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Sugar trade in the Eighteenth-Century Persian Gulf

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Chapter 6: Persisting Commercial Middle Ground

During late Safavid period, the solid collaboration between the VOC and their *Banian* brokers at Bandar Abbas and Isfahan stimulated the import of Javanese sugar into the Iranian market and the reverse flow of gold and silver coins to India. As has been discussed, however, the Afghan revolution in 1722 marked the beginning of a radical transformation of the trans-regional trade once the central nerve — i.e. Bandar Abbas and Isfahan — had been significantly damaged. Numerous alternative channels began to emerge in the Persian Gulf and adjacent countries where maritime merchants could trade sugar for exportable bullion. Until their final withdrawal from the Gulf in 1766 the VOC enlisted various local agents to adjust to the changed commercial environment. We shall now examine how the relationships between the Company and these agents were conducted and what insights they provide into the resilience of the trade.

1. Bandar Abbas

The bankruptcy of the Rawals: the Afghan interregnum (1722–30)

The Rawal family, who served the VOC as Bandar Abbas brokers during the Safavid period, faced a serious financial crisis after the Afghan invasion. In the last days of the Safavid period major wholesale merchants who purchased goods from the Dutch at Bandar Abbas drew cheques on their business partners in Isfahan, as was customary, and these were payable to the Dutch factory there. The Bandar Abbas brokers Uttamchand and Ishwardas guaranteed the settlement. The extreme havoc caused by the Afghan intrusion, however, resulted in the ruin of many rich merchants in Isfahan involved in these monetary transfers. The recipients of those bills were killed, financially destroyed or moved away. Consequently all the responsibility for the unsettled money fell upon the brokers.¹ On top of that the brokers suffered terribly from pillaging by the Baluchi nomads in southeastern Iran, who repeatedly intruded into Bandar Abbas and exploited the political turmoil that engulfed the littoral in the 1720s.²

In earlier times the brokers would improve their liquidity by selling their own commodities at Bandar Abbas. But now they could not, as most of the wholesale merchants who had traded at the port headed to Basra.³ Besides, Hajji Abd al-Rida, one of the main trading partners of the VOC, died in 1722.⁴ It was not until 1730 that Hajji Abd al-Wahab, another principal wholesaler and brother of Abd al-Rida, sent the Company a letter requesting permission to restart the old trading enterprise. This did not materialize, since by then his economic power had totally declined, and soon afterwards he died.⁵

¹ NA VOC2168, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 13 April 1730, p. 48.

² NA VOC2016 2, separate letter from P. 't Lam at Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 25 August 1724, p. 48.

³ NA VOC1999, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 30 April 1723, pp. 419-21.

⁴ NA VOC1999, final report from J. Oets to J. de Croeze, Bandar Abbas, 15 November 1722, p. 260.

⁵ NA VOC2253, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 15 May 1731, pp. 121-3; VOC2254, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 19 July 1732, p. 595; VOC2322 1, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 30 September 1733,

The VOC became alarmed by the looming bankruptcy of Uttamchand and Ishwardas, and so took two measures. First, they tried to hold the brokers' capital as collateral. In March 1724, the Dutch head of Bandar Abbas, Pieter 't Lam, wrote that in order to reduce the debt of the agents not only had he confiscated the assets that they had managed to save from marauding Baluchis at the Dutch factory but he had also searched for any cash and gold that they might have hidden in their houses or elsewhere.⁶ Second, the VOC tried to facilitate the brokers' private trade. As described before, the Company arranged for the brokers to transport their private sugar to Masqat in 1724, and to Basra in the later part of the decade. It seems that these attempts had an adverse effect. The trade at Masqat turned out to be detrimental to their agents, the Dutch commented, because it occasioned much expenditure for transshipping cargoes as well as serious damage to the sugar after being housed in a hot cabin.⁷ By 1727, Uttamchand and Ishwardas became so desolate that they claimed to have no means to sustain their big family.⁸

From the second half of the 1720s onwards the brokers asked the VOC to discharge them from the enormous debt arising from the lost Isfahan bills. At a meeting held at the Dutch factory on 23 August 1726 Uttamchand and Ishwardas requested permission for one of them to go to Batavia to tell the High Government about the misery they were in and to beg them to relieve them of the responsibility for the debt. According to the Dutch their debt amounted to 150,598 guilders 15 stivers. The factory did not grant their request but earnestly asked Batavia to show special favour on this issue, saying that these fellows were so desperate that if no adequate measures were applied it would be almost impossible for them to continue to serve the Company.⁹

While the fortune of the brokers was rapidly waning, we note that some of the people who had served the Rawal firm began to play a bigger role in supporting the VOC commerce. Uttamchand and Ishwardas, who were still young (around 20 years old when they were appointed as co-brokers of Dharmdas in 1719), received much assistance from their experienced clerks. In November 1722 the Dutch director, Jan Oets, wrote that the brokers were quite good at trade for their age, for they were helped especially by their "chief servant" (*opperste of eerste dienaar*) named Monsjeterdas. Monsjeterdas was probably not related to the brokers. Oets continued that this man was trustworthy and had some special experience, for he had earlier acted as the Company's broker at Basra. Oets said the factory should keep him on hand.¹⁰ Five months later, when much of the Bandar Abbas trade was being redirected to Basra, the Bandar Abbas factory directed a *Banian* servant of the brokers to collect information on the Basra market through his business correspondents there.¹¹ That *Banian* servant was very probably Monsjeterdas.

fol. 108v. Cf. W. Floor, *The Rise and Fall of Nader Shah: Dutch East India Company Reports, 1730–47* (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2009), 220-1.

⁶ NA VOC2016 1, separate letter from P. 't Lam at Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 31 March 1724, pp. 121-2.

⁷ NA VOC2034 2, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 20 September 1725, pp. 38-9.

⁸ NA VOC2042, letter from Bandar Abbas to The Netherlands, 16 June 1727, fol. 3946v.

⁹ NA VOC2055 2, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 10 September 1726, pp. 9-11.

¹⁰ NA VOC1999, final report from Oets to de Croeze, Bandar Abbas, 15 November 1722, p. 269.

¹¹ NA VOC1999, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 30 April 1723, p. 421.

It is also worth mentioning that around the same time an Armenian family who had acted as VOC wool collectors at Kerman were involved with the Dutch service at Bandar Abbas. At the turn of the eighteenth century the Company established a permanent agency in Kerman for the procurement of wool and hired two Armenian brothers in Julfa, Isfahan, named Mardiros (Martiroes) and Mourad (Mouraet). After both merchants died in the early 1710s, a son of Mardiros named Hovhaness (Auwanees) took over the post and remained there till 1747. In that year he died a cruel death during Nadir Shah's punitive campaign in the region.¹²

The family of Hovhaness acted as the Company's interpreters at Bandar Abbas in the aftermath of the Afghan invasion. In March 1720, when the interpreter Joseph Busskens died, the Bandar Abbas factory wanted the Sahids, another Julfa Armenian family who had been the interpreters for the Dutch at Isfahan during the late Safavid period, to take care of the port (Appendix 11). However, the best candidate was Elias Sahid. He had long supported his elderly father Francois as second interpreter at Isfahan, but he could not leave the capital. Francois died in February 1721 and Elias immediately succeeded to this position.¹³ In early 1722 the factory appointed another son of the late Francois named Joseph.¹⁴ Yet due to increased road insecurity he could not leave Isfahan. Therefore in July 1723 Bandar Abbas asked a brother of Hovhaness resident in Kerman named Khatchadour (Ghodjatoer) to work as a provisional interpreter.¹⁵

Khatchadour played a key role in propping up the Company's trade at the port. During the abrupt downfall of the brokers, 't Lam wrote in 1725 that he had relied on the provisional interpreter Khatchadour to continue the Company's business. He suggested that Batavia should confirm him as a broker as well, saying that he was competent as a broker and as an interpreter.¹⁶

In the later part of the decade, however, serious illness prevented Khatchadour from working properly. The factory nominated Joseph Sahid and his brother David as interpreters, asking either one of them to come down to do the task. Before David appeared in Bandar Abbas in July 1730 Khatchadour's father-in-law Minas acted as a temporary interpreter.¹⁷ The Dutch records contain no evidence that the Hovhaness family served Bandar Abbas in later times, but their influence can be inferred from the fact that in 1741 Hovhaness used David's brother and successor Ibrahim as his business agent (*volmacht*) at the port.¹⁸

¹² R. Matthee, "The East India Company Trade in Kerman Wool, 1658–1730," In *Etudes safavides*, edited by J. Calmard (Paris: Institut Français de Recherche en Iran, 1993), 366, 377, 378; NA VOC1779, final report from F. Castelijns to W. Backer Jacobsz, Bandar Abbas, 1 May 1709, p. 409.

¹³ Meanwhile, Bandar Abbas used the Persian secretary there named Mulla Muhammad Shah as a provisional interpreter and after his death, an Armenian called Aphlataer. NA VOC1964, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 15 February 1721, pp. 70-1; VOC1964, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 5 April 1721, pp. 359-60.

¹⁴ Joseph Sahid could speak and write Dutch, French and Portuguese as well as Persian and Armenian. NA VOC1999, final report from Oets to de Croeze, Bandar Abbas, 15 November 1722, pp. 295-6.

¹⁵ NA VOC2016 1, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 1 November 1723, pp. 28-9.

¹⁶ NA VOC2034 1, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 15 May 1725, pp. 12-3, 18.

¹⁷ NA VOC2168, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 13 April 1730, pp. 79-80; VOC2253, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 15 May 1731, pp. 111-2.

¹⁸ NA VOC2511, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 31 July 1741, p. 138.

Collapse of the brokers with the VOC: Nadir Shah's rule (1730–47)

After Iran restored some composure under the control of Nadir Shah the VOC resumed regular imports. But their trade at Bandar Abbas never returned to its former level and suffered throughout Nadir Shah's period of control. The Dutch archives for this period show a great degree of correlation between the fate of the Company and that of their much cherished collaboration with the brokers during the preceding years.

Partnership in crisis

The dysfunction of the bullion market at Isfahan and the concurrent recession experienced by the powerful wholesalers from Shiraz caused a significant decline to the commercial network on which the monetary transfers from Bandar Abbas to Isfahan and the reverse flows of gold and silver specie depended. It is interesting that these unfavourable conditions made Bandar Abbas become something closer to a "trading" port in the true sense of that word: a port where commodities were exchanged. It was not unusual for merchants who appeared in Bandar Abbas after the Afghan conquest to offer exportable bullion, especially copper coins, for imported items.

