

# The Merchant Networks of Afghan Sikhs: The Cold War, its Legacies and Beyond

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## Abstract

This article documents the migration of Afghanistan's Sikh communities to Asia and Europe during the Cold War and its aftermath. It analyses these migratory trajectories both in the context of conflict in Afghanistan and the refugee flows it created as well as in relation to the long-term role of Afghan Sikhs in transregional trade. The article argues that exploring Sikh migration from Afghanistan through the twin analytical lenses of trade networks and the Cold War helps to illuminate a more complex range of identities and experiences than allowed for by a singular focus on their status as either 'refugees' or migrants from 'the Global South'.

*Keywords:* Afghanistan; migration; trade networks; commerce; London

## Introduction

This article documents the migration of Afghanistan's Sikh communities to Asia and Europe and explores the ways in which their migration trajectories are entangled with the Cold War and its aftermath.<sup>1</sup> It analyses these migratory trajectories in the context of conflict inside Afghanistan and the refugee flows of Afghan Sikhs in which this violence resulted (especially to the former Soviet Union, UK, EU, Canada and the USA). I also explore Sikh migration in relation to the historic role that Sikhs in Afghanistan have played as a 'middleman trading community' operating between South and Central Asia and northern Eurasia. Simultaneously deploying the analytical devices of the Cold War and trading networks, I argue, illuminates the complexity and diversity of Afghan Sikh networks and experiences.

Besides contributing to the understanding of the contemporary history of this little explored trading group, the article seeks to make a contribution to inter-disciplinary literature on migration and diaspora

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in two ways. Firstly, framing the migratory trajectories of Afghan Sikhs in the context of the Cold War and its ongoing aftermath brings attention to geographies obscured in scholarship that focuses on South-North migration. The material presented in the article illuminates the significance of migration from Afghanistan to post-Soviet contexts but also the critical implications this has had for the identities and activities of people from the country living elsewhere, especially in Western Europe and North America. Secondly, the article also seeks to demonstrate the ways in which Afghan Sikhs embark upon modes of making a livelihood in relation to a longer history of commercial activity. Recognition of Afghan Sikhs' ongoing identification with long distance trade between Afghanistan and the wider world complicates more one-dimensional representations of this and other historically 'mobile societies' within the literature on migration and refugee studies (Ho 2017).

## **Afghanistan, Sikhs and the Cold War**

The Cold War was the central geopolitical dynamic that resulted in violence and conflict in Afghanistan, the disintegration of the country's state structures and the rise to power of Islamist-orientated regimes hostile towards the country's historic religious and cultural diversity (Leake 2022; Nunan 2016). The war between the pro-Soviet government of Afghanistan and mujahidin resistance organisations supported by countries in Western Europe and North America as well as their allies in Asia and the Middle East eventually resulted in state collapse in 1992 and the emergence of a series of governments led by groups and individuals standing on Islamist political platforms. Internal and geopolitical antagonisms stretching back to the Cold War also played a powerful role in the chronic insecurity that affected Afghanistan following the US-led international intervention of 2001. Across these periods, Sikhs left Afghanistan in successive waves.

Cold War dynamics not only led Sikhs to flee Afghanistan but also shaped the range of contexts to which they moved and subsequently (re)established themselves as trading communities. Most Sikhs from Afghanistan initially moved to India in 1992 before a significant proportion sought refugee status in Europe and North America later in the decade. At the same time, Sikhs from Afghanistan also moved to multiple urban settings across the former Soviet Union. These settings were connected to Afghanistan through a history of interaction and

exchange dating back to the sixteenth century (Dale 2002) and, of more relevance to this article, a modern history of Cold War cooperation which materialised in the form of migration from Afghanistan to the Soviet Union for higher education and technical training (e.g., Ibañez Tirado 2019). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the emergence of new economies in the post-Soviet world meant that cities such as Moscow, Odesa and Tashkent offered significant commercial opportunities for groups with an understanding of and expertise in long-distance and cross-border trade (Humphrey 2002). Sikhs and Hindus from Afghanistan numbering between approximately two and five thousand individuals lived across former Soviet countries and were involved in a range of commercial activities. The wealth and commercial knowledge the traders acquired in the post-Soviet world eventually enabled them to play a significant role in the fortunes of increasingly globally dispersed Afghan Sikhs.

Afghan Sikh communities continue to be mobile, relocating businesses, families and community institutions. The post-2001 international intervention in Afghanistan resulted in chronic levels of violence and hostility in the country, some of which directly targeted the country's remaining Sikhs and Hindus and led them to flee. The aftermath of the Cold War has also affected Sikhs in the countries in which they settled after leaving Afghanistan. In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Afghan Sikhs living in the country have moved their families to the UK and EU; Afghan Sikhs living in Russia have also moved their families and businesses to London over the past twenty years because of organised crime and the regular experience of racist attacks. A consideration of the migratory trajectories of Afghan Sikhs in the wider context of the Cold War reveals activities, transregional and global connections and commercial geographies that a singular focus on their experiences as 'refugees' or as migrants from 'the Global South' conceals.

