

# THE INDIAN COMMUNITY AND ITS ECONOMIC ACTIVITY IN ZANZIBAR DURING THE 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

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## Abstract

The Indians were considered the main category working in trade in Zanzibar during the reign of Sultan Saeed Bin Sultan, the founder of the modern state of Zanzibar (1806–1856). The Indian traders got the appreciation and respect of Saeed Bin Sultan and they were allowed to work in trade in the region and he treated them as local traders in order to establish a commercial empire. Hence most of the Indian traders came during his rule, and in 1835, as the case with others, they came with the seasonal wind.

The Indian traders were Muslims and Hindu, but they didn't consider Zanzibar as their homeland, they used to travel to India and come back. Among them, the Moslem Bahara became prominent, most of them were rich traders, who lived in Zanzibar and took it as their homeland.

The Indian traders succeeded in supporting the economics of Zanzibar and financing the Arab commercial projects and developing the internal trade. Some of them succeeded in possessing large farms of cloves. And because of their commercial activity and their economic status they succeeded in establishing an excellent social position and they taught their children reading and writing. On the other side Britain encouraged the Indians to migrate to Eastern Africa because of its need for the technical Indian working class and handcraft to make use of their experience. Hence the important role of the Indian merchants in the trade of Eastern Africa came.

**Keywords:** African History, Zanzibar History, Indian Community in Zanzibar, Economic Activities of Indian Economy.

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## 1. Introduction

The Indian community in Zanzibar is one of the oldest communities to settle in East Africa. Indian merchants have been active in the area since the first century AD. The waves of these traders succeeded in migrating to East Africa before the colonial domination there. It is noteworthy that the monsoon blowing across the Indian Ocean contributed to the arrival of Indians and others from Asia to Eastern and Southern Africa.

Zanzibar brought Indian traders to the attention of being the central hub for business activities in the east of the continent. The number of Indians, especially traders, has increased in the island, especially since Oman's Sultan *Saeed bin Sultan*, who moved the capital from Muscat to Zanzibar in 1840, and realized the importance of the economic activity of the Indians to the Island, who were estimated around a 1000 the year mentioned. Due to their experiences, Indian Traders have succeeded in gaining financial superiority there. It is no accident that they numbered nearly 6,000 in 1861, which was about 10 percent of Zanzibar's total population. Their scope of work was not confined to the economic field, but some became advisers to the Omani sultans.

Aim of the research: introducing the reader to the economic activity of the Indian community in in East Africa, particularly in Zanzibar, a small island with a large historical heritage.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Different types of materials were used in this particular paper, such as: published Documents, Books, Journals, and other historical studies, that focus on the African History in general, and Zanzibar History in particular, in addition to the materials that deal with the history of the Indian Community in Africa, and their Economic Activities.

The suitable Historical Methods that were used in this paper are: the analysis of sequences, and comparative methods.

### 3. Result and Discussion

According to the sources, the first contact between the Indians and East Africa dates back to an early stage. Some researchers see their channels of communication as young as 2000 years [1]. East African regions encouraged Indian merchants to come to this area. The Historian Bhacker, says that the Indians were doing a prosperous trade with East Africa in the century when Christ was born. "There is a continuous infiltration and migratory waves from India to East Africa [2]. Since the first century AD, there have been a large number of Indian merchants, and there is a strong business relationship between West India and the eastern coast of Africa [3]. It should be noted that the monsoons blowing across the Indian Ocean contributed to the commercial activity between India and East Africa [3].

Indian migratory waves continued to Eastern Africa and settled in the 15th century before the arrival of Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama. Indian migrations to East Africa were not limited to India but came from Persia after settling in Indian ports such as Bombay [4]. In 1781, Hindus and Muslims Indians arrived to the island of Mauritius which was under French rule [5].