Because of the instability that lingered over the Bandar Abbas market, however, those merchants (mostly arriving from or via Kerman) were highly adaptable. Only when the market appeared to pick up would they come up with some money and immediately purchase goods (often partially on credit) so that they could leave the precarious environment as soon as possible. Such a hectic manner of trade gave maritime suppliers little time to deliberate on whether those to whom they were selling merchandise were solvent or not. The VOC brokers stood security for such uncertain deals. If a buyer turned out to be insolvent then they had to compensate for the loss from their brokerage income.¹⁹ The brokers were also responsible for collecting profitable types of copper coinage and copper goods.²⁰

Despite continuously rearranging their services the brokers' commercial clout became a mere shadow of its former self. In 1733 the Dutch factors reported with much alarm that no merchants would trust them with money, since the creditworthiness of the brokers had considerably decreased.²¹ Extortion perpetrated by the local bureaucratic elite increased to finance Nadir Shah's naval activities in the Gulf from the middle of the 1730s onwards, which added to the despondency of the brokers.²²

During the late Safavid period the VOC had given the Rawals the brokership of Bandar Abbas and various associated perquisites, including protection. The brokers in turn took responsibility for most of the Company's investment so that the Company could carry out their commerce. In Nadir Shah's time, however, the ailing family disliked that old partnership

¹⁹ NA VOC2584, final report from C. Koenad to S. Clement, 22 January 1742, pp. 1845-8.

²⁰ NA VOC2448, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 30 April 1738, pp. 1804-5.

²¹ NA VOC2322 1, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 30 September 1733, fols. 108v-9r.

²² For a recent analysis of the government's interference with trade at Bandar Abbas during Nadir Shah's time, see Floor, *The Rise and Fall of Nader Shah*, 226-31.

unless the Company was willing to discharge them from the debt arising from the lost Isfahan bills. When Ishwardas died on 19 July 1736 the factory tried to find a successor among his brothers, but no one came forward because of the burden of the bills. The other broker, Uttamchand, requested relief from the persistent liability. About two months later two brothers of Uttamchand, named Kumarchand (Koemertjent) and Abchand (Abtjent) who were aged 31 and 30 respectively, applied for the vacant position (Appendix 10). The Dutch offered them the position on condition that the merchants accepted responsibility for the debt. But they insisted they would not take responsibility for any part of it. After many fruitless arguments the Dutch compromised. They appointed Kumarchand and Abchand as co-brokers with Uttamchand and then conferred a customary present of neckerchiefs on all of them and their secretary (*secretaris*) as a sign of the Company's special favour.²³

From this time on it became usual for the VOC to ask many members of the Rawal firm to share the heavy debt of the Isfahan bills. The factory kept asking Kumarchand and Abchand to take on some of the obligation and in the end the new brokers acquiesced.²⁴ As mentioned in the previous chapter, Uttamchand left for Bombay to pick up his wife in April 1737 but died there. When he departed the Dutch persuaded the other brokers, Kumarchand and Abchand, another brother named Bishambardas (Wisschermerdas) who was about 25 years of age, and their bookkeeper (*boekhouder*) Babu (Baboe), to undertake the liabilities as well as all business relating to the brokership of Bandar Abbas.²⁵ In February 1738, at the request of Kumarchand and Abchand, the VOC officially added Bishambardas, who had so far served them well, to the brokership. Thereby they made it clear that he also stood security for the brokers' debt, which then amounted to 226,882 guilders 17 stivers, including a sum of 106,058 guilders 6 stivers 8 pennies for the Isfahan bills.²⁶

However, the Rawal firm became inoperative towards the end of Nadir Shah's reign. Although in 1743–44 the brokers' debt had been reduced to 169,029 guilders 11 stivers, the Dutch noted that those "bankrupts" had not only petitioned for discharge from the whole obligation but also for permission to move to another Dutch factory with their family.²⁷ After the death of Bishambardas, on 30 September 1745 Bandar Abbas convened a board that included the remaining brokers, Kumarchand and Abchand together with Ishwardas, who was the heir of the brokers' late secretary. There the Dutch factors reminded the brokers of their overdue debt and Ishwardas of his father's debt to the Company, and demanded that they square all accounts promptly. Yet these merchants could not comply at all because they were being severely pressed for tribute exacted by the Persian authorities in the Gulf regions at the time. This shocked the Company into adding extra surety by involving another brother of the brokers named Thakurdas (Tackourdas) as co-broker.²⁸

In May 1747 the mercantile community of Bandar Abbas had virtually disappeared. All the *Multani Banians* and many of the *Bhansalis* to which the Rawals belonged had taken

²³ NA VOC2416, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 10 December 1736, pp. 248-52.

²⁴ NA VOC2417, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 4 April 1737, pp. 3539-40.

²⁵ *Idem*, p. 3541.

²⁶ NA VOC2448, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 30 April 1738, pp. 1831-2.

²⁷ NA VOC2655, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 10 January 1745, p. 66.

²⁸ NA VOC2705, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 31 July 1746, pp. 53-5.

shelter in the port of Barka in Oman. The *Bhansalis* had evacuated most of their wives there. As a result, there remained very few people in Bandar Abbas except those affiliated with the European Companies.²⁹

The EIC's flexibility

At this time during Nadir Shah's rule the EIC also experienced a serious crisis in their relationship with their local broker at Bandar Abbas, but their response to it contrasted remarkably to that of the VOC.

The EIC like the VOC utilized many local people to conduct business in Iran. During the late Safavid period the EIC kept one broker, one interpreter (*linguist*) and one Persian secretary (*writer*) at Bandar Abbas, and one broker and one interpreter at Isfahan. They had posted some agents in Shiraz to obtain wine and in Kerman to obtain wool. The broker Chittor (Chittorah) at Bandar Abbas was a pivotal figure, providing seamless backing for the Company's trading enterprises.

Chittor was most probably of Indian origin. He lived with male and female family members in the port.³⁰ As the EIC broker he basically acted as an intermediary linking potential buyers of goods belonging to the English — both belonging officially to the Company and also to private traders — with the English lodge and facilitating transactions on a commission basis.³¹ In addition he offered a variety of financial services, including factory management and money transfers and exchange, while also occasionally acting as the delegate for the English to the port authorities.³²

Like the VOC, the EIC would safeguard a broker's resources. In 1709 the Company strongly protested against the behaviour of the port government. They claimed that they had ignored a court order to capture criminals who in the year before had broken into Chittor's house in Issin, a neighbouring village, and that they had neglected to make good the broker's losses. The English even appealed to a higher authority at Lar by sending copies of these orders there.³³

After the death of Chittor in September 1725 his son Kishorji (Kessourji) succeeded to his position.³⁴ In spite of the deteriorating trading conditions in Bandar Abbas during the Afghan occupation Kishorji continued to mediate between the English and local wholesale

²⁹ BL IOR G/29/7, 30 April 1747.

³⁰ He died leaving three daughters behind. BL IOR G/29/5, 27 April 1730.

³¹ C. Lockyer, *An Account of the Trade in India* (London: Samuel Crouch, 1711), 225-6.

³² BL IOR G/29/2, 6 November 1708 (paying monthly expenses), 24 August 1709 (collecting the EIC's share of customs revenues of Bandar Abbas), 20 February 1710 (arranging bills for Kerman), 23 June 1710 (negotiating with the port government); Lockyer, *An Account of the Trade in India*, 226-7 (exchanging coins).

³³ BL IOR G/29/2, 22 or 24 July 1710.

³⁴ BL IOR G/29/18, letter from Basra to London, 22 December 1725, fol. 42v.

merchants.³⁵ When no buyers were found he undertook the trade of unsold articles at agreed prices.³⁶ His time of service, though, did not last long, as he died in September 1729.³⁷

The brokership was then passed on to a *Banian* named Shankar (Sankar). Shankar had been involved in the EIC trade, specifically that of Kerman wool, from earlier times and no doubt had had transactions with Kishorji.³⁸ It seems that he was not related to the broker family. When Kishorji passed away he left only three sisters remaining in Bandar Abbas.³⁹ Shankar also established a business colony-cum-home in Bandar Abbas.⁴⁰ He conducted private trade with the growing market at Masqat as his dinghy plied between Bandar Abbas and Masqat where he kept an agent.⁴¹

In this highly uncertain commercial environment Shankar still provided the EIC with a similar set of services to the one offered by his predecessors. He even added the important function of co-ordinating shipments of copper to Bombay.⁴² However, the partnership somewhat unexpectedly broke up on 15 October 1739, when the broker asked for permission to resign:

Sankhar waiting on the [EIC] agent this morning, hinted some suspicions of the Hon[ourable] Company's having given orders to discharge him from the brokership, as they had refused to let him have the last year's cloth, tho' so small a quantity and his debt to them lessened within a trifle. Complaining also of his sufferings from the government who under the distinction of being our broker, he said, and with the notion of his prodigious gettings, had taken from him at times, as he cou[ld] make appear by his books, to the amount of above four thousand tomands [*tūmāns*], besides obliging him to trust them great sums other ways, all which as a private merchant he sho[ul]d have been exempted from. [...] and informed that the decline in trade of late and the little prospect he saw of its reviving whereby he might be encouraged to sit under these hardships, but on the contrary new ones approaching which his present circumstances would not allow him to submit to, with other reasons, but principally that of the Ho[nourable] Company's denying him their credit as before determined him to take our leave for his resigning, after he had collected his debts and cleaned off the remainder of what he owed the Hon[ourable] Company.⁴³

³⁵ BL IOR G/29/5, 6 February 1729.

³⁶ BL IOR G/29/3, 9 January 1727.

³⁷ BL IOR G/29/5, 12 September 1729.

³⁸ In 1727, the EIC already called him broker. Idem, 5 July 1727, 20 May 1729 (his accounts with the Company's secretary and Kerman wool merchant called Qasim).

³⁹ Idem, 27 April 1730.

⁴⁰ Idem, 7 January 1737 (his son's wedding).

⁴¹ Idem, 30 August 1736; G/29/6, 13 November 1740.

⁴² Idem, 15 May 1738.

⁴³ Idem, 4 October 1739.

Shankar mentioned two reasons for his resignation. First, he suffered from persistent extortion from the ruling elite who targeted him because of his distinguished status as the EIC broker. His loss, which he claimed amounted to more than 4,000 *tūmāns*, made it no longer feasible for him to continue his business in Bandar Abbas, where the market had significantly declined in those days. Second and more importantly, Shankar had a strong suspicion that the Company might discharge him from trading their merchandise.

