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On the Brink of the Modern: the Julfa Armenians and their World

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The study of the Julfa Armenians is a relatively young branch of Armenian history. Though a few historians, among them greats such as Alishan and Leo, had written on the history of Julfa in the first half of the 20th century or before, the beginnings of the modern study of the Julfa Armenian merchants can be dated to three articles by Levon Khachikian on the seventeenth century merchant Hovhannes Ter Davtyan, published in French, English and Russian in 1966-67. The articles appeared in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Calcutta, in *Annales*, and in the Proceedings of the 27th International Conference of Orientalists. None was published in a journal devoted to Armenian studies and it is fair to say that Khachikian's ground-breaking work initially produced its main impact outside the world of Armenian studies, primarily because Fernand Braudel, among other world historians, picked up on the significance of his sources and findings for the history of world trade and economy.

That was what drew me to the field as a starting PhD student in the early 1980s, when I set out from Oxford to study for a year in Yerevan under Hakob Papazian's supervision, struggling to understand the Julfan commercial dialect through the pages of the then newly published full text of Hovhannes Ter Davtyan's account book. I came to Julfan history from the study of the Islamic Middle East, from Iranian history in particular, and at that time I knew little about Armenian history and was not, though it may be sacrilege to admit this in the present company, especially interested in it. The sub-title of my thesis on the Julfa merchants - "A Study in Pre-Modern Asian Trade" - indicates my focus on the commercial world of Asia in the heyday of European commercial capitalism. I identified my subject as pre-modern, rather than as modern or early modern following Kirti Chaudhuri's understanding of "an age when the technological breakthrough of the late eighteenth century had not as yet fundamentally changed the structure of... societies and state systems".

At least in part my interest in international economic history was a conscious reaction against

what I saw as an anachronistic obsession with writing national history, and against the tyranny of the nationalist paradigm in approaching the history of Iran (and indeed Armenia).

Things have moved on considerably in the last two or three decades. The study of Julfa history has grown vigorously, generating numerous theses, articles and books devoted to a wide range of topics, many on the commerce that was central to Julfa's life and significance, but others on other matters: on church history, on art and architecture, and on Julfa's place in the history of ideas and technology. In the course of the same period the application of the term 'Early Modern' to the history of South Asia and the Middle East in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries has gained wider currency, as our understanding of what constitutes Modern has changed. We have moved away from a concentration on the emergence of the nation state, factory industrialization and the technological revolution to embrace other less exclusively European changes: the emergence of new elites, distinct from the landed or tribal warrior aristocrats of the medieval period, the adoption of new forms of military technology and organization, the growing commercialization of the political economy and of political elites, and the dynamic emergence of new networks of commercial and cultural exchange. A student writing a doctoral thesis on New Julfa today would be unlikely to use the term 'pre-Modern' in the subtitle.

Considered in the light of current conceptions of Early Modern Asia, the Julfa Armenians appear as good examples of a number of these trends. Their relationship to the Safavid Shahs is a striking instance of the emergence of new service elites; their trading and financial activities exemplify the dynamic expansion of commercialism; and their embrace of novel cultural and intellectual experiences - from Indian textiles to Chinese ceramics and modern European techniques in painting - fall into the pattern of new networks of exchange. These modern qualities of the Julfa Armenians have been noted before by a number of distinguished scholars, some present at this conference - Dikran Kouymjian and Keram Kevonian to name but two.

In a thought-provoking 1997 study entitled "The Armenian Way to Modernity", Levon Zekiyan emphasized the role played by the Julfa merchants in the early stages of the Armenian encounter with modernity. He remarked on their global commercial network, which in the seventeenth century brought them into close contact with western Europeans, and thereby introduced Armenians for the first time to the ideas of the European

enlightenment and to technological advances such as the printing press. He noted also the individualism, rationalism and commercialism of the merchants, and how these qualities affected their cultural interests and activities, stimulating an altogether new phase in Armenian literary culture. In this study Zekiyan went further than those who had worked previously on the trading activities of the Julfa merchants and their remarkable adaptation to the era of commercial capitalism. While others had noted the sophistication of Julfan commercial practice and their ready adoption of the new, whether in the shape of European intercontinental navigation or of merchants' handbooks and advances in applied arithmetic, no previous study had laid such emphasis on the role of the Julfa merchants in the wider Armenian experience of modernity.

