Shikarpur the Eighteenth century commercial Emporinm of Asia

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Among the cities and towns of Sind having extensive trade connections with Central Asia from 18th century onwards ranks the name of Shikarpur, which was founded by Daudpotas in 1617 A.D. This city of Sind lies near the northern frontier of the provincial territories and about 28 miles directly west of the Indus. Shikurpur has been a town of first importance to the Indus trade particularly and to that of Asia generally. Speaking on the year of foundation of the town, Chablani writes, "Whatever the legendary accounts of the foundation of Shikarpur may be, suffice it to say that the authentic records show that it was built in the year 1026 Hijra, corresponding to the year A.D. 1617 by the Daudpotras, the weaver-rulers of Upper Sind." 1 Apart from this, many other records also mention the year 1617 A.D. as the year of foundation of Shikarpur.

Shikarpur remained under the rule of Daudpotras until 1701 A.D. when the Kalhora ruler "Yar Mohammad succeeded in wresting Shikarpur from the Daudpotras." 2 He died in the year 1719. The same year his son and successor Noor Mohammad was admitted by the Moghal emperor, Mohammad Shah, to the same title, dignities and offices of his father.

Nadir Shah, the Persian ruler, invaded Sind in 1739 and brought it under the dominance of Persia. Before 1739, Sind was an integral part of the Moghal empire. When Sind was subjugated to Persia, Noor Mohammad Kalhoro revolted, which made Nadir Shah to rush to Sind and capture Noor Mohammad, who had fled with all his treasure to the fort of Umerkot. According to Chablani, "...the north-western portion of his territory was handed

over to the Chief of Kelat, and Shikarpur was restored to the Daudpotras" 3 Thus the town again came under the rule of Daudpotas.

Nadir Shah was assassinated in the year 1747 and Ahmed Shah Abdali became the ruler of his dominions, including Sind. After sometime Noor Mohammad withheld the tribute. This led to the invasion of Sind by Ahmed Shah Abdali in 1754. After the death of Noor Mohammad in 1755, his elder son Mohammad Muradyab Khah became his successor and agreed to pay the tribute, withheld by his father. "Upper Sind at the period of the invasion of Hindustan and the sack of Delhi by Nadir Shah formed part of the subah of Multan. On the dismemberment of the empire of Delhi, the portion named Moghulee, comprising Sukkur, Bukkar and shikarpur and its dependencies was annexed to the Durani Kingdom by Ahmed Shah Abdali whose capital was Kabul." 4 It appears that perhaps the importance of the so called Moghulee portion from a commercial point of view lured the Afghan ruler to sudjugate it to his dominions. "...It (Shikarpur) continued for a century or more to be a bone of contention between the Daudpotras and Kalhoras until Ahmed Shah Durani made it a part of the Sibi Province under an Afghan Governor. This arrangement was very favourable to the Afghan trade which came down the Bolan Pass, and Shikarpur soon attracted the Banias who have made it famous." 5 It is worth mentioning here that though Shikarpur had started to emerge as an important emporium under the Kalhora rule, and irs trade was subsepuently encouraged by Afghan rulers, the period of its utmost prosperity starts from the year 1785, "when Timur Shah, the ruler of Kandhar, extended his protection to the Hindus and encouraged them to settle in the town promising that they should carry on their trade without dread of indefinite extortion." 6

It has already been mentioned that Shikarpur was a town of Moghulee portion under the Durani rule. Here the Nawabs used to rule on benalf of Durani Government. "In 1244 Hijra (1824 A.D.) Mir Karam Ali Khan collected the troops through Balochi *Sarders*, and invaded Shikarpur under the command of Nawab Wali Mohammad Khan Leghari... In those days Shiksrpur was being ruled by Nawab Mansur Ali Khan ... Nawab Wali Mohammad Khan through Jumma

Khan Barkzai persuaded Nawab Mansur Ali Khan, who handed over the keys of the town to Nawab Wali Mohammad Khan Leghari and he himself left the town."? Thus Shikarpur was brought under the dominance of Talpurs. But the Talpur rule on Shikarpur did not last for a longer period and only after 19 years the British extended their power over Sind including Shikarpur.

