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Trade, Politics and *Nuhani* Afghans during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries.

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The history of the people of Afghanistan has been deeply intertwined with the people of Hindustan since prehistoric times. In medieval Indian history Afghans have their own place and role. They were the settlers, peasants, traders, soldiers, chiefs and rulers.¹ There were various Afghan tribes who were scattered along the northern and north-western regions of India and the present Afghanistan. Initially Afghans entered into India as soldiers and later on were followed by a series of migrations.² The immigrant Afghans thus comprised of mercenaries, merchants, fugitives, fortune-seekers etc.³ In other words, there were both pull and push factors behind the Afghan migrations to northern parts of India from the sultanate period onwards.

The tribal units of the Afghans had their own peculiarities and were divided into a sort of functional hierarchical set up. Usually there was one dominant and leading tribe while the others were acting as its vassals.⁴ Further sub-divisions within a tribe would have made this set up more complex and competitive. Similarly there were various tribes and sub-tribes of the *Nuhani*s like *Daulat Khel*, *Miyan Khel*, *Niyazi*, *Marwat*, *Khasor* and *Tator*.⁵ In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the leading tribe of the *Nuhani*s was the *Daulat Khel*.⁶

One of the important features of tribal mode of living was the constant seasonal migrations from one region to another. This way of life had a deep influence on their economic activities as well. The range of trading operations of the *Nuhani* Afghans was largely determined by their seasonal migrations. Their

¹ Irfan Habib, *Evolution of the Afghan Tribal System*, Papers from the Aligarh Historians Society, 2001. p. 27.

² Iqbal Husain, *Studies in Polity Economy and Society of the Trans-Gangetic Valley: Fifteenth- Nineteenth Centuries*, (Delhi: Primus Books, 2013), pp. 335-365; This book contains a section on Afghans and provides a detailed information about their immigration and settlements in different parts of northern India and their role as soldiers, zamindars, chiefs and rulers, besides the approach of the sultans and the Mughals towards them.

³ Ibid., p. 354.

⁴ Anatoly M. Khazanov, *Nomads and the Outside World*, Eng. tr., by Julia Crookenden, (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), p 162.

⁵ *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., I, p. 219.

⁶ Anatoly M. Khazanov, *Nomads and the Outside world*, p. 162.

migratory journeys northward extended to the regions of Kabul, Balkh, Bukhara and Samarkand and South-eastwards to Bengal.⁷ This could have been due to the availability of the pasture grounds or some familiarity with those regions. As far as Bengal is concerned some Afghan tribesmen had already migrated in those parts during the first Afghan sultanate in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.⁸ This would have developed a sort of social base of the Afghans and encouraged them to settle in those parts.

Another significant character of Afghans, noticed by some contemporary observers, was their versatility to serve as both soldiers and merchants.⁹ This feature was also found in the *Nuhani* Afghans as well. Some scholars have characterised the trade of the *Nuhani*s as “mediatory trade”.¹⁰ It is largely because of their pastoral migratory nature and the coincidence of their migratory routes with the trade routes that connected these regions.¹¹ They were one of the *powinda* Afghan nomads. The *Nuhani*s spent their winter in the Indus valley. Their summer pastures were located on the Ghazni plateau and on the borders of Khurasan. Gradually they, as mediatory traders, turned the trade between India and Iran and between India and Central Asia into their secondary occupation.¹² However, from the descriptions of the Mughal emperor Babur, it seems that some of them had turned into full-fledged merchants and devoted themselves exclusively to the trading activities. In the sixteenth century these *powindahs* made their journey from Bukhara through Qandahar and the Gomal Pass twice a year.¹³ But Alexander Burnes writes that they changed their residences in fixed three *Kirees* (divisions) conducted by three branches of the tribe i.e., *Nusseer, Kharoutee and Miyan Khel*.¹⁴ These divisions also indicate the division in the pattern of migrations itself. It was with the last branch that the Hindu merchants and other foreigners travelled.¹⁵ These divisions also indicate the hierarchical divisions that had developed among the *Nuhani* tribes. The fighting men of the *Nuhani* Afghans belonged to these branches.

