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# THE INDIAN MERCHANT COMMUNITY OF MASQAṬ

By CALVIN H. ALLEN, JR.

In 1836 the Arabian traveller J. R. Wellsted described the Hindu community of Masqaṭ, 'Umān, as constituting 'a body of the principal merchants'<sup>1</sup> of that port. By the 1870s the Indian merchants dominated the commercial life of Masqaṭ<sup>2</sup> and had replaced the Āl Bū Sa'id rulers of the town as the paramount economic power in 'Umān. While this community has much wider significance than their pivotal role in the commerce of Masqaṭ and 'Umān (the Indian merchants in Masqaṭ were a component of the great Indian Ocean trading network, and as Hindus and Shī'īs in a Sunnī, more properly Khārijī, country they offer potential insights into the status of minority groups in Muslim states) the focus of this study is the more specific problem of their origins, development and social and economic activities in Masqaṭ to the end of the nineteenth century.

Contacts between India and the coast of 'Umān probably began very early in the commercial history of the Indian Ocean when maritime trade was conducted between Sumer and the Harappan civilization of the Indus valley. Some archaeologists believe that Magan, the source of copper for this ancient trade, was located somewhere in 'Umān,<sup>3</sup> and this argument is supported by the numerous ancient copper mining sites that have been discovered in the Ḥajar Mountains behind Ṣuḥār. While it is probably safe to assume that Indian merchants called on the coastal ports of 'Umān, we do not yet have concrete evidence that would support any further generalizations about the role of Indians in this ancient trade.

It is impossible to determine when the first Indian merchant decided to establish a semi-permanent presence in Masqaṭ or anywhere else on the Bāṭina coast, but evidence points to settlement occurring no later than the fifteenth century. Andrew Williamson gives no indication of Indian settlement at Ṣuḥār, the 'Umānī port that flourished in the tenth century,<sup>4</sup> but S. B. Miles reported the ruins of a Hindu temple at Qalhāt,<sup>5</sup> the principal 'Umānī port of the fifteenth century. The argument for fifteenth-century settlement is supported further by de Albuquerque's report that Hindu merchants from Gujārat escaped from Khayr Fakkān, a secondary port on the Shimiliya coast of northern 'Umān, before he sacked that town in 1507.<sup>6</sup>

Once we enter the period of Portuguese domination of the Indian Ocean trade, information on Indian commercial activities in 'Umān and Masqaṭ becomes more available. The Portuguese relied heavily on Indian Hindus in their attempts to secure a monopoly of the Indian Ocean/Arabian Gulf trade.<sup>7</sup> Masqaṭ also played an important role in Portuguese commercial policy as the port became the headquarters of their Arabian Gulf operation early in the seventeenth century when Hurmuz was lost.

<sup>1</sup> J. R. Wellsted, *Travels in Arabia*, London, 1838, I, 18-21.

<sup>2</sup> Robert G. Landen, *Oman since 1856*, Princeton, 1967, 138.

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Bibby, *Looking for Dilmun*, New York, 1969, 220.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Williamson, *Sohar and Omani seafaring in the Indian Ocean*, Masqaṭ, 1973.

<sup>5</sup> S. B. Miles, *Countries and tribes of the Persian Gulf*, second ed., London, 1966, 526. On Qalhāt see J. C. Wilkinson, 'Qalhāt', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, second ed., 500-501.

<sup>6</sup> Afonso de Albuquerque, *The commentaries of the great Afonso Dalaboquerque, second Viceroy of India*, ed. Walter de Gray Birch, London, 1875, I, 99-100. Miles (p. 151), incorrectly claims that these Hindus were Kutchis. This view probably derived from the fact that the Hindus in Masqaṭ during Miles's residence (late nineteenth century) were Kutchi.

<sup>7</sup> See M. N. Pearson, 'Indigenous dominance in a colonial economy: the Goa Rendas, 1600-1670', *Mare Luso-indicum*, II, 1972, 61-73, for a study of the role of Hindu traders under the Portuguese.

Masqat's most important Indian trading partner during this period was the city of Thattha located on the Indus River in Sind. Thattha had been an important trade centre between the Indian Ocean and Central Asia before the Portuguese sack of the city in the sixteenth century.<sup>8</sup> During the period of Portuguese control of its trade, Thattha continued to be an active commercial centre, boasting '40,000 weavers of calico and loongees<sup>9</sup> . . . and artisans of every other class and description to the number of 20,000 more, exclusive of bankers, money changers, shopkeepers and sellers of grain, who were estimated at 60,000 more'.<sup>10</sup> Among the goods exported by Thattha were cloth, including elegantly embroidered cashmere shawls<sup>11</sup> and silk,<sup>12</sup> cotton yarn, opium, ghee, indigo<sup>13</sup> and sugar.<sup>14</sup> Thattha's commerce in these goods with Africa and the Gulf was so great that the British believed that the Portuguese position in Masqat was entirely dependent on the customs duties they collected as a result of their policy of forcing all Africa and Gulf bound shipping to call at Masqat for licensing.<sup>15</sup>

The trade between Masqat and Thattha was conducted by Hindu merchants in Portuguese ships, and many of these Hindus had warehouses and trading establishments at Masqat.<sup>16</sup> Oral traditions of the Indian merchant community in Masqat allege that these Sindis were the first 'Banians'<sup>17</sup> to settle in Masqat and add that they were Bhattias (Bhattiyā).<sup>18</sup>

Sindi Bhattias apparently thrived under the Portuguese rulers of Masqat. The 'Umāni chroniclers Ibn Ruzayq and al-Sālimi both report that a Banian 'worshipper of the cow' acted as supply agent for the Portuguese garrison at Masqat, and the Portuguese commander seems to have accepted advice freely from his agent. However, the Banian eventually became dissatisfied with the Portuguese, especially as the commander wished to marry his daughter, and helped the Ya'āriiba rulers of 'Umān expel the Europeans from Masqat in 1650.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>8</sup> James Burnes, *A visit to the Courts of Sindh*, Karachi, 1974, 27. Burnes had visited Thattha in 1828.

<sup>9</sup> Loonghee, s. from Hindi *lungi*, a scarf or length of cloth to wrap around the body. See *Hobson-Jobson*, London, 1903, 519. In 'Umān these *lungis*, known locally as *wazar*, are worn by all males.

<sup>10</sup> E. H. Aitken, *Gazetteer of the Province of Sind*, Karachi, 1907, 116. Aitken was quoting a British official, Henry Pottinger, who was a member of the British mission to Sind in 1809.

<sup>11</sup> Burnes, op. cit., 92. In 'Umān and the rest of Arabia these shawls are used as turbans.

<sup>12</sup> Al-Sālimi relates a story about how the Imām Sa'id b. Aḥmad (1199/1784) wore a silk 'diwālī' or cummerbund, *Tuhfat al-a'yān bi-sirat ahl 'Umān* (5th edition), Kuwait, 1974, II, 176.