His suspicion that the EIC might not trust him any more seems justifiable. The Bandar Abbas factory with no hesitation allowed him to leave on that same day, although they promised to keep protecting him until he recovered his investments from the port government and the English officials and others. They also allowed him to retain the status of Company broker for that purpose.⁴⁴ What is more intriguing, however, is that the English factors then suspended the brokership and took over most of the work that Shankar had so far undertaken.⁴⁵ In October 1742 the factors wrote about the deal in woollen goods they had recently made with the Persian authorities:

This is the inconvenience of dealing with these government people, tho' unavoidable. Formerly indeed when the broker was [in good?] circumstances, they used to direct themselves to him so that [they] did not appear to the Company, but the matter being changed [and] they nevertheless expecting to be obliged in their wants, we are applied to. But as yet we have been able to keep on tolerable terms and either by assignments on the Banians or other means secured the money, tho' we have been some time out of it. The Dutch are fair to submit to the like [...] but they have been so ill-treated that they have, as some of their heads confessed, a debt outstanding of above one thousand tomands from the government.⁴⁶

Why did the EIC stop using a broker at Bandar Abbas? One possibility is that they could not find any capable merchant in the port at the time. But perhaps a more important setting to be considered is that from the second half of the 1730s the EIC increasingly redirected their trade from Bandar Abbas to the burgeoning market of Kerman. As argued in Chapter 3, from early 1737 the EIC and many associated merchants, most of them EIC officers, regularly forwarded imported goods to Kerman, including English woollen products, sugar and pepper, where they could be traded for copper ware and copper coins.

The English entrusted the new venture to their representatives in Kerman. In 1695 the EIC set up a permanent trading station in Kerman before the VOC and commissioned the Julfa Armenians to purchase Kerman wool.⁴⁷ However, during Nadir Shah's rule the EIC deployed

⁴⁴ Idem, 4 October 1739, 14 December 1740.

⁴⁵ Shankar at times helped the Company's trade of woollen goods until around mid-1742. Idem, 28 April 1742 (his last brokerage service).

⁴⁶ Idem, 20 October 1742.

⁴⁷ Matthee, "The East India Company Trade in Kerman Wool," 365.

one English officer at a time there: William Cordeaux (1732–33), Nathaniel Whitwell (1733–36), Henry Savage (1736–46), and Danvers Graves (1746–47). They also took advantage of various merchants who were presumably Zoroastrian: these included Ziyabakhsh (Seawax), who served the Company as broker and secretary for most of this period; his son-in-law Isfandiyar (Espondior); Shahryar (Sharyar); and Mahmud, who was possibly a Muslim and acted as interpreter (*linguist*). From April 1737, when the Bandar Abbas factory explicitly ordered Savage, its resident, to sell transferred woollen goods and acquire copper in return, the fully-fledged Kerman agency vigorously collected copper as well as wool. This went on until early in 1747, when mounting financial exploitation of the region by Nadir Shah made the project ineffectual and Graves left the town. The English documentation of Bandar Abbas for that period contains many references to Kerman caravans arriving with wool and exportable bullion, chiefly copper (“lump copper” and “old copper”), though probably not all the loads belonged to the English.⁴⁸

It should be noted that the VOC also kept a local wool collector in Kerman and had a plan to develop the local agency into a permanent factory around the same time.⁴⁹ That plan came to nothing. The suspension of the EIC brokership at Bandar Abbas during Nadir Shah’s reign therefore indicates that the English had a higher level of flexibility in responding to the relocation of the market to Kerman than the VOC. In other words, we can say that the Dutch made more effort to shore up existing channels of trade in order to manage the unstable situation.

Although our knowledge is still rudimentary we can suggest that in the third and fourth decades of the eighteenth century the English enterprisingly explored new business frameworks for manipulating local intermediaries across the northern Indian Ocean, while the Dutch tended to foster the old foundation. Nadri has pointed out that in Surat from the late 1730s the EIC reined in the power of their broker by defining and redefining his position and by changing the nomenclature of his title from broker to *wakīl* and then to *marfatida*. By contrast the VOC and their brokers deepened their interdependency over the course of the century.⁵⁰ In Bengal both Companies had long struggled to restrain the authority of their brokers, who were rich merchants and played a critical role in managing Company investments in export commodities. Yet the EIC abolished the office in 1741 and then engaged local merchants as *gomastas* to procure export articles, while the VOC retained the status quo however unwillingly.⁵¹ Considering that the English from this time on increasingly

⁴⁸ For instance, BL IOR G/29/6, 24 September 1737, 13 January 1738, 3 December 1739, 22 September 1743, 16 September 1745; G/29/7, 24 September 1746, 10 January 1747. Nadir Shah also sent from Kerman to Bandar Abbas a large caravan loaded with copper, asafetida, etc. for export to India. Idem, 18 February 1747.

⁴⁹ NA VOC2710, letter from Bandar Abbas to The Netherlands, 10 October 1748, fols. 1318r-v.

⁵⁰ G. Nadri, “Commercial World of Mancherji Khurshedji and the Dutch East India Company: A Study of Mutual Relationships,” *Modern Asian Studies* 41, no. 2 (2007): 342. Cf. A. Das Gupta, “The Broker at Mughal Surat, c. 1740,” *Revista de cultura* 13-14 (1991): 173-80.

⁵¹ S. Chaudhury, *From Prosperity to Decline: Eighteenth Century Bengal* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1995), 47-65, 93-108.

outscored the Dutch in all these places — the Persian Gulf, Surat and Bengal — it is telling to highlight such a difference of attitude as a crucial trigger point.⁵²

Erosion of the Rawal firm: 1747–59

Thanks to a series of petitions sent to Batavia the Bandar Abbas brokers Kumarchand, Abchand and Thakurdas were finally discharged from the debt for the Isfahan bills in 1752–53. Their situation in no way improved, however. Even after their debt was written off the “poor people” owed the Company the large sum of 97,972 guilders 10 stivers. The factory seized five houses and a garden belonging to them, but these properties turned out to have little or no value because of their bad condition.⁵³

Whereas the twilight of the broker family marks an irreversible decline in the Bandar Abbas trade it is intriguing to note that some countervailing forces in the marketplace remained. First of all, the EIC reactivated the brokership at Bandar Abbas at the close of the 1740s. During this time the factory used three *Banians*, called Chiballah, Parwana (Parwana), and Keemah.⁵⁴ These merchants might have belonged to the *Bhansali* caste in the port, as the English factors were afraid that their agents, despite their status as Company servants, would be forced to pay a heavy tax to the authorities on behalf of the “wretchedly poor” community.⁵⁵ The brokers promoted sales of Company goods in Bandar Abbas while driving up the Company’s investments in Kerman wool by arranging cheques for money transfers to and from Kerman. There Mahmud the interpreter, mentioned previously, remained in service.⁵⁶ Due to there being so few cash-laden merchants remittances became extremely difficult by the mid-1750s. That was when Bandar Abbas began to send the needed cash to Kerman by caravan.⁵⁷

The principal servants of the VOC brokers were also noticeably active. In his final report, the Dutch director Schoonderwoerd wrote that it was not the brokers but their servants that had actually handled the Company’s business in Bandar Abbas during his term (1745–55). Since the current brokers Abchand and Thakurdas were raised in luxury and had not learned how to do the required services well, he said, he had been able to manage his duty with special help from the brokers’ secretary (*schrijver*) Ishwardas. Ishwardas always stood

⁵² A number of scholars have scrutinized the role of local intermediaries in the making of the British empire in India during the eighteenth century. Among others, see L. Subramanian, *Indigenous Capital and Imperial Expansion: Bombay, Surat, and the West Coast* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996); S. Neild-Basu, “The Dubashes of Madras,” *Modern Asian Studies* 18, no. 1 (1984): 1–31; P.J. Marshall, “Masters and Banians in Eighteenth-Century Calcutta,” In *The Age of Partnership: Europeans in Asia before Dominion*, edited by B. Kling and M. Pearson (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1979), 191–213. For the case of the nineteenth-century Persian Gulf, see J. Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj: Merchants, Rulers, and the British in the Nineteenth-Century Gulf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁵³ NA VOC2843, letter from J. van Schoonderwoerd at Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 1 October 1753, p. 18; VOC2885 2, final report from J. van Schoonderwoerd to D. Aansorg, 28 November 1755, p. 15.

⁵⁴ BL IOR G/29/7, 13 September 1750 (Chiballah), 23 June 1752 (Parwana and Keemah). Parwana died by June 1761. BL IOR G/29/13, 25 June 1761.

⁵⁵ BL IOR G/29/9, 5 November 1755.

⁵⁶ BL IOR G/29/8, 13 August 1754; 20 October 1754.

⁵⁷ BL IOR G/29/9, 3 September 1755.

security for the Company's transactions as he was "rather rich (*tamelijk gegoed*)". The man had in fact died not long before this report, and his brother Dwarkadas (Duarkardas) had succeeded to the role.⁵⁸

David Busskens, the son of the aforementioned Joseph Busskens, is another interesting example of this. David had a vital role in the VOC enterprises in Iran after the Safavid period. In 1730–31 the Company employed him as assistant (*assistent*), the lowest rank in the Dutch hierarchy in Persia, to help the newly-appointed Isfahan chief Mattheus van Leijpsigh together with the Isfahan interpreters. For this service the Company agreed to pay him 10 guilders every month on a three-year contract.⁵⁹ In 1737, when the VOC embarked on a new venture at Bushrie, they installed David to perform an interpreting service there.⁶⁰ About three years later he was back in Isfahan to act as the second-in-command. After the Dutch personnel withdrew from the city in 1746 he and the Isfahan interpreters looked after the Company's properties they had left behind.⁶¹

In early 1753, when the Bandar Abbas interpreter David Sahid (on his second stint beginning 1751) passed away, the VOC appointed David Busskens, who had conveniently arrived from Isfahan, as his successor.⁶² Then the factory asked him to act as broker as well. Touching on the recent loss of Kumarchand, Schoonderwoerd reported that the remaining brokers were "incapable" and "untrustworthy", and therefore it was advisable to add David into the brokering service. As an incentive Schoonderwoerd offered him a special privilege: the right to collect an additional 0.5 per cent commission on top of the usual one per cent.⁶³

In the last days of their operation in Bandar Abbas the VOC formed the impression that the catastrophic fall of the Rawals was actually occasioned by the Ishwardas family and David Busskens. In the last report that the Dutch officials submitted to Batavia they expressed their utmost chagrin about the brokers Abchand and Thakurdas. Those men had been solvent at the departure of the former director Schoonderwoerd at the end of 1755, but when a few years later the Dutch asked them to pay further dues the requested payment never turned up. To the greater embarrassment of the officers they felt that this had happened even though the brokers had not been the victims of extortion nor had they suffered bankruptcy in recent years. According to Abchand and Thakurdas, the reason for their insolvency was that their servants (*dienaars*) Ishwardas and Dwarkadas, to whom they had consigned all the work, had involved

⁵⁸ NA VOC2885 2, final report from Schoonderwoerd to Aansorg, 28 November 1755, p. 25.

