position of the country brought to the provinces crossed by the caravans?

The Afghan Economy: A Transit Economy

Until the 20th century, the Afghan economy was essentially a transit economy. As seen above, Afghanistan benefits from the passage of caravans that connect the cities of northern India to the cities of Central Asia or Persia, but the role of the country is only marginal if we consider the overall amount of exchanges that are carried out by trans-regional trade actors. Indeed, Afghanistan is not the main recipient of goods crossing it. On the contrary, only a very small part of the goods that pass through Afghanistan are sold on its markets. With the exception of the Kabul bazaar, which at the time represented a relatively interesting market for Indian products, the other towns crossed had only a limited function of logistical support for the caravans. Indian goods only transited there but were very rarely sold there.

Afghan sovereigns have tried on several occasions to increase the share of benefits that cross-regional trade offers to Afghanistan. An 1887 note[13] sent by British agents in Afghanistan to the Indian government shows a request by the Emir Abdour Rahman of economic compensation calculated on the basis of the goods' value sent from Bukhara to India through Afghan territory by merchants from the city of Peshawar. The objective of the Emir's request was to be able to benefit from the income generated by the trade in goods from Central Asia which

13. National Archives of India, New Delhi. Foreign dept. 1887 – Secret F June 1887 NOS 181-185.

only pass through Afghanistan without bringing income for the Kingdom. It's also true for the funds that are transferred by Indian trade agencies from Moscow to Calcutta, because the emir believed that part of this money belonged to the transit country. If Abdour Rahmane's requests was not accepted by the government of British India (which on the contrary advised by a note to its embassies to change the route of the goods if necessary to prevent the Afghan sovereign from repeating his requests), it proves that the total transactions carried out by Indian agents through Afghanistan have reached such a level that every country wanted to profit from these exchanges. Moreover, the Afghan transit economy, at the time, depended to a large extent on the credit networks of the banks of Multan and Shikarpur. Representatives of Indian trading companies in Afghanistan were around 8,000 in the early modern era and they were known as Hindki. "Most of these banking houses were family businesses, with the satellite branches scattered throughout the region and run by members originally sent out from these two cities [Multan and Shikarpur]."[14] The Hindki merchants, originating from the two central cities of trans-regional trade, belong mostly to the merchant castes of the khatri. In Afghanistan they were engaged in a secondary market compared to the large Indian international network, which was more local and active in exchanges which generally covered short distances. These markets are becoming vital to the Afghan economy as trade by land is replaced by trade by sea. The activity of the Indian merchants was fundamental for the progress of trade, but it would never have succeeded in reaching such a level of efficiency without the essential contribution of the Afghan nomads, real logistical partners in the movement of goods through the region.

Merchant Networks and Afghan Nomads

The Hindki network makes it possible to resupply the Afghan provinces otherwise excluded from international trade by steamboats and to maintain links with neighboring regions. Hindu merchants were not the only ones to animate the market and guarantee credit in Afghanistan, but they shared the sector with Afghan merchants and other minorities: Armenians, Jews, Georgians and Persians. They all acted as intermediaries between the Afghan economy and the international or trans-regional economy. Their activity would never have reached the degree of importance it has had throughout its history without the collaboration of a crucial element in the region's trade: the Pashtun or Lohani nomads. While Indian merchants enabled cross-regional trade to be financed and efficiently organized, Pashtun nomads provided the logistics that for centuries allowed goods to cross Afghanistan to Central Asia, Persia and India. Caravans, or kafila, were the instrument through which the boom in trade between Asia and