<sup>13</sup> William Foster, *The English factories in India, 1634-1636*, Oxford, 1911, 127-34. 'Umān had a local indigo dyeing industry centred on Nizwā and Firq.

<sup>14</sup> *idem*, *The English factories in India: 1637-1641*, Oxford, 1912, 135.

<sup>15</sup> *idem*, *The English factories in India: 1646-1650*, Oxford, 1914, 153.

<sup>16</sup> *idem*, *The English factories in India: 1634-1636*, 127.

<sup>17</sup> Banian or Banyan derives from the Gujarati *vāniyā*, a man of the trading caste. The term has been adopted to mean all Hindu merchants regardless of caste. See *Hobson-Jobson*, 63-4. Landen claims that the term is 'evidently a corruption of the word "Bhattia"' (p. 131). This is incorrect.

<sup>18</sup> Personal communication to the author from Ranchordas Lalji Purecha, the grandson of Ratansi Purshottam, and Durgarsi Dharamsi Sampat, 'Bhattiyā samsthāno itihās; Part 6: Masqat', *Bhattia Yuva Magazine*, Magh [vs] 1989, 111-15. This series, written in Gujarati, is an extremely important source for the history of the Bhattia community throughout India and the Indian Ocean basin. I wish to express my thanks to Mr. Dilip Ukka of Mandvi, Kutch, for his assistance in translating the various articles used in this study. On the Bhattias, see also R. E. Enthoven, *The tribes and castes of Bombay*, Bombay, 1920, I, 133-45, and James Campbell (ed.), *Bombay Presidency District Gazetteer*, v (Cutch, Palanpur and Mahi), Bombay, 1880, 53-4.

<sup>19</sup> Ḥumayd b. Muḥammad b. Ruzayq, *al-Fath al-mubīn fī sirat al-sādhak Āl Bū Sa'idiyyin*, Masqat, 1977, 286-91; G. P. Badger, *History of the imams and seyyids of 'Oman*, by *Salih ibn Razik*, London, 1971, xxvi, 81-7; al-Sālimi, pp. 65-7. The account given by al-Sālimi differs

Bhattia support for the Ya'ariba proved to be very beneficial for the Banians. The community was exempted from paying the poll tax (*jizya*)<sup>20</sup> and permission was granted for the construction of a temple. Although the details need not concern us here, oral tradition attributes the founding of the temple in Masqat to Sindi Bhattias some three hundred years ago. The idol for the temple, a representation of the deity Govindarāj, was transported to Masqat from Basra, where the Hindu community was experiencing difficulties. Once their new temple was built and the idol in place, the Bhattias demonstrated their strong ties with their adopted home by including an 'Umānī dagger in its vestments.<sup>21</sup>

The Hindu community was not affected adversely by the civil war which established the Āl Bū Sa'īd dynasty in the 1740s, and it continued to prosper under Aḥmad b. Sa'īd (1743-82). In January 1765 the Danish explorer Carsten Niebuhr spent two weeks at Masqat and has left the following description of the Banian community :

In no other Mahometan city are the Banians so numerous as in Maskat ; their number in this city amounts to no fewer than twelve hundred. They are permitted to live agreeably to their own laws, to bring their wives hither, to set up idols in their chambers, and to burn their dead.<sup>22</sup>

Under the benevolent rule of Aḥmad the Banians founded their second temple in Masqat, this one a Havelī or Puṣṭimārgī sect temple. Other Hindu sects also set up their own shrines so that Masqat eventually had four Hindu places of worship.<sup>23</sup>

Despite these early successes of the Sindi Bhattias, the community was faced by a number of problems that led to its ultimate demise in Masqat. Three factors interacted concurrently between 1785 and 1820 to drive the Sindis from Masqat. First, the economy of Thattha collapsed. Second, a shift in the commercial practices of the rulers of Masqat hindered Sindi Bhattia

from that of ibn Ruzayq in that the former claims that the principal Hindu was named Sakālība and his assistant was Narūtim. Ibn Ruzayq mentions only Narūtim. Carsten Niebuhr, *Travels through Arabia and other countries of the East*, Edinburgh, 1792, II, 116 contains the earliest (1765) published account of this story, although he offers no details. In Mandvi, Kutch, a similar story was related to me in which a prominent nineteenth-century merchant family, known in Masqat as Bayt Shabika, was alleged to have assisted the Āl Bū Sa'īd in a similar manner.

<sup>20</sup> Al-Sālimī, 67 ; ibn Ruzayq, 291.

<sup>21</sup> D. D. Sampat, 'Part 7: Masqat', Phalgun, 1989, 172-8. Sampat doubts that the idol went from Basra. This whole episode is of interest as it provides some clues to early Bhattia religious practices. The majority of Bhattias were converted during the last decade of the seventeenth century to the Puṣṭimārgī sect, a Vaishnavite group with principal deities Krishna as a child and as flute player and Śrī Nāthjī (an incarnation of Krishna) founded by the Mahāprabhu Śrī Vallabhacārya. The movement began in, interestingly enough, Thattha and spread to Kutch and the rest of Gujarat. The fact that this was a Govindarāj temple rather than a Puṣṭimārgī temple, known as Havelī, serves either to date the temple before 1700 or may be an indication of a certain amount of conservatism within the Bhattia community of Masqat. Ranchordas Lalji relates that this temple, which was located near the old palace, was torn down in 1971 to make way for the new palace, and the idol was returned to India.

<sup>22</sup> Niebuhr, *Travels*, 116.

<sup>23</sup> These included the Govindarāj temple, the Havelī, known as Bāvājī, which is one of the two temples that still exist in Masqat, a Kālkā temple situated on the Masqat side of the pass to Rjyām and a large Śiva temple, known as Motīśvar, located in the Rāwīyya section of Masqat. The Kālkā temple, utilized by the small but influential Gosain Brahmin community in Masqat, included a graveyard to accommodate the Gosain practice of burying their dead in a seated position. The temple was demolished in 1970 to make way for a road, and the idol is now stored in the Bāvājī temple. Motīśvar was built near a large banyan tree and contained two wells. The temple became the centre of Hindu social life in Masqat as well as the water source for the community. It has been rebuilt recently, and contains, beside the linga representing Śiva, Nandī, Śiva's mount, and a turtle, as well as a small shrine to Hanumānt. The Hindu community also had, and continues to utilize, a burning ghāt for the cremation of its dead, a cow pen, no longer in use, and a *guphā*, or 'holy cave', located in the mountains near Sidāb.

enterprises. Finally, Bhattias from Kutch began to challenge Sindi Bhattia commercial activities in Masqaṭ.