## **Note on Methodology**

The article is primarily based on fieldwork conducted between January 2022 and March 2023 in Southall, a 'post-migration' suburb in West London (Baumann 1996) that is now home to approximately 25,000 Sikhs of Afghan heritage. It also includes fieldwork amongst Afghan Sikhs and Hindus living in Vancouver (April 2023), Hamburg (February 2023) and Frankfurt (March 2023). Fieldwork entailed spending

time with Afghan Sikh merchants in the wholesale and retail markets in which they run businesses. Furthermore, I conducted and recorded semi-formal interviews and visited gurdwaras established in London. I was also invited to attend festivals in the religious calendar of Afghan Sikhs, as well as events at which concerns about the community's future in the diaspora and in Afghanistan were the focus of discussion. My relationships with Sikhs from Afghanistan living in London stretch back to research I conducted during the 2010s (Marsden 2016; 2021). I conducted extensive ethnographical fieldwork on trading networks comprising merchants from Afghanistan. In London, Ukraine and Russia, an international trade city in China and in Afghanistan, I met tens of Sikhs and Hindus from Afghanistan who were involved in the long-distance commodity trade (e.g., Marsden 2018). I visited gurdwaras in Kabul in 2018 and 2019, and spoke to several Sikhs and Hindus in the city who continued to live in Afghanistan until shortly after the return to power of the Taliban in August 2021.

## **From Transregional Trading Community to Global Dispersal: Afghan Sikh Experiences of the Cold War**

Sikhs and Hindus formed a sizeable and influential community of between 80,000 and 250,000 persons in modern Afghanistan; from the early 1990s onwards, both of these closely interlinked communities began to leave Afghanistan in large numbers. Relatively little is known about the history of 'Hindki' communities living in the territories that make up modern Afghanistan. According to Hanifi, Afghanistan's 'Hindkis' (a term used in the country to refer to people of Indian background) included Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus who worked as 'bankers, merchants and traders' and shared 'social origins in and economic connections to various localities in India' (Hanifi 2011).<sup>2</sup> Historical studies tend to suggest that communities identifying as Sikh and Hindu today are most likely the descendants of merchants and bankers from Punjab and Sindh who settled in towns across present day Afghanistan from around the seventeenth century onwards (Bonotto 2021). Hindki traders and credit providers were not isolated 'minority' communities; they are better thought of, rather, as a 'mobile society' (Ho 2017) that formed dispersed networks connected to the multiple societies of the transregional arena across which they worked.

Hindki merchants were initially encouraged to settle in the region by Afghan rulers who had close relations to India's Mughal rulers (Dale

2002; Hopkins 2009; Levy 2002). In the eighteenth century, Indian firms established contact with these merchants and sent their own agents (*arethi*) to the region. The merchants predominantly belonged to the Khatri caste (historically merchants and agriculturalists). Hindki merchants from this background sold textiles on behalf of Indian firms, and invested profits raised from trade in both short and long-term interest loans to Muslim traders and farmers. In the nineteenth century, Hindkis played a pivotal role in trade between South, Central and West Asia (Hanifi 2011) and beyond to Russia, building close relationships with the nomads who moved goods and also capitalising on their literacy by way of engagements with British India's colonial authorities (Dale 2002). Bonotto (2021) estimates that in the mid-nineteenth century, Hindkis were roughly equally divided between Sikh and Hindu. From the 1920s, a Sikh movement of reform was founded, the Chief Khalsa Diwan, which actively encouraged Khatri communities to publicly profess their adherence to the Sikh faith (cf. Barrier 2000).

Central Asia's incorporation within the Russian Empire resulted in major transformations in the region's commercial dynamics. The Russian administration of Turkestan targeted the activities of Indian moneylenders, initially allowing them to trade but preventing them from giving the loans from which they derived the bulk of their profits. Small Indian outposts remained in Central Asia until the Bolshevik revolution, but most merchants left the region after the Russian conquest (Levi 2016).<sup>3</sup>

In Afghanistan during the first half of the twentieth century, Hindkis conducted business in urban centres and small towns across the country. Sikhs in particular were reputed *hakims* (medical experts), known for their knowledge of and ability to administer *yunnani* medicine (the Indo-Muslim expression of Ayurvedic tradition) (e.g., Alavi 2016). Wealthier families were also involved in the trade of medicinal plants, such as asafoetida and liquorice, both within Afghanistan and between India and the country. Sikh hakims continued to be much sought after by local communities across Afghanistan until the present day.<sup>4</sup> Hindkis also owned and farmed land in Afghanistan's provinces. Afghan Hindki respondents in London, for example, have told me that their families owned land in different parts of Afghanistan, including Jebul Seraj and Charikar in northern Afghanistan, Nangahar in the southeast and Ghazni and Helmand in the south. Sikh religious life was inscribed on Afghanistan's landscapes. Shrines (*dargahs*) and places of religious significance in urban and rural Afghanistan and the

northwestern provinces of British India were a focus of veneration by Hindki communities who travelled locally and across national borders to conduct pilgrimages and participate in religious festivals.