Although it is not clear from the medieval sources how the *Nuhani* traders organised their journeys across the borders. However, one could draw some insights from the continuity of their trading patterns and the detailed account of G.T. Vigne, who accompanied a *Nuhani* caravan, about the organisation of their journeys. The caravans were divided into three divisions with each division following the other.¹⁶ The three divisions were safely conducted by three tribes i.e., *Nusseer, Kharoutee and Miyan Khel* respectively.¹⁷ It was from the 10th April to 10-12th May that the journeys were undertaken. To travel by first caravan it was necessary

⁷ Stephen Frederic Dale, *Indian Merchants and Eurasian Trade, 1600-1750*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 62.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Niccolao Manucci, *Storia Dor Mogor or Mogul India*, Vol. II, tr., William Irvine, (New Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1990), p. 426.

¹⁰ Anatoly M Khazanov, *Nomads and the Outside World*, p. 210. ; Dale, *Indian Merchants and Eurasian Trade*, p. 64.

¹¹ Anatoly M Khazanov and Andre Wink, ed. *Nomads in the Sedentary World*, (UK: Curzon Press, 2001), p. 216.

¹² Anatoly M Khazanov, *Nomads and the Outside World*, p. 210.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

¹⁴ Alexander Burnes, *Cabool, Being a Narrative of a Journey to and Residence in that City*, (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1842), pp. 77-78.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹⁶ G. T. Vigne, *A Personal Narrative of a Visit to Ghuzni, Kabul, and Afghanistan, and of a Residence at the Court of Dost Mohamed: With Notices of Runjit Sing, Khiva, and the Russian Expedition*, (London: Whittaker & Company, 1840), p. 68.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

to reach at Derabund before 10th April, in the second before 20-25th April.¹⁸ About the third and largest division there was much uncertainty but it usually departed on 10th or 12th May.¹⁹

By the time the Mughals had gained complete control over Bihar and Bengal the *Nuhani* and other Afghans were spread across Mughal Empire from Ghazni to Bengal. Some of the Afghan tribes took active part in trade. Among them the tribe of *Nuhani*s was very important from the trading point of view. One historian has also labelled them as “Natural” merchants given their pastoral economy and migratory life patterns.²⁰ While some others label them as tribal traders.²¹ However, they seem to be more than that. Emperor Babur in his memoirs refers to the *Nuhani* Afghan tribe while his stay in Kabul. He mentions that they were quite accomplished traders.²² He sometimes distinguished them from the other Afghan tribes. This was perhaps due their importance as long-distance traders.²³ They played a significant role in the trading activities of the sixteenth and seventeenth century India. Even some early nineteenth century travellers were also impressed by their trading ventures. Their area of influence extended from the northern parts of India, Afghanistan and Central Asia. They even went to the lands of Iran and conducted their trading activities.

Although, Afghans are largely considered as horse traders but their range of trading commodities was very considerable. Apart from horses they traded in such commodities as white cloths, aromatic roots, sugars and *tipuchaqs*.²⁴ The Afghan traders also brought *Husaini*, a well-known and long stone-less grapes, into Hindustan in round, flat boxes of poplar wood.²⁵ Their range of trading commodities also seems to have expanded up to the first half of the nineteenth century. The first caravan carried the coarse goods of Moghiana and salt of Punjab and the second caravan had indigo bought at Multan and Buhawulpore and Chintz of Hindustan.²⁶ The third caravan was laden with golden cloth of Benaras, English Chintzes, calicos, gun-locks and like objects.²⁷ On 15th October 1836 the third caravan brought pomegranates, almonds, raisins and ruwash from Kabul, horses, cochineal, nankin, gold thread, raw silk and other goods from Bokhara.²⁸ Since camels were used as a means of transport, the *Nuhani* merchants would also have been involved in the trade of camels also.

