# ARMENIANS IN INDIA AND TIBET

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An article which is probably not so well known as it deserves to be is "The Ledger of the Merchant Hovhannes Joughayetsi" by Levon Khachikian of Soviet Armenia, communicated by Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterji in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society* VII 1966.

Hovhannes was an Armenian merchant of Jougha (Julfa), a suburb of Isfahan, who in 1682 entered into partnership with a leading Armenian company in India trading in the Levant, China, and many other parts of the world. They had a branch in Lhasa and the article contains extracts from the ledger dealing with Tibet, Nepal and India. Publication of the complete ledger with a comprehensive analysis is foreshadowed in the article but I do not know whether it has yet been achieved.

Hovhannes joined the firm's branch at Lhasa in 1686 and his journal gives meticulous details of his merchandize and its prices, his borrowings and transmission of funds and so on. He describes the route by which he travelled by way of Nepal, Kuti and Shigatse. The goods he took with him were of many kinds including pearls, amber and piece goods. At Lhasa, where he stayed for nearly six years, he found Armenian employees of his principals already well established with their families, apparently for some years, and accustomed to trade as far afield as Sining. Hovhannes had many business dealings—and some disputes—with his fellow countrymen and with Newars, and Kashmiris as well as Tibetans including lamas, nobles and traders. During his stay he learnt Tibetan and when he left in June 1692 he took a large consignment of musk.

There is in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society, Bengal,* 1833 an article by Csoma de Kőrös about a Tibetan passport recorded in Hyde's *Historia Religionis Veterum Persarum* (1760), as having been granted by the governor of Lhasa to an Armenian Joannes (the name in Tibetan is represented as I-wang-na) on his departure from the city; but as the year is 1688 it cannot relate to Hovhannes of the ledger.

The extracts from that ledger tell little about the social and political life of Tibet; perhaps publication of the complete document will shed more light on such matters. But the insights Hovhannes gives on the business world draw attention to the important part the Armenians played in Asian trade.

This is not the place to follow all the vicissitudes of their history which goes back to the seventh century B.C. and includes a probable trading conection with China as early as the fifth century A.D. We may take as a start-

ting point for their connection with India and Central Asia the establishment of the New Kingdom of Cilicia at the beginning of the 12th century. Its king Heythum formed an alliance with the Mongols and went himself to visit Ogotai at Karakoram in the then fashionable hope of finding in Asia a champion to deliver the Holy Land from the infidel. Armenians, both monk and lay, were met at the court of Ogotai's successor Kuyuk by the Fransciscan friar William of Rubruck.

The Armenians in Cilicia controlled the great entrepot port of Ayas (Lajazzo) on the gulf of Alexandretta which had long been a channel of trade between the East and West and which under them throve greatly and developed links all over Europe, especially through Venice. The Polo family passed through Ayas on their way to the Far East. Armenian merchants had probably preceded them along the trade routes through Central Asia. But what set on foot a great commercial diaspora throughout the whole known world was a series of conquests of Cilician Armenia by one neighbouring power after another—Egyptian, Ottoman Turk, and Persian. Armenians emigrated to many parts of Europe and to China, where as early as the 13th century an Armenian lady had built a church at Zaitun, and to India where they are reported by 1497. A great commercial centre was established in Persia when in 1602 the ruler Shah Abbas, having lost control of Cilicia to the Ottomans, transferred 50,000 Armenians to a new city he made for them at Julfa, a suburb of Isfahan. From there their trade branched out even more strongly. They became international bankers and money was transferred through their branches all over Asia and Europe.

In India they rapidly settled in the more important business centres where they became known as courageous, honest and charitable and won the reputation of the hardiest and most reliable masters of caravans through Central Asia. Bento de Goes on his great journey in 1603 from Agra to China travelled in disguise as an Armenian and was accompanied by a faithful and resolute Armenian servant Ishaq. Some Armenians in their wide-ranging activities found employment early in the 16th century as bodyguards to the king of Martaban.

Their status in India was greatly enhanced when Akbar married an Armenian Christian lady whose influence won for her community permission to build a church at Agra. Other churches with their accompanying graveyards duly followed at other Armenian settlements at Surat, Delhi, Patna, Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. Akbar's esteem for the Armenians led him to appoint as Chief Judge, Khwaja Abdul Hai who was then converted to Islam. But the most famous was Mirza Zulkarnain. The titles Khwaja, Mirza, Beg, and Mukhtear borne by distinguished Armenians reflect their Persian connection. Zulkarnain's father Mirza Sikander who arrived in India in 1590 found favour with Akbar. He married Juliana, a daughter of the Chief Judge Abdul Hai; she retained her Christian faith and was apparently related to Akbar's Christian wife Mariam. By her Mirza Sikander had two sons, Sikander and Zulkarnain born in 1592 and 1595 respectively. Later, on Juliana's death, he married her sister and had two

more sons.