Sindi Bhattia trade in Masqaṭ was dependent on selling the exports of Thattha either for cash or in exchange for the African and Arabian Gulf products available in the port, goods which included dates, rhinoceros horn, coffee, ivory and African slaves. Unfortunately, Thattha was on the road to becoming an economic backwater with nothing to export and no market for imports. The city's problems had begun with the expulsion of the Portuguese from the Indian Ocean during the last half of the seventeenth century. The collapse of the Portuguese trading network and its replacement by the British network centred on Surat, and later Bombay, was detrimental to Thattha's business interests as trade was drawn away from the city.<sup>24</sup> While these international influences were disrupting commerce, the intolerant Muslim Talpur dynasty was persecuting all Hindus within Sind.<sup>25</sup> Finally, sometime during this period the Indus River changed course, and Thattha found itself some five miles from its principal transportation route. Thattha's economy collapsed. In 1809 it was said of the once thriving city,

... The only manufactures now carried on in Tatta are those of a few white cloths and coloured loongees, and in lieu of the bustle of a great trading city, the streets are deserted, the few shops that remain are scarcely worthy of being called such, in view of the disreputable figure they cut, and the whole bazaar exhibits a deplorable picture of poverty and depressed commerce.<sup>26</sup>

The situation was so bad in Thattha that the Sindis abandoned it and began developing Karachi as an alternative.<sup>27</sup>

While the Sindi Bhattias might have established alternative markets and sources of supplies to Thattha and continued to conduct business in Masqaṭ with Indian goods via Karachi, the development of strong competition in both Masqaṭ and western India precluded that possibility. In Masqaṭ Ḥamad b. Sa'īd Āl Bū Sa'īd set up an independent government in 1785 and launched an aggressive commercial policy aimed at securing a monopoly over Arabian Gulf trade.<sup>28</sup> The most important aspect of this new policy to the Sindi Bhattias was Ḥamad's establishment of direct trading contacts with Afghanistan via the Indus River.<sup>29</sup> This put the Sindi Bhattias in direct competition with state commercial activities.

Competition was also developing in India in the form of another group of Bhattia merchants, the Kutchis. Kutch, lying to the east of the Indus River mouth, is, in many ways, very similar to 'Umān in that it is an arid, rugged country that is virtually cut off from the rest of India by the sometimes impassable Rann of Kutch. As a result, contacts with neighbours have always

<sup>24</sup> On the decline of Thattha see the massive work by William Foster, *The English factories in India, passim*. Also, for a more succinct description of the plight of the former trading centres in Portuguese India see *The travels of the Abbé Carre in India and the Near East, 1672 to 1674*, ed. Charles Fawcett, London, 1947, I, 214-15 for his description of Goa.

<sup>25</sup> Aitkin, *Gazetteer*, 116-17.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 116. This is Pottinger's description based on personal observation (see n. 10).

<sup>27</sup> *Selections from the Records of the Bombay Government*, new series, no. 17, 1-245. Two articles on Karachi from 1838 and 1840. Sampat, 'Part 3: Karachi', Paush 1989, 26-9.

<sup>28</sup> See the author's unpublished Ph.D. thesis, 'Sayyids, shets and sultāns: politics and trade in Masqaṭ under the Āl Bū Sa'īd', University of Washington (Seattle), 1978, 33-67.

<sup>29</sup> 'Report on the commerce of Arabia and Persia by Samuel Manesty and Hartford Jones, 1790', in Ahmad Muṣṭafā abū Ḥakima, *History of Kuwayt* [in Arabic], Kuwayt, 1970, I, part 2, 21-82, 59-60.

been easier by sea, a condition facilitated by the many fine ports along the Kutchi coast, most notably Mandvi (the mart).<sup>30</sup>

These natural conditions combined with a series of events in the late eighteenth century to encourage the Kutchi Bhattias to become active in the Gulf trade. Most of the credit for this commercial expansion has gone to the Kutchi ruler Godjī II (1760-78) who was extremely active in the development of Mandvi's shipbuilding industry.<sup>31</sup> Godji's actions were probably motivated by the collapse of Kutchi agriculture as a result of the damming of the Indus by the ruler of Sind in 1764.<sup>32</sup> A new dam in Sind in 1802, a famine and plague in 1812 and an earthquake in 1819 all served to cause Kutchis to leave the land. Further inducement came in the form of Fath Muhammad, the chief deputy of the Hindu Mahārāo, whose continuous wars during the late eighteenth-early nineteenth centuries encouraged social disruption.<sup>33</sup> Despite these dislocations, Kutch was relatively prosperous as the court encouraged the arts and crafts. Mandvi flourished as a result of the trade that provided raw materials to Kutchi craftsmen.<sup>34</sup>

Increasingly, Kutchi Bhattias began appearing in Masqaṭ. The Kutchis had every advantage over the Sindis. They were not in competition with the *sayyids* of Masqaṭ as the Kutchis served largely as shippers rather than middlemen. Kutchi merchants transported the few products of Kutch, predominantly cotton yarn and piece-goods, as well as goods from Bombay and the Gujarati ports, to Masqaṭ where they could be sold to the *sayyid* or his agents. By contrast, the Sindis had their business establishments in Masqaṭ, and while they could have sold to the *sayyid*, Sindi overheads and, consequently, prices were higher. A second Kutchi advantage was that they had a market for a wide range of the products that Masqaṭ had to offer due to their secure trading network in India.<sup>35</sup>

Faced with the problem of insecurity and loss of markets in Sind and competition from the Āl Bū Sa'īd *sayyids* and the Kutchis in both Masqaṭ and India, the Sindi Bhattias began to abandon Masqaṭ in favour of Bahrayn, where they were active in the pearl trade.<sup>36</sup> By 1900 there were only two Sindis still residing in Masqaṭ, and by World War I there were none, although a few continued to live in the coastal towns.<sup>37</sup>

The Sindi Bhattias were soon replaced by Kutchis. Kutchi settlement in Masqaṭ and the growth of their own commercial establishment to the point where Kutchi Bhattias dominated the trade and economic affairs of the port

<sup>30</sup> Mandvi is also known as Musca-Mandvi after the neighbouring village of Musca. This name is very intriguing as Masqaṭ is often referred to as Muska in the Arabic chronicles. I visited Musca in May 1977 in search of information on the origin of the name of the town but met with little success. I would speculate that this village is probably named after Masqaṭ, just as Mandvi's newest suburb, Swalli, is named after the Swahili coast. On the early history of Mandvi see Campbell, *Bombay Presidency District Gazetteer*, 1-227 passim.

<sup>31</sup> L. F. Rushbrook Williams, *The Black Hills: Kutch in history and legend*, London, 1958, 41. D. D. Sampat, 'Part 65: Bhattias of Mandvi', Phalgun 1992, 133-8.

<sup>32</sup> Campbell, *op. cit.*, 10, states that the rice fields of western Kutch were reduced to grazing lands as a result of this action.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 10, 17, 40; D. D. Sampat, 'Part 73: Customs of Bhattias', Asadh 1992, 313-16.