The *Nuhani* Afghans did not contain their activities to trade only but also entered into the military and administrative services as well. They participated in the wars to conquer the different districts. Large cash awards were granted to them. Besides, the wealthy and strategic districts were assigned to them.²⁹ Some of the *Nuhani* Afghans were given land grants by Babur in the early part of the sixteenth century. Among them

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Stephen Frederic Dale, *Indian Merchants and Eurasian Trade*, p. 62.

²¹ Chetan Singh, *Region and Empire: Punjab in the Seventeenth Century*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 267.

²² Stephen Frederic Dale, *The Garden of the Eight Paradises: Babur and the Culture of Empire in Central Asia, Afghanistan and India (1483-1530)*, (Leiden: Brill, 2004), p. 311.

²³ Ibid. p. 441.

²⁴ Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur, *Baburnama*, 2 vols. Tr., A.N. Beveridge, (New Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1989), p. 235.

²⁵ G. T. Vigne, *A Personal Narrative*, p.172; Babur also praises *Sahibi*, a grape grown in Koh-daman, among the Samarkandi fruits. p. 203.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 68.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 69.

²⁹ Stephen Frederic Dale, *The Garden of the Eight Paradises*, p. 342.

who entered the service of Babur and received land grants were Yahya *Nuhani* and his brother.³⁰ Mahmud Khan *Nuhani*, along with some 7 or 8000 *Nuhani* Afghans, was given 50 lakhs from Bihar revenues.³¹ One crore was retained as *Khalisa* and the rest of the revenues of Bihar were handed over to Jalal Khan.³² He agreed to pay one crore as tribute. On 8th June 1529 Yahya *Nuhani* was also given the allowance of 15 lakhs from Parsarur, a pargana of Lahore.³³ He was also given a dress of honour. This would have greatly enhanced their reputation and thereby boosted their trading operations as well. Largely the Afghans were concentrated in the eastern regions. It was here that Babur approximately enrolled 8000 *Nuhani*s in his service.³⁴ Akbar gave Qutlugh Khan *Nuhani* some parganas of Bengal and Orissa in fief.³⁵ Man Singh had also given Khawaja Usman *Nuhani* some more parganas in Orissa and Satagoan.³⁶

Sources of the sixteenth century also make it clear that the *Nuhani* Afghans absorbed the functions of a trader, soldier, and a revenue administrator during the period of sultans and the Mughals. Initially various *Nuhani* Afghans fought against the Mughals while some others submitted to Babur and fought from his side. To bring the Afghans into his fold Babur had also bestowed some lucrative land grants, as stated above, to various Afghans tribes and *Nuhani*s were one of them. This would have given a larger access and power to the Afghan traders throughout the Mughal administered territories and beyond. They could naturally have become the larger suppliers of the military supplies during the campaigns as we find in the case of Banjaras.

Trade and politics has been intimately related to each other. Some Afghans had started their careers as traders and ultimately ended as rulers. *Nuhani* Afghans are a good example of this kind of relationship. Jos Gommans also points that Afghans had a reputation of using horse trade as a springboard to gain political power.³⁷ *Nuhani* Afghan merchants were mainly dealing with horse trade. They supplied horses to India from Central Asia and Iran. Dependence of the Mughal cavalry supplies on the imports of Turkish breeds would have also necessitated to control the trade routes through Kabul and Central Asia.³⁸ After the fall of Vijayanagara state there was a northward shift of the trade routes. Besides, the fall of Vijayanagara state coincided with the decline of the overseas horse trade. Similarly the rise of Mughal state was concurrent with the domination of the overland supply lines.³⁹ Since Afghan traders dominated these routes it would have made them an indispensable part of the route regulatory system and the trading arrangements of the region. As per the estimates of Abul Fazl the *Nuhani*s possessed 50,000 horsemen when Babur defeated the Lodis and forced them into Bihar and Bengal where Darya Khan *Nuhani* was ruling.⁴⁰

³⁰ Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur, *Baburnama*, II, p. 676.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., pp. 683-84.