Giving a brief account of the economy of Shikarpur during the Talpur rule in Sind, which started in 1783, Moulai Shadai assumes, "The caravans of Kandhar and Khorasan, in winter, used to come up to Shikarpur ... Shikarpur, Sukkur, Rohri, Larkana, Kandiaro, Hala, Hyderabad, Mirpurkhas, Umerkot, Tando Mohammad Khan, Nasarpur, Sehwan, Thatta and Karachi were the censres of trade." 8 Capt. Goldsmid, in this connection states, ...a few years, probably ten or twelve, after the cession of transfer of Shikarpur, from the Afghan to the Meers' government, we find it reported that the place contains immense wealth, and 30,000 inhabitants ... when the Ameers were in power, individuals were found among them (Bunnias of Shikarpoor) who would bear comparison in courteous demeanour, or honest dealing, with the most civilized of our Notive gentlemen at the three presidencies; and such as these, gave a fame to the city of their location, which may be said to have attained its zenith under the government superceedad at the British conquest."9 These two statements appear to give more reliable account of the facts as compared to the Sind Gazetteer, which states, "After the Talpurs got possession of Shikarpur in 1824, its trade suffered considerably from the political distractions in Afghanistan and from actual invasion." 10

Geography:

Describing the geography of the town, George Bease writes, ' (Shikarpur) is Headquarter of Uppor Sind Collectorate and is the most important in a commercial point of view, situated 25 miles due west of the Indus." 11 According to Langley also, "Shikarpur is situated on the high road to Candahar by the Bolan Pass, and this must always give it an important influence on the trade of the Indus and the countries beyond." 12 Postans also agrees with this when he states, "Shikarpur was designated one of the gates of Khorassan, bec-

ause it is in the direct route from the Indus to that country by the great defile of the Bolan, which offers the only means of communication with the upper country, and has therefore always been, and must continue to be adopted as the commercial line of traffic." 13 With regard to the trade of the town by water routes, the Bombay Government Records state, "Silk and other commodities from the north-west may, with the advantage of water Carriage from shikarpor to the Presibency, enter considerably into the market of Bombay by the route of the Indus." 14 From these statements it follows that the main factor which gave the town of Shikarpur a place of renown was its geographical situation, with respect to both land and water routes of trade during the period under study.

Speaking on the situation of the town, Burton remarks, "This capital of merchants, bankers and money-changers is built upon a low alluvial plain abounding, as usual, in fine dust and glittering warp." 15 At one time the town of Shikarpur was surrounded by *Alam Panah* (surrounding wall), which had 8 gates, as Langley states "The city which is about 3 miles in circumference. is surrounded by a very dilapidated wall, having 8 huge gates, beyond which are luxuriant gardens." 16 According to Moulai Shadai at the time of passing of the town to the Talpurs in 1824, there was a surrounding wall round the town "having 8 gates (namely) Lakhi, Hazari, Haathi, Khanpuri, Karan, Vagno, Sevi and Nausbehro." 17

During the period under study, there was a great bazar, an important market place in Shikarpur, almost bifurcating the town. "The *bonne bouche* of Shikarpur is the Great Bazar the main street, almost bisecting the city-about 800 yards long, and ramifying on either side." 18 This old bazar is still in existence and is popularly known as *Dhak Bazar*. Besides there is Stewart Gunj bazar which is linked with *Dhak Bazar*. Describing the Stewart Gunj, George Bease writes, "The old bazar extends for about 900 yards through the center of the city-A new market has been constructed, called the Stewart Gunge, called after the late popular collector, is a continuation of the old bazar, which is very commodious and well adopted for traffic." 19 According to Sind Gazetteer, "The Stewart Gunj Market so called after a popular Collector and Magistrate of that name

which is a continuation of the old bazar is not only very commodious and serviceable, but has greatly contributed to improve the appearance of the city." 20

Shikarpur apart from a great commercial centre, has also been a place of sufficient agricultural productivity. Accordig to George Bease, "The soil is alluvial, being the deposit of the canals and channels, it is so rich as to require no manure, producing very extensive crops, in return of culture and irrigation. The town is surrounded by flourishing groves and orchards yielding in abundance dates, mangoes, oranges, mulberries and other fruits, the usual produce of the country."21 Thus it is evident that Shikarpur enjoyed the gifts of nature in the shape of a fine geographical situation from a commercial point of view on the one hand and a trap of canals necessary for agricultural prosperity on the other. But still it can be said that the main factor which made Shikarpur an important emporium of Sindhi trade during the period under study was its situation on the cross roads of commerce with Central Asia

People and their Occupations:

The available records of 19th century show that there was a majority of business-minded Hindu population as compared to Muslim and other population in the town. It seems that due to the geogra-phically favourable position of the town from a commercial point of view and the encouragement of Hindus by Timur Shah in 1785 to settle in it, Hindu population greatly flourished and it can be said that Hindus from other parts of India specially Sind might have migrated to Shikarpur to prosper under its commerce, as Sorley remarks, "...one fact is certain, namely, that between 1740 and 1800 there was a great shifting of the population of Sind. the chief concentration latering from Tatta to Shikarpur, Hyderabad and Karachi."22

Speaking of the total population in the town, postans (1843) writes, "it...contains 22,000 inhabitants, according to an accurate census taken by the author..."23 While Langley (1860) states, "It...contains 22,000 inhabitants, according to the census of Captain

Postans, but since increased fully one-third." 24 It means that by 1860 its population rose to about 29,333 inhabitants. The same author continues, "About two-thirds of the inhabitants of Shikarpur are Hindoos, of very lax tenets,...and of the remainder one thousand are Afghans, or the descendants of Afghans..."25 Althogh this information does not exactly pertain to the period under study, still the facts revealed by it, can be extended safely to the period under survey.