<sup>34</sup> Marianne Young, *Cutch: or, Random sketches of western India*, London, 1838, 10-14; James Tod, *Travels in western India*, Delhi, 1971, 448-51.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.* Both of the above sources give excellent accounts of Mandvi's role in the slave trade.

<sup>36</sup> D. D. Sampat, 'Part 4: Sind', Paush 1989, 29-31. Sindi Bhattias still play an important role in the commerce of Bahrayn and Dubai.

<sup>37</sup> At least one Sindi merchant family continued to reside in Ṣuḥār as late as 1977. The principal Sindi merchant in Masqaṭ today is Meghji Laxmidas Ved from Shahbunder, but this family, which was established in Mstrah in 1907, has no direct ties to the early Sindi merchants. (Personal communication to author from Meghji Laxmidas Ved.)

grew in two stages, separated by Sa'īd b. Sulṭān's transfer of his residence to Zanzibar after 1830. While Sayyid Sa'īd remained in Masqaṭ, he kept a tight personal control over commercial affairs. Under these conditions, the Kutchis did not establish an extended presence in the port, although in the early years a merchant may have remained in Masqaṭ for a few months before picking up a suitable cargo for a return voyage. Some Kutchis did establish temporary commercial outlets in Masqaṭ, but these would be operated for only a few years before the merchant retired to Mandvi.<sup>38</sup> A few Kutchi Bhattias even rose to prominence in the service of the commercially-minded Sayyid Sa'īd.

Two examples will serve to demonstrate this early stage in the development of the Kutchi Bhattia community in Masqaṭ. Virji Purshottam Toprani today owns a small shop in Maṭraḥ, but his family claims seven generations of contacts with Masqaṭ. The Topranis originated in the vicinity of the Rann of Kutch but moved to Mandvi when the Rann encroached on their farmlands. Once settled in Mandvi the family turned to commerce. Late in the eighteenth century, one Aranji Toprani sailed to Masqaṭ to conduct business, and he was followed in later years by his son and then grandson. The grandson, Umarsi, established the family's first business house in Masqaṭ.<sup>39</sup>

A second example is Umarsi's contemporary Gopal Mawji Bhimani. Family legend claims that Gopal's great-grandfather was the first Bhimani to trade in Masqaṭ late in the eighteenth century.<sup>40</sup> In time, the family founded a business in Masqaṭ, and Gopal Bhimani began to play an active role in Masqaṭi politics. Gopal was among the Banians who encouraged Sa'īd b. Sulṭān to conquer Zanzibar, and his business manager was active in the suppression of piracy.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> D. D. Sampat, *Kacchnū vepārtantra*, Karachi [vs] 1991, 17-18; *idem*, 'Part 105: trade with Masqaṭ', *Kārttik* 1994, 863-5.

<sup>39</sup> Personal communication from Virji Purshottam Toprani. The genealogy of the family is:

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Aranji
|
Ramdas
|
Umarsi
|
Valabdas
|
Damodar (c. 1857-1932)
|
Purshottam (1888-1976)
|
Virji

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<sup>40</sup> Personal communication from Premji Jannadas Bhimani of Mandvi. The genealogy of the Bhimani family is:

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Rawji
|
Bhimji
|
Mawji
|
Gopa
|
Mulji
|
Jivandas
|
Mawdawji
|
Jannadas (d. 1942)
|
Premji (b. 1906)

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<sup>41</sup> D. D. Sampat, 'Part 62: towards Kutch and Kathiswad', *Bhadarvo* 1991, 527-34. The association of the Bhattia merchants with Sa'īd's African policy is very significant. The standard

The second stage in the development of the Kutchi community in Masqaṭ began with Sayyid Sa'īd's transfer of his attentions to Zanzibar after 1830. During this period the community grew in size and influence as a result of two factors. First, during Sa'īd's extended absences in East Africa he left most of Masqaṭ's commercial affairs in the hands of resident Bhattias. Both the treasurer and chief customs official were Kutchi Bhattias,<sup>42</sup> and it was probably at this time that the practice of farming the Masqaṭī customs was instituted.<sup>43</sup> A second factor that encouraged the Kutchi Bhattias to extend their interests was that Sayyid Sa'īd shifted from being a middleman to production. Once settled in Zanzibar, the *sayyid* was no longer interested in buying and selling the goods of others and making his profit on mark-ups and commissions. Instead, Sa'īd was selling slaves and cloves.<sup>44</sup> This turn of events left a commercial vacuum in Masqaṭ, and Kutchis began to pour into the port. By 1840 the Banian population had reached 2,000,<sup>45</sup> and, as already stated by Wellsted, the community had become the principal economic power in Masqaṭ.

Conditions in Masqaṭ following the death of Sa'īd b. Sulṭān in 1856 were in no way detrimental to Kutchi Bhattia commercial interests. Thuwaynī b. Sa'īd (1856-68) had never shown the business acumen of his father, a situation that is explained, at least in part, by Sa'īd's practice during his extended absences from Masqaṭ of putting commercial affairs in the hands of Kutchis while Thuwaynī was involved in political matters. Thuwaynī simply continued this practice, and his reign was marked by an abandoning of state control of trade in favour of attempts to gain greater political influence and control in 'Umān.<sup>46</sup> This change in policy was disastrous for the Āl Bū Sa'īd dynasty which lost the great profits from trade that had made Sayyid Sa'īd wealthy at a time when governmental expenses were increasing due to involvement in tribal politics and squabbles. The Kutchi Bhattias, by contrast, flourished. There was no state competition of any kind, and the Banians continued to control the treasury and customs house. The profits that had formerly filled the coffers of the ruling family now went to the Kutchi merchants.

The apparently bright economic prospects of the Bhattias were clouded by the rumblings in the interior of 'Umān that had resulted from Thuwaynī's rumblings in tribal affairs. A real crisis for Bhattia interests occurred when the Imām 'Azzān b. Qays and his allies assumed control of Masqaṭ and established a fundamentalist Ibādī regime (1868-71). The new conservative government not only removed the Bhattias from their important financial posts but also sought to extend Ibādī social regulations, including a ban on the use of tobacco, the playing of musical instruments and dress requirements, to all the inhabitants of Masqaṭ. Despite 'Azzān's assurances that he supported freedom of religious practices, the Hindus, who employ bells, gongs and drums

interpretation of the establishment of Hindu commercial influence at Zanzibar has attributed it to Sa'īd b. Sulṭān encouraging their migration to that port. 'Abd al-Muhammad Ḥusayn Sharif, in his Ph.D. thesis 'The rise of a commercial empire: an aspect of the economic history of Zanzibar, 1770-1873', University of London, 1971, expresses doubt about this theory. He argues that the Hindu merchants encouraged Sa'īd. Sampat's evidence supports that view, although it may be more proper to argue that the development of Zanzibar was a joint endeavour.