14. Benjamin D. Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan* (Palgrave-Mcmillan, 2009), 116.

the Indian subcontinent was possible. Alexander Burnes (1805-1841), in one of his letters on the trade between India and Afghanistan, noted that the Derajat, the territory between the cities of Dera Ghazi Khan and Dera Ismail Khan, is an essential crossing point for goods. This is where the caravans from India congregate before continuing west. The main roads intersected at Derabund (30 miles west from Dera Ismail Khan) and there began the Goolairee Pass route, through which the Lohani passed. According to Burnes' information, the Lohani gather together near Derabund in April: the families spent the winter near the Indus while the men left to buy goods in India. From Derabund they went to Khorasan where they spent the summer. The Lohani are organized into three divisions called "kirees" (which according to Burnes meant migrations) named : Nusseer, Kharoutee and Meeankhyl. Generally, Hindu merchants and foreigners traveled with the third group. The caravans reached Kabul and Kandahar around mid-June, just in time to send the goods to Bukhara and Herat where they were picked up by local Indian merchants or other nomads to continue their journey. At the end of October they headed back to India with their cargoes of fruit, horses and products from Kabul. It is the same route that Babur took in 1505, he came across a caravan of Lohani around Derajat.[15] Indian merchandise and merchants therefore followed the ancestral paths taken by the Pashtun nomads following their seasonal migration in a well established mechanism that allowed products from India to reach Afghan bazaars and caravanserais in time to be loaded into other caravans in the direction of Turan or Persia. It was this system which, together with the institution of the note of credit, allowed the goods exported by the subcontinent to flow into distant markets, passing through isolated and hostile regions through which no one else except the Pashtun nomads could have traveled without risking being robbed or killed. Each caravan, or kafila, was autonomous and depended only on a leader, called *kafilabashi*, who decided the path to take according to the random factors that presented themselves each season at the time of departure (revolt or instability in certain provinces, heavy rains or impassable roads, etc.). The agreement between the leader of the caravan and the merchants included only the price of transport and the final destination. Once these details were agreed upon, the caravan would decide autonomously which path to follow in order to reach its final destination. As already discussed above, this system allowed merchants to adapt quickly to market requirements and to change routes easily in the event of an unforeseen event. Besides, Hopkins noticed that this system stressesed the prices in the bazaars crossed all along the trip by making the market very unstable. Caravans could change destination or route at the last minute if better prices for the goods were possible elsewhere. It was up to the decision of the *kafilabashi* who represented the highest and only authority within the caravan. "The costs involved were minimal and the potential

15. Alexander Burnes, *Travels into Bokhara: Together with a Narrative of a Voyage to the Indus* (Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2003), 76-79.

benefits very high. The pervasiveness of the Central Asian credit network facilitated both commercial and physical flexibility."[16]

The Lohani were able to choose the best path according to the situation and have a close relationship with the Indian merchants which guaranteed them support during their stops in the bazaars. They were also very efficient when it came to guaranteeing the safety of the caravan and therefore to the merchandise. Well armed and trained to use weapons, the Pashtun nomads were the only ones able to cross without fear the gorges or mountainous areas particularly favorable to ambushes by the Pashtun tribes who inhabited them. Their characteristics allowed them to be both the best way to transport the goods and to ensure their protection during the transfer. For these same reasons, many merchants, travelers and spies have called on the services of the Lohani nomads to cross Afghanistan and reach their destinations in Central Asia or Persia totally safely. George Forster was one of the Europeans who used the kafila to cross Afghanistan in 1782. Forster traveled disguised as an Armenian merchant, having learned that the presence of an Armenian in a caravan was not unusual at all in the region. During his crossing of Afghanistan, passing through Kandahar, Ghazni, Kabul and Herat, Forster met Armenian merchants in the caravanserais of Afghan cities, four of whom told him about the attempts of forced conversion they had to undergo from the muslim merchant of Herat's city.[17] When he arrived in Kabul, Forster was welcomed by a Georgian named Bagdasir who has lived for twenty years in Kabul in a caravanserai and who wrote a reference letter for his guest who was about to join Persia. At the same time, Forster met an Armenian merchant living in Peshawar. Forster could only notice that in Kabul all the religions were represented (Muslims, Christians, Jews and Hindus).[18] In Kandahar several Hindu families originating from Multan were installed there, Forster was very impressed by their situation and he pointed out that: "a very long line of shops occupied by Hindus, who seemed happy in their look and manners, sufficiently proves that they find in Kandahar freedom and protection."[19] Forster confirmed that Armenian merchants were a constant presence in the bazaars and caravanserais of 18th century in Afghanistan. Where do these Armenian merchants came from? When did an Armenian community appear in Afghanistan in the capital Kabul?

16. Benjamin D. Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan* (Palgrave-Mcmillan, 2009), 119-120.

17. George Forster, *Voyage du Bengale à Pétersbourg à travers les provinces septentrionales de l'Inde, le Kachmyr, la Perse, volume 2* (Delance, 1802), 176.

