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A Passage from India: Trajectories of Economic Integration in London and Mediterranean Europe¹

Mark-Anthony Falzon

In this paper I shall be looking at Hindu Sindhis, a well-defined community of traders from northwest India. More specifically, I will compare the pathways of economic integration of Hindu Sindhis in two very different places – London and the Mediterranean island of Malta. Data for the paper derive from two sources. Intermittently between 1995 and 2000, I conducted anthropological fieldwork in Malta, London, and Bombay (Mumbai). I draw extensively on oral history as narrated to me by several senior traders. Research in the Malta National Archives in 1999 yielded 88 records pertaining to 10 Sindhi firms that date from 1887 to 1928.²

Any study of migration and integration must include a look at processes of economic integration at the national and, increasingly, global levels. It is evident that, from the *vu compra* ('want to buy?') peddlers selling everything from beach towels to souvenirs in Italy, to Gujarati corner-shopkeepers in Britain, entrepreneurship of some sort is the occupational choice of many thousands of immigrants to Europe. This phenomenon has been studied for various situations (notably the Netherlands and the US) and there is a sizeable body of work on 'ethnic/immigrant entrepreneurs'.³ As the word 'ethnic' indicates, most of the studies trace the integration of immigrant groups into host economies by focusing on the group itself – in so doing "they reduce immigrant entrepreneurship to an ethno-cultural phenomenon existing within an economic and institutional vacuum".⁴ There is a dearth of studies that locate particular groups within different spatio-temporal contexts, thus highlighting the importance of the interaction between ethno-cultural dynamics and local socio-economic situations, as part of the integrative process.

In this paper I will try to show that Hindu Sindhi diaspora and migration are:

- themselves embedded, to paraphrase Clifford, in 'particular maps and histories', these being quite often specific to nation-states;⁵
- uneven processes that leave ostensibly homogenous (on the basis of ethnicity, religion, nationality, etc.) groups with marked internal dif-

ferentiation as regards access to resources and structural positions within nation-states and the global economic system.⁶

Although 'Sindhi business' may, on the basis of ethnic affiliation, be seen as a vertebrate category, in fact it takes on different local hues as different facets of the diaspora that themselves have developed within particular historical milieus, encounter specific local situations.

Introducing Hindu Sindhis

Hindu Sindhis (henceforth 'Sindhis') originate in the province of Sind which from 1843 to 1947 was the most northwestern province of British India; Sind became part of the newly-formed nation-state of Pakistan with the Independence of India and the Partition of the country in 1947. When the British conquered Sind and annexed it to their Indian possessions in 1843, the province had for several hundred years been ruled by a series of Muslim dynasties. Prior to the Muslim conquest, the population of Sind was predominantly Hindu with a strong Buddhist presence;⁷ by the time of the British annexation however, it was mainly Muslim with roughly one-fifth of the population being Hindu. The Hindus of Sind were mostly employed in trade and small business, although a very small number of them served as administrators to the Muslim Talpur Mirs and aristocracy and, later, to the British.

In a nutshell, there were two major waves of population movement out of Sind. The first, which originated with the British annexation of the province in 1843, was confined to a group of merchants from the small town of Hyderabad (to be distinguished from the city of Hyderabad in central India) who, leaving their families behind, struck out in search of business opportunities to places as far apart as Panama and the Straits Settlements (today's Singapore). Because the wares they sold and traded in originally were the handicrafts of Sind ('Sind works'), these migrants were known as 'Sindworkis' and the type of long-distance translocal commerce they practised as 'Sindwork'. This first significant population movement was therefore centred solely around trade and may be described as a 'trade diaspora'.⁸

The second migration, on the other hand, was a direct result of the political and social strife that came with the Partition of India in 1947. Sindhis left their homes in the fledgling Pakistan en masse and moved to India or to locations such as Malta where they already had considerable business interests. Since then the Sindhis that had settled in India after Partition have participated in a third migration: the so-called 'In-

dian diaspora' which has seen millions of people move out of the subcontinent in search of opportunity.

Sindhi migration therefore is typical of modern mass migrations from India (and South Asia generally), which have taken place within two broad contexts: the first, that of Imperialism within which Indians left the subcontinent as indentured labourers or (as in the case of the Sindhis) independent traders; the second, that of free migration to western countries and the Middle East in search of better job opportunities in all sectors.⁹ As a result of this series of migrations, Sindhis today are dispersed in well over one hundred countries. They retain a degree of cohesion that manifests itself in marriage and kinship practices, in the politics of group identity and, most notably, in the types of business relations they engage in. Most importantly, they have managed to integrate and embed themselves into the economies of their various destinations, often taking into their stride sea changes in economic structure and opportunity. It is at this point that comparison becomes possible.

The Sindwork Diaspora and the Mediterranean Link

As witnessed by the tragic events unfolding daily on Sicilian beaches, to immigrants today, Mediterranean Europe is little more than a stepping stone towards the economically more promising northern European countries. This, however, was not always so and has to do with the Mediterranean's present status as a political and economic backwater. In order to understand Sindhi migration to Malta one has to think back to a rather different situation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when the Mediterranean was one of the important theatres of northern European interest; this was particularly true for the British, for whom the middle sea was an essential part of the route to India, the 'jewel in the crown' of empire.

