

## Indian Guests at the Court of the Tsar

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For a long time, Russia served as a bridge between the East and the West. Fairy tales about the richness of eastern lands and their people reached Russia and Europe and resulted in numerous attempts to find the shortest way to the East. Unlike Western countries, Russia lies in close proximity to Eastern countries and had developed strong economic ties which later influenced Russian culture by making it more Eastern than Western.



Till the beginning of the 18th century Russia did not have access to the outer oceans and seas, so it grew in breadth, expanding its borders mostly towards the east and the south. Russian chronicles of the 12th century contain information about the wonderful land of India, its spices, precious stones as big as an egg and miraculous practices. As early as the 13th century, Russian fairs and markets dealt

in a variety of goods from this far-away country. Goods from India reached the markets of Moscow, the Russian capital city, through the city of Astrakhan, the capital of the Astrakhan Khanate. Astrakhan Khanate was a Turkic Tatar state, one of the numerous states organized after the disintegration of the Golden Horde in the middle of the 15th century. The Khanate occupied the region of Low Volga river and the Caspian Sea basin, which had both strategic and economic importance. At that time, Russian merchants did not find it easy to visit India, but Indian merchants became quite often guests in the Russian lands. Astrakhan emerged as a center of Russian-Indian economic contacts. The ruler of Muscovite principality, Ivan IV, also known as Ivan the Terrible for his cruelty, conquered the Astrakhan Khanate after a long war in 1554 CE. In Astrakhan, the new Moscow ruler found a well-organized community of an Indian merchants, which was ready to serve the interests of the new authorities. Contemporary chronicles mentioned numerous textile manufactories which were established in Astrakhan by Indians. The textile industry was new to Russia and the merchants were invited to Moscow to demonstrate the rich variety of their textile goods. In 1666 CE, the clandestine agency of the Russian court asked the Astrakhan governor-general to



send to Moscow several Indian craftsmen who possessed the knowledge of making unbleached calico and cotton. Such natural dye as madder was also in great demand.



Russian officials collected information on all available routes of access to India. Russia saw itself as an important mediator in developing and strengthening economic ties with India, Persia, Transcaucasia and Central Asia. The routes which led to India were known from the Hellenistic period, but not all of them were accessible due to changes in the political situation, climate conditions and economic preferences. In the 16th – 17th centuries there were four possible routes to India, each of them taking as long as three months in one direction. The first route led to Delhi through the Persian city of Kandaghar. For the trade caravan of camels and horses it took about a month to reach Delhi. From Kandaghar the merchants travelled to Gilan and from there they could reach Astrakhan by travelling around the Caspian Sea. The second route led to Delhi through the territory of the Central Asian Khanate of Bukhara. Bukhara and Khiva became important economic centers of the region since the 16th century and their rulers consolidated international trade of the Silk Road. From the Khanate of Bukhara the road to Delhi passed through Kabul. Various goods were transported by camels, and horses were used as a means of transport between the caravan merchants. The third

route was known since the times of Alexander the Great and led from Delhi to Tatta by land. From Tatta one travelled by the sea to Laurestan, Isfahan and through the Gilan province to Astrakhan. The

fourth route led from Delhi to Kashan and then again to Astrakhan through Kashan and Gilan provinces of the Persian empire.

The history of Russian trade with its eastern neighbours is quite interesting. Till the 16th century, Russians were quite satisfied with their trade balance with India, Persia and Central Asia. In the reign of Ivan IV, the

Muscovy principality decided to intensify its economic relations with these lands because of Great Britain. Envoys of Elizabeth I arrived at the court of the Russian Tsar with a request to search for the shortest way to India with the help of Russian merchants. The Russians refused to cooperate with the British and instead decided to develop economic relations with India by themselves and established the Muscovite Trade Company for trade with the Eastern countries. Moscow, Astrakhan, Yaroslavl and Archangelsk were chosen as the main centers for the Company's activities. Moscow was known as a capital city with a growing economic and industrial activity; Astrakhan became an important trade city, the crossroads of East-West trade; Yaroslavl was an important center for inner Russian trade with two big annual fairs and Archangesk was a big port city on the shores of the Nordic Sea which allowed the enlarged delivery of Eastern goods to Great Britain, the German lands and North European countries.