In the late 15th century, Indian merchants in East Africa brought the attention of travelers of Vasco de Gama. These merchants were the medium that he used to transport ivory from East Africa to India after it was obtained from Africans who transported it from the African interior to the coast [2, p. 4]. The coastal city of *Kloh* in East Africa was one of the most important centers, used by the Portuguese to transport ivory by Indian traders [2, p. 5]. To the importance of these traders, the Portuguese have relied heavily on them to contribute to the Portuguese-African trade, reflecting the important role of these traders in the economic activity of East Africa [2, p. 6]. The confidence of the Portuguese was high among the Indian merchants, especially the Hindu (Banyan), who were able to enter and trade in the African regions under Portuguese influence [2, p. 6]. It should be noted, that Indian traders found in Ivory more economic importance than in the slave trade [2, p. 7].

It is no coincidence that American port traders who have reached the East African coast are associated with Indian traders in Zanzibar and other East African regions in recognition of their efforts and economic activity [2, p. 11].

Indian traders correctly estimated the importance of ivory trade in East Africa, especially with their countries. The sources estimated that India imported 272 tons of ivory annually in the late 16th century, an important trade figure in time and place [2, p. 26]. So, it is no wonder that the Swahili scholar John Middleton describes Indians as having settled in East Africa's coastal cities for centuries [6], and the economic factor was the most important factor in their stability.

The Indians were the largest Asian minority in East Africa and were not the result of colonial domination of the eastern continent, but their commercial activity before the arrival of European colonialism, representing the actual monopoly of trade in East Africa, which encouraged their stability in the east coast [6]. In this sense, the Indians were described as merchants and businessmen and not colonists [7].

European sources have described the majority of Indians who arrived in East Africa as *Gujarati* from the North-West of the Indian coast, but very few lived in the East African coast cities and did not penetrate the continent. However, the great migration of the Indians occurred, when the British administration seized Uganda in the late 19th century many Indians contributed to the construction of the railroad from the coast to Lake Victoria in 1896, But 90 percent of the Indian workers returned home after the construction of the railway [1].

According to the Professor *Abdul-Sharif*, one of the leading researchers in the history of Zanzibar and East Africa, the ivory trade was the main factor, responsible for the Indian migration to East Africa [8]. At the same time, Indian merchants practiced grain and livestock business as stated in the writings of an emissary, named Johannes Karph (1840) [9]. The scope of Indian business was not limited to that, but East Africa began to flood Indian clothing, produced in Bombay in 1860, to the extent that Indian clothes replaced American clothing in East Africa [9, p. 63].

Zanzibar has brought Indian traders to the attention of being a very fertile island and central hub for East African business activities, as well as being the second largest island in the western Indian Ocean after Madagascar [8, p. 3].

In 1800 Zanzibar became the main foreign trade center along the East African coast, and Indians and Europeans traded on the African land [10]. In 1819, the ruler of Amman, Saeed bin Sultan, visited the island of Zanzibar for the first time. According to the sources, there are 200 Indians residing on the island and their number increased steadily until it reached 1000 at the end of 1840 [11, p. 30]. Said bin Sultan correctly estimated the role of Indians in the business of East Africa, so it is not surprising that his capital, Zanzibar, is the “Metropolis” (means: Motherland) of East Africa. The Sultan was an intelligent man who gave monopoly and increased trade to the Indians [11]. It should be noted, that the Indians settled in Oman for a long time, it is not surprising for them to become a financial force in the economic sector in Zanzibar [12]. Moreover, the Indians, who emigrated from Muscat considered themselves a part of the Omani *AlBusaid* [4, p. 117]. *Said Bin Sultan* counted Indians, who were born in Omani territory or lived there for a long time, especially wives and children, as they were residents of Oman. They accepted the fact that they were not British nationals [4, p. 166]. This has led to the Indians moving their families to settle in Zanzibar, and as a result to the large number of Indian immigrants to Zanzibar [11, p. 83], the island government resorted to registering them for future preparations for settlement on the island. Because of the large number of Indians, the rulers of the island put restrictions to prevent the entry of Indians to Zanzibar, which raised their protest [11, p. 83].