18. Ibid, 56.

19. Ibid, 122.

Armenians in India and Afghanistan

The first record of an Armenian merchant community's presence in India and Afghanistan is traced back to the 17th century. Lahore, the summer capital of the Mughal Empire and an important commercial center of Punjab, was the home to an Armenian colony from the beginning of the 17th century. A letter written on September 6th 1604, from Agra by Brother Jerome Xavier briefly described the condition of the Armenians in the city : most of them were active merchants in the wine trade. The same letter pointed out that thanks to Emperor Akbar's Firman, Christians could openly practice their faith in the lands of the Mughal Empire. Two years later, on September 25th 1606, a letter from the same brother Xavier described a change in the situation for the Armenians : Lahore was at the time experiencing a period of instability due to the revolt of Prince Khursu (1587-1622), son of Emperor Jahangir (r.1605-1627), fourth Mughal emperor. The insecurity caused by the revolt pushed Armenian merchants to hide their goods to avoid robberies. A successive letter dated in August 12th 1609, written by Brother Pinheiro, demonstrated the persecutions suffered by the Armenian community at that time. The letter spoke of 23 Armenian merchants who may have run away from the city with their families to escape the events. As pointed out by Mesrov Seth, the Armenian community was relatively large and committed to trade,[20] although among them there were a lot of landowners and public officials in the service of the Mughal administration.[21] If the community could enjoy a certain well-being due to the merchants' activity, it was not as easy regarding religious practices. The Armenians of Lahore found themselves both victims of persecution by Muslims and the object of attempts to rally to the Catholic Church on the part of Brother Pinheiro and the Jesuits. The missionary fathers considered very seriously the possibility of converting Armenians because among them there were many outstanding men and some of them had helped the Jesuits to meet the emperors Jahangir and Shah Jahan. The Armenians were considered more likely to listen to the fathers of the Catholic Church who had to report to their superiors in Europe on the regions' situation in which they were on mission's inhabitants' conversion.

Relationships between Jesuits and Armenians in India have been tense sometimes, although there have never been any reported episode of open hostility. The Jesuits considered Armenians as Christians to be protected, although they did not approve of the habit of some members of the community to hide their religious identity so that they could live among their non-Christian neighbors.[22] Armenians were opposed to the organization of a Jesuit mission in India and

20. Mesrov Seth, *Armenians in India: from the Earliest Time to the Present Day* (Asian Educational Service, 1992), 201.

21. Edward McLagan, *The Jesuits and the Great Mogul* (Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1932), 271.

22. Ibid, 271-273.

looked suspiciously at the brothers who came from Europe. However, it's also true that, at the beginning of the mission, the Armenians cooperated with the Jesuits as interpreters during the interviews with the Mughal court. Father Pinheiro interceded with the authorities to save poor Armenians who in 1604 risked being persecuted because of their activity as wine producers. According to another missionary, Brother Pierre de Jarric, "The Armenians in this country as a whole, are less ready than formerly to scorn and insult the Church; for it is known that the Fathers enjoy the favor and support of the Viceroy, and that the officers of justice have orders to banish from the town"[7]. Armenians who lived in the Mughal Empire or in Persia and who had a high social status wore civil or military distinctions such as Agah, Khodjah or Khan. This is also true for the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire, who bore the titles of Bey, Effendi or Pasha. Armenian merchants who arrived in India at the beginning of the 17th century were from the city of New Julfa, located in the suburbs of Isfahan and founded in 1605 during the reign of Shah Abbas I (r.1587-1629) by a colony of 12,000 Armenian families from Julfa, an Armenian city on the Araxes River.[23] In Lahore the Armenians lived in separate neighborhoods from the rest of the population. In 1757 Brother Tieffentaller wrote that Armenian and Georgian soldiers in the service of Ahmad Shah Durrani had protected the inhabitants of the Armenian neighborhood from robberies during the third Afghan invasion of Punjab. These soldiers were part of a Christian artillery group serving under former Lahore Governor Mir Mannu, brought to Kabul by Ahmad Shah a few years earlier during the second Afghan invasion of Punjab.

Relationships Between Armenian Merchants and British India

In the 17th century, Armenian merchants were also active in the maritime trade between India and Persia (via the ports of Thatta in Sindh and the one of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf). In 1688 a commercial agreement was signed by the Armenian merchant community represented by Khojah Phanoos Khalantar and the East India Company for Great Britain.[24] Through this agreement the Armenian community became a commercial partner of British India. Britain recognized Armenians as "chief carriers of European goods from India to Persia."[25] This status granted Armenian merchants the same privileges as British merchants of the East India Company in terms of employment and services. The Armenians obtained the same treatment as their European peers, which represented an great advantage for the community, and acquired supremacy in the maritime trade