The community of Indian merchants who chose Astrakhan as their place of residence grew steadily. In 'good' years of trade about 200 merchants brought their goods to Russia and in



'bad' trade years (mostly because of local wars with Persia and Central Asian lands) about 80 Indian merchants would succeed in reaching Russia. Indian merchants obtained numerous privileges from the Muscovy government, their trade rights were guaranteed and protected. They paid taxes similar to local Russian merchants and were under the administrative jurisdiction of the Kazan tax authorities that dealt with non-Russian subjects. In the course of time, they built the Indian artisan and trade quarter. The buildings of this quarter reminded them of their far off motherland. Indian merchants developed intensive trade links with Moscow, Archangelsk (the port on the North of Russia on the shores of the Nordic Sea, Yaroslavl, Tver and later with Saint Petersburg. In 1723 they applied to the Russian Emperor Peter I (the Great) with a request to allow them to trade in Chinese goods with Europe and on the territory of Siberia and to trade in Russian goods in China. The permission was provided and described as vitally important for the growing economic interests of Russia. The special permit allowed credit and loans for Indian merchants with the purpose of developing economic relation with the



Eastern neighbours of the Russian empire such as China and Persia.

The street which led to the Indian quarter was called the Indian street and remnants of the buildings can be found there today.

According to records relating to 1750 CE, in the Indian quarter there were 73 merchant shops, in the 18th century, their number grew to 78. Indian merchants came mostly from Punjab and Rajputana, all of them were Hindus and not Moslems. Some of the merchants spent more time in Russia than in India.

At the end of the 18th century, when travel to India became a dangerous enterprise, most of the community members asked for Russian citizenship and in course of time turned into Russian subjects. Family ties with the distant motherland became fragile and the question of establishing a family and raising children became especially acute. Bringing brides from India proved extremely difficult as Indian women did not travel so far and never accompanied their husbands on their business trips.

A solution was found with the help of young women belonging to the neighbouring Tatar community. Tatars are Sunni Moslems, but they were known as tolerant and flexible in religious matters. The young women who were ready to adopt the traditions of their future husbands became new members of the male community of

Indian merchants. Their descendants known under the name of Agryzheny Tatars are still living in Astrakhan and nearby. The name Agryzheny comes from the Turk-Tatar word 'child' and refers to children who were born in mixed Indian-Tatar families. The Agryzheny population of Astrakhan in the 18th century was a sizable one.

The Astrakhan city administration archives offer interesting evidence of the burial practices of the Indian community as one of the main attractions for other city-dwellers.

Citizens of Astrakhan were amused by the Indian burial procedure of burning the body of the



deceased and spreading the ash above the river. The population census of Astrakhan, which was held in 1835 CE listed 164,830 idolaters (mostly Kalmyks and Indians). The Kalmyks were Lamaists and Indians were Hindus. Both Kalmyk and Indian communities had seven active temples where idols were offered worship. Traditional Indian burials ceased to be reported at the



beginning of the 19th century.

The size of the economic activity of the Indian community is very impressive. Indian merchants were not only traders; they were also energetic entrepreneurs. At the end of the 18th century, the Indian quarter of Astrakhan counted 1170 merchant shops and about 70 industrial enterprises. Practically all the enterprises produced different goods for the well-established textile industry in the region.

Three enterprises produced sapras, twelve enterprises produced cotton and unbleached calico, twenty-one enterprises produced natural

dye and provided the service of dyeing the fabric of the local producers. Other enterprises dealt in gold and silver jewelry, diamonds and other precious stones. Numerous merchant shops traded in different kinds of fabric – silk, raw cotton and cotton, wool and Cashmere and the most popular dyes such as madder and ink nuts. Indian merchants as economic intermediaries were aware of market demands and public taste on both sides.

From India they brought precious and semi-precious stones, such as diamonds, rubies and sapphires to Russia; various kinds of spices – cardamom, clove, nutmeg, cinnamon, white and yellow ginger and textile goods. From Russia to the Persian and Indian markets they supplied European fabric (mostly Dutch and British), mirrors, raw leather and yuft (specially made soft leather), steel needles, cast iron, steel, copper, glass, clay and porcelain, wrapping and writing paper, sugar, sunflower seeds, linen fabric.

Indian merchants were often used as informers and diplomats. Russian city-dwellers were educated enough to distinguish an Indian merchant from the Persian or Bukharian and were aware that with India not only a land of wonders and fairy tales. Russian administration since the mid-16th century searched for an opportunity to establish constant diplomatic relations with the rulers of the Mughal Empire. Four times Russian rulers sent diplomatic messages to the Mughals between 1646CE – 1675CE carrying a proposal for strengthening and enriching economic relations but in vain.

The story of the community of Indian merchants in Astrakhan could easily become one of the beautiful fairy tales of the past, but the facts provided speak for themselves: no one can deny that the region lying between Astrakhan and Moscow continues to be famous for and proud of its textile goods, the colours and patterns of which clearly indicate their Indian origin. ●●

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