All these measures did not prevent the emigration of the Indians to Zanzibar, especially when *Said bin Sultan* transferred the capital from Muscat to Zanzibar. The latter brought with him Hindus for the purpose of benefiting from them in the management of financial and commercial affairs as well as their enjoyment of the administration of taxes and not only the Hindus but the migration of Muslims Shiites to the island [6, p. 7].

The Indians have succeeded in extending their influence and full control over the bank-like financial system, which provides important loans in Zanzibar [6, p. 7]. Thus, the Indians monopolized the source of debt to the Arabs and borrowed from them with high benefits, especially Indian Muslims [4, p. 140]. The tax system in Zanzibar was entirely under their control until, in 1830, *Jairam Sewji* was appointed director of the Zanzibar Tax Department [10, p. 42], and since 1867, he was paying an amount of \$ 310,000 to the Sultan of Zanzibar [13].

The reign of Said bin Sultan (1806–1856) was the era of the strong growth of the Indian presence in Zanzibar, but they remained a separate category that differed from the Arabs and Africans [13, p. 55], despite their good understanding of the *Swahili* language since 1811, as well as the Arabic language, same to the Omanis [4, p. 68–69].

The trade in cloves in Zanzibar has grown considerably. According to figures from a British diplomat in 1867-1868, the trade amounted to 433,693 thousand pounds, a large amount of time and space, but it is important that half of this trade, according to a British official, named Dr. Kirk, was in the hands of Indian traders [13, p. 69]. In any case, the Arabs, being the ruling power of Zanzibar, formed the aristocratic class and called the Indians to be like the middle class in Britain, while the Africans were considered a lower class [13, p. 242]. Therefore, the vital center of the Indians in the economy was not only the island, but also in East Africa, and for its financial value, Clover Farms had been mortgaged to merchants [14].

The Indians succeeded in putting Zanzibar in the forefront of the ivory trade after they spread everywhere from British and Belgian Africa in the early years of colonization [2, p. 34]. Indian *dhow*s were transporting ivory from Zanzibar to various export areas [2, p. 61]. The Indian activity was distinguished by others, especially the European communities, such as the Americans, the French, and the Germans, so that the communities in question were doing all their work through the Indian merchants because of the development of their trade in Zanzibar [10, p. 40]. It should be noted, that the Indians brought the attention of the Chinese to the Indian Ocean and the importance of trade there [15].

Thanks to the commercial activity of the Indians in Zanzibar, the number of people in Zanzibar increased dramatically. In 1861, there were 5–6 thousand Indians in the city of Zanzibar alone, and there was a Hindu street [6, p. 8–9], as well as Indian temples and mosques in Zan-

zibar for practicing religious activities [11, p. 38]. What worth mention, is that the population of Zanzibar during the reign of Sultan *Barghash* reached more than 60 thousand people [10, p. 115].

Indian merchants were not only active in the above-mentioned goods but participated in the slave trade. In 1842 [16] *Said bin Sultan* warned of the slave trade of the Indians under British control. This trade has been a source of conflict between Arabs and Indians in Zanzibar [16]. The Indians exploited the advantages of their presence under the legal care of the British consul in Zanzibar for their extensive business. On the other hand, the concern of the Arabs in Zanzibar of the financial superiority of Indian traders, especially in the 1870s after their entry into the slave trade field, moreover, their control over Clover Trade in Zanzibar [16]. The Arabs were concerned that Indians had a number of slaves as well as their prominent role in agriculture and the economy of commercial convoys within the continent [4, p. 132]. The Indians emerged as early exporters of cloves from Zanzibar to the United States, Britain and Indonesia [11, p. 115]. In spite of the economic activity of the Indians in Zanzibar, they remained the third part of the population of the island and their importance in social and political life was much lower than that of Arabs and Africans and disproportionate to their large business activity [17].

Despite the benefits that the Indians gained as British citizens and a distinct group from the Arabs and Africans, they faced conflicts with the British resident in Zanzibar, which banned the slave trade, which is contrary to their interests [18], about which the British Consul in Zanzibar Hammerton in a report to his government said that “Indians in Zanzibar were all slave traders” [4, p. 165].