23. Seth, *Armenians in India: from the Earliest Time to the Present Day*, 1992, 148.
24. Ibid, 48-50.
25. Ibid, 230.

sector between India and Persia.[26] The British agents chose the Armenians as partners because of their linguistic knowledge in the countries in which they are settled, but also for their knowledge of the political authorities' customs and for their ability to promote their interests. The Armenians thus became agents of the British and interceded with the local authorities to the advantage of British India. In exchange for the official role that the British recognized for them, the Armenians agreed to use European ships (and mainly British ships) to transport the goods they negotiated and to further develop their commercial network. The 1688 agreement encouraged Armenian merchants to gradually abandon land trade routes and redirect trade to the sea using British ships. The same agreement granted Armenians the freedom to settle in Indian cities, to buy and sell land and houses and granted them the right to access civil charges on the same basis than British citizens. In the context of cooperation and mutual trust that existed between the British colonial authorities and the Armenian community in the region, it was not surprising to see, half a century later, Great Britain encouraging and helping the settling of an Armenian community in Kabul.

Armenians in Kabul

The exact year of the settling of an Armenian community in Kabul is not known. The Persian King Nadir Shah (r.1736-1747) encouraged the arrival of Armenian merchants in the great bazaars of Kabul, Kandahar and Herat, at that time under his control in order to stimulate trade for his empire. In 1737 he settled between 200 and 300 Armenian families in Afghanistan in order to encourage land exchanges between India and Persia.[27] Their presence became constant in Afghanistan for a century. The Armenian colony of Kabul in 1707 obtained special privileges from the Mughal authorities in Kabul.[28] The privileges received included not only freedom of worship, but also the end of dress requirements and tax reduction. Letters written by Armenian merchants in Kabul in 1799 revealed that their trade relationships were extended to Tbilisi and Istanbul. Later documents (written between 1812 and 1848) showed that the economic interests of Kabul's Armenians reached the khanates of Central Asia, as well as the city of Dera Ismail Khan. Some members of the community had developed an activity of bankers, one of the favorite activities of non-Muslims in the region and had opened trading posts in the city of Ghazni, at the south of Kabul. If the economic relationship of the Armenian community with India were flourishing, their cultural links with their original land were almost non-existent: no more priests were sent to Kabul from New Julfa or from India, leaving the small Afghan

26. Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707-1748*, 1986, 73-74.

27. Gregorian, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Reform and Modernization, 1880-1946*, 1969), 66.

28. Seth, *Armenians in India: from the Earliest Time to the Present Day*, 1992, 207.

community materially and spiritually all alone. In the absence of prelates on Afghan territory, the community was deprived of religious functions during the most important moments of its members' lives, such as weddings, baptisms and funerals. There are lots of Anglican priests' testimonies who arrived in Afghanistan following British military missions and who were asked to make religious services and administer baptisms in the Armenian church in Kabul. The Rev. Joseph Wolff, who arrived on a mission in Kabul in 1832, wrote in his diary about making a religious service in Persian in front of about twenty Armenians in this same church hidden behind buildings and organized like a *saray*, not far from the Bala Hissar and Jalalabad Gate. Afghanistan's Armenians had adopted Persian names and they had embraced daily customs of the Muslim population, such as taking off their shoes before entering their church.[29]

Kabul's Armenian colony lived in such isolation that in 1896, the Emir Abdour Rahmane decided to send a letter to the Armenian community of Calcutta asking them to send a dozen families to Kabul, in order to fill the loneliness of the 21 Armenians living in the territories of the kingdom of Afghanistan.[30] Abdour Rahmane's approach was not motivated only by his pity and his sympathy for the Armenian community, but it aimed to re-establish commercial links with India without passing through the networks of Hindu merchants that he wished to compete (see above). At the end of the 19th century, the military power of the emir depended on British economic and military aid, which was a condition to the cession of the country's external sovereignty. Economic exchanges were mainly with India and the attempt to revitalize Armenian commercial channels can be seen as an attempt to free itself from the dependence of the Afghan economy on Hindu networks. The end of the Armenian presence in Afghanistan most likely came a year after Emir Abour Rahman's letter of intercession to the Armenian community in Calcutta. The emir took the decision to banish the Armenians from his kingdom in 1897. The consumption of alcohol was prohibited for all subjects (not only Muslims) and this prohibition deprived the Armenians of one of their sources of income. It's possible that the decision of the emir was taken in order to restore Islamic morality among his subjects (prohibition of the consumption of alcoholic beverages). The emir was in the process of restoring order in his country after years of turmoil which took him to the throne of Afghanistan. He decided to get rid of the Christian minority of Armenian origin (now perceived as very close to Westerners and in particular to the British) because he suspected some of them of being spies. After these events, part of the Afghan Armenians settled in Peshawar, from where they were banished in 1907 for reasons that are not known[31]. After the death of Abdour Rahmane, a war of succession broke out until the emergence of Sher Ali Khan as the successor to the

