**Re-imagining Locations by way of the “Indian Diaspora”**

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**Introduction**

This article examines how diasporas re-orient conventional cartographies and spatial configurations by identifying historically located networks that often escape the attention of scholars and policy makers working within the framework of individual nations. The foregrounding of such networks brings into focus global flows that predates the age of globalization and create possibilities of exploring and strengthening collaborations across regions. For an understanding of these new forms of dispersal and new forms of connectedness the study of the diaspora assumes significance. The contemporary ubiquity of the diaspora as a focus of study is informed by dispersal of people on the one hand and new forms of connectedness on the other. The growth of interest in matters of global scope has led to a rethinking about spatial and temporal categories where not only the nation and its borders have been subject to scrutiny but also categories like regions and areas have come under interrogation. As Sukanya Banerjee argues, amidst this re-thinking of spatial and temporal categories diasporas have gained currency as a productive framework for re-imagining locations, movements, identities and social formations that have been overlooked by earlier modes of analysis or equally important, stand the chance of being flattened by the homogenizing effects of global capital.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Traditionally, the study of the diaspora revolved around the dilemma of groups, who, though settled in a host state maintained memories of the homeland and led a dual existence between two cultures. Discussions on diaspora communities were essentially an extension of ethnographic discourses where memory was seen to play a significant part. All these studies assumed prolonged residence with reduced possibilities of a return to the homeland. Nostalgia, thus, constituted the focus of the study of the diaspora. In recent years, however, the term diaspora itself has undergone transformation from a dispersed community oriented around a single point of origin to the inclusion of groups as disparate as exiles, expatriates, refugees, asylum seekers, labour migrants, queer communities, domestic service workers, executives of transnational corporations and transnational sex workers.[[2]](#footnote-2) These disparate groups no longer constitute the stable bounded communities that they once implied.While Paul Gilroy’s evocation of the Black Atlantic world with its fractured movements and identities extended the study of the diaspora to an imaginative re-thinking of effects of migration, dispersal and displacement, rapid advances in technology has led to a spate of digital diasporas. There are therefore multiple ways in which trajectories and identities are charted bringing into question terms like the “Indian Diaspora” which brings with it the temptation to think of them as stable bounded communities or transcendent homogeneous groups.

**The “Indian” Diaspora in Central Asia**

All of these issues come into play when one examines what would be identified as the “Indian” diasporic community in Central Asia.[[3]](#footnote-3) Close attention to the generic terms used here would indicate that traditionally groups and networks that could be termed as disaporic in the region were not all “Indian” in the contemporary sense. They were subsumed within the general term “Multani” “Khatri” “Marwari” or later “Shikarpuri” but were a conglomerate of different groups and subgroups including the Lohanis, Bohras, Parachas, Khojas, Bhatias.[[4]](#footnote-4) Also movements of these groups extended beyond what is delimited as the frontiers of the five post-Soviet Central Asian states creating opportunities for new imaginations that are rooted in networks that operated across the region. In recent times various ‘New Silk Road’ initiatives provide opportunities for exploring these multifaceted imaginations about the region. Within the metaphorical frame of the New Silk Road there were a number of strategies, most premised on prospects for overland connection between China, India, the Middle East, Europe and Russia resulting in revenue for the Central Asian states and sustainable development for Afghanistan. The American Administration’s vision of Central and South Asia as a single interconnected region held together by Afghanistan is interesting in this context. The perspective was reflected in a speech by the then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton when she argued

For centuries the nations of South and Central Asia were connected to each other and the rest of the continent by a sprawling trading network called the Silk Road. Afghanistan’s bustling markets sat at the heart of this network. Afghan merchants traded their goods from the courts of the Pharaohs to the Great Wall of China. As we look to the future of this region, let’s make this precedent as inspiration for a long term vision for Afghanistan and its neighbours. Let us set our sights on a New Silk Road—a web of economic and transit connections that will bind together a region too long torn apart by conflict and division.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This is the broader area within which one finds the dispersal of a merchant diaspora loosely identified as “Indian.”