Under the leadership of Amanullah Khan (1919-1929), Afghanistan's state embarked upon the path of modernisation (e.g., Ahmed 2017); this had complicated implications for the country's ethno-religious minorities (e.g., Koplik 2015). During the reign of Amanullah, individual Hindkis expanded their influence in society beyond the domain of commerce. As in the case of 'middleman trading diasporas' in other contexts (Curtin 1994), the skills of members of the networks had historically been capitalised upon by power holders in Afghanistan who appointed Hindus and Sikhs to senior positions, including in the court's treasury (Dass nd.). During this period, Hindkis also became state employees, especially in the fields of education, health and, to a lesser extent, the armed forces. Most, however, continued their historic roles in trade. Hindki traders became pivotal to Afghanistan's economy, especially the export of dried fruits and nuts to India and Pakistan and the import of manufactured goods – including textiles, electronic goods and car spare parts – from Asian countries, including India, Korea, Japan and Hong Kong. Firms run by Sikhs and Hindus distributed imported commodities to commercial centres across Afghanistan. Sikhs continued to be active in the provision of *yunnani* medicine. They also deployed their knowledge of medicine and reputation as medical specialists to study medicine and pharmacology in Afghan universities, open pharmacies and import drugs to Afghanistan, mostly from India, but also, later in the century, from Eastern European countries, notably Yugoslavia. Through such activities, families cemented their reputes as knowledgeable *hakims* in towns and villages across Afghanistan. A man in his mid-sixties who lives in London mentioned to me that a local leader in the northern city of Kunduz had gifted his grandfather several hectares of land after the latter had successfully cured one of the leaders' relatives.

The relative stability of the era of King Zahir Shah (1933-1973), especially after the launch of a new constitution in 1965, as well as the economic success of Hindki communities, resulted in gurdwaras openly functioning across the country. Policies launched in the 1930s that sought to 'nativise' Afghanistan's economy had resulted in some Sikhs and Hindus being required to relocate from villages and rural areas into the country's urban centres on the pretext of their security (O'Halpin 2016). Between the mid-1960s and late 1980s, their role in the public life and administration of the country grew. Wealthier Sikhs

and Hindus in Kabul moved out of historic urban neighbourhoods (such as the Hindu Guzaar neighbourhood in Shor Bazar) and into newly constructed residential areas, notably that of Karte Parwan in which a gurdwara was also constructed. During this period, families purchased orchards and small properties in rural regions of Afghanistan, visiting them in large groups for picnic parties during the summer months. A man in his mid-fifties from Lalpura, a district in the province of Nangahar which is of religious significance to Sikhs who live in London, remarked to me, 'we used to think one day this country will become something, so we bought land and spent our money there, not knowing what was actually going to happen'.

During the 1980s, Hindki communal life in Afghanistan became increasingly concentrated in Kabul. The 1979 invasion of Afghanistan by Soviet forces and the US's decision to support the mujahidin by creating supply routes located in Pakistan resulted in violence and insecurity across much of Afghanistan, especially the country's rural areas and provincial towns. A small proportion of Afghanistan's Sikhs and Hindus were politically active during the pro-Soviet governments of the 1980s. The membership of both the Khalq and Parcham wings of the leftist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) included Hindkis. Some Sikhs also directly worked for or alongside Afghanistan's security services. A shopkeeper from a town in central Afghanistan told me how he supplied information gathered in his shop to Afghanistan's intelligence service (KhAD). The pro-Soviet government of Afghanistan in the 1980s and early 1990s built good relations with Afghan Hindkis, supporting the construction of religious buildings and appointing Sikhs and Hindus as representatives in various legislative assemblies. President Najibullah is reported to have told a gathering of the country's Sikhs and Hindus that their commercial acumen had ensured the movement of vital commodities, including foodstuffs and medicine, into the country, especially from India and the former Soviet Union, and that he considered this as a form of military service to the country. As with other citizens of the country, Sikhs and Hindus were required to undertake compulsory military service (*askari*), but a special provision enabled them to return to their homes at night.

For most Hindkis in the country, the final years of the pro-Soviet governments were marked by rising levels of violence and by what they now describe as a shift in attitude towards Sikhs and Hindus by the country's Muslims. A Hindu man in his fifties currently living in London remarked: 'Before the Muslims were very good, treated us with respect,

like our family. After the beginning of war and when more and more [people] went to Pakistan, they changed completely, hating everybody who was non-Muslim'. Insecurity in Afghanistan's provinces led Hindkis living in various parts of the country to relocate to Kabul. In some instances, Islamists directly targeted non-Muslim communities. A place of worship of importance to both Sikhs and Hindus in the eastern province of Khost, for example, was damaged in an attack in 1986, leading many of the approximately 200 Hindki families living in the town and neighbouring villages to move to Kabul. In 1988, an attack by gunmen on Sikhs in a gurdwara in Jalalabad led both Sikhs and Hindus to leave the city. Sikh respondents in London often interpreted these attacks as resulting from the close relationship between various mujahidin organisations and Pakistan, a country keen to expand its role in Afghanistan. Conflict between the mujahidin and government forces in Khost and other regions had a serious effect on Hindki-run businesses; families from both communities moved to Kabul in search of more stable commercial opportunities. Initially, Hindki families migrated to Kabul from the provinces. From the mid-1980s, they increasingly sought to leave the country, mostly to India, though some individuals travelled to Germany. In the months following the capture of Kabul by the mujahidin in 1992, approximately 60,000 Sikhs and Hindus living in Afghanistan left the country for India, most travelling with family and possessions in large trucks by way of Pakistan, the government of which had assured them a safe passage.<sup>5</sup>