Stimulated by these ideas, and prompted by the kind invitation from the convenors of this conference, I am taking this opportunity to consider the significance of the history of New Julfa in the context of Armenian national history, and in particular in relation to the Armenian passage to modernity, questions that I have fastidiously, and probably prudently, avoided in my previous excursions into the subject. I cannot follow Kouymjian and Zekiyan and others in debating the cultural and intellectual contribution of the Julfa Armenians, so this lecture will focus on one particular aspect of the transition from the medieval to the modern age, namely the development by the Julfa merchants of what we may consider proto-national modes of communal organization and representation. And we will explore this question in the context of the Julfa merchants' interaction with a number of external actors - from governments to commercial companies - with which they came into contact in the 16th to 18th centuries.

It should be acknowledged at the outset that, in contrast to the wealth of primary sources for the Julfan commercial system, there are few surviving documentary sources on the government and administration of the Julfa community. We rely to a great extent on external sources - the accounts of European travellers, merchants and diplomats, on the records of the English and Dutch East India companies, and on a few surviving Persian and Armenians sources. Doubtless partly as a result of this dearth of sources and the invitation it offers for historical speculation, there are marked differences of opinion among historians of Julfa about how the community was governed. On one side of the debate we have Ina Baghdiantz McCabe, who has argued in her 1999 book, *The Shah's Silk for Europe's Silver*, for a fully

functioning 'republic' of New Julfa, complete with a set of autonomous administrative institutions; my views are at the other extreme, in a conference paper on Julfan commercial law published under the editorship of Keram Kevonian and Sushil Chaudhury, I doubted the existence of any formally constituted, regularly convened administrative bodies, arguing that Julfa's administration was in the hands of persons - the mayor (*kalantar*), district heads (*kadkhoda*) and for some matters the bishop - not administrative bodies. Sebouh Aslanian's recent research in the Julfa archive at the All Saviour's Monastery, where he discovered of a large number of arbitration decisions issued collectively by the Julfa merchants has led me to temper my views somewhat, though I still maintain that Julfa's government was characterized by a low level of institutionalization. It is not our purpose today, however, to revive this debate, but rather to look at a series of episodes or moments in the history of Julfa when the community was called on to act as a corporate entity, or was treated as such by outsiders interested in engaging with the Julfan Armenians as a national community, and to consider what these moments tell us about the transition from the medieval to the modern age.

Taking as our starting point the situation prior to their enforced migration to Isfahan in 1604, when they still inhabited Old Julfa on the Aras river, the Julfans' relationship with the Khans of Nakhichevan and then with the early Safavid monarchs and their representatives, appears to have been unexceptional for its time and place. By the 16th century few vestiges remained of the indigenous Armenian landed aristocracy, and towns were often governed and represented on the wider stage by the head of the leading notable family of the day. He, backed by the heads of the other notable families, was responsible for allocating and collecting taxes, for making the requisite professions of loyalty and obedience to the current ruler, for providing hospitality and other services to the ruler or his agents, as required, and, perhaps, for maintaining defences and supporting a garrison. In this respect an Armenian town such as Julfa was not unlike towns inhabited by Muslim subjects, though as Christians they were liable to certain additional taxes, some discrimination and doubtless occasional prejudice or worse. Relatively, and increasingly, remote from the successive Safavid capitals of Tabriz, Qazvin and Isfahan, the Julfans' interactions with the Safavid court were, as far as we know, neither frequent nor intense.

With the resettlement in New Julfa, Isfahan in 1605, the situation changed markedly. Now incorporated into the Safavid system as a part of the directly administered royal estates

(*khassa*), the Julfans had much closer direct connections with the ruling monarch himself, with a variety of senior officials and with other members of the Safavid elite. While the *Kalantar* remained the most important figure in relations with Shah and court, the range and intensity of interaction meant that many other members of the community formed connections outside. Royal protection and favour gave the Julfans a high degree of autonomy and a privileged status, but came at the price of acting as the Shah's commercial and diplomatic agents and finding collective responses to royal initiatives - especially during the reign of the innovative 'Abbas I (1587-1629).