⁵⁹ The VOC established a formal hierarchy for their operation in Persia in the eighteenth century. The director (*directeur*, later *gezaghebber*) or head officer held the status of senior merchant (*opperkoopman*). He was followed in descending order of rank by a merchant (*koopman*), a junior merchant (*onderkoopman*), a bookkeeper (*boekhouder*), and finally an assistant (*assistent*). NA VOC2253, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 15 May 1731, pp. 118-9; W. Floor, *The Afghan Occupation of Safavid Persia 1721–1729* (Paris: Association pour l'Avancement des Études iraniennes, 1998), 8-9; Idem, *The Rise and Fall of Nader Shah*, xiii-xvi.

⁶⁰ NA VOC2448, resolution, Bandar Abbas, 21 June 1737, p. 443.

⁶¹ NA VOC2584, letter from Bushire to Bandar Abbas, pp. 1544-5; Floor, *The Rise and Fall of Nader Shah*, 88, 99, 175.

⁶² For the second term, David Sahid could not work well due to his age and obesity (*zwaarlijvigheid*). NA VOC2787, letter from J. van Schoonderwoerd at Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 17 February 1751, p. 41; VOC2824, letter from J. van Schoonderwoerd at Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 8 February 1753, pp. 22-3.

⁶³ Idem, p. 23.

David Busskens in their business, and that they had put too much trust in him, and that together they had lost the money. This could have been a mere excuse, but the Dutch officials were nevertheless convinced.⁶⁴ “It is a real pity,” they said, “that those who formerly had such a considerable wealth have to live so miserably, and even more so because they would not be able to pay off their debt to the Company, for what we have written about the way their money has been stolen from time to time is only partially reported (*de wijs op welk zij het van tijd tot tijd zijn kwijtgemaakt vooral gedeeltelijk is terneder gesteld*).”⁶⁵ The activities of all these merchants suggest that some of the vigour of the merchant world of Bandar Abbas in the late Safavid period was sustained in the late 1750s.

In 1763, four years after the Dutch retreat, Batavia received a letter from the Company’s brokers at Bandar Abbas (*makelaars van de Edele Comp[agnie] in de negorij Abasi*) named “Takardas” and “Kordas” asking for permanent protection so that they could maintain some esteem among the local merchants. The first named broker may have actually been Thakurdas.⁶⁶

2. Isfahan

In August 1723, soon after the Afghan conquest, the Isfahan broker Khemchand died, and his nephew Hemraj Jethmalani took over as broker. In the upheaval following the revolution, however, the bullion market in Isfahan crumbled, which made it impossible for the broker to procure any gold ducat that was requested.⁶⁷

The re-establishment of Persian rule by Nadir Shah did not change the general situation. No substantial inflows of money returned, though the VOC occasionally collected gold and silver coins from there.⁶⁸ Under these circumstances the Isfahan broker was no longer the money merchant he used to be. His main task was now limited to providing the factory with its necessary financial obligations, such as the payment of salaries to the workforce.⁶⁹ To stress how critical Hemraj was for the upkeep of the Isfahan factory Bandar Abbas reported that, in order to deter a total crash of Isfahan, they had made sure to repay their debt to him, thereby keeping him incentivized in their service.⁷⁰

Over the course of the 1730s it became extremely difficult for the VOC to continue the Isfahan enterprise. The highly-sophisticated banking network by which Bandar Abbas had consistently supported Isfahan during the late Safavid period had virtually disappeared. In

⁶⁴ NA VOC2968, letter from the ship *Nieuw Nieuwen Kerk* to Batavia, 1 May 1759, pp. 6-7.

⁶⁵ *Idem*, p. 20.

⁶⁶ NA VOC3092 1, translation of a Persian letter from Takardas and Kordas to Batavia, received on 1 March 1763, pp. 57-8.

⁶⁷ NA VOC2253, final report from N. Schorer to M. van Leijpsigh, Isfahan, 1 October 1730, pp. 660-1.

⁶⁸ NA VOC2390, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 19 March 1736, p. 13.

⁶⁹ NA VOC2254, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 19 July 1732, pp. 451-2; VOC2356, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 9 November 1734, p. 30.

⁷⁰ NA VOC2322 1, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 30 September 1733, fol. 51r.

addition, the continuous fiscal exploitation by the authorities repressed the merchant societies in Isfahan, so that one after the other they left for alternative places of trade.⁷¹

In order to improve the situation Bandar Abbas at times sent some of the imported goods traded for cash to Isfahan by caravan. One such caravan under the supervision of the Dutch officials Joris Brand and Isaac de Crane took the route over Yazd in the early summer of 1737. The usual track through Fars was blocked by Nadir Shah's military operations, so they had to push through unfamiliar highlands with few known decent caravanserais. They were conveying goods worth 12,336 guilders 17 stivers and 8 pennies to Isfahan.⁷²

In Isfahan some of these goods were traded for needed money. The rest was denoted as presents for the ruling elite, etc. For trading the factory used Hemraj's brother Bishendas as a substitute broker (*substituut makelaar*), as Hemraj had retreated to Bandar Abbas.⁷³ Knowing that he was in competition with the Armenians, the *Banians* and other local merchants who came with goods purchased from the English and French at Bandar Abbas, Bishendas managed to sell various articles, including Javanese castor sugar and candy sugar, usually on credit for three or four months. He received one per cent of the total value from the Company.⁷⁴ This agency lasted until the departure of the Dutch staff in 1746.

3. Basra

Banian connections

In the 1720s Basra gradually made up for the failing bullion centre at Isfahan that had become inoperative over time. Basra was also absorbing much of the sugar trade in Bandar Abbas. The structural change in the trans-regional trade underpinned the prompt establishment of a permanent trading post in Basra by the VOC in 1723–24. How did they connect with the new commercial environment?

According to Abdullah, in the eighteenth century the market in Basra was one of various mercantile societies built on networks of family, clan, tribe, birthplace, or ethnicity. The Muslim merchants (Sunni and Shiite) were the most powerful, and the Turkish family of the Chelebis held a prominent presence among them. Among the non-Muslims the Armenians were the richest, followed by the Jews, who during the second half of the century thrived in comparison to the Armenians. These different merchant communities were involved with different trading routes: the Chelebis were mainly involved in the maritime trade with India,

⁷¹ For a detailed description of the city during Nadir Shah's time, see Floor, *The Rise and Fall of Nader Shah*, 1-99.

⁷² NA VOC2448, letter from Bandar Abbas to Isfahan, 7 May 1737, pp. 1199-200.

⁷³ NA VOC2610 1, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 31 October 1742, pp. 182-3.

⁷⁴ NA VOC2448, price list, Isfahan, 6 August 1737, pp. 1580-3; VOC2610 2, annual sales statement, Isfahan, 1741-42, pp. 62-3.

especially Surat; the Armenians in the caravan traffic with Aleppo; and the Jews in the river trade with Baghdad.⁷⁵

We may add to Abdullah's list the "Indian" merchants. The Englishman Julius Griffiths, when he visited Basra in 1786, saw that the population there consisted of "a mixture of Christians, Jews, Arabians, and Indians," all of them conducting commerce, and that the Jews and the Indians seemed to be engrossed in trading jewels and precious metals and in money exchange, while the Armenians and other Christian sects (not distinguished from each other in the record above) conducted general import and export.⁷⁶

When the VOC launched their new enterprise they aligned themselves with this "Indian" sector. The Company initially planned to install a *Banian* merchant called Munshi (Monsje), who was then in Bandar Abbas as the Basra broker (*makelaar*). However, on 18 October 1723 when he was about to leave for Basra he was found strangled outside the town. After months of searching the Bandar Abbas factory finally found another experienced *Banian* named Mulchand (Moeltjent), and they immediately sent him to Basra in February 1724.⁷⁷ Little is known about Mulchand's early career, but there is no doubt that he was closely associated with, if not a member of, the firm of the Isfahan broker Hemraj. Sources show that his brother named Sandaldas (Sendeldas) was a principal agent of Hemraj at Isfahan.⁷⁸ Settled in the city of Basra with his family members (six in total), Mulchand formed an indispensable part of the *Banian* society there.⁷⁹ In July 1725 the port authorities arrested him, charging him because all the *Banians* in the city were complaining about him. As a result the Company was obliged to pay more than 300 *tūmāns* in ransom. The Dutch officers wrote with unusual annoyance that the port government had made a big mistake, for the *Banians* would have paid the ransom money if the Company had not.⁸⁰

Our source materials contain few clues as to where exactly these *Banian* merchants came from. Mulchand, by having an association with the Hemraj firm, may have had a Sindi genealogy. Then there is Tolaram (Tollaram), a man who served the VOC as *ṣarrāf* (money changer) in 1742–43. In April 1743 he took leave for Surat because he had recently received a considerable inheritance from his relative in Hindustan.⁸¹

Mulchand undertook trade in imported Company goods with merchants coming from the eastern Mediterranean, Iraq and Iran as well as those at Basra. As in Bandar Abbas and

⁷⁵ Sood emphasizes the crucial value of family, especially the father-son relationship, in this commercial environment. Th. Abdullah, *Merchants, Mamluks, and Murder: The Political Economy of Trade in Eighteenth-century Basra* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 83–98; G. Sood, *India and the Islamic Heartlands: An Eighteenth-century World of Circulation and Exchange* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁷⁶ J. Griffiths, *Travels in Europe, Asia Minor and Arabia* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1805), 390.

⁷⁷ NA VOC2016 1, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 31 March 1724, p. 70.

⁷⁸ NA VOC2357 1, resolution, Bandar Abbas, 21 March 1735, pp. 683–4; VOC2511, letter from Isfahan to Bandar Abbas, 4 July 1740, pp. 944–5.

