

Zanzibar Economy and Indian Merchants in the 19th Century.

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Introduction

In 1840, Omani Sultan Saiyid Said moved his capital from Muscat to Stone Town in Zanzibar and trade was his foremost interest. In his desire to make Zanzibar the commercial centre of East Africa, he welcomed foreign merchants and made commercial treaties with the America, Britain, and France. He realized that the most important element in the mercantile life of East Africa remained the Indian community. Its members, indeed, had been considerably augmented by an influx from Oman of Hindu from that part of Arabia who had followed him to Zanzibar. The rulers of Oman had for many years displayed a much more tolerant attitude to the Hindu trader and moneylender than other Arabian rulers. Saiyid said continued the tolerant policy of his predecessors in Oman. Moreover, he actively encouraged Indians to settle in his East African territories. Although his Arab subjects resented his peaceful invasion, Saiyid Said gave Indians, both Muslim and Hindu, the fullest religious toleration and laid no restrictions upon them. He had such a high opinion of their ability that he employed them in the financial side of his government, and always gave the key-post of Customs Master to a Hindu. In fact, neither Saiyid Said nor any of his successors ever entrusted any branch of the revenue to an Arab, for, as Livingstone remarked, if he had done so he would have received 'nothing but a crop of lies.

Explanation:

Until almost the end of the nineteenth century, the office of Customs Master remained in Indian hands, the customs being 'farmed out' by the Sultan for successive periods of five years on the payments of a lump sum calculated on an estimate of annual yield. The contract was first held by the Hindu firm of Wat Bania for \$70,000, but soon passed to another Hindu, Jairam Sewji, and remained in his family for some forty years. As the trade of East Africa increased, so the sum paid to the Sultan was augmented at the termination of each five-yearly agreement. By 1881, the contract had risen from the original \$70,000 to no less than \$500,000 (Hollingsworth, 1960). The Customs Master had his agents, who were relatives or Hindu employees of the firm of Jairam Sewji, at every port on the coast. As he was able to carry on his firm's private trade, in which he was greatly helped by his key position in the Sultan's financial service. It is not surprising that he accumulated a huge fortune and that he exercised great influence at the palace. According to Rigby, who was British consul in Zanzibar during the early years of reign of Saiyid Majid (1856-70), Jairam Sewji left a fortune of 3 million dollars in hard cash. Dr J. Christie, who was physician to Saiyid Barghash (1870-88) for a short time in 1870, described the Customs Master and his colleagues as 'the real ruling power at Zanzibar. It is significant that when Stanley had an audience with Saiyid

Barghash in 1871, he found seated on the right of the Sultan a venerable old Hindu with a shrewd, intelligent face. This was Ladha Damji, who for nearly forty years was the chief agent of Jairam Sewji, and according to Sir John Kirk, was respected for his upright conduct by all classes (Krik, 1860).

There was only one period of five years during which the office of Customs Master was not held by a Hindu. This happened in 1876, when the customs contract was transferred by Saiyid Barghash to a Muslim, the wealthy Khoja, Taria Topan, who at that time was the friend and confident of Sultan.

However, in 1880, the contract reverted to the firm of Jairam Sewji, with whom it remained until the proclamation of a British protectorate over Zanzibar in 1890, when the Customs was entirely re-organized under a European official (Hollingsworth, 1960). During Saiyid Said's reign Muslims, in addition to Hindus, came to Zanzibar in ever-increasing numbers from India. By 1844, in fact, they outnumbered the Hindus, for in the year British consul estimated that the Hindu population was about 500, whereas the Muslim numbered between six and seven hundred. These Muslim immigrants were mainly Shias of the Khoja and Bohra sects from Kutch, Kathiawar, and Bombay, who unlike Hindus made permanent homes for themselves and their families in East Africa and seldom returned to India.

The homes of merchants in the bazaar area were generally plain and functional, small and, in early days, lacking an internal courtyard. Albrand enumerated 214 Indians in 1819, and in 1835 Ruschenberger described their shops as mere holes, raised a foot or two above the street. By 1840s, when the Banyans numbered 400 to 700, the wealthier merchants, of whom there were about 40, were building large and commodious residents. The living quarters moved to the upper floors and some of the houses had verandas built along the outer walls. While the rooms behind the shop on the ground floor served as storerooms. By 1860, whole new quarters were being established in the city that were largely inhabited by them with some degree of concentration by the different castes and sects around their communal and religious establishments. The Indian population of the city had grown fifteen fold by the 1870s when it numbered nearly 3,000 (Sheriff, 2002).

Although, the Indian population at this time was still mainly concentrated in Zanzibar, there was a steady growth also in the number traders in every town on the coast. When Burton visited East Africa in 1859 he found fifty Hindu and some thirty Indian Muslims at Mombasa, twenty Hindus at Tanga, another twenty Hindus at Pangani, and fifty Hindus and a hundred Khojas at Kilwa. The total Indian population of East Africa at this time amounted to nearly six thousand. The Indians, who tended to be associated with trade, were not a homogeneous merchant class and were in the process of transition from seasonal merchants into an indigenised community. The most prominent section of the merchants during the first half of the nineteenth century were the Hindus who were concentrated in the wholesale business. However, even among them, there were 77 artisans out of a total of 314 adult males practising as goldsmiths, blacksmiths, carpenters, tailors and barbers and many of the remainder were

small shopkeepers, pawnbrokers and moneylenders. According to Guillain and Burton, the Banians were birds of passage rather than colonists. Because of caste restrictions they could not bring their families to reproduce themselves in East Africa. There was not a single Hindu woman on the island as late as 1857 (Freeman-Grenville, 1962).