It is clear that 'Abbas had plans not just for the Julfans, but for the Armenians of his realm in general, who were used in his anti-Ottoman diplomacy with the Christian powers. His abortive plans to transfer the seat of the Catholicos to Isfahan and to construct a Cathedral there to accommodate Armenians, Assyrians and Catholics suggest the scale of his ambitions. While overall the Julfans' benefitted from 'Abbas's interest and attention, being in the royal eye could be dangerous. Disappointments in negotiations with the Christian powers could have dangerous repercussions, as one group of Armenians in Isfahan discovered when a visiting Catholic bishop overstepped the mark in claiming an interest in the Shah's Christian subjects, leading the Shah to threaten them with forcible conversion to Islam. The Armenian community in Isfahan, it must be remembered, was a composite community comprising Armenians from Yerevan, Tabriz, Dasht and many other places as well as Julfa, and New Julfa's temporal and spiritual leaders were called on to take an interest in, and on occasion intercede on behalf of, a larger and more complex Armenian community than had been the case in the sixteenth century.

One of the first occasion when the Julfa merchants were called upon to act in a corporate manner occurred during 'Abbas I's reign when the Shah staged a silk auction, in which the Armenians were obliged to bid collectively against the English East India Company for the right to export silk from the Safavid realms. The Shah made the raw silk trade a royal monopoly in 1619 and, in response to the efforts of the English East India Company agents to secure contracts to send the entire Safavid silk export to Europe via the Ocean route, staged the auction to decide who would win the contract to export the royal silk. The Armenians, the English and the Spanish - reluctantly represented by the head of the Carmelite mission participated in the auction, though the Spanish party refused to bid, having no authority to do

so. There was undoubtedly a large element of political and commercial theatre about the auction, but it nonetheless compelled the Julfans, through their representative, the *Kalantar*, to bid collectively for the whole of the year's silk export. What is most interesting for our purposes about this auction, is the fact that the parties to it were national. The English - like the Dutch East India Company, with which the Julfans also had frequent contact - was self-evidently so, operating as they did under a monopolistic charter from its national governments. The English and Dutch companies were generally in an intense competition with one another, a competition that mirrored the political rivalry between England and the Netherlands. Their mode of operation also was distinctively modern: rather than bidding in the market place like other merchants, they sought to negotiate privileged commercial positions through direct approaches to the supreme political authority. For the Armenians, however, this kind of national collective bargaining was new and unfamiliar and their participation in the auction - successful as it turned out - surely marks a significant moment, even if it is one whose implications find no reflection in surviving contemporary Armenian sources.

In the course of the 17th century the Julfa Armenians had dealings with a range of other actors, whether in Isfahan or abroad, either on the King's business or in the course of their own increasingly wide ranging commercial activities. On a number of occasions they negotiated, and in several instances signed agreements, with the courts of Europe, the papacy, Romanov Muscovy, Ottoman and Mughal provinicial governors, and European East India and Levant Companies, among others. Dealing with this multiplicity of political and corporate entities in the fast-changing world of early modern Eurasia placed a strain on the traditional system of representation by a single community leader and elicited new responses from the Julfans.

The silk auction during 'Abbas I's reign was a one off event that was not repeated, but the European trading companies were part of the early modern trading landscape. On some occasions the Armenians encountered them as rivals, on others they cooperated with them. We will look now at two further occasions where Julfa merchants found it in their interest to act collectively as 'an Armenian nation' in the commercial arena.

The first of these is in the dealings and agreements with Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich of Russia in the 1660s and 1670s. The Russian route was by this time an established itinerary for

European and Armenian merchants trading between Iran and the Caspian on the one hand and the Baltic and the Atlantic seaboard of Europe on the other. Russian trade policy in the period, however, was generally protective of Russian merchant interests and reluctant to grant transit privileges to non-Russian merchants. The details of the trade deals negotiated in 1667, 1673 and 1676 interest us less here than the way in which the Julfa Armenians represented themselves to the Russian court. The 1667 agreement was negotiated on behalf of the Armenians by agents of the Shahrimanean family, which had previously acted as agents of the Shah and Grand Vazir (*I'timad al-Dawla*) in exchanges between the Romanov and Safavid courts. The initial channel of approach, then was a traditional one belonging to a long-established practice of royal gift exchange which amounted to a substantial luxury trade. However the negotiations of 1666 were not carried out on behalf of the Shah or Vazir, as earlier visits had been, but on behalf of what the Russian sources describe as the Armenian trading company or companies (the same term - *kumpanots'* - features also in the Armenian signatures of the agents). While some have seen this as evidence of the existence of an actual Julfa Armenian trading company, a more plausible explanation (since there is no other evidence for the existence of such a company) is that the Julfan negotiators presented themselves as company representatives to enhance their credibility and chances of success in a world which was accustomed to monopolistic trading companies negotiating deals with governments. On this occasion th Armenians were acting not in competition with the English and Dutch, but in collaboration with them. In 1667 they commissioned the services of an English broker in Moscow, while in 1676 they were supported in their negotiations by the Dutch ambassador to the Romanov court.