Infighting between the various mujahidin groups seeking influence in the government of Afghanistan between 1992 and 1996 affected the entire population of Kabul yet had especially significant implications for non-Muslim Hindkis. Given their historic role as merchants in Afghanistan, mujahidin fighters and criminal gangs operating in the period assumed that all Sikhs and Hindus living in Kabul were wealthy. Strongmen and their fighters forcibly occupied properties belonging to both Sikh and Hindu families in Kabul and other provincial towns from 1992 onwards. A pharmacist from Kunduz who now lives in London told me how the land gifted to him by a local figure of power and authority was occupied by groups aligned with the mujahidin in the 1990s. Several Sikh and Hindu religious buildings were also occupied by mujahidin groups and were used as military bases in the street fighting that destroyed much of Kabul during the 1990s. Individuals seeking to defend their property were murdered and kidnapping for ransom was a regular occurrence. A Hindu originally



from Laghman told me how one of his Hindu neighbours in Kabul was killed in front of him after he had refused to sell his property at a low cost to a Muslim family. The security of Hindkis remaining in the country continued to be connected to wider geopolitical conflicts across the Indian subcontinent. The destruction of the Babri Masjid by Hindu fundamentalists in India in 1992 resulted in attacks on Hindu and Sikh religious institutions in Afghanistan, including a Hindu temple in Khost that a trader from the town who now lives in London told me was largely destroyed in a bomb blast.

By 1996 and the onset of the first era of Taliban rule, Hindkis continuing to live in Afghanistan formed a small community largely though not exclusively comprising families that did not have sufficient capital to emigrate to India or elsewhere. The first era of Taliban rule (1996-2001) resulted in further restrictions on Hindki activities—members of the community were required to wear yellow insignia in public that distinguished them from Muslims. A few individuals who had sent their families abroad returned to Afghanistan, mostly those who imported medicine from India and travelled regularly between Kabul and Delhi; others maintained retail shops in the city; still more ran businesses but primarily stayed in the country to act as the custodians of Hindu and Sikh religious institutions.

Hindkis living in Afghanistan and in the diaspora experienced relative stability during the period between 2001 and 2021 in which a US-led NATO coalition provided security to formally-elected governments. This period in Afghanistan until 2010 enabled the repair of Sikh gurdwaras and Hindu temples. A handful of individuals returned to the country from abroad—sometimes with the hope of gaining access to family property which had massively increased in value. Few, however, settled, reporting being threatened by powerful individuals who occupied the houses they had left a decade or more previously. In the post-2001 period, Afghanistan's government enabled representation of Hindkis in the parliament.<sup>6</sup> Sikhs living in Afghanistan whom I met in September 2018 and July 2019 told me, however, that they felt the government treated them as a 'treasure to be preserved' yet did little to support them practically. Land allocated by the government for the communities to cremate their dead was located, for example, on the outskirts of the city—during cremations, local Muslims pelted Sikhs and Hindus with stones in front of miniscule police presence who reportedly lacked the power to do anything other than stand back and watch. As the Taliban insurgency intensified after the

partial withdrawal of international forces commenced in 2014, Sikh and Hindu places of worship were the target of several attacks by Islamist militants. On 1 November 2018, an attack in Jalalabad resulted in the deaths of several Sikh community leaders. In this context, families continuing to live in provincial cities (mostly Jalalabad and Ghazni) relocated to Kabul and lived in Sikh gurdwaras and Hindu mandirs in Shor Bazar and Karte Parwan. Families able to leave Afghanistan continued to do so; Sikh movements and organisations, especially the Canada-based Manmeet Singh Bhullar Foundation in collaboration with the World Sikh Organisation, increasingly supported the emigration of Afghan Sikhs (especially those living in the insecure provinces of Helmand and Kandahar).

Upon the return to power of the Taliban in August 2021, international organisations evacuated several Hindki families in Afghanistan, mostly to India from where they began the process of being resettled in Canada. A handful of individuals continue to live in Afghanistan largely because they do not have access to passports. The economic crisis and attacks by ISIS-Khorasan, including on the Karte Parwan Gurdwara on 17 June 2022, meant that by the beginning of 2023 only a handful of Sikh men remained in Afghanistan. Those who left after August 2021 report that while their relationships with Taliban officials were cordial, they were concerned for their lives after the ISIS-Khorasan attack on the gurdwara. Sikh Afghan men escorted the remaining sacred scriptures in the country by air to India in January 2023. Even though Muslim security guards defended the community's religious sites, the Taliban pledges to protect these sites were a source of little comfort to Sikhs and Hindus in the diaspora.

## **Nodes, Networks and Markets**

Having explored the Afghan Sikh global dispersal in the context of the Cold War and its aftermath, the article now explores their migratory trajectories in greater detail. It emphasises the entwinement of these trajectories with Cold War historical processes and analyses their structure and dynamics in relation to concepts developed by historians who have studied the functioning of trade networks. Sikhs from Afghanistan have established concentrated populations in cities across a range of countries. Scholarly discussions of these communities tend to focus on migration from Afghanistan to India and from there to Western Europe and North America. As a result, it is easy to conceive of Afghan Sikh migration as a form of South-North mobility driven by

conflict. As Cheuk (2013) has explored, however, Sikhs have fashioned commercial networks in multiple settings, including, for example, between Hong Kong and mainland China. The following analysis builds on work addressing the importance of religion and ethnicity in the understanding of Sikh commercial activities and seeks to contribute to a wider body of scholarly work on the role of social networks in long-distance commerce.