There is ample evidence of Indian merchants from different regions of the subcontinent moving well beyond the traditional boundaries of the South Asian subcontinent—the land frontiers traditionally marked by the Indus river in the west and Burma in the northeast.[[6]](#footnote-6) Indeed, it is worth recalling that large parts of Southeast Asia, Central and West Asia represented a region of economic and cultural influence facilitated by overland and oceanic trade routes that were well known and probably widely used several centuries earlier. The earliest records of Indians in these peripheral regions are largely restricted to political and religious traces with the foundation of states in Southeast Asia strongly influenced by Indian culture and the settlement of Buddhist missionaries and scholars in Southeast Asia, Afghanistan and Central Asia. Yet the presence of Brahman priests and Buddhists monks in Southeast Asia and Buddhist monks in Afghanistan and Central Asia was almost certainly coincident with Indian trade with these regions. Indeed, there is no reason to think of Hindu and Buddhist priests and missionaries and merchants necessarily as distinct groups of individuals. It is however impossible to ascertain when the movement of Indian merchants and religious specialists first led to the establishment of significant Indian mercantile diasporas in these neighboring regions.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Indians formed multiple mercantile diasporas in West, Central, East and Southeast Asia right through the period of European colonial dominance. China and India represent interesting and contrasting economic and cultural centers that generated merchant diasporas from among their indigenous populations. As Stephen Dale argues, the most obvious factors driving the spread of Indian mercantile diasporas were: the enormous reservoir of fertile agricultural land, the early growth of major urban centers and the consequent social division of labor and the production of valuable agrarian and manufactured products to serve a large and diverse population. In addition, as with China, the regions on India’s sea and land frontiers remained less economically developed and socially differentiated throughout most of India’s recorded history. These territories include Southeast Asia, Central Asia, including the western region known as Mawarannahr or Transoxiana and the eastern zone, including the Mongolian steppe and the region previously designated as Chinese Turkistan and now as the Xinjiang region of China and finally parts of West Asia, most particularly, Afghanistan and Iran.[[8]](#footnote-8) It was northern and northwestern Indians, largely individuals of the large Hindu caste group known as Khattris, who traded in Afghanistan, Mawarannahr, Iran and Russia. The Khattris, who were natives of the Punjab and adjacent regions in northwestern India, exerted economic influence in Afghanistan, Central Asia and Iran, eventually even reaching Moscow.

Almost nothing is known about the actual organization of particular Indian mercantile diasporas prior to the eleventh century, but after that date substantial information becomes available for Indian mercantile diasporas, whose members were natives of different Indian regions that settled in two neighboring areas: Southeast Asia and territories to India’s north and northwest, including Afghanistan, Central Asia, Iran and even Russia. It was northern and northwestern Indians, largely individuals of the large Hindu caste group known as Khattris, who traded in Afghanistan, Mawarannahr, Iran and Russia. The Khattris, natives of the Punjab and adjacent regions in northwestern India, exerted economic influence in Afghanistan, Central Asia and Iran, eventually even reaching Moscow.[[9]](#footnote-9) As in the case of Indian economic relations with Southeast Asia, India’s enormous productive capacity made it a dominant economic power in the northwest as well as the southeast, and the principal source of India’s economic dominance in the northwestern region was initially the same as in Southeast Asia, that is Indian textiles. India was, in fact, the dominant economic power throughout the entire Indian Ocean region and its merchants were successful along its northwestern periphery for the same reasons they flourished in Southeast Asia: valuable goods, substantial capital resources and sophisticated financial commercial skills. Just as Indian merchants from South India almost certainly traded in Southeast so too it is probable that Indians from the Punjab and the northwestern regions of South Asia traded with Afghanistan, Central Asia and Iran just as early.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Dale argues that records show that during the relatively stable era of Mughal rule in India (1526-1739/1857) and Safavid rule in Iran (1501-1722), Indian bankers and merchants traveled to and resided semi-permanently in Mawarannahr, Afghanistan and Iran. From Iran they later moved into Russian territory at Astrakhan and traveled up the Volga to Moscow, where they resided in the Kitae Gorod, the “Chinese city,” where most foreign merchants lived.[[11]](#footnote-11) Punjabi Khattris, Pushtuns or Afghans and Marwaris from Rajasthan were the principal merchant groups from the Mughal territories of South Asia who traded in these regions. Indian merchants in the west could reach Afghanistan and Central Asia on camel caravans from late spring to early fall via the Khyber and Bolan passes and travel onwards to Iran. Afghan nomadic or semi-nomadic clans who possessed camels and regularly moved between South Asia and Afghanistan and Central Asia provided the overland “shipping” for at least part of the journey through the dangerous northwest passes and Afghan territories. Alternatively, merchants could reach Iran or the Persian Gulf by ship directly from Gujarat or by sailing down the Indus to the sea. Interesting in terms of present Indian initiatives for a north south corridor through the Iranian port city of Bandar Abbas is a comment by an English merchant writing in 1662 who noted that merchants engaged in trade from Surat in Gujarat to Gombroon (Bandar Abbas) in the Persian Gulf were mostly Indians.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Khattris were to be found throughout Afghanistan and as far west as the Russian Caspian port of Astrakhan, functioning as “bankers, merchants, goldsmiths and sellers of grain.”[[13]](#footnote-13) The few Muslim Multanis whose names are mentioned were probably Afghans, who themselves traded as well as provided camel caravans for other merchants. In addition, a number of other Hindu as well as Jain merchants, and some Indian Muslims, also traded in Iran, Afghanistan and southern Russia in the eighteenth century. The Hindus and Jains, including Hindu Agarwals and Jain Oswals, were usually subsumed under the general geographical identity as Marwaris, originally natives of the Marwar region of Rajasthan. While the Multani merchant diaspora in Afghanistan, Central Asia, Iran and Russia, was dispersed over a wide area, most of them lived and worked in Isfahan, the capital of Iran in the seventeenth century. Different observers estimated that 10,000 Indian merchants lived in Iran without leaving. 10,000 may be a formulaic number for a large but uncounted number, but at the least it suggests that substantial numbers of Khattris and smaller numbers of other Indians lived and worked in Iran and especially in Isfahan during the Safavid era. Many of these individuals may have come from Indian families long settled in Afghanistan, where Indian mercantile castes continued to live and supply capital and commercial goods until the late twentieth century. In Afghanistan Hindu merchants/moneylenders lived in towns and villages during the Mughal-Safavid era and well into the late twentieth century. In Afghanistan particularly, whose inhabitants were often tribal, with relatively little occupational differentiation, Indian commercial castes provided many of these inhabitants with goods and capital. Often these Hindus were the only merchants in towns and villages.[[14]](#footnote-14)