29. Ibid, 201.
30. Ibid, 213-214.
31. Ibid, 208-212.

deceased Emir. Armenians became again the object of persecution by the new king, because the marriage ties between his rival Azam Khan and an Armenian woman caused Armenians to "found themselves on the wrong side of the political divide."[32] The Armenians of Afghanistan ended the same way as the Jews of Afghanistan, who were also active in the trade of luxury goods (mainly furs from northern Afghanistan particularly prized by the elites of Central Asia) and the sale of wine and other drinks, like alcoholic beverages often of their own production.

The Jews of Afghanistan

Available sources about the Jewish community in Afghanistan are almost absent between the 11th and 16th centuries. According to Sara Koplik, this is due to the Mongol invasions which caused the loss of documents and led to the dispersal of the Israelite communities in Khorasan.[33] The Arab geographer Muhammad Al-Idrisi (1099-1166) mentioned a large community of Jews in Kabul who lived apart from Muslims, while inscriptions found not far from the minaret of Jam, in the central region of Ghor, indicated the presence of a wealthy Jewish community between the 12th and 13th centuries. As recalled by Gnoli, the dates of the inscriptions correspond to the period during which the mountainous region of Ghor came out of its isolation before finding itself cut off again from the outside world following the Mongol invasions.[34] From the middle of the 12th century, Ghor became a military and economic power. Beyond the borders of Afghanistan, Jewish communities were present in Persia as well as in Central Asia, and they shared identity features with their Afghan co-religionists. The same is true for Armenians, because in the 19th and 20th centuries Afghanistan was a land of asylum for Jews and Armenians fleeing persecution, forced conversions and political changes in neighboring countries of Afghanistan. It's therefore evident that the links between the different non-Muslim communities were able to be maintained, not only thanks to the frequent exchanges between the merchants belonging to these groups, but also thanks to the historical links that each community had with their co-religionists of the neighboring regions. Afghan Jews are part of a "cultural continuity" that stretches from Mashhad to Samarkand, via Herat, Merv and Bukhara.[35] Most often the Afghan Jews were settled in the middle of the Tajik population, with whom the Jews shared the

32. Jonathan L. Lee, "The Armenians of Kabul and Afghanistan," in *Cairo to Kabul, Afghan and Islamic Studies* (ed.) Ralph Pinder-Wilson (Melisende, 2002), 160.

33. Sara Koplik, *A Political and Economic History of the Jews of Afghanistan* (Brill, 2015), 16.

34. Gherardo Gnoli, *Le iscrizioni Giudeo-Persiane del Gur (Afghanistan)* (Istituto Italiano per il Medio Oriente, 1964), 9.

35. Koplik, *A Political and Economic History of the Jews of Afghanistan*, 2015, 16.

profession of merchants, the Pashtuns having abandoned this economic niche, as noted by Mr. Elphinstone (1779-1859) during his travels in Afghanistan.[36]

Afghan Jews can be divided into two social categories: the poor and the wealthy. Jews from the first category lived mainly in rural areas and ran small shops selling various products. They often acted as intermediaries between different tribes or between sedentary and nomadic populations, as they were considered neutral because they did not belong to any of these groups. Members of the wealthy category lived mainly in urban centers (small, medium or large) and were merchants, active in importing textiles, skins, furs and carpets.[37] They competed with members of the Hindu community in the drug trade and currency exchange. In contemporary times, the fierce competition between commercial agents of Indian origin pushed the Afghan Jewish merchants to leave the exchange business and reorganize their activity in the production and sale of alcoholic beverages.[38] Long-distance trade is also an activity that has affected members of the Afghan Jewish community. Often Jewish traders traveled to remote parts of the country, especially in northern Afghanistan. They were almost the only ones who could enjoy permission to travel in disputed territories and tribal zones, in order to encourage trade, because their status as a minority did not make them perceived as a threat to the inhabitants of the areas they crossed.