⁷⁹ NA VOC2476, resolution, Bandar Abbas, 16 February 1739, p. 502.

⁸⁰ NA VOC2023, extract letter from Basra, 8 October 1725, fols. 3342v–3r.

⁸¹ NA VOC2610 1, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 31 October 1742, p. 133; VOC2610 2, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 29 June 1743, pp. 202–3. Sood suggests that a *Banian* merchant called "Manbūr" who acted as a broker (*dallāl*) in Basra in the late 1740s was from Gujarat. Sood, *India and the Islamic Heartlands*, 112.

Isfahan the commission was fixed at one per cent. Usually, it seems, the broker traded the goods for local coins and then exchanged them for exportable gold and silver specie. For that procedure to be successful the VOC directed him to hire a *ṣarrāf* from his brokerage income.⁸² Since the Company did not employ an interpreter (*tolk*) at Basra till the late 1730s, the broker would act as their delegate to the authorities alongside the Dutch personnel, some of whom were familiar with the vernacular languages.⁸³

During the period 1723–34 Basra sold about 0.7 million pounds of sugar (castor and candy) through Mulchand to supplement the plummeting trade at Bandar Abbas; during that time it stood at nearly 1.8 million pounds.⁸⁴ However, the partnership came to an abrupt end in 1735 when it was discovered that Mulchand was embezzling Company funds. “There was nothing ever so disheartening,” a message from Basra to Bandar Abbas in May 1735 declared, “as the confession that the Company’s broker Mulchand made after receiving the news of the former chief Dames Heij [in Bandar Abbas].” The broker admitted that “he had spent the Company’s cash entrusted him to settle Mr. Heij’s debt [to him], and as a result became unable to effectuate the order to send it to Gamron [Bandar Abbas], while apologizing for having caused the disaster, with many lamentable and clamorous expressions.”⁸⁵

The Basra officials seem to have felt some sympathy for Mulchand, at least at first. The same report relates that since the establishment of the factory in 1724 Mulchand had performed satisfactorily. He had always been the receiver and holder of the Company’s money while also procuring specie for export according to what was available and what was ordered. He had never failed to execute his duty until this occasion. Even now this situation had arisen unexpectedly following the death of Heij, which made it impossible for the broker to return to the Company money that he had wanted to use just temporarily.⁸⁶ The report goes on to criticize Heij severely, claiming that in spite of Mulchand’s request, Heij left for Bandar Abbas without even issuing a certificate for his debt. This reportedly totalled 2,590 *tūmāns*, of which he had settled only a tiny part in Bandar Abbas.⁸⁷

These considerations, however, ultimately meant less than nothing to the VOC. Getting back their money was all that mattered to them. The thorough investigation that ensued unearthed the fact that before his departure to Basra Mulchand had made contract with two *Banians* in Bandar Abbas called Bishendas and Nath to share all profits and losses which would occur during his brokership in Basra.⁸⁸ These *Banians* are probably to be identified as Bishendas, the brother of Hemraj, and a former clerk of Khemchand at Isfahan called Naga Nath (Chapter 5). In fact, Nath was a son-in-law of Mulchand.⁸⁹ Accordingly, the Company

⁸² NA VOC2006, instruction from P. ’t Lam at Bandar Abbas to L. de Cleen and J. de Villiers, 29 February 1724, fol. 3002r.

⁸³ Bandar Abbas sent bookkeeper Dames Heij to Basra for his proficiency in Persian. Idem, fol. 3001r.

⁸⁴ See Appendices 2 and 4.

⁸⁵ NA VOC2357 2, charge against Mulchand from G. Gutchi at Basra to Batavia, 25 May 1735, p. 88.

⁸⁶ Idem, pp. 88–9.

⁸⁷ Idem, pp. 89–92. Cf. VOC VOC2357 2, Mulchand’s confession, Basra, undated, pp. 98–9.

⁸⁸ NA VOC2357 2, charge against Mulchand from G. Gutchi at Basra to Batavia, 25 May 1735, p. 93.

⁸⁹ NA VOC2416, resolution, Bandar Abbas, 6 July 1736, pp. 1198–9.

tried to sequester the property of the guarantors, whatever little value it had.⁹⁰ In November 1735 Mulchand and his family were brought to Bandar Abbas where he was subjected to further interrogations and confiscations. The Dutch made his “friends” Bishendas and Nath responsible for the outstanding money.⁹¹ After squeezing as much as they could out of Mulchand, in 1739 he was sent far away from Bandar Abbas to Cochin in Malabar, so that his creditors could not run after him. He was sent with a letter to the Dutch supervisor there asking him to keep Mulchand under strict surveillance lest he turn against the Company from some other place.⁹²

In the meantime Basra used a *Banian* called Fattitjant as a provisional broker, and distinguished him and his *šarrāf* as subjects of the VOC by conferring *khil’as* on them. The Dutch officer Willem Slaars acted as interpreter, for he had good linguistic ability.⁹³ By 1740, however, Fattitjant had also been dismissed for misconduct, and then the post of broker was given to another *Banian* named Tjettoe. He had been working for the Dutch factory for more than four years previously.⁹⁴

The Sahid family

Despite the fact that the *Banian* community was a key group facilitating the VOC trade in Basra, the Julfa Armenian family of the Sahids, who had been the official Isfahan interpreters from the Safavid period, also played a big role in the Dutch trade in the early 1740s. From the late 1670s till his death in 1721 the VOC employed the leader of the merchant house Francois Sahid as (chief) Isfahan interpreter (Appendix 11).⁹⁵ He was a dependable fixer, and the Dutch counted on him to negotiate with the Safavid court specifically for silk deals.⁹⁶ In return he received monthly wages and necessary support from the Company, as well as enjoying various royal favours, such as an exemption from *jizya*, the right to collect a brokerage for trade in textiles (*lijwaten*), weighed goods and asafetida in Bandar Abbas, etc.⁹⁷

As described above, the Sahid family also served as the Bandar Abbas interpreters after the Safavid period. In July 1730 David Sahid, son of Francois, came down to Bandar Abbas to carry out this function. He had to take leave for Isfahan in November 1735 to be treated for

⁹⁰ NA VOC2357 2, report on the goods confiscated from Bishendas and Nath, Bandar Abbas, 19 April 1735, pp. 82-3.

⁹¹ NA VOC2417, separate letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 30 November 1736, pp. 3451-5.

⁹² NA VOC2476, resolution, Bandar Abbas, 16 February 1739, pp. 501-3. After the deportation of Mulchand, the VOC asked his brother Sandaldas who was in Isfahan to share the responsibility for the arrears, but he flatly declined. VOC2511, letter from Isfahan to Bandar Abbas, 4 July 1740, pp. 944-6.

⁹³ The VOC described Fattitjant as being “a bad man and not capable enough to stay away from bankruptcy” (*een slim en buiten vermogen van respondentie voor bankroeten*). NA VOC2448, letter from Basra to Bandar Abbas, 1 November 1737, pp. 1075-6.

⁹⁴ NA VOC2511, letter from Basra to Bandar Abbas, 31 January 1740, pp. 1016-8.

⁹⁵ NA VOC1732, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 31 January 1706, pp. 302-4.

⁹⁶ NA VOC1694, letter from Bandar Abbas to The Netherlands, 20 May 1704, p. 288.

⁹⁷ According to a Persian order of October 1731, the Safavid king allowed Francois and his offspring that particular brokerage on a 30-year contract, and the contract remained valid. F.W. Stapel (ed.), *Corpus diplomaticum*, vol. 5 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1935), 81 (Article 2), 82 (Article 9); NA VOC2254, Persian order by Muhammad Ali Khan, October 1731, pp. 1414-7.

an ophthalmic problem (*blindheid*). Bandar Abbas then called up his brother Ibrahim from Isfahan together with the aforementioned David Busskens, who was competent in Dutch.⁹⁸

Perhaps around this time, the Sahids turned their attention to Basra. In November 1738, the VOC appointed Jacob Jan Sahid (also called Jan Jacob Sahid), the son of the Isfahan interpreter Elias, to replace Slaars as the Basra interpreter. The Dutch noted that Jacob Jan had acted as such before, and now he was to act as broker as well.⁹⁹ In February 1741 the *Banian* broker Tjettoe died and the VOC had extreme difficulty in finding a reliable replacement.¹⁰⁰ Jacob Jan stepped up to provide the needed skill.¹⁰¹ Although the Company appointed a broker and a *ṣarrāf* soon afterwards, since “handling those offices was too heavy a workload” for Jacob Jan, he remained involved in the management of the Company’s cash.¹⁰² Meanwhile, Jacob Jan as interpreter successfully persuaded the Basra government to reduce the Dutch tariff from 4 to 3 per cent.¹⁰³

Because of Jacob Jan’s superb performance at Basra, in 1743 the Bandar Abbas factory called him over to be their interpreter. The incumbent Ibrahim, who was upset about his consequent dismissal, was mollified by being appointed to the vacant post of Basra interpreter.¹⁰⁴ In 1750 there was a decision to switch back the offices, but the plan did not work. Jacob Jan returned to Basra to be interpreter there again but died soon afterwards. Ibrahim, who had not yet left for Bandar Abbas, was unwilling to move again on account of “his big family” (*zijn grote familie*) and wanted to continue his interpreting service at Basra. The VOC met his request and gave the office of Bandar Abbas interpreter to David Sahid for the second time.¹⁰⁵ Ibrahim was on duty in Basra until the Dutch factors deserted the city in 1753.¹⁰⁶

S. Aslanian recently argued that during Nadir Shah’s reign there was a critical reformation of the global network of Armenian merchants. He contends that Nadir Shah’s oppression of the Armenian society in Julfa, the pivot of their business network, which culminated in his ruinous taxation demands at the close of his reign, led to the collapse of Julfa’s once-celebrated economy. It also caused the community to disperse to other economic centres in the Mediterranean, to Iraq, to Russia and to India; these were places where they had strong commercial interests and thus it gave new life to the entire network.¹⁰⁷ The active

⁹⁸ NA VOC2390, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 19 March 1736, pp. 14-5. About five years later, David acted as the substitute for his brother and Isfahan interpreter Elias. Floor, *The Rise and Fall of Nader Shah*, 95-7, 98-9.

⁹⁹ NA VOC2476, resolution, Bandar Abbas, 28 November 1738, pp. 381-2. He received a monthly salary of 80 *maḥmūdīs*. VOC2511, specification of monthly expenses, Basra, March 1740, p. 1222.