On the other hand, Muslim Indian facing no such religious restrictions, began to settle earlier. By the 1840s, the 165 Khoja households had 26 married women. By the 1870s, there were nearly 700 females in a population of over 2,000 Khojas organised in 500 households. A similar pattern applied to the smaller Bohora community which numbered about 300, and there were 250 Sunni Muslims. By the mid-1870s, most of the Khojas were locally born and permanent settlers. Their houses, excepting those belonging to some half dozen wealthy wholesale merchants, were two storey high, arranged in narrow streets converging towards the market place and the custom house. It is clear that the Muslim communities had become stabilised and were reproducing themselves in East Africa, although new immigrants continued to come from India (Hollingsworth, 1960).

No doubt that establishment of a British Consulate at Zanzibar in 1841 was an additional attraction to Indian immigrants, who gained a feeling of greater security. Under the terms of a commercial treaty which Saiyid Said signed with Britain in 1839 British subjects were accorded many valuable privileges. Not only were they guaranteed the liberty to enter, reside in, and trade with all parts of Saiyid Said's territories, but they were also enabled to purchase, sell, or hire land or house, and their premises were safeguarded from unauthorized entry or search. The treaty also stipulated that the sultan's authorities should not interfere in disputes between British subjects, or between British Subjects and the subjects of other counties. More than this, a dispute between a British subject and a subject of the Sultan was to be decided by the British consul (Nicholls, 1971). The first British consul in Zanzibar was captain Atkins Hamerton. At the time of his appointment nearly all the Indians in East Africa were British Subjects or British protected subjects, since the majority of them came from western India, which by that date had come almost entirely under British control. They quickly realized the added security afforded them by the presence of a British consul on the coast. For example, only a few months after his

arrival, Hamerton intervened on their behalf when Jairam Sewji tried to force some of his Hindu subordinates to become subjects of the Sultan and to repudiate their status as British subject.

The next year, Hamerton helped some of the smaller Indian traders by stopping unauthorized charges being levied on them at some of the coastal ports. British explorer Speke felt especial sympathy for the Hindu because they could not bring their wives with them from India. He observed that those who settled in the smaller ports lived lives of great loneliness, surrounded as they were by 'savages devoid of sympathy'. But no doubt their voluntary exile had its compensations. They drove hard bargains with the 'savages' and lived for the day they would amass sufficient money to return to India (Sheriff, 1971).

From time to time resentment against the growing financial dominance of the Indian colonists flared up among the Arabs and Swahilis. An example of this resentment occurred a few

months after the accession of Saiyid Barghash in 1870, when he made a sudden attack on the Indian population of Zanzibar. Alleging that certain Indian had stolen cloves from Arab plantations. He ordered that all Indians should be ejected from the plantations and prohibited from trading beyond the precincts of the town. But British consul promptly came to their rescue and reminded the commercial treaty which guaranteed the liberty of all British subject to enter and trade in all parts of the Sultan's territories. Soon Barghash realized that he could not afford permanently to antagonize the Indian community. During rest of his reign wealthy Indians such as Damji and Taria Topen were his most trusted confidants and advisers (Sheriff, 1971). It was not surprising that until East Africa came under European administration at the end of the nineteenth century very few Indian traders ventured far from the coast. From time to time a few bolder spirits did travel some distance into the interior. The most remarkable of these pioneers was undoubtedly a Khoja called Musa Mzuri who had already spent about thirty years in Nyamwezi country. He had originally come from Surat to join his eldest brother who was trading in Zanzibar. After his brother's death Musa extended his business and was so successful in his ventures that he ultimately became the recognised leader of the trading community of Tabora. Situated at a spot where the caravan routes radiated to Lake Tanganyika and Victoria, Tabora had grown into the largest of the Arab settlements in the interior (Pearson, 1998).

As the century developed there was an increasing European participation in East African commerce, yet the Indian trader's dominant position was still maintained. No imports could be distributed to native customers in the interior without his agency. The entire cargoes of vessels from Europe and America were purchased by Indian firms and then resold to Indian retailers all along the coast. It was the Indian merchant who collected from native traders the various products from the interior, which he then either exported direct to India or resold to European merchants at Zanzibar.

Conclusion

However, The chief exports were ivory, slaves, cloves, gum copal, sesame seed and cowrie shells. Ivory and slaves could only be obtained by long and costly expeditions into the interior. The bigger and more elaborate caravans which the Arabs now led into the interior were almost entirely financed by Indians. Although, there is less evidence that Indians themselves ever took an active part in direct slave dealing, yet as the capitalists who financed these caravans they were certainly indirectly responsible for the expansion of the trade. Hence, Indian trades were the one of the primary driving force to create Zanzibar as a trading hub of East Africa.

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