The base of the community was the city of Herat. The families resided there and the mother houses of the Afghan Jewish merchants were located there too. The men left Herat and their families for long periods of time up to six months. During these periods they traveled for professional reasons across the country, particularly in northern cities such as Maimana or Qala-e Naw, living in caravanserais reserved for Jewish men, sharing meals and moments of prayer with their co-religionists.[39] In cities like Bukhara, Jews carried out the same activities as the larger Hindu community. Hindus traded tea and indigo from India and exported from Central Asia products such as silk, cotton, rice and wheat.

Afghan Jews spoke in Judeo-Persian. According to the testimony of Itzhak Bezalel, quoted by Sara Koplik: "[...] the three communities of Bukharan, Afghanistani, and Mashhadi hidden Jews are all interconnected, the latter two groups are more closely linked through dialect and custom."[40] The Afghan and Meshhed dialects are much closer to each other than the dialect spoken by the

36. M. Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul and its Dependencies in Persia, Tartary and India (*London: Bentley, 1842).

37. Ibid, 38.

38. Gregorian, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Reform and Modernization, 1880-1946,* 1969, 64-65.

39. Koplik, *A Political and Economic History of the Jews of Afghanistan*, 2015, 39.

40. Ibid.

Bukharan Jews, which is more influenced by the local languages than Persian. In addition to their mother tongue, Afghan Jews knew Dari (relatively close to Judeo-Persian), Pashto, Russian, English, and Hebrew, languages essential for their business activities. The strength of Jewish merchants was their connection to markets in India and Persia. Connection possible thanks to their family ties with the two regions.

It was not uncommon for members of the same family to live separately in various cities located along the trade routes through which the products and goods they traded passed. Family ties and trade relationships between the various geographical areas were interrupted by the Soviet Revolution of 1917 and the new political balance. The isolation and rapid disappearance of Bukharan Jewish merchants in the region allowed Afghan Jews to replace their co-religionists as intermediaries in the flourishing karakul leather market. This new space for the Afghan community was short-lived: the Afghan government initiated policies of nationalization of international trade excluding members of the Jewish community during the 1930s. Since the creation of the state of Israel, more and more Afghan Jews have left the country to move to Jerusalem and its surroundings. The exodus intensified after the end of World War II and the end of the British Empire in India, bringing within a few years the end of the millennial Jewish presence in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

Before independence in 1747, the territories of present-day Afghanistan lived for more than two centuries under the control of foreign authorities: Persia, Mughal India and the Uzbek khanates of Central Asia. Although Afghanistan was banished to the margins of the empires, it has lived in the middle of a territory culturally rich but above all economically interconnected. Afghanistan was at the center of a vast trade network that reached Central Asia, Persia, the Ottoman Empire and Russia from northern India. Between the 16th and the 17th centuries, trade between these regions intensified thanks to the stability guaranteed by long periods of peace and visionary policies put in place by the Moghol and Persian rulers. Numerous roads and infrastructures have been created, the number of caravanserais available to traveling merchants increased, while the harmonization of weights and measures made it easier for negotiations. In this economically prosperous context, some communities of merchants and traders had been able to prosper: Hindus, Armenians and Jews not only controlled the exchanges between the different regions of the trade network, but they have also become an essential element for the power and the system in which they worked. Merchants, retailers and bankers have dominated the regional economy for over two centuries.

In this context, Afghanistan was no exception. Although Afghanistan is a marginal player in all trade relationships between border countries, it has

benefited from its central location and cities such as Kabul, Kandahar, Ghazni and Herat have become increasingly important as transit centers for goods. In a country without a ruling class or an enterprising merchant class, as it's the case in contemporary Afghanistan, non-Muslim minorities have been the vital element to connect the country to the rest of the merchant network that was headed by Mughal India. Helped by the possibility of lending money at interest rates, by their relative freedom of movement as a minority and the support of family networks in neighboring countries, members of minorities played the role that the bourgeoisie had played in Europe in the development of trade and economy. The non-Muslims have therefore carried out the task of economic development in Afghanistan, a country where an enterprising and dynamic bourgeois class has practically never existed. The decline of merchant minorities in Afghanistan is partly caused by their special status as minority citizens. Between the 19th and 20th centuries, as trans-regional trade began to lose strength, independent Afghanistan wanted to put its hand to the economy to take advantage of the proceeds from the export of luxury goods (such as karakul skin or nuts). The creation of national export monopolies has reduced the range of action of non-Muslim merchants by forcing them to reinvent themselves as retailers or to leave the country, resulting in the end of their trans-national economic activities.

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