It is mainly the first wave of diaspora that concerns us here. Sindwork and its long-distance networks of trade emanating from Hyderabad were also, but not exclusively, the product of historical contingency: a number of causal factors were at play. First, the deposal of the Talpur Mirs by the British caused a sudden breakdown in the patterns of consumption of high-quality handicrafts by local ruling elites with the result that established Hindu Sindhi traders had to locate new markets for their goods. Second, the world in the second half of the 19th century was one of rapidly growing opportunities and a British-dominated, expanding world economy. This happened on two levels: first, the growing ease of communication and transport in north-west India and

Sind itself, and second, the global reality of a growing exchange of goods and people often across vast distances.

British rule expanded the limits of communications and transport in Sind. In 1889 for example, the Indus Valley Railways that linked up with major lines in India to connect Karachi to Delhi was completed. In 1864, the Indo-European Telegraph Department laid a submarine cable between Karachi and Fao (in what was then Turkish Arabia), joining the Turkish telegraph line and therefore linking up Sind (Karachi) with Europe.¹⁰

More importantly the Suez canal, opened in 1871, proved a major impetus behind the increasing level of transport and communication. In 1891, – for instance, Sind participated in some sort of foreign trade with 37 countries as compared to 18 in 1871.¹¹ The argument here is not merely that Sind was linked up with the world in terms of enterprise and trade, but that this world was *itself* expanding rapidly due partly to the British ‘policy of adventure’ and cultivation of free trade. Besides, the case of Sind is typical in that the second half of the 19th century witnessed the beginning of large-scale communication technologies with the diffusion of the telegraph and the invention of the telephone. The period, that has been described as the ‘second Industrial Revolution’,¹² was one of confluence of different technological developments that created new ways of producing, travelling, and communicating. This point is essential in order to understand the link between a small landlocked town in Sind and a Mediterranean island. Although the move out of Sind by Hyderabad traders was a reaction to local circumstances, it was feasible only because of the global realities of the latter half of the 19th century. This then was the infrastructure which made possible the bridging of geographical boundaries through trade and brought the first Sindworkis to Maltese shores.

The first Sindwork firms were established in Hyderabad around 1860. After this date one comes across Hyderabad traders setting up business in several places around the world. They arrived in Japan a few years after the 1868 Meiji Restoration;¹³ in 1890 Bulchand, a *bhai-band* from Hyderabad, landed on the shores of the Gold Coast in what today is Ghana¹⁴; around 1880, Sindhi traders went to Ceylon;¹⁵ in 1870, Sindhi firms established themselves in Gibraltar, and in Sierra Leone via Mediterranean routes in 1893;¹⁶ and in Hong Kong, a small Sindhi community was active by the late 19th century.¹⁷

The first thrust of the diaspora seems to have been in the direction of the Mediterranean – Markovits holds that their first destination was Egypt – and later through India to the Far East.¹⁸ The Mediterranean then, as now, was a favourite destination with travellers and tourists from Britain and the industrial countries of northern Europe and as such constituted a profitable market for the handicrafts of Sind –

which were of high repute among connoisseurs of 'Oriental' (in Edward Said's sense) artefacts. Around the same time the 'overland route' to India through the Mediterranean and the Red Sea (rather than round the Cape of Good Hope) became popular with the coming of steamers – P. & O. vessels, for example, began plying this route in 1840. Passengers would embark at the ports of the north and sail round through Gibraltar, disembarking at Alexandria and proceeding by Nile steamer to Cairo; from Cairo they went by carriage to Suez where they embarked on another boat down the Red Sea and frequently changed into a third one at Aden according to whether their final destination was Bombay, Calcutta, or Madras.¹⁹ The names of these places come up again and again in the papers of Sindworki firms from the mid-19th century. The Mediterranean, then, with its shiploads of travellers eager to buy into the idea of 'authentic' souvenirs, provided an attractive market for the Sindworkis.

Later, as Sindworkis diversified into curios and silk and started to draw upon sources other than local Sind production, they found excellent centres of production and sourcing in India and the Far East, particularly Bombay (where many Sindwork firms set up depots and, in some cases, offices functioning in conjunction with Hyderabad) and Japan. The main line of trade of Sindwork seems to have been the export of silk and curios from the East to the West. Here the points of the compass pertain to the *provenance* of producers/consumers rather than their *location* – in the geographical sense, an Indian-made curio sold to a British traveller in Singapore, for instance, was moving from West to East. Firms were quick to open new branches and expand their network to places as far away as Panama and Australia, generally following the lines of international travel – not surprisingly, their expansion often converged with the advance of the British Empire, itself *the* major actor in the large-scale international human interactions of the time.

Sindworkis in Malta: Tourism and the Trade in 'Curios'

The earliest record of Sindworki activities in Malta dates from 1887; when the firm Pohoomull Brothers applied to the colonial authorities for the release from customs of one case containing 'Oriental goods and some fancy weapons as knives, daggers, etc.' Since the application states the firm's intention to sell these wares in its shop, it is evident that it had been operating in Malta for some time – enough time to establish a shop that is.²⁰ By the first decade of the 20th century, at least ten Sindwork firms had established businesses in Malta. For many of these firms, Malta was one node in a trade network spanning the Far East, the Mediterranean, East and West Africa, and South America.