³⁴ Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur, *Baburnama*, II, p. 676; and Rita Joshi, *The Afghan Nobility and the Mughals (1526-1707)*, (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1985), p. 49.

³⁵ Khwajah Nimat Allah, *Tarikh-I-Khan Jahani wa Makhzan-I Afghani*, Vol. I, ed. S. M. Imam Al Din, (Decca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1960), p. 70.

³⁶ Ibid., 71.

³⁷ Jos Gommans, *Mughal Warfare: Indian Frontiers and High Roads to Empire, 1500-1700*. (London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2002), p. 116.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 115.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Stehleb Federic Dale, *Indian Merchants and Eurasian Trade*, pp. 62-63.

The state would not have remained indifferent about these developments. Babur was also well aware about the importance of traders and trade routes. It becomes clear from his attitude towards trade and its smooth functioning. After establishing himself in Kabul he started giving favours and honours to the *Nuhani* traders and other people. He also brought the *Nuhani* Afghans under his services. On 26th October 1519 he bestowed honorary dresses to the Hindustani traders headed by Yahya Khan *Nuhani*.⁴¹ Sher Shah Suri was also a great supporter of trade and traders given his construction of the roads, caravanserais and Dak chowkis. However, his attitude towards the *Nuhani* merchants is not clear from the contemporary sources. His overall relationship with the *Nuhani* rulers and chiefs was not quite cordial. It would have cast shadow on the *Nuhani* traders as well. Sher Shah's political favours on *Sarwanis*, petty Afghan traders, is a case in point. Akbar adopted the policy of conciliation, coercion and diplomacy towards the Afghans. He too had the presence of Afghan traders in the court. Jala, an Afghan, was a part of Akbar's court solely by his profession as a horse-dealer.⁴² He was a son of a broker and was highly trusted.⁴³

Merchants were always vulnerable to various attacks and the *Nuhani* traders were no exception to it. They also fell prey to both the raiders and robbers. Babur also mentions about the seizure of various goods from the Afghan merchants who were on the roads.⁴⁴ Even some Afghan traders had lost their lives. One such incident is mentioned by Babur in his memoir. Khawaja Khizr *Nuhani* was killed by Hindi Mughal, one of Babur's soldier. He was a famous and reputed Afghan trader.⁴⁵ Babur, having passed through his difficulties and establishing himself in Kabul, honoured the *Nuhanis* with robes of honour.⁴⁶

The *Nuhani* traders had, for the sake of safe conduct of trade, also established their own mechanisms of protection. The beheading of the Khawaja Khizr *Nuhani* points to some kind of fight between the *Nuhani* Afghans and the Babur's party. Abul Fazl makes it clear while pointing to an incident of attack on the *Nuhanis*.⁴⁷ They were attacked by the Hazaras. In retaliation they stood firm and fought for seven days.⁴⁸ At last they were overpowered by thirst and thus turned back. They had also sought the help from the leader of the *Tarikis*.⁴⁹ While crossing the Gumal pass they kept themselves armed to protect themselves from the attacks of the Waziri tribes, who had dominated the area along the course of Gumal River.⁵⁰ Alexander Burnes, in the early nineteenth century, also refers to the security measures of the *Nuhani* Afghans. They bore arms and great number of men to protect not only their own property but also of those who accompanied them.⁵¹ They were conducted by the three branches of tribes like *Nusseer*, *Khauroutee* and *Meeaeen Khyl*.⁵²

⁴¹ Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur, *Baburnama*, Vol. II, p. 416.