Much literature on trade networks emphasises the role played by shared bonds of religion and ethnicity in facilitating the type of trust-based relationships of significance to the functioning of long-distance trading networks (cf. Cohen 1971). More recently, however, studies have focused on the specific structure of trading networks. An especially interesting area of debate concerns the ways in which variations in the structuring of networks affect their durability over time and resilience in the face of major shocks (e.g., Aslanian 2016; Marsden and Anderson 2020; Trivellato 2009). In his historical work on the Armenian trading diaspora, for example, Sebouh Aslanian (2016) has brought attention to the critical role played by 'nodes' in the economic fortunes of trading networks, and the forms of discipline and solidarity upon which their social and cultural reproduction depends. Aslanian identifies two types of trading networks. 'Multinodal monocentric networks' references how multiple nodes were critical to the activities of merchants, yet a single dominant 'nodal centre ... defines and regulates the identity and economic vitality of the network as a whole' (2016: 14-15). By contrast, 'multinodal polycentric' trading networks have no single 'nodal centre' but operate from numerous centres, each of which plays if not equal then varying importance for the activities of the trading network as a whole. A nodal centre is both critical for the circulating of the objects and credit necessary for commerce but also the women and religious specialists central to the network's social and cultural reproduction. Aslanian suggests that networks comprising a dominant nodal centre are often less able to respond to major ruptures than those in which multiple nodes are of critical significance to networks' commercial activities and their cultural and social reproduction (cf. Trivellato 2009). After the Armenian networks studied by Aslanian lost their dominant node in Iran, the traders shifted their activities from the field of commerce to the domain of politics, pressing for the establishment of an Armenian nation-state.

The trajectories of Afghan Sikh networks in the context of the Cold War and its aftermath add a further layer of analysis to debates about the relationship between the structure of trading networks and their

resilience. Unlike the Armenian networks studied by Aslanian, Afghan Sikhs did not respond to ruptures in their commercial activities brought about by the Islamist takeover of Afghanistan by vacating the field of commerce and transferring their energies into a different field of activity. Rather, Afghan Sikhs altered the commodities in which they dealt, the geographies of the routes along which they traded and the locations of the nodes at which their networks intersected.

## **Afghan Sikh Commercial Nodes in the Post-Soviet World**

Since they began leaving Afghanistan in the 1980s, Afghan Hindkis have established multiple nodes in various parts of Asia and Europe. As noted above, the vast majority of Sikhs living in Afghanistan left the country for India after the collapse of the Soviet-backed government in 1992. India's historically rigid policy towards refugees and the difficulty of doing commerce in the country, however, led Sikhs to leave the Delhi neighbourhoods in which they lived from the early 1990s onwards. In the early 1990s, Afghan Sikhs mostly moved to cities across the former Soviet Union, especially Tashkent, Moscow and Odesa.<sup>7</sup> These cities became important sites for the commercial activities of Afghans in the 1990s and continue to play an important role today (Marsden 2018).

After 1992, Moscow came to be regarded by Muslims and Hindkis as the dominant commercial node of Afghan trading networks in the former Soviet Union. Sikh traders from Afghanistan were able to bring capital to Russia from Afghanistan and India without using formal banking mechanisms. Traders moved their capital in the form of beads and semi-precious stones such as amethyst. A Muslim involved in the money transfer business in Moscow in the 1990s told me how he worked closely with Sikhs:

They would travel on the flight between Delhi and Moscow with bags full of stones which they would give me on their arrival in Moscow. I would ask them for two days to sell the stones and then give them both cash and a receipt. I made money by selling at a higher price than that at which I bought the beads from them. The receipt of sale was important for them because it demonstrated how they had earned the money in their possession, thereby facilitating their opening bank accounts in Russia and allowing them to move the money wherever in the world they needed.

From 1992 onwards, wholesale merchants living in Moscow imported goods on credit from factories and outlets in China, often travelling with the goods overland by way of Kazakhstan. Commodities imported to Russia (from toys to hardware to beads, electronic cigarettes, textiles and clothing and electronic goods) were then sold to local buyers and given on credit to Afghan Muslims who owned businesses in both wholesale and retail markets dotted across the country. Afghan traders undertook forms of trade with which they were familiar from their experiences in Afghanistan, such as the sale of cloth, textiles and electronic goods, though they also expanded their activities into new fields, including toys and hardware. 'In Afghanistan', reported a trader originally from Jebul Seraj who now lives in London, 'we never sold cigarettes or tobacco because it is not allowed in our religion. Having moved from Afghanistan and needing simple ways of making money, more of our traders have engaged in such forms of business even though we are not supposed to'. The creation of commercial nodes in new contexts required merchants to be flexible not only in terms of the commodities in which they dealt but also the normative and religious standards they deployed to evaluate participation by Afghan Sikhs in different types of trade.

Markets in the post-Soviet world rapidly came to play a key role in the commercial activities of Afghan Sikhs globally. Traders in Moscow, I was often told, can make higher daily profits in the city compared to anywhere in the world, including Dubai.<sup>8</sup> Traders seeking to build business in Moscow needed significant sums of capital to invest in their fledgling businesses. Tashkent was an especially important city in the capitalisation of Afghan trading networks (Muslim, Sikh and Hindu) in the years immediately following 1992. A Hindu trader whose family hails from eastern Afghanistan told me how he and his father had established a trading venture in Tashkent before moving to Moscow after having made enough money to do so. In Moscow, Sikh, Hindu and Muslim traders from Afghanistan (many of whom had studied in the Soviet Union and were aligned with the pro-Soviet regimes of the 1980s) established wholesale businesses in the building of a hotel initially constructed to host participants in the Moscow Olympic Games of 1982 (Marsden 2016; 2021).