Although the main trade was that of the export of silk and curio items from the Far East and India respectively to the tourist and visitor entrepôts of the Mediterranean and South America, there were significant subsidiary currents of a more localised aspect. Thus, for example, there were circum-Mediterranean networks which were engaged in the re-export of goods that did not sell well in a particular place, or in the export of locally-manufactured products.

The typical Sindhi establishment in Malta was an import business and a retail outlet on the main shopping thoroughfare of the island, Strada Reale (later Kingsway and today Republic Street) in the capital Valletta. As photographs from the period show, the shops were generally well laid-out and the wares arranged in an attractive way – this was a luxury tourist market that required central locations and a quality image.

It is worth keeping in mind that the factor behind the presence of Sindhis in Malta was the geographical location of the island within the context of the British Empire. Most Mediterranean shipping routes included Malta on their itinerary and this meant a large presence of travellers, troops, and administrators stopping over briefly and exploring Valletta, including the main shopping area that was situated a couple of streets away from the harbour. The dependence of Sindhi firms on tourists and stop-overs was evident in the spatial location of their businesses, which ensured that from the time a ship dropped anchor to the time it left Malta, the visitor was tempted constantly by the Sindworkis' wares.

Their dependence on the tourist sector was also evident in the types of goods they sold. Up to around 1930, Sindhi shops in Malta were mostly engaged in the curio and luxury textiles trade; a typical Sindwork shopfront sign from 1907, for instance, read 'Grand Indo-Egyptian Persian Bazaar – Suppliers to the German Imperial Family.' They catered to the Orientalist tastes of tourists and visitors and made little effort to explore the local market. This is not to say that they had no Maltese customers; turn-of-the-century Japanese ceramics, one of the lines that Sindhis dealt in, survive in many a Maltese home today. Shops were stocked with Japanese ceramics and antimony wares, brassware, silk items of clothing such as kimonos imported mainly from Japan, silver filigree, embroideries, and curiosities.

The Sindworki firms seem to have been well-organised: they had letterheads printed professionally for their correspondence for instance, and they also enrolled the services of the town's more established lawyers when relating to the colonial government. In all cases the head-offices, where the important decisions regarding the firm network were taken and personnel enrolled, were in Hyderabad; the telegraph was widely used for rapid communication between Malta and Sind. Most

Sindworkis present in Malta at the time were salaried employees. Each firm had a manager and a number of shop assistants (who apparently often doubled as cooks and servants to the managers) depending on the size of the firm. The owners of the firms are recorded as visiting Malta from time to time, presumably to check on the progress of the branch and scout for new ideas and markets.

Employees were recruited on a two-and-a-half- or three-year contract basis. Potential recruits were generally located by word of mouth, inevitable in a small town like Hyderabad; one case specifically mentions that an employee was enrolled through an uncle of his who was on good terms with the owner of the firm.²¹ The passage to and from Hyderabad was paid for by the firm; in the few cases in which salary is mentioned, it appears that half the employees' monthly salary was sent back home to Hyderabad, and the other half given to the employees in a lump sum when their contracts ended (this was probably only the case with junior employees). During their period of employment, they lived together in housing provided by the firm, usually in Valletta itself or its suburb, Floriana. Neither managers nor junior employees were allowed to bring their wives and dependants over from Hyderabad and it was only after Partition in 1947 that Sindhi men in Malta were joined by their families. There were several instances of relatives working together in the same firm.²²

As regards employment itself, there were two systems in operation. The first was based on the old *gumashta* (agent) system whereby the owner of the firm employed agents to run his various branches. These agents were a type of working partners – they worked on a commission basis, and had some degree of autonomy. The second, and by far the most common, type was that of the salaried employee. Employees were recruited generally on a three-year written contract that bound both employer and employee for the duration of that period. *Bhaiband* boys were enrolled at a young age (15 or so was a typical age for a son, slightly older for a relative or acquaintance, to leave school and join a business) and assigned to a particular branch.

Originally, wherever the Sindworkis went, they tended to keep to themselves and form little enclaves. They did not necessarily mix with other groups of Indians present in their destinations as traders or indentured workers. By the mid-20th century, trading associations were being formed by Sindhis around the world, usually aimed at protecting their interests as a group. Yet even within these enclaves, competition was rife. Individual firms expected complete loyalty from their employees and did not encourage them to socialise widely, especially not with the employees of other firms. (Again, as the joint petition for better conditions from Malta shows, the employees did not necessarily subscribe to this idea.) Members of particular firms ate and worked to-

gether, slept under the same roof, and sometimes did *puja* (worship) together – this was partly because the risk of trade information leaking to another Sindwork firm was a constant worry to the employers and considered to be too great to encourage a wider socialisation.