<sup>42</sup> D. D. Sampat, 'Part 105: trade with Masqaṭ', *Karttik* 1994, 964-5.

<sup>43</sup> The earliest mention of a Banian holding the customs farm is in 1827 in R. H. Thomas, *Selections from the Records of the Bombay Government*, new series, no. 24, 1856, 632. D. D. Sampat, *Kacchinū vepārtantra*, 19, states that Sa'īd b. Sulṭān farmed the customs to the Bhimanis.

<sup>44</sup> See Frederick Cooper, *Plantation slavery on the East Coast of Africa*, New Haven and London, 1977, for a discussion of the development of Sa'īd's Zanzibar plantations. The impact of Sa'īd's moving to Zanzibar on Masqaṭ is discussed in my 'Sayyids, Shets and Sulṭāns', 68-86.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas, *op. cit.*, 631.

<sup>46</sup> See my 'Sayyids, Shets and Sulṭāns', 86-92.



in their ceremonies, often fell foul of the authorities, and there were a number of attacks on Banians.<sup>47</sup> The Indians began an exodus from Masqat, and the community of at least 2,000 dwindled to a mere 250 by 1870.<sup>48</sup>

This rapid population decline has been used as evidence to support the argument that Masqat suffered a serious economic depression during the years following the death of Sayyid Sa'id,<sup>49</sup> a depression from which it never really recovered. While there is little doubt that Masqat was faced with economic problems at this time, they were neither so serious nor permanent as has been believed heretofore. In the first place, many of those who left Masqat during this period were family members rather than the merchants themselves. An indication of this is that by 1900, when some, but by no means all, family members were again coming to Masqat, the Banian population was back up to 1,500.<sup>50</sup> The second group that was most affected by the unsettled state of affairs in Masqat was the older generation of merchants, including the remaining Sindis, who abandoned the port for safe retirement in India. This view is supported by the fact that after the overthrow of the Imamate and the establishment of a more moderate government under Turki b. Sa'id (1871-88), a whole new group of young Kutchi Bhattias emerged as the commercial leaders of Masqat.

An examination of one of the leading Banians of Masqat during the late nineteenth century, Shet<sup>51</sup> Ratansi Purshottam Purecha, will serve as an example of the new business class that came to dominate the trade and finances of the port after 1871. Ratansi first went to Masqat in 1857 as a boy of fourteen or fifteen in order to obtain business experience at his uncle's shop. He worked as a clerk for ten years until 1867 when he established his own firm, probably with capital borrowed from his uncle. The company survived the difficult years of the Imamate, and Ratansi developed a thriving business.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>47</sup> A good account of the problems of 'Azzan b. Qays's reign, based on India Office Records, Muscat Political Agency, R/15/6/2, is available in Landen, pp. 309-10.

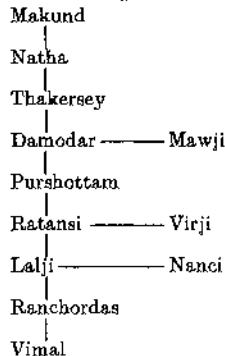
<sup>48</sup> India Office Records, Muscat Political Agency, R/15/6/2, Disbrowe to Gonne, Muscat, 26 April 1869. As is usually the case in dealing with statistics from these sources, some error is assumed. Disbrowe says that there are 250 subjects with dependents. It is possible that the population was as high as 750.

<sup>49</sup> Landen, *Oman since 1856*, 134-5.

<sup>50</sup> India Office Records, Muscat Political Agency, R/15/6/67, Memorandum, Cox, Muscat, 30 July 1900. This once again raises the problem of numbers. Landen says that there were 250 merchants at this time (p. 141). Ratansi Purshottam's family came in 1900 and was one of the first to do so according to family tradition.

<sup>51</sup> Shet, singular, from the Hindi *seth* meaning head of a corporation, merchant or banker. See *Hobson-Jobson*, 813. In Masqat the title is used as an address of respect.

<sup>52</sup> Most of the facts concerning the life of Ratansi Purshottam were related to me by Ranchordas Lalji, Ratansi's grandson, who also provided the following genealogy:



On the training of a young Banian see D. D. Sampat, 'Part 6: Masqat', *Magh* 1989, 115.

Ratansi Purshottam, like most Bhattia businessmen, dealt in a wide range of goods, including grain, textiles, dates, coffee. Acting as a commission agent, Ratansi would distribute these goods throughout the western Indian Ocean basin on consignment and receive a percentage of the profits, when there were profits.<sup>53</sup> To aid in these commercial operations Masqaṭī Banians often established working agreements with merchants in foreign ports. These were quite often family members, such as was the case with Ratansi, whose brother owned a business in Bombay and who, himself, had an office in Karachi. In the absence of family members these arrangements would be made with other Bhattias, although it was not unusual to deal with a non-Bhattia or even a Muslim if the need arose.<sup>54</sup>

An important contribution of the new merchant group of the late nineteenth century was its 'internationalization' of the trade of Masqaṭ. That is to say that trade was expanded beyond the confines of the Indian Ocean basin. The Indian merchants showed great adaptability in this area. Arab and Indian sailing ships were being replaced rapidly by European steamers,<sup>55</sup> and the Banians were able to import new products from Europe and America for their traditional markets and export traditional goods to new markets overseas. Ratansi played an important role in this expanded trade as he was a leading arms merchant, dealing with the London firm Schwarte and Hammer and the Hamburg arms dealer Moritz Magnus, and was active in exporting dates to the United States through the New York firm of William Hills (now a subsidiary of Nabisco).<sup>56</sup>

Most of the Banians lived and worked in Masqaṭ within the walled portion of the city and close to the sultān's palace. Ratansi was no exception, although the family did move to Maṭraḥ in 1915 when that port supplanted Masqaṭ as the commercial centre of 'Umān. Early in the 1880s Ratansi began to acquire land along the waterfront of Masqaṭ and eventually came to own all the waterfront property with the exception of the palace, customs house and British Political Agency.<sup>57</sup> This was only one of many parcels of land that Ratansi came to own,<sup>58</sup> and by the end of the nineteenth century he and his Banian colleagues owned most of the best property in Masqaṭ and Maṭraḥ.<sup>59</sup>

Land holdings were closely linked with the banking functions of the Banian community as many lands transfers were the result of mortgage foreclosures. Land, houses and date palms were about the only collateral that the local population had to offer in return for a loan that would tide them over to the next date harvest. The level of indebtedness was high and foreclosures a regular occurrence. Even if holding a mortgage, though, the Banian lender was

<sup>53</sup> Landen, op. cit., 137, is very critical of this system.