What the Armenians were offering was to commit their nation to carry the entire raw silk export from Persia to Europe via Russia. The prospect of securing the revenue from the entire Iranian raw silk transit trade was the carrot that persuaded the Russians to sign the deal. In the short term the ploy paid off.

Confirmation of the fact that the Armenian agents in Moscow were acting on behalf of the whole Julfan merchant community exists in the shape of a letter sent in 1671 to the Russian Tsar by the Kalantar and leading merchants - in all probability the Kadkhodas or district heads - of New Julfa. Shushanik Khachikian has analysed the signatories of this letter to reveal that the 'Company' represented in the Moscow negotiations was indeed none other than

the Julfa community acting in concert to achieve a collective goal: a transit trade agreement that would exempt its merchants from the normal restrictions placed on foreign traders in Russia. Like the silk auction forty years earlier, the negotiations in Moscow show the Julfans responding to their early modern political and commercial context by acting collectively as an 'Armenian Nation' to achieve a specific goal. But as with the silk auction, this collective action was a short term response to a particular challenge. In practice extended family household continued to be the fundamental building block of Julfan society and trade, and family firms continued to export silk by whatever route seemed most viable and profitable from year to year. If the Armenians had ever had any intention of diverting the course of the silk trade, they soon abandoned it, as their Russian partners were quick to point out.

The trade negotiations with Russia were unique in that we have surviving documentary evidence of both the use of the word 'Company' by the Armenians, and in the documented corporate involvement of the Julfans' community leaders. In other respects, however, they fit an emerging pattern of trade deals signed by often self-styled representatives of the Armenian nation with foreign governments and trading companies. Such was the case when in 1688 Panos Ghalandarean, a leading Julfa merchant, signed a deal with the English East India Company on behalf of 'himself and others of the Armenian nation'; such also was the case when Philippe de Zagly, an Armenian charlatan and fraudster, who had no real claim to represent anyone but himself, signed an agreement in 1696 granting Armenians the right to transport goods via the Duchy of Courland on the Baltic Sea. Other instances could also be brought forward, and while each of them is distinctive, they have in common that they treated the Julfa Armenian merchant community as a corporate national entity, capable of entering into contractual agreements in the manner of the European trading companies of the age. In each case it subsequently turned out that while some merchants may have chosen to take advantage of the agreements, others ignored them and continued to trade according to their perceptions of their own best interest.

On the one hand these cases show us the Julfans' readiness to adapt to the expectations and practices of early modern international trade, and by extension to present themselves and at least on some level to perceive themselves as constituting a single national community, comparable to the incorporated trading companies of other nations, in order to take advantage of commercial opportunity and enter into agreements with a variety of governments; on the

other hand they show how limited was the Armenians capacity to behave as a nation in a sustained way. The Safavid system granted them administrative autonomy but little space or encouragement to institutionalize that autonomy, which ultimately was theirs by royal favour, not by right. While within the community also the obstacles to sustained collective action were formidable, with both social tradition and business practice dictating the primacy of the family household. Making a brief show of national unity to achieve a specific objective or avert a threat was possible, but acting as a nation in a consistent and sustained manner was not.