Post-1930s Diversification

In the early 1930s, a change took place in the Sindwork business based in Malta as the main companies withdrew their interests. According to the memory of Sindhis living in Malta today, this was due to falling profits. This explanation is probably correct given that the worldwide economic recession and the resulting flop in tourism dealt a heavy blow to the silk and curio industry – the firm Udhavadas & Co, for instance, was one of the casualties.²³ However, the shops that had belonged to these firms did not close down; rather, they were sold to the former employees (generally to the managers) of the firms, who were ready to operate at smaller profits. Further proof of this change of ownership lies in the fact that today most of the premises from where the firms operated still belong to the descendants of the erstwhile employees.

Therefore, since the late 1930s, Sindhi business in Malta has been in the hands of the erstwhile managers of the Sindwork firms who had become the owners of the retail outlets, and their descendants. Apart from the close relatives of the traders who moved from Hyderabad to Malta (often via a number of intermediate stops in India or elsewhere) to join their menfolk permanently, Partition produced no significant influx of Sindhis along the established model of ‘splintering off’ the major firms and recruiting new people from India. There were two reasons behind this. First, Malta being a very small island with limited market possibilities, it was not seen as a land of opportunity as were places such as Hong Kong and Africa. Second, and more importantly, from 1952 to 1985, tight immigration laws meant that the only Sindhi men who could move to Malta from elsewhere were those who got married to local Sindhi girls. As one informant complained to me, ‘we wanted to do favours to our cousins, but we couldn’t. In 1952, the doors were closed and we couldn’t bring anyone to Malta. For 33 years not a single person came from India’. Sindhi business in Malta has therefore tended to be passed down and/or to change hands within or between the same 8 to 10 families. The local development of Sindhi business is therefore a very interesting case study in that it shows a closed system in terms of number of personnel – even if these people remained well-connected in terms of both family (through marriage, that is) and business to Sindhis across the world.

This shift in the personnel structure coincided with a general change of line. Although a few shops continued to deal in the old line of curios and luxury textiles, many of them started to diversify and explore the local market, concentrating on a wider variety of textiles. By the beginning of World War Two the strength of Sindhi businesses in Malta had become the import, wholesale, and retail traders of textiles mainly for the local market. Many of the shops specialising in curios and luxury textiles had shifted towards, and diversified into, the general textile sector. This proved to be a wise choice. The post-war period in Malta was characterised by the growing affluence and changing expectations of Maltese society – indeed, old people in Malta today tend to differentiate strongly between the lifestyles they led before and after the War. The textiles sector gained steadily in importance as Maltese women generally (as opposed to a small urban elite, that is) became aware of fashions and started making clothes that went beyond utilitarian principles and experimented with styles and type of textiles. In the period between the late-1950s and the mid-1970s, Sindhi retailers enjoyed a veritable bonanza of business. Through their family and trading connections in the Far East and notably Japan, they had access to affordable and good quality sources of textiles. During that period, they had little competition from Maltese businessmen and monopolised the textiles market almost completely – the saying among Maltese seamstresses was: *‘Jekk trid bicca drapp tajba mur ghand l-Indjani’* (‘If you are looking for quality textiles, ask the Indians’).

Things were to change yet again, however. During the last quarter of the century Malta’s female workforce increased and diversified even as sex discrimination was officially erased regarding wage rates in 1971. This meant that there were more women with less time and more cash to spare who needed smart clothes for everyday use, and who were therefore prone to buy ready-mades. Sindhi businesses were quick to respond: by the mid-1980s, almost all of the textile shops in Valletta had changed their line to ready-mades, with an emphasis on the lower-middle end of the market. This time competition with Maltese-owned businesses was intense but the Sindhis were able to combine competitive prices with relatively good quality and managed to hold their ground in this new sector very well indeed. The proliferation of Maltese-owned boutiques in fact offered new opportunities for Sindhis, since almost all of them became large-scale wholesalers as well as retailers; previously they had tended to concentrate on import and retail. Most boutiques owned and run by the Maltese were and still are small local ventures that rely on wholesalers with established import links for their stocks. Sindhis relied on their knowledge and established networks of translocal trade (one should keep in mind that they could draw upon a long history of Sindwork) to supply these small retailers.

Today around 19 Sindhi-owned businesses deal in ready-mades while four deal in textiles. The latter specialise in high quality textiles – there is still a demand for this upper-end market since Maltese women prefer to have clothes made to measure for special occasions such as weddings.

Not all Sindhi businesses made the shift from curios to textiles to ready-mades, however. Two or three continued to operate in the bazaar-type line and to cater to tourists as well as an increasing number of Maltese people looking for off-beat gifts or cheap home decorations. These bazaar-type shops were very creative and innovative in their choice of lines. In the early 1980s, for instance, cheap electronics such as watches, calculators, and games sold very well; again, Sindhi connections in Hong Kong and other mass-production centres in the Far East placed them in an excellent position to import, retail, and wholesale to Maltese shopkeepers. Their shops, situated as they were on Malta's prime shopping street, were almost assured brisk business provided the product was attractive.