Juliana's sons were brought up by Akbar's wife Mariam in the imperial harem and there Zulkarnain became a favourite of the prince Jahangir. In 1606, after he had become Emperor, Jahangir, who had given Zulkarnain a huge *jagir*, had the boy circumcised and tried to persuade him to embrace Islam; but Zulkarnain steadfastly refused to give up his faith. Although Jahangir was displeased he did not withdraw his favour and continued to employ Zulkarnain in his service. But when Shah Jahan succeeded to the throne in 1627 his fervid commitment to Islam led him to persecute Zulkarnain, even though the two had been close boyhood friends, and to mulct him of his great wealth. In face of threats Zulkarnain's two half-brothers were converted but he, although reduced almost to poverty, stood firm in his faith and continued to protect so far as he could the interests of his community and of the Portugese Jesuit missionaries. In 1640 he was restored to favour and was appointed to a succession of important posts in Bengal and Kashmir until he retired to Delhi in 1654 where he was granted a pension of Rs. 100/ a day. Contemporary Jesuit records describe him as a great and devoted champion and benefactor of the faith. Among his acts was the founding of a college at Agra and it appears that he had ideas of establishing another in West Tibet, presumably as a result of the mission there of the Jesuits Antonio de Andrade and Francis of Azevedo.

Another Armenian who made a mark was Sikander Beg who served, somewhat equivocally, as surgeon of the ill-fated Sulaiman Shikoh, son of the equally ill-fated Dara Shikoh. Yet another member of the community was helped by the Venetian adventurer Niccolao Manucci to rescue a Hindu girl from being burnt alive as a Suttee. The Armenian converted her to Christianity and married her.

The generally discreet influence and the reliability of these leading Armenians was such that in 1690 Khoja Isral Sarhat was invited from Delhi to negotiate the purchase of three villages which eventually became Calcutta. There had been Armenians in that part of Bengal long before Job Charnock as memorials in their cemetery dating from 1630 make clear; and they had a dock and gardens on the Howrah bank of the Hooghly. Not long after the building of Fort William at Calcutta, Armenians were being recruited there to the East India Company's army.

From this enterprising people several westerners in India and also in China came to learn something about Tibet. Ralph Fitch (1580) and Peter Mundy (1630) both met Armenians in India and the former made enquiries about the trade in silk and musk from Tibet of which he saw evidence in Behar. Armenians gave information about Tibet to Manucci who also had long talks about the country with the Jesuits Grueber and D'Orville after their great journey from China to India in 1661/62. When they passed through Lhasa there must have been Armenians there but their account, which Father Hosten sadly records is "arid as the Himalayan uplands", makes no mention of them. Manucci reports the good treatment of the few merchants who found their way to Tibet in search of trade in gold, perfect

musk, and rubies. Among Tibetan customs he mentions are the cutting up of the bodies of the dead and the keeping in small boxes of the dried excrement of lamas which was a prized medicine. That information perhaps came from Grueber who includes it in his account.

A systematic investigator of Tibetan trade was John Marshall, the English agent at Patna from 1667 to 1671, who heard about the country from an Armenian, Batista de Johan, who had been in "Lossa" and also from Mukhtear Ishaq who had been three times to Sining. He recounts a lot of sound information about Tibet and its customs, and details of the trade. The French doctor and philosopher Baron Jean Baptiste Tavernier, writing about the same time mentions Armenian merchants at Patna who had brought amber images to take to "Bootan" which his description clearly identifies as Tibet. At Patna he actually saw Tibetan traders wearing boxes containing "the dried ordure of their King".

News of Tibet was relayed from China by Father Verbiest who reports what was told to a Persian Jesuit in 1688 by an Armenian at Sining. His information about the government of the country is generally accurate, though slight; but he indulges in the fancy that the Grand Lama was certainly Prester John; and the statement that there were statues of Adam and Eve in a temple at Lhasa is well wide of the mark.

The great attraction of the Tibetan trade was musk. This substance, secreted by a gland in the belly of the male of a species of deer—a jaunty little creature with ugly long canine tusks and harsh hair useful for stuffing cushions—which is found from the Tibetan Himalaya to eastern Siberia, Szechwan, Yunnan and Korea in scrub and thin forest at elevations of about 9000 to 11,000 feet, was in great demand in ancient Greece, Rome and China as a valuable base for perfumes. During the T'ang era it was an important item of tribute from the Sining region; and it would be no surprise if the Chinese were the first to discover its valuable properties. As mentioned earlier, it was the main item of merchandize taken from Tibet by the Armenian Hovhannes on his return to India. The demand continued in India and Nepal, at least up to 1950.

With the considerable information available to them in Patna, which was their starting point, the Capuchin missionaries to Tibet in 1707 must have expected to find Armenians at Lhasa and, indeed, they relied greatly on Khwaja Dawith, a favorite merchant of the king, as interpreter and banker. It might, however, have been a surprise to them to discover a number of Russian Christians there for contemporary accounts in India do not appear to mention them although Tavernier heard of a Russian embassy passing through Tibet on the way to China. This was, perhaps, a confused echo of Bayakov's mission in 1655/1656. The Jesuit Father Ippolito Desideri also mentions Armenians at Lhasa, and doubtless enjoyed their help. But the looting and devastation caused by the Dzungar occupation of the city in 1717 seem to have seen the end of regular Armenian and Russian settlement at Lhasa and the new Chinese influence in Tibet after 1720 and the Gorkha domination of Nepal may have militated against its

restoration. Nevertheless some connection continued for in 1811 Thomas Manning met an Armenian at Lhasa who wanted to accompany him on his return to India.

I can find no reference to Armenian trade with Tibet after that time but an Armenian community continues in Calcutta although its numbers are decreasing. There is an Armenian church, college and girls school; and the community is about 300 strong. There are small numbers of Armenians in Bombay and Madras but I understand that since 1947 many of the less prosperous have emigrated to the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia. The old connection with Tibet and its trade is now only a distant memory.

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