In the 18th century, as the Safavid Empire declined then collapsed, the Julfa community progressively fragmented into a series of colonies in South Asia, Europe and the Ottoman Empire. Some of these satellite colonies had been established for many years, but until about the middle of the 18th century - during the reign of Nadir Shah - they had all retained their ties to the metropolitan centre in New Julfa, Isfahan. Now, however, those ties broke, or became so tenuous as to lose their significance. Each colony and each merchant household had to find its own place in the world, and the outcomes were quite diverse, as they adapted themselves to the political, social and economic circumstances of their several host countries. In Madras and Calcutta, the East India Company colonies in India, a considerable degree of autonomy was retained, as the Company preferred to leave individual communties' communal arrangements intact and to deal through their established leaderships. In the case of the Armenians, leading merchants and priests were called on to fulfill this role in a way that was in some ways reminiscent of arrangements in Isfahan, although now the system was based not upon royal beneficence, but on company regulations. We should perhaps look to this combination of communal autonomy within a constitutional framework set by the East India Company and a cultural milieu imbued with contemporary British thought and values to understand why the Armenians in India played the role they did in the genesis of modern Armenian nationalism. This is the argument advanced by Sebouh Aslanian in his forthcoming book on the Julfa merchants. He sees the articulation of nationhood by Armenians in 18th-century Madras as a response to the need to rethink their indentity when the collapse of Safavid Iran and the severing of ties with New Julfa meant that their previous identity as members of a cosmopolitan Julfan trade network was no longer viable.

The situation in India was not, however, typical. In Venice the leading Armenian family, the

Shahrimaneans, sought to assimilate into the Venetian nobility, and in general in 18th-century Western Europe the scope for communal self-government was small and we do not see the kind of developments that took place in India among the descendants of the Julfa merchants. While the Mekhitarst congregations in Venice and Vienna became centres of Armenian scholarship and progressive thought, the Armenian merchants in the major trading cities of Europe tended rather to assimilate into the mainstream culture and society.

Astrakhan in Russia presents another alternative. The Armenian colony there was of long standing and the management of the various trading communities in this, Russia's gateway to the East, was distinctive. During the reign of Catherine the Great, the Armenians, like the other non-Russian nationalities, were allowed a considerable degree of autonomy, but had to shape it to fit the modernizing bureaucratic requirements of the Russian state. In Astrakhan they built for the first time a *Rathaus,* a special building to act as the centre for their local self-government activities. In New Julfa and the other colonies no such dedicated space had existed, and whatever space was needed for meetings and for preserving records must have been found on church premises or in the houses of the Kalantar or other community leaders. In Astrakhan the Armenians also codified for the first time the communal law that in Julfa itself and the other colonies they had always preserved and practiced without recourse to a written text. In the eighteenth century we see a new stage in the development of the pattern of partial communal autonomy for the splinter colonies of the Julfa Armenians. In each case the shape that was taken reflects the larger political, administrative and cultural context.

To conclude, I believe that the Julfa merchants' encounters with the European national trading companies and with governments that responded to them as if they were a comparable trading nation are of interest for the study of Armenians' first experiences of modernity and nationalism. The first episode that we have considered - the 1619 silk auction - predates by nearly 50 years Arakel Davrizhetsi's *History of the Armenians*. While our Armenian sources contain no trace of the articulation of a sense of Armenian national interest or identity in relation to these encounters, it does not seem farfetched to suggest that this, and other similar experiences, must have left some impression on the Julfans, some awareness of the implications of being treated as one among a finite set of competing trading nations, and of having to act, or at least to present themselves, as such. This, I would propose, forms part of the background to the early awareness of nationhood that we find in the works of

Armenian historians and scholars in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and may be a part of the explanation for Armenians' early interest in questions of nation relative to other peoples outside Western Europe.

I would not, however, wish to exaggerate the achievements of the Julfa merchants in mobilizing themselves as 'the Armenian trading nation'. As we have seen, their steps in this direction were mostly reactive and geared towards specific limited objectives. In each of the cases menioned above, their capacity to present themselves as a united trading nation was not matched by a capability to act as one over a period of time. As a community, they enjoyed autonomy and were able to innovate and adapt to the changing requirements of the Early Modern trading world, but within the context of Safavid Iran, they lacked the opportunity and space to develop and institutionalize that autonomy beyond its set and precarious limits. In the 18th century also, while intellectual developments carried the agenda of an Armenian nation forward, the potential of realizing it was contingent on the political and cultural context of the various diaspora communities. The fuller articulation and development of Armenian nationhood had to wait for a later time and a different place, ultimately for the creation of an independent Armenian state.