<sup>54</sup> In the course of numerous interviews with many of Masqaṭ's merchants, both Hindu and Muslim, this fact was stressed.

<sup>55</sup> Landen, pp. 96-9.

<sup>56</sup> Banian utilization of the steamship to the benefit of Masqaṭ is discussed in my 'Sayyids, Shets and Sultāns', 140-77.

<sup>57</sup> This property was sold to the British Indian government in 1901 and is now included in the British Embassy compound. See Ruth Hawley, *The British Embassy in Muscat: a short history*, Muscat, 1974, 9-10. India Office Records, Muscat Political Agency, R/15/6/26 contains a detailed record of how Ratansi originally acquired all of this property.

<sup>58</sup> In 1906, the year of his death, Ratansi owned one large residence with office building and twelve warehouses, five of which had upper-story residences and one with a courtyard, in Masqaṭ; two houses, one with garden, in Sidḥb; two houses with lower story offices and two warehouses, one with an attached courtyard, in Maṭraḥ and two farms with water-rights in outlying villages. Ratansi Purshottam papers, Account Book for 1905-6.

<sup>59</sup> India Office Records, Muscat Political Agency, R/15/6/67, Cox to Landsdowne, Muscat, 21 September 1902.

not always guaranteed that a debt would be repaid as it was not unheard of to have an obscure *waqf* property mortgaged on the pretence that it was a private holding. When the debtor defaulted or died and the Banian brought charges, the *waqf* document would be presented and the mortgage had to be cancelled.<sup>60</sup>

The Banians of Masqat retained a fairly high degree of community solidarity, this despite economic competition. The community was represented in political matters by the *nagar seth* or *mukhā*, the most respected man in the community. During the later nineteenth century this office was held by a Bhimani.<sup>61</sup> The Hindus celebrated their religious festivals, such as New Year (Divālī), with social gatherings and dinner parties. Usually a dish of the best food would be taken to the sultān. Banians were also invited to the palace on special occasions, although they would not eat the food prepared by the ruler's non-Hindu cooks.<sup>62</sup> For the most part, dietary laws were kept, and the community maintained a herd of cows to ensure a steady supply of dairy products.<sup>63</sup> Kutchi or Gujerati remained the principal language spoken within the community, although most did learn Arabic for business purposes, and accounts were kept in Gujarati. Indian dress styles were maintained.<sup>64</sup> In general, the Masqatī Hindu made no attempt to assimilate.

Aside from the Bhimani family and Ratansi Purshottam, there were a large number of important Hindu merchants in Masqat during the late nineteenth century. Among them were Dowlatgirji Manrupgirji, a Gosain Brahman from Kutch who owned a business in Masqat but entrusted it to a manager while he continued to reside in a monastery outside of Mandvi; Virji Ratansi, an important banker, and Damodar Dharamsi, who occasionally farmed the customs. These three, along with Ratansi Purshottam, were considered to be the 'four pillars' of Hindu society.<sup>65</sup> Upon this base a number of other Banians established prosperous businesses that have continued to flourish in Masqat. These include Khimji Ramdas, Dayal Purshottam, Danji Murarji, Vallabdas Umarsi and Gopalji Walji.

A second group of Indians lived within the domains of the sultān, the Khwājas (Khojas). Very little is known about the Khwāja community of 'Umān, which goes by the name Lūti,<sup>66</sup> and virtually nothing has been written. The Luwātiyya claim origins in Hyderabad, Sind and are, therefore, occasionally given the *nisba* Haydarābādī.

<sup>60</sup> India Office Records, Muscat Political Agency, R/15/6/25, Cox to Government of India, Muscat, 27 September 1902.

<sup>61</sup> Personal communication from Ranchordas Lalji. The Hindu Association, known as the Mahājan, was formally incorporated in the 1930s with the president becoming an elected official. During the twentieth century the Mahājan administered most aspects of Hindu communal life, including the schools, temples and cow herd and property donated to the community by merchants who died without heirs or otherwise.

<sup>62</sup> D. D. Sampat, 'Part 7: Masqat', Phalgun 1989, 172-8.

<sup>63</sup> The cow-pen, *pañjarāpol*, was located next to the Śiva temple in Rāwiyya. These cows, unlike most in Masqat, were not fed fish, which resulted in a fishy taste to the milk. Surplus milk was sold for the benefit of the community. When the 'Umān National Dairy was opened, the cows were donated to the state with the agreement that when the animals stopped producing they would be sent to India rather than slaughtered.

<sup>64</sup> On dress distinctions among various levels of Banian society in Masqat see D. D. Sampat, *Kacchnū vepāntantra*, 19.

<sup>65</sup> These four merchants were given nicknames corresponding to the four high cards in a deck. Dowlatgirji was the 'ace' (Īkkā), Ratansi was the 'king' (Batsa), Virji was the 'queen' (Rānī) but was also called Bayt Bisah (after the Masqatī coin) because of his banking activities, and Damodar was the 'jack' (Ghulām). See also D. D. Sampat, 'Part 7: Masqat', Phalgun 1989, 172-8 for references to Ratansi as Batsa.

<sup>66</sup> Lūti, pl. Luwātiyya. The origin of the name is unknown, but both the Arabic and Persian roots are unflattering terms.

The origins of the community are obscure with many different legends persisting about from whence the Luwātiyya came. A small pamphlet written by a member of the community and based on classical Arabic sources and a manuscript by 'al-Haydarābādī' asserts that the Luwātiyya are the descendants of one al-Ḥakam b. 'Awānat al-Lāt. According to this account, al-Ḥakam accompanied the first Arab campaigns against India and eventually became the governor of Sind.<sup>67</sup> A second legend claims that the Luwātiyya were originally Banū Lu'ayy Arabs from Ḥijāz who went to India with Muḥammad al-Qāsim and were eventually converted to Shi'ism.<sup>68</sup> A variant of this account is that the Banū Lu'ayy were Khārijites who fled to 'Umān but were later expelled from this sanctuary and moved on to India where they converted to Shi'ism.<sup>69</sup> These legends aside, it is fairly certain that the Luwātiyya, like their Khwāja co-religionists in India, were converts from Hinduism. However, unlike the majority of Khwājas, the Luwātiyya were probably not Lohanas but Bhattias. The name Lūti provides an important clue to this theory. Among the clans of the Bhattias is the Panchlutiya (the five martyrs, commemorating an important event in Bhattia history),<sup>70</sup> and many Bhattias in Sind were converted to Islam.<sup>71</sup> The Luwātiyya were almost certainly Bhattias of the Panchlutiya clan who were converted to Islam.