Afghan Sikhs regard linguistic versatility as pivotal to their commercial success in Russia. A handful of Sikhs who moved to the former Soviet Union to trade had learned Russian while studying in the Soviet Union on state-sponsored bursaries during the 1970s and 1980s; most,

however, learned the language during day-to-day conversations and interactions with their customers. Sikh traders in Moscow learned not only Russian; younger Sikhs brought up in India who had moved to support family businesses also learned Farsi and Pashto as a result of working alongside Muslims from Afghanistan. Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus ran offices next to one another in the market in Moscow and regularly visited each other to buy goods and request commodities on credit.

Traders in Moscow imported goods not only directly to the city from China – they also imported goods to the Ukrainian port city of Odesa and used informal transporters to bring commodities to Moscow along routes that avoided custom posts. Afghan Hindkis established sizeable businesses in Odesa (as well as Kyiv) which facilitated this trade; these companies also supplied markets in Ukraine. By 2014, Afghan Sikhs owned substantial properties in Odesa. At this time, Afghan Sikhs constructed a gurdwara in a small village close to the 7 Kilometre wholesale market in which Afghan Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus conducted business alongside local traders, as well as Turks and Arabs (Marsden 2018; Skvirskaja and Humphrey 2015).

According to Muslim traders from Afghanistan, Sikhs were the dominant traders in economic terms in the Afghan wholesale market complex in Moscow. As a result, Sikhs in Moscow were able to exert their collective influence to set prices and weaken the business of traders they regarded as being a threat to their activities. In Odesa, they ran sizeable businesses but did not exert the same level of influence as they did in Moscow. According to Muslim traders with whom I have spoken, their weaker comparative position in Odesa had important implications for the nature of the commercial strategies in the city. In Moscow, Sikhs were able to work with one another and set prices in the commodities in which they dealt at a level that ensured their domination of those markets. By contrast, in Odesa, Sikhs were required to build closer social relations with Afghan Muslim traders in the market in order to protect their businesses. A Muslim trader in Odesa told me that a Muslim Afghan friend of his in Moscow had remarked to him: ‘You should be thankful that there are not so many Sikhs in Ukraine, otherwise by God you would not be able to make the profit you currently do’.

Across these post-Soviet contexts, Afghan Sikh merchants alongside their Muslim compatriots played a major role in establishing social

institutions (notably markets) that played a significant role in the commercial fortunes of the community as a whole. As we shall see below, however, Odesa and Moscow were of significance to Afghan Sikhs primarily as commercial nodes and not as centres of the cultural and social reproduction of the community. In this respect, they differed significantly from Kabul's status as a social, cultural, commercial and political centre for the life of Afghan Sikhs in the years leading up to 1992.

## **Nodes of Cultural and Social Reproduction of Afghan Sikh Life in Europe**

In spite of their commercial successes, a sizeable number of Sikhs and Hindus working in post-Soviet settings moved to European countries and the UK in particular during the 2000s and 2010s. Southall increasingly came to play the role of a dominant node in the commercial activities of Afghan Sikhs as well as in the social and cultural reproduction of their networks. A critical mass of families in London has enabled Sikhs to establish religious institutions that are central to ensuring the discipline of traders, the building of relationships of trust between them and maintaining the cultural distinctiveness on which the networks are based. London is home to a significant number of Sikh communities from India, yet the concentrated residence of Afghan Sikh families in the city enables them to maintain distinct places of worship that are critical to the social and cultural reproduction. A concentration of Afghan Sikhs in London has also enabled the establishment of wholesale markets that are critical to the pooling of knowledge about commerce and reputation that is central to the overall functioning of the networks.

A mixture of commercial opportunities, the scope for integrating families within expanding Afghan Sikh communities in Western Europe and the difficulties of life and business in the former Soviet countries informed this migratory trajectory. Afghan Sikh merchants regularly lost significant sums of money in the former Soviet Union having been targeted by criminal gangs and state officials. Political instability and conflicts also impacted the types of business in which Sikhs in particular and Afghans more generally were active in the post-Soviet world. The annexation of Crimea and the Donbass by Russia in 2014, for example, reduced the size of businesses run by traders from Afghanistan based in Ukraine in two ways. On the one hand,

both Crimea and the Donbass constituted important markets for the commodities which Afghans imported to the country. On the other hand, the increasingly securitised border between Russia and Ukraine made it increasingly difficult if not impossible to move goods informally between the countries. Traders from Afghanistan based in both Ukraine and Russia had previously increased their profit margins and volumes of trade by circumventing customs regimes – restrictions on trade across the border resulted in diminished returns on the commodities in which they dealt. Racism directed against migrants from Asia (especially but not exclusively those living in Moscow) was a further factor that encouraged traders living in Russia to move to Europe. Traders working in Ukraine were also affected by a tighter regulatory environment given the increased importance placed by the country's leadership on closer ties with the European Union.

Concerns relating to the ability to reproduce Afghan Sikh cultural and social life in Moscow also resulted in Afghan Sikhs moving out of the former Soviet Union. Afghan Sikh businessmen often sought to relocate their families to the UK and elsewhere while they continued to run businesses in Moscow. The small size of communities in the former Soviet Union and the growing tendency for these communities to consist of men living apart from their families reduced the scope for maintaining ritual and social life for the limited Afghan Sikh families who remained there. In light of the increasingly outpost-like nature of life for Afghan Sikhs in the former Soviet Union, cities in Europe, and especially London, increasingly became centres for the social and cultural reproduction of trading networks.