According to Postans, "...the population of Shikarpur may be calculated at 28,571 (say 30,000) souls, of whom 8,558(say 10,000) or one third are Mahomedans. In the above are also included many Hindoos, who are employed in distant countries as agents from the Soucars, returning at various periods to their families, who are always left at Shikarpur ... The Hindoos carry on all the trade, whilst the cultivation, and artisanship of almost every denomination, is in the hands of the Mahomedans."26 The facts which are revealed by the above statements are, firstly, that Hindus were in vast majority in the town of Shikarpur and secondly, that Hindus dominated so far as the trade and commerce of the town was concerned, while Muslims mostly occupied labour jobs.

The names of the merchants of Shikarpur during the period under study are however difficult to have access to. According to one of the old residents of Shikarpur, "The names of the Hindu merchants of that period are not only difficult to be traced but also impossible to be had, because the Hindus of that period were only merchants and the historians were Muslims who, it seems, had hatred towards trade. It is because of this reason that they ignored this thing and written only on the literature and poetry of that time."27

Speaking on the commercial importance of Shikarpuri Hindus postans writes, "They possess, however, an unusual degree of influence at Shikarpur, and are too valuable to the financial resource of the country not to be permitted to maintain it...with the exception of the Moollas and Syuds, few of the Mahomedans of this city are either wealthy or influential." 28

It will not be justified to ignore the business mentality and sharpness in business tacts and calculations, the natural gifts poss-

essed and inherited by Shikarpuri merchants. "This people, much as all to whom money gain is the object of life-whose reputation is but a jewel, because, like the painted fowl of the Native Indian sportsman, it attracts other jewels towards it, must in the course of events, produce men who attain to eminence in their profession; and in a land where reputation is so little studied, and the word so little understood, except as a facon de parler, those who appreciate and regard it for any motives at all must at least be respectable. No wonder, then that the Bunnias of Shikarpur, men of intelligence, perseverance and energy in business, should become in time merchants of trust and distinction," 29 Not only intelligent in business dealings but the Shikarpuri merchants were trustworthy also and enjoyed goodwill in these matters as Langley remarks, "Small praise as the Hindoo merchants deserve for the morality of their ways, I must admit that they are trustworthy men of business, and I believe that few instances can be cited of one of their Hoondies (native bills of exchange) being dishonoured." 30

It is worth mentioning here that apart from playing an important role for the economies of Sind and the countries where they were either stationed or to which they travelled for trade purposes, the merchants of Shikarpur also served as an important source of valuable information on the political conditions prevaling in foreign countries. This is evident from the statement of Goldsmid. He writes, "...They visit countries, and keep up acquaintance with current political occurrences which are but very partially known to their rulers. They have certain sources of information, to which others cannot possibly have access. Shrewd, observing, enterprising men return constantly to the city of their birth, from long residence in Samarkand, Bokhara, Herat, and many other equally important places. On their arrival, they are capable of affording valuable information, wholly independent of their private commercial dealings; and the heads of houses who receive these, their agents. would willingly communicate their unprofessional gleanings to others, if they knew to whom and to what extent. It is not that many events of political interest are not now made public by this means, but were a system established, and encouragement given to the system it is deferentially, that much would be brought to light for the advantage of Goverment

both as regards science and politics, which is now hidden in a sealed book." 31

One can easily judge from the above the influence of Shikarpuri merchants from a commercial and consequently a political point of view.

Commercial Documents:-

The use of various commercial documents is inevitable in the trade of any time. Accordingly many commercial documents and records were used in the trade of Shikarpur with other parts of the world particularly the Central Asia. Not only this but effective measures were taken and special marks put on such documents in order to prevent fraud and their misuse. In this respect, Shikarpuri merchants deserve much credit and importance. They practised the use of various commercial documents and books of account of their own, which were scientifically and technically drawn and used by their future generations throughout the world of trade.