¹⁰⁰ NA VOC2583, letter from at Basra to Bandar Abbas, 31 March 1741, pp. 1017-9.

¹⁰¹ NA VOC2583, letter from Basra to Bandar Abbas, 10 August 1741, p. 1085.

¹⁰² NA VOC2610 1, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 31 October 1742, p. 133.

¹⁰³ Idem, pp. 137-8. See also Chapter 4.

¹⁰⁴ NA VOC2610 2, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 29 June 1743, pp. 199-200; VOC2680, letter from Bandar Abbas to Batavia, 10 August 1745, pp. 166-7.

¹⁰⁵ NA VOC2787, letter from Basra to Batavia, 10 August 1751, p. 9.

¹⁰⁶ NA VOC3064, letter from Kharg to Batavia, 30 September 1761, p. 16.

¹⁰⁷ Aslanian has developed Herzig’s argument. E. Herzig, “The Armenian Merchants of New Julfa, Isfahan: A Study in Pre-modern Asian Trade,” (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 1991), 102-9; S. Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 202-14.

commitment of the Sahid family to the VOC enterprise at Basra as seen above not only supports his idea, but also suggests that the increased sugar trade for bullion there was one of the stimuli for the claimed transformation of the network.¹⁰⁸

4. Bushire

Bushire also progressively benefited from the contraction of the Bandar Abbas trade while developing its own depository of exportable bullion, particularly copper. The VOC entered this budding market in 1737.

Although the details of the merchant community of Bushire at the time are somewhat cursory, the general image is clear enough. It was similarly composed of various merchant groups including Iranians, Arabs, Armenians, Jews and *Banians*, and was anchored on the idea of family, clan and ethnicity.¹⁰⁹ Apart from the Arab family of the Madhkurs, who had augmented their influence both in the political and mercantile life of Bushire towards the mid-century, the Iranian and Armenian merchants were the most powerful.¹¹⁰

In order to conduct active trade at Bushire the EIC sought associations with the Iranian sector. To do this they utilized a powerful Iranian merchant named Agha Abdi as their broker.¹¹¹ The VOC by contrast made most use of the *Banian* sector, just like they did in Basra. The Company chose the aforementioned Nath as their Bushire broker. Nath was now in residence at Bandar Abbas, but according to the Dutch he had had some previous experience of trading in Bushire for two years. The Company also asked Bishambardas, the brother of the then Bandar Abbas broker Uttamchand, to act jointly with Nath. But Bishambardas refused their request. David Busskens joined the project as interpreter.¹¹² Apparently Nath was a leading figure in the *Banian* community in Bushire. In 1739, the port authorities nagged the Dutch about Nath's activities, saying many *Banians* had left the place and this had caused them a great loss.¹¹³ We know little about the native countries of these *Banians*, but many might well hail from Sind since Nath was in close contact with that country (a subject to which I shall return later).

During the time of the VOC operations (1737–53) the market at Bushire for the Company's Javanese sugar was only of secondary importance in the northern Gulf. The port functioned rather as a transit hub from Basra to Shiraz. The Dutch prioritized the sales at

¹⁰⁸ The nature of the Dutch's local agency at Basra would be more accurately understood if we further study their English counterpart. For an overview of it, see Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj*, 229 (Appendix 3).

¹⁰⁹ W. Floor, *The Persian Gulf: The Rise of the Gulf Arabs: The Politics of Trade on the Persian Littoral 1747–1792* (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2007), 235–54; S. Grummon, "The Rise and Fall of the Arab Shaykhdom of Būshire: 1750–1850," (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1985), 242–64.

¹¹⁰ See Chapter 4.

¹¹¹ Idem.

¹¹² NA VOC2448, resolution, Bandar Abbas, 21 June 1737, pp. 443, 445–6; Idem, 3 July 1737, p. 460.

¹¹³ Floor, *The Rise of the Gulf Arabs*, 242–3.

Basra. Basra sometimes forwarded imported sugar to Bushire according to the demand. Nath would then engage there in the trade on a commission of one per cent.¹¹⁴

But for copper Bushire presented itself as a main market in the region, and the marketplace was highly competitive. In the face of so many different competitors, including the English, the French and the Armenians, the *Banian* broker struggled to procure old copper ware and copper *paysas*.¹¹⁵

5. Kharg

As mentioned already, in early 1753 the VOC received an invitation from Mir Nasir, the Arab ruler of Bandar Rig, to come to trade at Kharg Island, a territory in his possession. His offer arrived at a good time for the Company, who were then looking for a new centre of operations in the northern Gulf. Later that year they settled on the island to launch their final venture in the Gulf.

The Dutch records say that the Kharg factory used a broker, without specifying who it actually was. The picture gathered from sporadic evidence is that the broker was a merchant who had close business ties with Bandar Rig. In reference to an uncollected sum of 30,021 guilders 15 stivers, the Kharg factory wrote in 1755 that this was caused by the unexpected death of Mir Nasir in July 1754. Shortly before he died they had granted his request for him to borrow this amount of Company goods on a three-month credit. He would then send them to Shiraz, and thereby attract passing caravans to Bandar Rig. The factory wanted to encourage the trade and to keep on good terms with Mir Nasir in those days, so they accepted the proposal. They supposed they would have enough opportunities to reclaim the money at risk. Mir Nasir would promote trade in the merchandise in his port and consequently receive tolls to settle the account. Besides, the tolls that the inland merchants had to pay in Bandar Rig for the goods brought from Kharg always came into the hands of the Company's broker (*daar d' E[dele] Comp[ani]e door de op Bender Riek van de inlandse kooplieden voor d' ons afgekochte goederen te betalende tollen (die altijd in handen van onze makelaar komen) gelegentheid genoeg heeft, aan haar garant te komen*).¹¹⁶ That the broker was accountable for the toll revenue from Bandar Rig suggests that he acted as the customs master of the port.

It may be assumed that the Kharg broker was Armenian, given the fact that scores of Julfa Armenians took shelter in Bandar Rig during Nadir Shah's reign and founded a solid commercial base there. What is more, the VOC had several contacts with these Armenians before they came to Kharg. Around 1752 the Basra factory asked some Armenian merchants

¹¹⁴ NA VOC2476, annual sales statement, Bushire, 1737–38, pp. 1388-9.

¹¹⁵ See Chapter 4.

¹¹⁶ NA VOC2864, letter from Kharg to Batavia, 31 May 1755, pp. 51-2.

in Bandar Rig to acquire copper ware for export. In February 1753 five Armenians from the place requested Batavia to allow them to trade under the Company's protection.¹¹⁷

Kharg under the Dutch clearly owed much of its economic vitality to the Armenian population there. During the Dutch period the island was inhabited by diverse communities, including Arabs, Iranians, *Banians*, Armenians, Africans and Europeans.¹¹⁸ The Armenian community increased their presence by repeatedly incorporating Armenian merchants from the Iranian littoral, in particular from Bandar Rig. In late 1754 many inhabitants of Bandar Rig and Bushire, fearful of the approaching sounds of battle from the interior, took refuge in Kharg. According to the Dutch this included all the Armenians from those ports. As a result, the number of the Armenian citizens on the island increased to 100 persons. Among them were ten wealthy merchants who carried out trading to Bengal, Coromandel and Surat.¹¹⁹ Two years later the Dutch reported again that, due to the rapid decline of Bandar Rig, both the Armenian and the Iranian merchants had left the place; those who had some capital tried to flee to Kharg or Basra. Bandar Rig was set to wane into a fishing village within a year.¹²⁰ In 1762 the Armenian settlement consisted of 115 to 200 people. They had raised enough money to build a small church there, served by two secular Armenians priests. The supervisor of the church called Auweek di Oannes acted as the VOC interpreter at Kharg.¹²¹

6. Masqat

The significant rise of the Masqat sugar trade was one of the highlights in the reformation of the Gulf market after the Safavid period. The VOC sent trial cargoes there in 1756 and 1757. How did they penetrate the growing market?

Immigrations of merchants

It is useful to note first that the success of Masqat was concurrent with the development of its mercantile society which was being infiltrated by waves of merchant immigrants after the 1720s. Masqat developed its transit trade significantly under the rule of the Arab Yarubi clan in the second half of the seventeenth century and the early eighteenth century.¹²² During that time the port was administered by a governor (*walī*) appointed by the Yarubi imam who lived

¹¹⁷ See Chapters 2 and 4. It may be interesting to note that in 1748, an Armenian called "Coja Melleck" held the post of *shāhbandar* (customs master) at Bushire. BL IOR G/29/7, 14 September 1748; Grummon, "The Rise and Fall of the Arab Shaykhdōm," 69-70; Floor, *The Rise of the Gulf Arabs*, 248.

¹¹⁸ For the population of the Kharg in the Dutch period, see Floor, *The Rise of the Gulf Arabs*, 121-9.

¹¹⁹ These refugees also included *Banian* and Iranian merchants. NA VOC2864, letter from Kharg to Batavia, 1 November 1754, pp. 18-9; Floor, *The Rise of the Gulf Arabs*, 119.

¹²⁰ NA VOC2885 3, letter from Kharg to Batavia, 5 August 1756, pp. 20-2.

¹²¹ NA VOC3092 1, letter from Kharg to Batavia, 19 October 1762, p. 37.