Sikhs leaving the former Soviet Union moved to cities in Europe in which there were established communities of Afghan Sikhs (mostly dating to the late 1990s though Sikhs from Afghanistan have run businesses in the German cities of Hamburg and Frankfurt since the early 1980s). Cities in Europe where Sikhs from Afghanistan were concentrated increasingly came to function as sites of cultural and social reproduction. Sikhs who moved to Europe from Russia also capitalised more and more on the commercial potentials of the cities in which they settled, especially London, Hamburg and Amsterdam. These were all cities in which the trade in low-grade Chinese commodities, especially products aimed at tourists, flourished from the 2000s onwards. All of these cities were also home to older and more recent communities of Afghan Muslim refugees who sought to make a living by engaging in commerce. Repeated streams of Afghan refugees fleeing conflict in



Afghanistan and moving to cities in Europe constituted an important and expanding market for inexpensive Chinese commodities, notably inexpensive cooking ware and home items. More importantly, Afghan families bought such goods for their own homes, but men from Afghanistan also sold them in the shops and market stalls they ran in order to make a living.

Sikhs who moved to London were especially well-positioned to import inexpensive commodities at cost to the UK because of the connections they had built with Chinese factories whilst doing commerce in Russia and Ukraine; they were also knowledgeable about high volume low profit-margin trade. In London, they also used airfreight to import commodities and gain commercial advantage over other importers. Some businessmen active in the market were also said to be knowledgeable of the trade in counterfeit goods such as watches, telephones and handbags.

Wealthy Hindki traders moving to the UK from Russia and Ukraine were also able to transfer their capital to the UK, capital they invested in the purchase of commercial property, especially wholesale and retail markets. As in Moscow, so too in London, markets were not only economic institutions—they also functioned as nodes in which knowledge about commercial opportunities and the trustworthiness of traders circulated (Anderson 2023). Markets established in the UK enabled traders to work alongside one another, as well as to maintain old and build new social relations. One market in London in particular became a hub for the import of commodities from China to the UK by independent traders. The market is well-known by traders from Afghanistan living across the city and elsewhere in the UK for its high volumes of trade. Merchants who have businesses in the market are all said to be millionaires, while shops are said to be so successful that in addition to paying the property fee, traders will often pay a substantial ‘good will’ fee. Traders running import businesses in the market exclusively identify themselves as being Afghan; those working there estimate that 90 per cent of businesses operating are owned by Hindu and Sikh traders from Afghanistan, the remainder being run and owned by Muslims from Afghanistan.

Traders who have come to the UK from Russia and Ukraine own some of the largest businesses in the market. Afghan Sikhs living in London often bring attention to the presence of thriving Sikh communities in Russia to indicate their community’s skills and successes. A Sikh trader living in London who sells motor insurance and is involved

in Afghan Sikh activism made the following remarks to me: ‘There are Sikhs in Moscow and Ukraine. They are very successful because they are multi-lingual and also because they are known in the region for being trustworthy – people know that Afghan Sikhs do what they say and do not cheat. There are no Indian Sikhs working in Russia, only Afghan Sikhs’. During a trip to the wholesale market in London, a Sikh community activist who showed me around also repeatedly pointed out traders who came to London from Moscow: ‘He is young but a millionaire. He speaks seven languages and is a clever entrepreneur’.

Hindki traders who made money in Moscow play an active role in the collective fortunes of Afghan Sikhs in London. A Hindu trader from Afghanistan owns the wholesale market in London. He initially rented out shops and warehouse space in the market to Afghan Sikh, Hindu and Muslim traders, many of whom then bought the commercial units outright. Owning the property in which they did business gave them a competitive advantage over other importers: it enabled them to maintain their businesses during periods of economic decline in the UK. A Sikh trader in his late twenties from Khost told me in January 2023, for instance, that he was not facing difficulties because he owned the warehouse and shop in which he was doing business in London.

Afghan Sikh merchants used profits made from trade to establish a wide range of institutions that played a critical role in the social and cultural reproduction of the networks and the range of commercial personnel required for their success. Success in trade in London, the movement to the city of wealthy traders from Russia and Ukraine and the culturally open nature of the city enabled capital to be invested in aspects of life regarded as being central to community identity. These included the construction of gurdwaras, the purchase of commercial property including wholesale and retail markets that acted as a node for commercial activities, the hiring of immigration lawyers and the organisation of ostentatious religious and familial events. By 2022, Sikhs from Afghanistan living in London had not only constructed a purpose-built gurdwara: they also ran two other gurdwaras in the city and had collectively bought properties intended for the development of two further gurdwaras. In Birmingham and Manchester, Afghan Sikhs had also purchased property upon which they planned to construct gurdwaras.

Besides London, other cities were also of significance (especially Amsterdam, Antwerp, Frankfurt and Hamburg in Europe and Toronto

and New York in North America) to the activities and identities of Afghan Sikhs. An indicator, however, of London's status as the central node is evident in the decision of Afghan Sikhs living in Europe (especially The Netherlands, Germany and Austria) to relocate their families to London, a move that was relatively straightforward up to the UK's formal exit from the European Union in January 2020. Afghan Sikhs opted to move their families and businesses to London having invested considerable energy and capital in building smaller nodes in Europe. One Sikh merchant, for instance, played a major role in establishing a gurdwara for Afghan Sikhs in the Belgium city of Antwerp, only to decide to relocate to London—a decision that other Antwerp-based Afghan Sikhs followed. Afghan Sikhs living in London have moved from a wide range of European cities including Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Hamburg and Vienna, and have chosen to shift their families and activities despite establishing successful businesses. A woman in her 60s originally from Kabul lived in Hamburg with her family between the 1980s and early 2000s. She told me why the family had decided to move to London: 'So we could all live as a family close to one another; if not, we would have had our daughters dispersed across Germany, Austria and Holland'. A combination of Brexit and attempts by the UK government to restrict the movement of refugees to the UK will likely limit the ability of the Afghan Sikhs to move to the city from other parts of the world.