⁴² Abul Fazl, *Akbarnama*, vol. III, Eng., tr., H. Beveridge, (Delhi: Rare Books, 1972), pp. 577-8.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur, *Baburnama*, I, p. 235.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Alexander Burnes, *Cabool: Being a Personal Narrative of a Journey to, and Residence in that City, in the Years 1836, 7, and 8*, (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1842), p.79.

⁴⁷ Abul Fazl, *Akbarnama*, Vol. III, p. 1160.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Stephen Frederic Dale, *Indian Merchants and Eurasian Trade*, pp. 53; and G.T. Vigne, *A Personal Narrative*, pp. 67-104.

⁵¹ Alexander Burnes, *Cabool: Being a Personal Narrative*, p. 78.

⁵² Ibid., p. 78.

Thus it shows that the *Nuhani* merchants were accompanied by escorts for the safety and security of the caravan.

The fortunes or importance of the *Nuhanis* also seems to have gone through some ups and downs from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. Mughal sources of post-Babur period do not have much references about the *Nuhanis* in general or as traders in particular. They are referred to as horse sellers in the end of the sixteenth century.⁵³ Abul Fazl also writes about the *Nuhani* Afghans. He says that ‘the luhani tribe practised buying and selling in Ghaznin.⁵⁴ In 1634 some merchants are mentioned as having gone from the plains to the hills along with their goods.⁵⁵ The list of their goods indicates that, if not all, but some of them would have been the *Nuhani* Afghans. Again they are mentioned as grain suppliers to the army of Prince Dara Shikoh in Qandahar in 1653.⁵⁶ Some nineteenth century travellers also witnessed the trading activities of the *Nuhanis*. They mention that the *Nuhanis* also took part in silk trade. G. T. Vigne had reported that “several hundred mounds of raw silk are brought to Multan every year by the Lohanis, chiefly from Bokhara and Turkistan: these are manufactured in one hundred and fifty workshops.”⁵⁷ These travellers saw the continuity of the trading practices and patterns since Babur’s period. Since the trading activities of the *Nuhani* Afghans also extended up to Multan it seems quite possible that the *Nuhanis* were also a part of the larger designation of the Multani merchants. Therefore, the Muslim Multani merchants mentioned in Iran and Central Asia must have comprised of *Nuhani* traders or Afghans as well.⁵⁸

Thus one can argue that the *Nuhani* Afghans had played a significant role not only in the politics but also in the internal and external trade of sixteenth and seventeenth century India. They were traders on the move and enduring overland merchants. Their trading activities ranged from transporters to traders. Much has been written on European merchants but less on the Afghan merchants. However, there are certain aspects which still remain to be explored. What was their relationship with the merchants of the sedentary world? More nuanced research is required to highlight their relationship with the state. How did they financed their trade? What was that made them more enduring merchants? The present study is a small effort towards understanding the world of the *Nuhani* Afghan merchants.

⁵³ Stephen Frederic Dale, *Indian Merchants and Eurasian Trade*, p. 63.

⁵⁴ Abul Fazl, *Akbarnama*, Vol. III, p. 1160; and Chetan Singh, *Region and Empire: Punjab in the Seventeenth Century*, (Delhi: Oxford university Press, 1991), p. 267.

⁵⁵ Yusuf Mirak, *Mazhar-I Shahjahani*, ed. Sayyid Hisamuddin Rashidi, (Karachi: Sind Adabi Board, 1962), p. 239.

⁵⁶ Henry George Raverty, *Notes on Afghanistan and Baluchistan*, Vol. II, (Quetta: Nisa Traders, 1878), p. 489; Stephen Frederic Dale, *Indian Merchants and Eurasian Trade*, p. 63.

⁵⁷ G. T. Vigne, *A Personal Narrative*, pp. 21-22; and Stephen Frederic Dale, *Indian Merchants and Eurasian Trade* p. 56.

⁵⁸ Scott Levi, The Indian Merchant Diaspora in Early Modern Central Asia and Iran, *Iranian Studies*, Volume 32, Number 4, Fall 1999, p. 489.