¹²² For the directions of Masqat's trade, see C. Allen, "Sayyids, Shets and Sultāns: Politics and Trade in Masqat under the Āl Bū Sa'īd," (PhD diss., University of Washington, 1978), 7-32; R. Klein, "Trade in the Safavid Port City Bandar Abbas and the Persian Gulf (ca. 1600-1680): A Study of Selected Aspects," (PhD diss., University of London, 1993-94), 130-1; Floor, *The Persian Gulf, Dutch-Omani Relations: A Commercial & Political History 1651-1806* (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2014), 127.

in Rustaq some 75 miles inland from Masqat.¹²³ The resident merchant community was mainly comprised of Arabs, Indians, Iranians and Armenians. Among them the richest were the Indians, especially those called “Sindis” and “*Banians*”. According to C. Allen, the “Sindis” were the first “*Banians*” to settle in Masqat, and they belonged to the Hindu caste of Bhattias from Thatta in Sind.¹²⁴

After the death of the Yarubi imam Sultan b. Sayf in 1718, a war of succession broke out, and hostilities rapidly spread throughout the interior. But Masqat remained undisturbed. The port afforded a shelter for many substantial merchants from Iran who had endured the simultaneous upheavals of the Afghan invasion. Its sugar trade was so brisk that in 1725 the VOC explored the possibility of trading sugar there for the ready money they needed.¹²⁵

From 1736 till 1747 the political situation in Oman became more fluid because of Nadir Shah’s military intervention. During that period he used his newly-built navy nominally to support a contender for the imamate named Sayf b. Sultan, but more probably to subjugate the country.¹²⁶ At first Masqat continued to function as the distribution centre for sugar in the Gulf. In September 1737 a small two-mast vessel which belonged to a Basra merchant came into Bandar Abbas from Masqat with a freight cargo of sugar and grain.¹²⁷ Around this time, transshipments also headed to Bushire.¹²⁸ But once Iranian troops took possession of Masqat in 1738 and 1742 there must have been negative consequences for the mercantile life of the port.¹²⁹

The commotion seems to have generated an alternative trading venue in Barka. Lying 45 miles west of Masqat Barka similarly encountered Iranian intruders but survived owing to the heroic resistance offered by the decisive Arab chief Ahmad b. Said. It was he who founded the Bu Said dynasty after this achievement.¹³⁰ In mid-1747 the *Multani Banian* and *Bhansali* in Bandar Abbas sailed across the Gulf to seek refuge in Barka. The market in Barka was well-equipped with ready money. Later that year the EIC factors in Bandar Abbas, who were in dire need of cash to keep up the factory, sent some old copper to Barka for an appropriate valuation.¹³¹

By 1750 much vigour had returned to Masqat, which had now under the Bu Said regime entirely superseded Bandar Abbas as the premier sugar market in the Lower Gulf. The town most likely welcomed a new wave of immigrants around this time. The EIC wrote in 1751

¹²³ Idem, 120-7.

¹²⁴ C. Allen, “The Indian Merchant Community of Masqat,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 44, no. 1 (1981): 40-1; Klein, “Trade in the Safavid Port City,” 132-3; Floor, *Dutch-Omani Relations*, 103-7, 118-20.

¹²⁵ See Chapter 4.

¹²⁶ L. Lockhart, “Nādir Shāh’s Campaigns in ‘Oman, 1737–1744,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 8, no. 1 (1935): 157-71; Floor, *The Rise of the Gulf Arabs*, 13-21.

¹²⁷ BL IOR G/29/6, 3 September 1737.

¹²⁸ See Chapter 4.

¹²⁹ Sood, *India and the Islamic Heartlands*, 184.

¹³⁰ Lockhart, “Nādir Shāh’s Campaigns in ‘Oman,” 167-70; P. Risso, *Oman & Muscat: An Early Modern History* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), 39-42.

¹³¹ BL IOR G/29/7, 30 November 1747.

that *Banians* in Kerman intended to move to Masqat.¹³² Over the course of the decade, there were large numbers of local craft conveying sugar from Masqat to all different ports in the Gulf and its adjacent waters where they could reap the benefits of trade. When the VOC abandoned Bandar Abbas in the late decade this further solidified Masqat's prime position for this traffic.¹³³

While the migrants from Iran provided an intermittent impetus, it should be noted that a Muslim merchant family from Hyderabad in Sind also built a recognized clearing house in Masqat. The VOC reported in October 1761 that they could not collect debt from their wool agent in Kerman, Hovhaness Khatchik (Oanes Katjeh), because of the default of a Mir Hassan Bayg (Mir Hassen Beek), who was the head of the "*sayyids*" (*sayds*) of the "Memeny" family in Hyderabad (Heyderabaat). Over a long period of time, they said, many rich merchants of the "Memeny" family who lived in Masqat and Surat and elsewhere had annually sent large sums of money to the head of the family and his adherents at home in exchange for cheques drawn on him. In recent years, however, too many cheques had been made out to him, so that the merchants had refused to accept them. As a result Hovhaness, who was banking on one such cheque, became unable to pay his debt.¹³⁴ The EIC also mentioned the same unrest. In September of the following year Nasir Khan, the ruler of Lar and also a creditor of the insolvent "*sayyid*" Hassan Bayg (Seid Hossan Beg), ordered his brother Jafar Khan, ruler of Bandar Abbas, instead to seize the goods belonging to some Hyderabad merchants who had arrived from Masqat and who were bound to Kerman.¹³⁵

Nothing has been written about this particular Muslim family, but the fact that the family expanded their business network from Hyderabad seems to suggest that they belonged to the Lawatis, a renowned Shiite business community in Masqat, who traced their historical origins to Hyderabad. However, Allen thinks that the first Lawati migration occurred a little later. He claims that the Lawatis from Sind and the Bhattias from Kutch increasingly settled in Masqat from the 1780s to replace the Bhattias from Sind, who had moved to other Gulf ports such as Bahrain.¹³⁶

Banian networks

In order to get access to the Masqat market the VOC principally tapped into the *Banian* community there. The first attempt took place in January 1756, when Schoonderwoerd stopped by at Masqat with surplus goods from Bandar Abbas on his way to Batavia. It seems, however, that he hardly participated in the unfamiliar commercial environment. He could only

¹³² Idem, 24 December 1750. The *Banians* were also leaving for India at the time. Idem, 6 February 1751.

¹³³ NA VOC3092, letter from the ruler of Bandar Abbas Jafar Khan to Batavia, 1 March 1763, pp. 55-7.

¹³⁴ NA VOC3064, letter from Kharg to Batavia, 1 October 1761, pp. 30-1.

¹³⁵ BL IOR G/29/14, 2 September 1762.

¹³⁶ Allen, "The Indian Merchant Community of Masqat," 41-53; L. Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 146-9. Floor points out that the Hyderabad merchants constituted an integral part of the merchant world of Bandar Abbas during Nadir Shah's time. Floor, *The Rise and Fall of Nader Shah*, 229.

dispose of 24,200 pounds of iron and 100,121 pounds of castor sugar, because there was a shortage of cash in the market during his stay.¹³⁷

What Schoonderwoerd did receive was an invitation from the governor of Sind (*raja of gouverneur van Dieuel, de hoofdplaats van Sindise Kust*) to trade in his land through a *Banian* resident in Masqat named Anand Ram (Annandaram). According to Schoonderwoerd Anand Ram was the “son of the former and old broker of the VOC” (*zoon van 's Comp[anies] gewezen oude makelaar*) Nath, i.e. the Bushire broker Nath, which suggests that his family had a business network linking Bushire, Masqat and Sind.¹³⁸

In July 1756 Batavia ordered Captain de Nijsz of *de Marienbosch* and Captain Brahé of *'t Pasgeld* to sail to Masqat with cargoes of various goods, but mainly of sugar. On the advice of Schoonderwoerd, who had arrived at Batavia a month earlier, the authorities also directed Brahé to set course to Sind if he did not find it feasible to trade at Masqat. Both ships left Batavia on 19 July 1756; *de Marienbosch* reached Masqat first, on 27 August 1756.¹³⁹

Soon after his arrival de Nijsz was able to see the imam Ahmad b. Said at a place called Bocca, one day away from Masqat by boat.¹⁴⁰ There de Nijsz used “our *Banian*” who could interpret Dutch and Arabic to negotiate with the imam about trade conditions.¹⁴¹ The identity of “our *Banian*” was probably “the broker at Masqat (*makelaar*) Faram Ram”.¹⁴² In subsequent correspondence the broker’s name is spelled “Noerotaem Anak Ram Djiendil Djoezie”, who must be Narottam Ramchandrar Joshi/Raoij, a Gujarati Brahmin *Banian*, whom the EIC had also recruited as their broker at Masqat around this time.¹⁴³ Narottam undertook to sell the imported Company goods and to procure items requested for export.¹⁴⁴ But the market turned out to be sluggish. It was not until February 1757 that most of the goods were sold.¹⁴⁵ Yet the broker requested Batavia to continue to send 100 canisters (*canassers*) of candy sugar and 2,000 canisters of castor sugar (about 0.6 million pounds in total).¹⁴⁶

When Brahé reached Masqat on 19 September 1756 he decided to steer *'t Pasgeld* to Karachi, Sind, according to instructions.¹⁴⁷ Following Schoonderwoerd’s advice he then appointed the aforementioned *Banian* Anand Ram (*een Benjaanse makelaar genaamd Annamderamme*) to accompany him as broker.¹⁴⁸ The Dutch communicated with him in Portuguese.¹⁴⁹

¹³⁷ See Chapter 2.

¹³⁸ NA VOC2885 1, letter from J. van Schoonderwoerd at Masqat to Batavia, 27 January 1756, p. 56.

¹³⁹ Floor, *The Rise of the Gulf Arabs*, 210.

¹⁴⁰ Floor suggests that Bocca refers to Dikkah near Matrah. Idem, 210-1.

¹⁴¹ NA VOC2909, report, C. de Nijsz, 6 May 1757, pp. 8-9.

¹⁴² Idem, p. 12.

¹⁴³ NA VOC2937, letter from Noerotaem Anak Ram Djiendil Djoezie to Batavia, received on 8 March 1758, pp. 107-9; Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj*, 84; BL IOR G/29/11, 16 September 1757.

¹⁴⁴ NA VOC2909, letter from Faram Ram (Narottam) to Batavia, received on 20 April 1757, pp. 4-5.

¹⁴⁵ Floor, *The Rise of the Gulf Arabs*, 212.

¹⁴⁶ NA VOC2909, report, de Nijsz, 6 May 1757, pp. 12-3.

¹⁴⁷ Floor, *The Rise of the Gulf Arabs*, 212.

¹⁴⁸ When Brahé arrived at Masqat, Anand Ram was in Bandar Abbas. NA VOC2937, report, W. Brahé and N. Mahué, 8 May 1757, pp. 6-7.

¹⁴⁹ Idem, pp. 9-10.

Brahé arrived at Karachi on the 8th of November and a few weeks later sailed up the Indus River to a market town called Auranga (Orangabander), where he rented a house in which to settle. He left for Batavia in April 1757.¹⁵⁰ During this period Anand Ram tirelessly invited wholesale merchants in those places to the Dutch party for trade. He also travelled to other trading towns such as Thatta to find possible buyers for the imported merchandise. He mediated deals for 638,747 pounds of castor sugar between the Dutch and some important merchants (indigenous *Banians* and Afghans), but the profits were rather small (74 per cent). His commission was 2 per cent. Furthermore, he played the important role of introducing the party to members of the local ruling elite.¹⁵¹ All these facts confirm that Anand Ram was certainly an important part of the merchant world of Sind while doing business in Masqat.