The central location of their shops also meant that the Sindhis were excellently positioned to tap major economic booms as they came. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, tourism grew dramatically from an insignificant trickle and by 1989, the annual figure of one million visitors was reached. A number of Sindhi businessmen (generally those in the bazaar line) ventured into souvenirs and at present a significant number of souvenir shops in Valletta belong to Sindhis – at one point, one enterprising individual ran a chain of four shops, all situated on the main street and all of which had belonged at one time to the Sindwork firms.

Since the 1970s, Sindhis in Malta have ventured increasingly into new lines. One business set up in 1972 specialises in supplying to industry – his company employs 19 Maltese people and imports and distributes a range of products used by the local manufacturing industry. A few have opened Indian restaurants as a subsidiary business to their import and wholesale trade; these are staffed by chefs and waiters brought over specially from India (not Sindhis, though) and two are co-owned with Maltese partners. One young entrepreneur whose father is in the business of importing, wholesaling, and retailing of souvenirs and bazaar-type goods has set up a separate real estate agency, again in partnership with a Maltese businessman.

Worthy of mention is the fact that Sindhi traders in Malta came together in 1955 to form the Indian Merchants' Association (Malta). In my mind this indicates a change in the spatial perception of business. Before Partition, when Sindworki firms were for the most part based in Hyderabad, local operations in Malta and elsewhere were seen as 'branches', as extensions of the company that is. The morphological

metaphor of the branch linked geographical extensions across space to the main trunk based in Hyderabad: the tree was the firm. After Partition, when it became clear that an eventual return to Sind was unlikely, local operations were visualised as pockets of business, located quanta of firms; there was no longer a 'branch' connecting them to Hyderabad. The Association was never very active in actual terms and in 1989 it was renamed the Maltese-Indian Community, which supports my argument for a shift in perception towards a located ethnic group. Today it concerns itself with community activities such as Diwali parties and running the temple and community centre.

The general trend is that while in the early days of its establishment Sindhi business in Malta was a specialised operation, it has moved in the direction of diversification, higher local investment, and embeddedness in the Maltese business world. The various lines Sindhis have explored are in part a result of local market conditions, but they are also products of connections with Sindhi businessmen living around the world, which have enabled them to integrate into local economic structures.

Doing Business in a World City: Sindhis in London

Sindhi business practices in London ought to be understood within the context of the economy of a city the influence of which has for centuries extended well beyond English or British shores. In general terms, the importance of London as a node of translocal processes makes sense within the recent framework of thought advanced.²⁴ The observation that, as Braudel puts it, 'cities always have a measure of control over physical space through the networks of communication emanating from them'²⁵ is certainly nothing new. Recent theorists, however, have suggested that in an increasingly interconnected ('globalised') world, advanced service systems tend to agglomerate in a few large metropolitan centres which go beyond the classical connective role of urban settlements and attain the status of 'world or global cities'. Sassen argues that the transformation of the world economy (a process which gained momentum in the 1960s) to one based on services and finance brought about a renewed importance of major ('global') cities as sites for certain types of activities and functions.²⁶ 'World cities' are the nerve centres of the globalised economy; they are the sites of most of the leading global markets for commodities, commodity futures, investment capital, foreign exchange, and equities and bonds; and they attract clusters of specialised business services, especially those that are international in scope.²⁷ Moreover, as Castells holds, 'the global city is not a place, but a process. A process by which centres of production

and consumption of advanced services, and their ancillary local societies, are connected in a global network ...'²⁸ Of course, the importance of world cities extends beyond the economic sphere and, as Hannerz for instance shows, they serve as hubs of 'transnational connections' on levels of cultural production other than the economy.²⁹

London is no run-of-the-mill world city. It belongs with Tokyo and New York in a league of special importance, and this is partly the result of its unique history. King describes a process whereby London changed from an Imperial capital to a world city – a specialised finance and business centre and base for cultural production in an increasingly integrated new international division of labour. Especially interesting is what he calls the period of the 'internationalisation of London' from the 1950s to the 1980s, as a result of which 'London has become the arena of international capital, the site for the creation of global profit'.³⁰

Its primacy as a global city and the growing post-war importance of London as a hub of international commerce and finance crossed paths with the Sindhi diaspora in three ways. First, the migration of Sindhis to London in the post-war years is to be seen within the context of the replacement, by international labour from the former colonies, of a population which was employed in manufacturing, and which left the city as the sector gave way to financial services.³¹ A few Sindworki firms had branches in London before Partition, but the bulk of Sindhi migration to the city (and to Britain in general) gained momentum in the 1960s. Many of the Sindhis who are now self-employed in business originally moved to London from India as young graduates of technical colleges (in some cases as students) and eventually caught up with the Sindworki firms operating there and went into business after a period of employment with these firms. We note, therefore, a shift in the sense that many of the Sindhis who moved to London as aspirants to the technical and professional salaried employment sector ended up moving on to self-employment using the Sindworki firms as stepping stones.

One of the reasons behind this shift was the degree of racial discrimination which these Sindhis encountered in London. Gul, for instance, moved to Britain from Kenya – where he had held a good clerical job with the Army – in the late-1960s: 'When I came here racism was unbelievable. People made fun of my accent, even though I spoke excellent English. After years of service with the Army in Kenya, I came here to be offered a job as a doorkeeper'.