None of the elders of the Lūti community know when the first Lūti migrated from India to 'Umān. However, most will claim that there have been Luwātiyya in 'Umān for four hundred years, a view which they support by citing a date on one of the gates that leads into the Lūti quarter of Maṭraḥ. While it is possible that Lūti merchants came to 'Umān four centuries ago, there is no real documentary evidence to support this contention; the inscription only tells us that the gate was built in the sixteenth century. The earliest mention of Luwātiyya in Arabic sources occurs in Ibn Ruzayq, who tells us that the Luwātiyya were among the principal occupants of Maṭraḥ during the reign of Ahmad b. Sa'īd (1743-82).<sup>72</sup> That statement is probably based on the fact that the Luwātiyya were prominent in Maṭraḥ in the 1850s when Ibn Ruzayq was writing.

There is stronger evidence for much later Lūti settlement in 'Umān. As mentioned earlier, the Luwātiyya claim to have originated in Hyderabad, Sind. Hyderabad was not founded until 1768.<sup>73</sup> Anyone claiming to be a Hyderabadī, therefore, could not have migrated to 'Umān before that date. Other events in Sind during the last two decades of the eighteenth century would have encouraged the growth of Khwāja commercial interests. First, the Talpur dynasty, established in 1783, destroyed the Hindu merchant class and paved the way for Muslim merchants.<sup>74</sup> Second, Khwājas could have played an important role in the opening up of direct trade between Masqat and Afghanistan during the reign of Ḥamad b. Sa'īd (1785-92). Finally, the best available documentary evidence for Lūti settlement in 'Umān during the late eighteenth century is an 1889 dispute in which the Luwātiyya claim privileges going back

<sup>67</sup> Muḥammad Taqī Ḥasan al-'Umānī, *Dalil al-sā'il*, n.d., 6 pages.

<sup>68</sup> Personal communication from Ḥājji 'Alī Sultān of Maṭraḥ.

<sup>69</sup> Personal communication from Muḥammad Maṭwānī of Maṭraḥ.

<sup>70</sup> Girjir Ratansi Sapat, *Bhāṭṭiyāonī prācīm sthiti*, Bombay, 1899, 69. Enthoven also lists the clans, or 'nookhs', of the Bhattias.

<sup>71</sup> D. D. Sampat, 'Part 8: Thattha', Bhadarvo 1991, 525-7; 'Part 73: Customs of the Bhattias', *Aśādḥ* 1992, 313-16.

<sup>72</sup> Ibn Ruzayq, *al-Fath al-mubin*, 356; Badger, *History of the imams*, 163.

<sup>73</sup> Aitken, *Gazetteer*, 113.

<sup>74</sup> See above, p. 42.

for a century.<sup>75</sup> In any event, by the time of the American diplomatic mission to Masqaṭ in 1835, the Luwātiyya were well established in Maṭraḥ.<sup>76</sup>

A second wave of Lūṭī settlement appears to have occurred during the second half of the nineteenth century. This opinion is supported by genealogical studies among contemporary Luwātiyya, who, for the most part, can remember back only as far as their great-grandfather,<sup>77</sup> and by the fact that a number of Khwājas were British subjects. This could only have occurred if they had migrated to 'Umān after 1840 when the British assumed control of Sind.<sup>78</sup>

All of this leads to the conclusion that the pattern of Lūṭī settlement in 'Umān was very similar to that of the Kutchi Bhattias. The earliest Lūṭīs came in the wake of the establishment of the Āl Bū Sa'īd state in Masqaṭ in 1785. The disruptions of 'Azzān b. Qays's reign may have had the same impact on the Lūṭī commercial community as it had on the Bhattias.<sup>79</sup> Following the re-establishment of moderate Āl Bū Sa'īd rule in 1871, a new group of Luwātiyya came to 'Umān and came to dominate the community.

The Luwātiyya operated within the same kind of mercantile system that the Banians utilized, and there were Khwājas in most of the Gulf ports, Bombay, Karachi, Zanzibar and Mombasa. Besides dealing in the standard products, like textiles, grain and dates, the Khwājas also had a virtual monopoly of the trade in dried fish from Masqaṭ as this was a product in which the Hindu merchants, for religious reasons, would not deal. Khwājas were also involved in various skilled crafts, like carpentry and boat building.<sup>80</sup>

Unlike the Banians, the Luwātiyya chose to make Maṭraḥ their home, and the community was concentrated in a ghetto, known as Sūr Luwātiyya, adjoining the market. The Sūr was off limits to non-Luwātiyya<sup>81</sup> and was

<sup>75</sup> J. G. Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, 'Oman and Central Arabia*, Calcutta, 1915, I, part 1, 535.

<sup>76</sup> W. S. W. Ruschenberger, *Narrative of a voyage round the world during the years 1835, 36, 37*, I, London, 1970, 125.

<sup>77</sup> Dr. Nihāmī Levzion, on the basis of oral traditions collected in West Africa, has found that migrant groups usually recall genealogy only as far as the first settler in the area. Personal communication. The following genealogies are offered as examples:

- (1) 'Alī Sulṭān :                   Muhammad Faḍl (d. 1916)
- |
- Sulṭān
- |
- 'Alī
- (2) Amin Mālallāh :               Wansiyah
- |
- Murād
- |
- Ḥabīb (d. 1938)
- |
- Mālallāh
- |
- Amin
- 3) Muḥammad Mūsā :           Ghulām
- |
- Ja'far (d. 1894)
- |
- Mūsā (d. 1967)
- |
- Muḥammad

<sup>78</sup> India Office Records, Muscat Political Agency, R/15/6/8, passim.

<sup>79</sup> See note 53. The Luwātiyya suffered equally under 'Azzān.

<sup>80</sup> Landen, *Oman since 1856*, 140.

<sup>81</sup> The Sūr Luwātiyya retains its exclusivity. My one attempt to walk through the quarter was unsuccessful as I did not get past the main gate before I was met by a concierge and told to leave. Ruschenberger was told in 1835 that outsiders were not admitted to the Sūr because Lūṭī women went unveiled (p. 125).

strictly residential; the Lūti merchant would commute to his shop in the markets at Maṭraḥ or Masqaṭ, unlike the Banian who usually lived above his shop.

Despite their permanent settlement in Maṭraḥ, the Luwātiyya remained segregated from their Arab neighbours. Although Lūti men would occasionally take 'Umānī women for brides, Lūti women always married within the community.<sup>82</sup> Khwājki, a mixture of Sindi and Kutchi, was the principal language spoken within the household, but Arabic was fairly widely used. The community had an elected shaykh and council of elders which governed communal affairs, and worship took place in a jamā'at khāna located within the walls of the Sūr.