Notwithstanding the disheartening result obtained by de Nijsz, Batavia decided to continue the Masqat project and ordered Captain Rood of *de Barbara Theodora* to sail to Masqat. They needed to get rid of the ever-growing sugar stocks, and one important consideration for Batavia must have been that they had a reliable broker in Masqat. After de Nijsz's voyage Narottam sent presents to the Governor General of Batavia Jacob Mossel, requesting him to reappoint him as the VOC broker for the next voyage. Mossel honoured his request and instructed him to sell the cargo of *de Barbara Theodora* at higher prices.¹⁵²

The ship arrived at Masqat on 21 September 1757. This time the market was so active that Rood had sold the whole cargo by the end of November.¹⁵³ Sugar trade was especially satisfactory. Total sales amounted to far more than the proposed 0.6 million pounds (794,568 pounds of castor sugar and 33,810 pounds of candy sugar), which realised a favourable profit of 101 per cent, 30 per cent more than the previous time.¹⁵⁴ Narottam was definitely a key player in this development. On the 25th of September, when Rood sold 800 to 1,000 canisters of castor sugar on a 3-month credit, the broker readily guaranteed the payment in conjunction with the governor of Masqat (*wakīl*), a practice to encourage the VOC to trade at Masqat.¹⁵⁵ As Anand Ram had done in Sind, Narottam also earned 2 per cent of the total sales.¹⁵⁶

Despite the improved situation, the High Government discontinued the shipping of sugar to Masqat and Sind due to a serious concern that the project was prejudicial to the factories of Kharg and Surat. Even so, Narottam continued to be active in Masqat. In 1760, in reply to his request, Batavia wrote that they would not resume trade, but he could easily get what he

¹⁵⁰ W. Floor, *The Dutch East India Company (VOC) and Diwel-Sind (Pakistan) in the 17th and 18th Centuries (Based on Original Dutch Records)* (Institute of Central and West Asian Studies (University of Karachi): Karachi, 1993–94), 52–3, 59, 60.

¹⁵¹ In spite of the crucial roles that Anand Ram played, Brahé was unhappy with the quality of the broker's service. He had a strong suspicion that Anand Ram had also received payments from the local merchants to mislead the Dutch. He concluded that, if he had had a good interpreter and a trustworthy broker, he could have realized more profits from the trade of sugar and spices. For the details, see the translation of Brahé's report. Idem, 57–87.

¹⁵² NA VOC1011 2, letter from J. Mossel to Faram Ram (Narottam), 25 July 1757, pp. 209–11.

¹⁵³ Floor, *The Rise of the Gulf Arabs*, 212, 215.

¹⁵⁴ See Chapter 2.

¹⁵⁵ Floor, *The Rise of the Gulf Arabs*, 213.

¹⁵⁶ NA VOC2937, sales statement, Masqat, 21 September 1757–7 December 1757, p. 85.

needed for Masqat from Kharg or Cochin.¹⁵⁷ As the EIC broker, Narottam was expected to supply intelligence while occasionally transmitting news from the Bombay Presidency to the English settlements in the Gulf and vice versa.¹⁵⁸ Narottam also formed an integral part of the information network of Mancherji Khurshedji, the Parsi broker of the VOC at Surat. In 1766, when the Kharg factory was conquered by the Arab chief Mir Muhanna, Narottam wrote about it to Nanna Bhai and Basroorji, the agents of Mancherji at Bombay, who then notified their master.¹⁵⁹

In 1777, Dutch private traders, backed by the High Government, resumed voyages to Masqat.¹⁶⁰ The voyages continued until 1796 when Masqat became the scene of the Anglo-French war (see Chapter 4). How the Dutch traders took part in the Masqat market during this phase is unknown, but it is almost certain that they also made good use of Narottam as their broker. In September 1796, to show his loyalty to the EIC, Narottam wrote to Bombay that he had given up working for the French and the Dutch, even though this would mean a considerable decrease in his income.¹⁶¹ In 1798 the EIC discharged Narottam, accusing him of divided loyalties as well as deceiving them financially. The function of the Company's broker was then taken over by Vishandas, a Bhattia working for the customs house of Masqat.¹⁶²

Conclusion

The present chapter has probed into the relationships between the VOC and their local agents in conducting the trade of Javanese sugar for exportable bullion in the Gulf and its interior after the Safavid period. The information obtained illuminates the high mobility and flexibility of the local merchant communities in the reformation of the market in the eighteenth century.

After the Afghan invasion the long collaboration between the VOC and their *Banian* brokers at Bandar Abbas, the Rawals, faded due to the Rawals defaulting in payments. In the catastrophe of the revolution rich merchants in Isfahan who were supposed to pay for the Company goods sold at Bandar Abbas had completely vanished. The brokers who stood surety for their payments had to shoulder responsibility for all the unsettled money. In addition, the deterioration of the economic conditions in Bandar Abbas during the Afghan interregnum — the Baluchi pillaging and the fall of the powerful Muslim wholesalers of Lar and Shiraz who had been the cornerstones of the port's trade — reduced the brokers' liquidity.

¹⁵⁷ NA VOC1014 1, letter from Mossel to Narottam, 13 August 1760, pp. 519-20. In 1761, Kharg also wrote a letter to Narottam instructing him to help Hovhaness Khatchik, who was then in Masqat, to collect the debt from the "Memeny" family and then transfer the money to Kharg. VOC3064, letter from Kharg to Batavia, 30 September 1761, pp. 24-5.

¹⁵⁸ He received a monthly salary of 100 rupees. Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj*, 84-5.

¹⁵⁹ Nadri, "Commercial World of Mancherji Khurshedji," 331-2.

¹⁶⁰ Floor, *Dutch-Omani Relations*, 161-9.

¹⁶¹ Risso, *Oman & Muscat*, 145-6.

¹⁶² Narottan died in that year. Idem, 49; Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj*, 84-5.

Some compensation for the endangered partnership, however, to some extent came from other business associates. From this time on some principal clerks of the brokers played a prominent role in the Company's trade at the port. The family of Hovhaness, a Julfa Armenian who was the Company's wool collector at Kerman, became more involved.

Burdened with their huge debt from the Afghan mishap, the Rawals remained suppressed during Nadir Shah's time, which also shackled the VOC enterprise. But the Dutch struggles show a striking contrast to the English reactions. The EIC, who increasingly redirected their trade from Bandar Abbas to Kerman, dissolved the *Banian* brokership at Bandar Abbas in 1739 and transferred most of its function to the agency at Kerman, which consisted of Zoroastrian and Muslim merchants. Until 1747 those agents, under the direction of an English resident, actively traded various import goods forwarded from Bandar Abbas for exportable goods, especially copper.

The cancellation of the Isfahan debt in the early 1750s did not help ease the Rawals' tight credit. But it offers another interesting contrast to the fact that around this time the English had reactivated the *Banian* agency at Bandar Abbas. The weakened partnership also reveals an active supporting cast. The family of Ishwardas, a clerk of the Rawals, remained wealthy until the Company's retreat. David Busskens, who had served the Dutch as interpreter for a long time, also assisted the brokering service. In the last days of the Company's operation these merchants practically took over the Rawal firm.

The Afghan conquest also diminished the partnership between the VOC and their *Banian* brokers at Isfahan, the Khemchand family, since at this time the bullion market sharply fell. The brokers Hemraj and Bishendas were no longer active in procuring gold and silver specie, but acted rather as financiers for the Isfahan factory on a limited provision of money and goods from the Bandar Abbas factory.

Whereas the old partnerships wavered uncertainly, the VOC established alternative local agencies in the new markets they entered. At Basra the Company partnered with the *Banian* community (supposedly from Sind and Hindustan), primarily utilizing them as brokers and money changers. The case of the first broker, Mulchand, suggests that the *Banians* sector had gained momentum from an increased participation of the *Banians* from Bandar Abbas and Isfahan after the Safavid period. The Dutch recruited Mulchand in Bandar Abbas in 1724. He was closely associated with the Hemraj firm; his brother was a principal servant of Hemraj at Isfahan, and apparently he himself was a business partner of Bishendas. Settled in Basra, Mulchand formed an integral part of the community and undertook literally the whole trade of the Company until 1735.

Despite the strong commitment of the *Banians*, the partnership was also underpinned by Jacob Jan Sahid, a Julfa Armenian whose family had served the Dutch at Isfahan as interpreters since the Safavid period. Installed as the first Basra broker in 1739, Jacob Jan represented the VOC to the Basra authorities, but in the early 1740s, when the Company found no proper *Banian* agents, he also acted as broker and money changer. His successor and uncle Ibrahim took up permanent residence in Basra, a sign of the phased migration of the Julfa Armenians to Basra from the late 1730s.

At Bushire the Company used another *Banian*, one named Nath, as their broker. Nath was the epitome of a mobile *Banian* of the eighteenth century. He first served Khemchand at Isfahan, and then moved to Bandar Abbas, Sind, and then back to Bandar Abbas, before he was appointed as the Bushire broker. In the meantime he also spent two years getting trading experience in Bushire.

The scene at the Kharg local agency is not very clear. It might well have included Armenian merchants, given the fact that a number of Julfa Armenians who had fled Nadir Shah's tyranny built a new settlement in 1754 in Bandar Rig, a place where the Kharg broker had strong interests. Afterwards, most of them moved to Kharg.

The significant rise in the sugar trade at Masqat in the eighteenth century must to a great extent be credited to the steady immigration of merchants after the 1720s. Masqat, which already had attracted the solid business colony of the Bhattias from Sind, extended its shelter to numerous merchants in Iran fleeing from the Afghan invasion. After a possible recession during Nadir Shah's military intervention in Oman, the port's merchant society attracted *Banians* from Kerman, and arguably incorporated Shiite Muslim merchants from Hyderabad. In 1756 and 1757, when the VOC were trading in Masqat, they encountered two *Banian* brokers named Anand Ram and Narottam. Anand Ram was a son of the Bushire broker Nath and similarly a mobile merchant. As representative of the governor of Sind at Masqat he invited the Dutch to trade in Sind. This in fact occurred under his guidance in 1757. Narottam, a Gujarati Brahmin, was an influential broker in Masqat, and he achieved favourable sugar sales in 1757. He would undertake sugar trade for the Dutch and the French for the rest of the century.

To conclude, the tremendous vigour with which the local merchant communities, particularly the *Banian* and the Armenian ones, strove to adjust to the rapidly changing economic circumstances provided a critical setting for the link between sugar and bullion to be maintained after the Safavid period.