The encouragement of Saeed bin Sultan to Indian traders to come to Zanzibar and to work with stability is very important. It is no wonder, that the center of the city of Zanzibar known as Stone Town was built by Indian merchants in honor of the Omani Sultanate [15, p. 49]. During the reign of the sultan, the merchants of the coastal cities had direct contacts with the Indian financiers in Zanzibar since 1837 [9, p. 99], which clearly indicates their financial influence. At the same time, the growth of *AlBusaid*'s power in Zanzibar left the Indian influence on Hindus and Muslims in the West Indian Ocean and Zanzibar became a rich and powerful country [19]. In contrast, according to European sources, the era of *Said bin Sultan* saw the Indians build a business empire in the face of British influence in the Arabian Gulf [19, p. 354]. The Indian aristocracy overtook the aristocratic societies of Swahili and led to a kind of estrangement thanks to Indian ingenuity [19, p. 354]. It is therefore no coincidence that Indian Rupee currency was used during the nineteenth century in East Africa [20]. Indians, who have long lived or were born in Africa, are no longer Indians in their own country, but are called African Indians [6, p. 2]. It is not surprising, that the Indians spread out in the East Coast and occupied lands outside Zanzibar in 1840 [21], as well as 8 % in Zanzibar of three million trees [6, p. 43].

As for the demographic weight of the Indian population in Zanzibar, their numbers increased, especially those, who came from India with their families, thus forming 10 % of the population of Zanzibar in 1861 [8, p. 37]. They represent the largest foreign community on the island of Zanzibar, where the sources estimated 3,091 in 1870, compared to 25 French and 23 British, 12 Germans and 12 Americans [11, p. 5]. In a letter, written by the British resident in Zanzibar to the governor of Kenya on August 5, 1916, Zanzibar was described as profound. Zanzibar was said to be a different region from East Africa in its relationship with immigrants for centuries. A large number of Indians with their families settled in Zanzibar and practiced commerce and they were Hindus, Shia Muslims and others [11, p. 83–86].

The Indian elites, who worked as advisors to the Omani sultans, had important positions. They began to set up clinics for most of the Indian sects, whether Ismailia Shi'a, Hindus or others [11, p. 100]. At the same time, a number of Indians were encouraging their family members to emigrate and settle in Zanzibar and East Africa. East Africa extended its presence from Mogadishu in Somalia to the islands of Mozambique [22].

The large group of Indians from Banyan and the Muslims came with their families from Kutch, Swart and Bombay [10, p. 88]. However, Indians did not stop reporting in newspapers to urge their own people to seek citizenship in East African countries [23].

Despite the demands of the Indians above and the strength of their economic activity, the Arabs lost the economic power in Zanzibar and became dependent on the financial and commercial activity of the Indians. In return, the Arabs found themselves monopolizing lands and political power [8, p. 25]. At the same time, the agreements with the United States in 1833 and with Britain in 1839 and France 1844 from the center of Zanzibar supported the financial center of the Indians in the Island [8, p. 21].

Indian traders in Zanzibar were known to be concentrated in the urban areas of the island, known as *Unguja*, and became representatives of the island council like Arabs and Britons. They suffered the same fate as the Arabs in the bloody Delta of Africans against Arabs and Indians in 1964, when thousands of them were killed [24].

However, one of the ideas of the East African Indians was seeking the political and social power of the Greater India Project [22, p. 46].

The number of Indians, especially traders, has increased in Zanzibar. It appears that the political atmosphere was an important factor that motivated waves of migrations from Indian subcontinent toward the east coast of Africa, and Zanzibar Archipelago, which resulted in changing the economic, and the social fabric of Zanzibar.

#### 4. Conclusion

1. The Indian community in Eastern cost of Africa, especially in Zanzibar, has played an important commercial role in the history of the region, which attracted Chinese attention to the region.
2. The Indian community dissolved in the East African Community and Zanzibar.
3. One of the ideas the East African Indians tried to achieve, was political and social power of the “Greater India” Project.

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