The Khwāja community of Maṭraḥ was affected by the controversy that erupted in India during the 1840s concerning the Aghā Khān's rights to the *dasawādh* or obligatory religious tithe. This dispute came to a head in 1862 with the initiation of legal proceedings by the Bombay merchants who argued that the tithe belonged to the community and not the Aghā Khān.<sup>83</sup> All but twenty families in Maṭraḥ supported the case against the Aghā Khān and were among those excommunicated when the courts ruled in favour of the religious leader. The Maṭraḥ Khwājas then became Ithnā-'Asharī Shī'is, the jamā'at khāna became a Shī'i mosque, and the community requested that a *qāḍī* be dispatched from Najaf (Iraq) to serve Luwātiyya legal needs.<sup>84</sup> The twenty families who chose to support the Aghā Khān were expelled from the Sūr and established a new jamā'at khāna just outside the north-western wall of their old home.<sup>85</sup>

By far the most important Lūti merchant of the later nineteenth century was Muḥammad Faḍl. Muḥammad Faḍl was born in Bombay in 1858<sup>86</sup> and eventually settled in the Sūr Luwātiyya. He began his business career as a clerk in the American firm, W. J. Towell, founded in 1865. Muḥammad Faḍl worked his way through the firm, becoming a partner in 1894 and full owner in 1906.<sup>87</sup> He also served as American Vice-Consul and later Consul and was quite active in securing American trade for Masqaṭ. For most of the late nineteenth century and up until World War I, W. J. Towell was the leading exporter of dates to the United States, and the company also acted as agent

<sup>82</sup> See J. C. Masselos, 'The Khojas of Bombay', in Imtiaz Ahmad (ed.), *Caste and social stratification among Muslims in India*, Columbia, Mo., 1978, 101, for a discussion of Khwāja marriage practices.

<sup>83</sup> J. N. Hollister, *The Shia of India*, London, 1953, 364-70.

<sup>84</sup> Lorimer, *Gazetteer*, I, part 2, appendix H, 'Religions and sects of the Persian Gulf region', 2377-80 and II B, Calcutta, 1908, 1034-5. Personal communication from 'Alī Sulṭān.

<sup>85</sup> The few Aghā Khānis (as they were called) who remained in Maṭraḥ left in 1965 on the orders of the Aghā Khān, who feared for their safety following the revolution in Zanzibar. Their jamā'at khāna, located in front of the girls' school in Maṭraḥ and next to the Jibru roundabout, was bought by the W. J. Towell Company and torn down to make way for an office building.

<sup>86</sup> United States National Archives, Muscat Consular Archives, Microfilm Publication T633, Macquire to Wharton, Muscat, 19 February 1893.

<sup>87</sup> The early history of the W. J. Towell Company is unclear. Towell apparently sold the company during the 1870s as in 1880 an Irishman named William Maguire, who became the second American Consul in Masqaṭ, described himself as the 'sole partner' in the company, which, despite Towell's absence, retained his name. Kamāl 'Abd al-Riḍā Sulṭān of W. J. Towell believes that his great-grandfather, Muḥammad Faḍl, became a partner in the company in 1884 when he purchased shares valued at RO 11,000. That seems unlikely according to American consular records which show that a Scot, Archibald Mackirdy, became Maguire's partner in 1887 and then inherited the company, and the American consulship, in 1893. Muḥammad Faḍl probably became a partner in 1894 and inherited the company on Mackirdy's death in 1906. See United States National Archives, Muscat Consular Records, Microfilm Publications T638 and T639, *passim*.

for Standard Oil. Unlike most of his Banian contemporaries, Muḥammad Faḍl did not have close relations with the government of the sultān.

Muḥammad Faḍl and Ratansi Purshottam had, in common with nearly all the Indian merchants, both Banian and Lūṭī, the protection of the British authorities in Masqaṭ. The general rule in determining who was or was not a British subject was that anyone who had settled in Masqaṭ after the British had assumed direct control over his native territory in India could obtain British protection. If he had lived in a native state that was under British protection, he was a British protected subject.<sup>88</sup> The benefits were the same: exemption from search of private property; exemption from local taxes; right of full discharge from creditors if bankrupt; British assistance in recovering debts; British official representation in any local trial and exemption from direct interference by local authorities.<sup>89</sup> In addition to these broad privileges, British subjects and protected persons could obtain the assistance of British diplomatic authorities in collecting damages for losses due to attack by the local population.

Needless to say, there were often difficulties in determining citizenship, and it was not uncommon for individuals to proclaim British protection in certain instances while claiming Masqaṭī citizenship in others. Most of the controversy was settled in 1867 when the British made provisions for the registration of British subjects and protected persons. Registration was not, however, a prerequisite to obtaining protection.<sup>91</sup>

British protection was a mixed blessing for the Indian merchants. While it served to ensure some measure of security for their businesses, the association with the British also had a negative impact. As Landen has pointed out, much of the 'Umānī resentment against the sultāns of Masqaṭ had resulted from their belief that the Āl Bū Sa'īd were mere puppets in the hands of the British.<sup>92</sup> Many of the problems experienced by Indian merchants during the final decades of the nineteenth century, such as the sacking and burning of their shops during the various raids on Masqaṭ and other actions in Ṣūr and some of the other coastal ports, may have resulted from their close association with the British.<sup>93</sup> The Indian merchants were viewed as agents of British designs of 'Umān.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, Indian merchants came to dominate the economic life of Masqaṭ, replacing the Āl Bū Sa'īd rulers as the principal merchants of the city and acquiring fortunes that had once gone to the royal family. The Hindu Banians, who had first come from Sind as junior partners to the Portuguese, flourished under the Ya'āriba but suffered as a result of the combined strains of political and economic dislocations at home and a more aggressive Masqaṭī commercial policy adopted by Ḥamad b. Sa'īd and followed by his successors. Khwājas from Sind and Bhattias from Kutch began to replace the Sindis, who moved on to other Gulf ports. The Kutchis allied themselves with Sayyid Sa'īd, and when he moved his capital to Zanzibar, they assumed control of the financial apparatus of Masqaṭ. The Kutchis faced

<sup>88</sup> India Office Records, Muscat Political Agency, R/15/6/8, *passim*.

<sup>89</sup> India Office Records, Muscat Political Agency, R/15/6/8, Political Secretary to Resident, Persian Gulf, Simla, 19 October 1875.

<sup>90</sup> Landen, *Oman since 1856*, 202.

<sup>91</sup> India Office Records, Muscat Political Agency, R/15/6/8, Political Secretary to Resident, Persian Gulf, Simla, 19 October 1875.

<sup>92</sup> Landen, *op. cit.*, 392.

<sup>93</sup> On the various difficulties between the British and the sultāns see sections in Lorimer entitled 'Protection of British Subjects in Oman', I, part 1A, 513-16, 535-8, 553-5.

their first serious crisis during the brief but commercially disastrous reign of 'Azzān b. Qays. However, the disruptions served to allow many younger, more venturesome merchants to become established in Masqaṭ. Once a more moderate regime was established in 1871 this new merchant group, comprising both Banians and Luwāṭiyya, once again assumed control of trade and fiscal administration and set about to restore Masqaṭ's commercial prominence by broadening the mercantile base of the port through trade with Europe and America.