Santosh is now the proud owner of a thriving electronics business based in fashionable offices in north London: 'When I first arrived here, I worked for six weeks in a nightshift job with a dry-cleaning firm, smelling all the nice smells of piles of clothes being washed. I

then joined K. Chellaram, with whom I worked for three years before setting up with my brother-in-law'. Racial discrimination was not limited to people seeking employment: Dharam, a qualified engineer who *did* get a job with a British company run by a 'particularly enlightened Britisher', remembers how 'clients would often look disappointed that the company had sent them an Indian engineer'. The factor of discrimination, then, prompted many people to seek employment with Sindworki firms that had offices in London – as one trader told me, 'at least they were Indians like us'. Of course, Sindworki bosses were only too keen to employ Sindhis, partly because, as one of them put it to me, 'English employees look at the time and ask for their rights'. The Sindworki network in London at the time was rather tight-knit and this facilitated the entry of new arrivals into the sector. Sindworki offices were concentrated in the Moorgate area where one building in particular, Salisbury House, housed several Sindhi offices (about 50 by one informant's estimate); the owners of the firms socialised regularly at a pub there, and the exchange (deliberate or not) of business information was especially easy. One trader told me how he had taken a week off from one firm in order to try another, but his boss got to know about this through the Moorgate circle and was 'very upset' about his employee's disloyalty.

Today that racial discrimination is – at least on the institutional level – much less salient than it was in the 1960s, many young Sindhis are going for well-paid middle-managerial and consultancy jobs in London. Sindhi parents tend to attach importance to their children's qualifications (even if this is not necessarily seen as the antecedent of professional employment – many of them would still wish their sons to take over their businesses, for instance) and are generally willing to finance post-graduate degrees, generally in business studies and management, at the LSE and other reputed Universities. These young people, therefore, find themselves in good positions to take up well-paid jobs, and an increasing number are doing just that.

The second population movement of Sindhis into London was due to the 'Africanisation' programs which took off in East Africa in the mid-1960s. East Africa had for a long time been a major site of settlement and business operations for Sindhis, who were generally but not exclusively involved in the import and wholesale sector; these operations were of course the product of Sindwork, which had continued to attract Sindhis from India to Africa after Partition. In 1967 in Kenya, the rights of non-citizens to stay in that country for any length of time were withdrawn. Deprived of their right to do business and/or reside in the country, non-citizen Indians suddenly found themselves in an uncertain position and in the period between September 1967 and March 1968, approximately 12,000 Indians rushed to settle in Britain.

In Tanzania, official restrictions on the private mercantile sector practically killed off private firms by 1970. In Uganda, Idi Amin expelled all Indians from the country in August 1972 as the culmination of a series of 'Africanisation' measures orchestrated by himself and his predecessors; a total of 28,600 refugees moved to Britain between September and November of that year. In a nutshell, by the late-1960s and early-1970s it was evident throughout East Africa that the era of free commerce (and in Uganda, the right of residence) was over, and that Indians generally and Sindhis particularly had no future there.³² As a result, a substantial number of the Sindhis moved from East Africa to London.

By my estimate, the Sindhis in London today number a few thousand. They have settled mainly in north and central London, and today distinguish themselves as 'central London Sindhis' or 'suburban Sindhis'. The former are very wealthy and generally own Sindworki firms spread over several countries, though some have made their money in London. The latter are generally people who migrated, as described above, from East Africa or India and are in small self-employed businesses or other forms of employment. This is no doubt a broad generalisation – homes in neighbourhoods such as Hampstead or Swiss Cottage often cost a lot of money – but by and large it seems to hold. Sindhis themselves certainly believed this; they often pointed out to me the differences in lifestyle between the two groups, and the alleged snobishness of the 'central London Sindhis'. Lila, whose multimillionaire Sindworki family belongs squarely in this category, explained to me how she socialised with women from millionaire Gujarati, Marwari, Punjabi, and Sindhi families living in central London, and that 'wealth has a lot to play in the selection of this circle – six out of my eight best friends, including three Sindhis, live on "millionaire row" – Avenue Road near Regent's Park'.

The second way – after the process of post-war immigration – in which London's status as a world city and Sindhi life in it are related, pertains more directly to business. Sassen has argued that to look at the global economy in terms of international finance or global telecommunications is only part of the story; it leaves out a plethora of activities and types of workers that are intimately connected to and indirectly produce global flows.³³ Thus, a world city consists indeed of city bankers and jet-setting financiers, but it also consists of substantial populations of people who are connected to them – whether by cleaning their offices, fitting fillings to their teeth, or selling them CD-Walkmans for their morning jogs. In turn, everyone needs the food store, the newsagent, and of course the curry house. Sindhis in London have tended to go into the provision of consumer items, although a substan-

tial number run restaurants or hotels, or provide some other service such as dry cleaning.