## Conclusion

Over the past fifty years, urban centres across Muslim Asia that were previously home to sizeable ethno-religious minority communities have become increasingly homogenous in terms of the religious adherence of their inhabitants (Green 2016). The emigration of ethno-religious minorities out of cities in Muslim Asia has arisen in the context of multiple political, social and economic transformations including economic nationalism, the rise to power of Islamist regimes hostile to non-Muslim minorities and violent conflict. By focusing on the case of Sikhs from Afghanistan, this article has sought to contribute to the wider understanding of the migratory trajectories, experiences and networks of Muslim Asia's non-Muslims during and after the end of the (first) Cold War.

The article has sought to make a contribution to the analysis of migration in the context of the Cold War and its aftermath in two specific

ways. At one level, it has sought to bring attention to the ways in which the migration of Sikhs from Afghanistan is enfolded within the history and legacies of the Cold War. Most Sikhs began leaving the country in the context of the collapse of the pro-Soviet regime and the capture of the state by mujahidin forces and leaders supported by the West. A combination of the close relationship of Sikhs to the pro-Soviet regime of the 1980s and Afghanistan's status as a location for proxy warfare between India and Pakistan made the country increasingly unsafe for Afghan Sikhs after 1992. The specific geographic trajectories of Afghan Sikh migration were also shaped by the Cold War and its ongoing legacies. Sikh traders moved their business to Uzbekistan, Russia and Ukraine in the 1990s having cultivated close connections with markets and industry in the Soviet Union in the prior decades. Furthermore, the migration of Afghan Sikhs from Ukraine in the wake of the Russian invasion of the country illustrates the ways in which the geographical contours of Sikh Afghan migration continue to be affected by the Cold War's afterlife (Kwon 2010). I have also sought to show the important role played by merchants based in Russia and Ukraine in the activities, networks and experiences of Afghan Sikhs living elsewhere, including London.

A second contribution of the article has been to analyse Afghan Sikhs' migratory trajectories in relation to their commercial strategies and dynamics rather than simply as the outcome of their ethno-religious 'identity'. The case of Afghan Sikhs provides an interesting example of a trading network that not only survived the loss of its nodal centre (Kabul) but also re-established a new one (London), raising questions about Aslanian's argument about the inherent vulnerability of monocentric networks. Movements of both people and capital arising from the Cold War have led London to become a pivotal node for Afghan Sikh networks. Initially, London functioned as a site for social and commercial reproduction, especially given the difficulties that Sikhs living in the post-Soviet world faced in engaging in rich forms of cultural life. By the 2010s, however, a combination of push and pull factors resulted in increasing numbers of Afghan Sikh merchants moving not only their families but also their businesses to the city; as a result, London came to occupy a central role in the fortunes of Afghan Sikh life globally. Over the course of three decades, Afghan Sikh merchants responded to the geopolitical forces that resulted in the collapse of Kabul as a city of central significance to their collective fortunes and identity in a manner that enabled them to establish and reproduce a multinodal monocentric network.

A consideration of Afghan Sikh mobility in the context of both the Cold War and the study of trade networks brings attention to the ways in which a focus either on South-North migration or national/international refugee policy reduces the complex forms of agency and strategy they have collectively and individually displayed over the past forty years of instability and rupture.

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## NOTES

- 1 This study was based on data collected for the 'The Afterlives of Urban Muslim Asia: Alternative Imaginaries of Society and Polity' (grant number AH/V004999/1). Data relevant to parts of the article is available at <https://protection.mimecast.com/s/W9kTCg2QrT1Dp3KfN0rtN?domain=doi.org>.
- 2 Little is known about the historical trajectories of Muslim Hindkis in Afghanistan over the twentieth century.
- 3 See Markovits (2002) and Falzon (2004) on the globalisation of Sindhi networks after their departure from Central Asia.
- 4 Sikhs with knowledge of yunnani medicine living in Europe and North America continue to give medical advice to Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus from Afghanistan. Indeed, some Sikhs living outside of Afghanistan continue to own medicinal shops in Kabul which are staffed and managed by Muslim employees and business partners. Muslim customers in Kabul call Sikh shopkeepers living in the UK, Canada and elsewhere for medical advice.

- 5 Many in the community claim their ability to leave the country prior to the collapse of the pro-Soviet regime was a result of the efforts of President Najibullah who instructed government officials to distribute passports to Sikhs and Hindus, ensuring that officers in the Indian embassy in Kabul were in a position to issue visas.
- 6 See Bonotto (2020) on the legal position of Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan during this period.
- 7 Sikhs from the Punjab in India also travelled to Russia and former Soviet countries such as Kazakhstan and Ukraine in the 1990s. International education and the parallel use of the region as an informal route for migration to Europe drove much of such mobility. See Bochkovskaya (2017).
- 8 Approximately 400 Afghan Hindkis are active in UAE's import-export trade, mostly importing and re-exporting textiles.

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