

LOCAL EXPERIENCES OF A GLOBAL DIASPORA

ARMENIANS IN 17TH-18TH CENTURY
BENGAL.

- Rethink the existing norms of diaspora merchant networks.
- Possibilities and potentials of looking at a global network from a local perspective.
- Challenge the notion of a constant presence of a - real, superior, 'original' node over historical space and time.

- Longue duree history
- Myth/Memory of homeland
- Limits of 'real' control
- Autonomous nodes and possibility of new identity for the network.

Locating Armenia



PRESENT DAY ARMENIA



THE WORLD OF INDIAN OCEAN



Structures of operation.

- “...being a trading Diaspora.” [Vahe Baladouni and Margaret Makepeace]
- Mercantile Diaspora Network- [Claude Markovits]
- Cross-cultural Trade- [Abner Cohen]

Circulation in a trading diaspora

- Based on familiarity and exclusivity.
- Goods
- Credit
- Information
- Human (Men/Women)

TRUST

- Exclusivity from the 'other' or the host societies was considered essential for the preservation of TRUST.
- Trust- Origin; Ethno-cultural familiarity; kinship; community;
- Also a consistent flow of information back to the node.

Diaspora

- Dispersed from an original centre
- Maintain a memory of homeland
- Believe that they are not accepted in the host society.
- Commitment to the maintenance of the homeland.

Characters of merchant diaspora

- Non-assimilative relation with the host society
- Make arrangements for the maintenance of the 'original identity' and exclusivity.
- Socio-cultural/ Judicial autonomy from the host societies.
- Political Outsiders.

Placing the Armenians

- Whole Society vs. The Cross Cultural Brokers
[Philip D. Curtin]
- Exclusivity and Familiarity as the secret of success.

How did the Armenians maintain the exclusivity?

- Supremacy of the original node.
- Kalanthar-Agent Structure
- Judicial organisation- Vacharakanats Zhogov.
- Training manual- Compendium of constant.
- Exclusive and constant flow of information.
- The All Saviour's Monastery

Armenian church in Calcutta







Armenian Church complex: Saidabad.



Bengal- 17th to 18th century.



Political Context

- The weakening of the Mughals
- Rise of Successor States
- Coming of the colonial state.

Economic context

- Traditional/ pre-existing networks.
- The joint stock European companies.



Armenians in India

Established as primary merchants of silk and textile trade between Levant and India.

Early examples against the exclusive paradigm

- Mirza-zul-qar-nain
- Travels of Tom Pires in 16th century
- Experiences of William Hawkins in Jahangir's court.

Local Compromises

- Selective Assimilation: mode of survival in a host society.
- Did such compromises weaken the network?
- Local alliances helped Armenians to survive and operate assuming multiple identities over time.

The Bengal Experience

- Competition and Collaboration: Characterizing the East India Company- Armenian relationship.
- Assuming many alliances.
- Acquiring many identities and agency.

Armenians and the colonial experience

- Treaty of 1688.
- Process of subjectification
- Enforcing networks.
- Multiple networks emerging within the New Julfa network.
- Localised experiences of the colonial within the Bay of Bengal zone.

Bay of Bengal: A peripheral node?

Principal characters

- Khwajah Sarhad Israili (for a period between 1703-1717)
- Khwajah Wazid (for a period between 1730-1757)
- Khwajah Petrus Uskan (a contemporary of wazid)
- Khwajah Petrus Aratoon (post 1757)

Why?

- Local Kalanthars or community chiefs.
- Diminishing real link with New Julfa.
- Capital accumulation and network formation in the Bay of Bengal.
- Principal merchants and financiers.
- Political agency.

1703-1717: Mercantile-Political collaborator

- The Surman Embassy and Israel Sarhad

1703-1717: Mercantile-Political collaborator

- Independent merchants
- Political insiders.
- Local alliances.
- Presence in opposing camps.
- Information brokers.
- The exclusivity of information circulation is broken.

Madras and Calcutta: Differences of experience

- *“A translate of the Phirmaund granted the English Co. by King Farukhsiyar and attested to be a true copy of the original by the Codgee Dated 5th of January 1716/1717, To the present Subah...at Golconda. Be it known unto you that Mr. John Surman and **Cojee Seerhaud** the English Company’s **gomastah**, have solicited the King in their behalf.”*

[Records of Fort St. George, Selections from Public Consultations, 21st july, 1717.]

Towards Plassey: Armenians as Great Firms

- Agency of Khwaja Wazid.
- Great Firm- Karren Leonard.

“Indigenous banking firms were indispensable allies of the Mughal state and the great firms’ diversion of resources...from the Mughals to other political powers in the Indian subcontinent contributed to the downfall of the empire...This period of ‘great firm’ partnership with regional powers, among them the East India Company was followed by political losses for the great banking firms...”

The Madras Armenians

- Experience of collaboration.
- Agency of Petrus Usca.
- *“I cannot help acquainting your honour &C. Of my great surprise to find that there is an order of council sent...to deliver the Romish chapel...at Viparee to Danish missionaries....I have no ill will to the Danish Missionaries...& have already wrote the governor I am willing to contribute something towards building a church for them...but to let them have Viparee Church is what I cannot consent to...and therefore I humbly desire your Honour &C. Will not insist on it, upon consideration that the many troubles I have undergone was with hopes of reaping advantages with your nation...”*

[St. David consultations, 25th November 1749.]

The legal subject

- British Mayor Court and Petrus Usca's inheritance case.
- The withdrawal of the jurisdiction of the Vacharakanats Zhogov.

Becoming Gomastah: Survival post Plassey

- Gomastah: An employed agent; lacking the agency of independent investment and circulation.
- Multiple alliance and the agency of Petrus Aratoon.
- William Bolts and the Legal definition for Armenians

Imagining Nation: Feedback from the peripheral node.