The huge (presently around 8 million), upwardly-mobile population of a metropolis such as London creates an insatiable appetite for consumer items; moreover, its cutting-edge commercial practices demand the latest technologies and innovations, and reward the people who are in a position to provide them. Sindhis, because of their family and community connections with Japan and other manufacturing centres of the Far East, are in such a position. A substantial number of Sindhis in London are in the electronics line, as evidenced by their presence on Tottenham Court Road, a hub of wholesale and retail electronics shops. In this context it is interesting to note how profoundly the routes of Sindhi business are related to changing global conceptions of quality.

In the early days of Sindhi operations in London (mainly from the 1930s to the 1960s), Sindworki firms often sourced products from Britain for their wholesale and retail businesses in Africa and elsewhere; then, British manufacturing was synonymous with high quality in the minds of many, while Japanese-made goods were seen as second-rate – as one trader who imported from Japan to East Africa told me, ‘we used to joke that they lasted a week and then died on you’. But as the image of Japanese manufacturing changed from that of tackiness to that of dependable technology and affordability, established Sindhi business routes were simply reversed to tap into the new global market trend. Interconnectedness shows up in other, similar instances. According to informants, the ‘hot line’ in the 1970s was the import of watches and cheap electronics from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Korea (note the similarity to the situation in Malta) – then of course, these countries specialised in such manufacture, and again Sindhis were well-equipped in terms of business connections to exploit the change. A significant number of Sindhi businesses in London tap into their connections with India and elsewhere to cater to the ‘ethnic niche’ market³⁴ – that is, the large numbers of people of South Asian origin settled in the city. One trader I met, for instance, made his money importing sari material through his brother based in Japan, for which he found ready sale among Bangladeshis in London. Again, this sector is to be seen within the context of the population dynamics of a metropolis, in the sense that only an urban locality attracts enough migrants from a particular place to form ‘ethnic markets’ – in Malta for instance, it would be inconceivable for Sindhi importers to specialise in such a sector, because the country in no way attracts the thousands of migrants that London and other big cities do.

The third way in which the dynamics of London impinge upon and interact with Sindhi business practices has more directly to do with the city’s status as a world city. Many of the major translocal Sindhi firms,

with branches in several places and generally involved in import and export but also sometimes in manufacture, have offices in London which, because of its infrastructure as a world city (communications, banks, etc.) is seen as an excellent place to co-ordinate business, especially finance. Possibly the best example of how London serves as a hub of translocal Sindhi business is that of confirming houses, which among Sindhis were in their heyday during the 1970s and 1980s. The principle of the confirming house was summed up to me by a Sindhi who made millions in the business and now lives in a penthouse overlooking Regent's Park in Central London: 'A wants to import from B, but he has no money; B doesn't know A, so credit is out of the question; the confirming house steps in as intermediary'. 'A' in this case are Sindhis operating in West Africa (notably Nigeria and Ghana), who imported goods from Chinese and other suppliers ('B') in Far Eastern countries. Direct credit between these suppliers and Sindhis in Africa proved very hard to negotiate, and many small traders based in Africa did not have the type of credit worthiness to go directly to the international banks. (With particular reference to Nigeria, there was the additional problem that Nigerian banks would not open letters of credit on behalf of exporters in the Far East.) Sindhis in London therefore set up confirming houses specialising in financing this trade. The confirming house in London would open a letter of credit in favour of the exporter. As soon as the goods were shipped, the exporter would get paid by the confirming house; the confirming house then allowed the importer in Africa a credit period which allowed him to sell the goods. Again in the case of Nigeria, the system was for the trader to pay his local bank, which in turn paid the confirming house in London through the Central Bank of Nigeria.

London was particularly well-suited to act as a hub of the financing of Sindhi trade. It is a 'supranational' key city situated at the core of a general post-war tendency towards the globalisation of capital; and in any case, the city has played an historic role as the hub of the world's financial system resulting from the accessibility of support services such as foreign-exchange brokerage, expertise in financing international trade, and good communications.³⁵

The Sindhi confirming houses themselves were mostly financed by British and other banks based or having branches in London, although some of them also made use of their own finances. They charged confirmation commissions of 4 to 5% (occasionally 3 or 6%); this depended on the liability and the stability of the country in question – as one confirming agent told me, '(t)o Liberia I may not accept 10% while to the US, 3 to 4% will do'. Apparently some countries imposed charges on money remittance, which practice increased the commission charges. The credit period was equally variable but was generally

in the region of 90 to 120 days from the day of shipment. In addition to these charges, the importer would have to pay the commission house the interest charged by the bank, plus any other expenses.

There were two types of confirming businesses. The first were known as 'house to house' and were owned by the importing company itself, typically a large and established Sindworki firm. Apart from financing trade, 'house to house' confirming houses acted as foils to siphon money out of Africa into Britain – the 'profit' made by the London company would ultimately be coming from the African company owned by the same people – and therefore distribute the assets of that company. This distribution of assets was extremely important for companies operating in West Africa, which was seen as a very unstable region. The second type was 'third party' or 'customer finance' confirming houses, which were separately-owned financing companies. Some Sindhi confirming houses in London had a few Gujarati clients based in West Africa, but the bulk of the trade took place between Sindhis; note, however, that this did not necessarily include the exporters, with whom relations of trust did not matter very much given that they were getting paid by the banks. Because they were ready to extend credit to Sindhis based on trust, confirming houses served as excellent stepping-stones for businessmen trying to establish themselves, who would otherwise never have managed to obtain credit from banks, let alone Far Eastern suppliers – as one confirming agent told me, 'in a way it is easier to start a business without initial capital, because of confirming houses'.