Of the commercial documents of Shikarpuri origin, which were in use during the period under survey in the trade practices of Shikarpuri Hindus, the one which occupied a prominent place and deserves much attention, was 'Hundi', regarding which Burton writes, "The Hundi, that rude instrument with which the Shikarpuri Rothschild works, is a short document, in the usual execrable stenagraphy, laboriously scribbled upon a square scrap of flimsy bank-note* paper ..."32 The from of Hundi however was not exactly like that of a modern bill of exchange as many of us think. According to Langley, "The form of these Hoondies is somewhat different from that of an English Bill of Exchange.',33

Commercial Education:

The discussion on the commerce of Shikarpur would be incomplete without taking into consideration the commercial education available to the children of Shikarpuri merchants during the period

under survey. There is little doubt that Hindus, specially those from Shikarpur were business-minded by nature, still they had to provide proper commercial education and training to their children to enable them to handle without much difficulty the business of their parents. No wonder, then, that the Shikarpuri merchants set up and financed special institutions and made other arrangements for educating their children in order not only to be sharp but honest also in business.

Most of the old merchants interviewed stated that there were special institutions or Sindhi schools known as *Oajhas*, wherein such children used to receive business education. ** Some were of the view that there were no such special institutions, but the parents used to send their children to the shops of other merchants in the town for such learning. This served the dual purpose of the merchants. In the first place, the children learned about the business practices, tacts and maintenance of business records, which were in use. Secondly, since the children worked on such shops as servants and without receiving any remuneration, they did not feel like the children of rich parents, and therefore, tried to work as much and good as possible for satisfying their bosses. This was very much helpful for them to achieve perfection. In such a situation they learned much more than if they were asked to work on the shops of their own parents.**

There is however some contradiction between the two view points stated above, but neither of them can be ignored. It can be said that though in some cases, Shikarpuri merchants used to send their children to the shops of other merchants for an 'on-the-job training', a majority of them practised to get their children admitted to *Oajhas*, the existence of which is far from any boubt. Burton in this respect states, "The Shikarpuri Hindu, after receiving a sound commercial education and studying the practice of trade at home, marries with much solemnity and ceremony. The birth of the first child is the signal for leaving home; the *'jeune pere'* takes leave of his family with tears and sobs; and he forthwith sets out alone for some distant land, with the probable intention of spending in exile half his life..."34

It follows therefore that there was a complete system of the commerce of Shikarpuri origin, whereby a Hindu child after receiving necessary education in business, had to leave his home for abroad in order to practise what he had learnt. He had to remain abroad compulsorily for about half of his life, and thereafter, whatever he earned, he used to bring to his homeland. This established and rigid practice seems to be with the majority of Hindu population and marks the completeness of the system.

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15. Burton, '*Sind Revisited*', Vol. 1877, p-246
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17. Moulai Shadai op. cit., p-651
18. Burton, op. cit., p-247
19. George Bease. op. cit., p-58
20. '*Sind Gazetteer*', op. cit., p-42
21. George Bease, op. cit., p-58
22. Sorley, op. cit., p-118
23. Postans. op. cit.. p-32
24. Langley, op. cit., p-162
25. -ibid- p-167
26. Postans, '*Miscellaneous Information on the Town of Shikarpur*', 1840-41 pp-88-89
27. Habibullah Bhutto, an original resident of Shikarpur, having good material on the town and knowing much about it.
28. Postans, '*Misc: Inf: on the Town of Shikarpur*', p-90
29. Goldsmid, Op. cit., p-25
30. Langley, op. cit., p-166

31. Goldsmid, op. cit,: p-46
32. Burton op. cit., p-253
* It was most probably written on this paper during the British Period.
33. Langley, op. cit., p-166.
**. Old Shikarpuri merchants/brokers named below who were interviewed to collet information about the commercial documents/records/ practices of Shikarpuri businessmen during the period under study:

a. Seth Khubchand)
b. Seth Remchand) Interviewed in May, 1976.

Both of them quote from their grandfathers (who were Commission Agents in their times in Shikarpur) and carry on business as *Bhalawnas* (Commission Agents) to this day in Stewart Gunj, Shikarpur.

c. Bhai Chugomul, aged 72, presently a shopkeeper in Shikarpur, interviewed in May, 1976, quotes from his grandmother.
d. Seth Persram, aged 75, presently a cloth merchant in Shikarpur, interviewed in May, 1976, quotes from his grandfather. who was a broker.
e. Bhai Premchand, aged 68, presently a merchant of utencils in Shikarpur, interviewed in May, 1976, quotes from his grandfather, who was a banker. Some old Hundies and coins of Shikarpur have also been collected from him.
f. Seth Preetam das, aged 70, presently a grain merchant in Shikarpur interviowed in May, 1976, quotes from his father and grandfather who were brokers in Shikarpur.
g. Bhai Kishinchand, aged 65, presently a contractor in Shikarpur, interviewed in May, 1976, quotes from his grandfathers, who were importers/exporters in Shikarpur. Few utencils of old Shikarpur have also been collected from them.

34. Burton, op. cit., pp-253-54