Confirming houses therefore made profits of 4 to 5% on thousands of business deals often worth vast amounts of money, and many Sindhis in London became millionaires in a matter of a few years. The system constituted a very important node of translocal Sindhi trade for about 15 to 20 years; all my informants told me that there has been a decline in its importance since the 1990s. There were several reasons for this decline. First, apparently the confirming house – importer networks were rife with problems of betrayed trust and defaulted payments, and this prompted many businessmen to be more wary and limit deals based on trust to relatives and Sindhis they knew well. One Sindhi who worked with a confirming house in London for four years told me that he observed several instances of malpractice by the firm, such as changing the date of receipt of payment from Africa and thus 'nicking a few days' more interest', claiming higher interest than the bank in London actually charged, and taking deposits from the Sindhi importers based in Africa before the letter of credit was opened, thus earning bonus interest on this money (which was deposited in banks). In addition to these problems, there were those brought about by economic and political shifts – the main reason behind the decline of the

London-Nigeria link, for instance, was the major slump in Nigerian trade in 1984 – due to falling oil prices.

Discussion

Sindhis around the world are interconnected in terms of kinship, religion, and ethnicity through practices such as transnational marriage matching and visiting, an equally diffuse belief in the cult-deity Jhulelal, and common myths of origin and historical formation. In this sense, one may comfortably speak in terms of ‘the Sindhi diaspora’ – and of course this level of corporacy affects business practice, as I explore elsewhere.³⁶

On the other hand, the Sindhi diaspora is a highly diverse collection of strategies which have developed differently on two levels. First, because the term ‘the diaspora’ in fact subsumes at least three waves of migration from the sub-continent; and each of these waves is located within a particular social and historical milieu. First, we have seen that in Malta Sindhis established themselves as part of the Sindwork diaspora of the 19th century; while in London, they mostly derive from the post-Partition movements and in particular from the expulsion of Indians from East Africa. Second, it is because of the economic aspect of ‘the diaspora’ that has developed in response to local situations, which of course are embedded in local structures of market and commercial organisation. Thus, in Malta, the development of Sindhi business has to be understood in terms of a small and somewhat-isolated (because of immigration laws) community operating within the context of a small nation-state with limited and shifting local markets; in London, Sindhi business practices have for their nourishment drawn on the dynamics of a world city and its needs and translocal connections. The personal histories recounted to me in Malta and London can be differentiated into a number of types. In Malta, they indicate a closed system of businesses being passed down through families and growing or shrinking according to the number of men in those families. When younger businessmen point out changes, these usually refer to lines and methods of doing business. In London, most Sindhi traders produce life histories of mobility and the exploration of opportunities and markets, generally involving transnational shifts. The point is that ‘Sindhi business’ is very much an umbrella term for practices which vary considerably according to locality. Moreover, it is essential to realise that trajectories of economic integration, even when underpinned by the centripetal dynamics of specific ethnic groups, are the results of historical interactions between mobility and local economic circumstance.

Notes

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- 2 Petitions to the Chief Secretary of Government (CSG), 1885 to 1930.
- 3 For an overview of published research see Rath and Kloosterman 2000.
- 4 Rath and Kloosterman 2000, 657
- 5 Clifford 1994, 302.
- 6 See Nowikowski 1984.
- 7 Maclean 1989, 12-14.
- 8 See Cohen 1971.
- 9 Jayawardena 1973; Clarke et al. 1990.
- 10 Baillie 1899; Choksey 1983; Hughes 1874.
- 11 *Annual Statement of the Trade and Navigation of the Province of Sind*, 1870 – 1, 1890 – 1 (Royal Commonwealth Society Collection, Cambridge).
- 12 See, for instance, Singer et al. 1958.
- 13 Chugani 1995: 23
- 14 Mahtani 1997, 14-16.
- 15 Chattopadhyaya 1979.
- 16 Merani & Van der Laan 1979, 240.
- 17 White 1994, 5
- 18 Markovits 2000, 117.
- 19 Tindall 1982, 93, 175.
- 20 CSG No 4949 / 1887.
- 21 CSG No 1822 / 1906.
- 22 In that order: CSG Nos 726 / 1919, 2486 / 1916, 1499 / 1919, 698 / 1920.
- 23 Markovits 2000, 143.
- 24 Notably by Friedmann 1986; King 1990; Sassen 1991, 1994; Knox 1995; and Castells 1996.
- 25 Braudel 1973, 312, see also Braudel 1982.
- 26 Sassen 1994.
- 27 Knox 1995.
- 28 Castells 1996, 386.
- 29 Hannerz 1996.
- 30 King 1990, 93.
- 31 King 1990, 71.
- 32 Gregory 1993.
- 33 Sassen 1994.
- 34 See Barth 1969.
- 35 King 1990, 90-91.
- 36 See Falzon 2003, 2004.