During the Mughal period some Indians had shifted from exporting Indian manufactured cotton cloth in favor of producing the cloth locally in Samarkand and elsewhere. Russia offered some of the same opportunities to Indian merchants, as did Iran and Central Asia. Indian merchants had no difficulty establishing a thriving mercantile settlement in Astrakhan, many of whose members traded in Iranian more than in Indian goods. One Indian merchant named Sutur, reported in a 1648 petition, that he had lived in Astrakhan and paid customs duties there for twenty-five years. Many of these diasporas also continued to thrive, even during the European colonial era. To take but one example, during the mid to late eighteenth century many Multani merchants shifted the focus of their activities further south along the Indus to Shikarpur and generated more diaspora settlements as “Shikarpuris,” first in the towns previously frequented by Multanis and by then by mid-twentieth century, throughout Eurasia. There of course remains a debate on the absence of any recorded evidence of “Indian” communities in what is today identified as Central Asia in official statistics of the time given the fact that the movement of people across the South and Central Asian regions was a given historical fact. There were several incomplete explanations for this including the fact that the Indians formed a trade diaspora who never settled permanently (thereby escaped enumeration) and eventually merged with the local communities.[[15]](#footnote-15)

**Routes and Roads**

On the other hand, geographically and culturally, the vision that India has had of the region she referred to as Central Asia is of an extended space. It is illustrated in a map accompanying one of the first of a number of volumes on *India and Central Asia*, published in 1955.[[16]](#footnote-16) Compiled out of a series of lectures given by Probodh Chandra Bagchi to the Indian History Congress, it delimits the region as extending across China westward up to the Aral Sea and including within it Balkh, Bokhara and Samarkand. This is the region out of which invading tribes entered India, across whose Silk Routes trade flourished and also the region where Indian culture and religion spread. Bagchi notes that the first country of Central Asia on the threshold of the Indian cultural world was Tokharestan, the land of the Tukharas. Tokharestan was an active intermediary between India on one side and Iran and Turan on the other. Although in the Mohamedan period Tokharestan came to mean the territories between Badakshan and Balkh, in the earlier period it was used in a much broader geographical sense and embraced all the provinces on both banks of the Amu Darya. It extended up to the passes of the Hindukush. Indian connection with this region was cemented through Buddhism. Buddhism was the predominant religion in the various states of Tokharisatn from about the second century BC up to the beginning of the eighth century when it was conquered by the Arabs. Connections were also cemented on the basis of the written script. The southern states of the Tarim basin was divided into three groups according to zones of cultural interest: (i) Kashgar and the neighbouring states; (ii) Khotan and the neighbouring states; and (iii) the region of Lobnor. Two of the Pamir states to the east of Shugnan, i.e. Sarikol and Hissar culturally belonged to Kashgar. As the writing in Kashgar is said to have been of Indian origin, based on the Brahmi, Bagchi notes that the same writing would have been current in the two other states. Similarly, Kharoshti was current in some parts of Khotan up to the third century and that was probably the script known in Kashgar in the early period. Brahmi was introduced in the fourth–fifth centuries when Kharosthi went out of use. India's contacts with Central Asia therefore go back to antiquity and there had traditionally been exchange of populations at different levels: as traders, scholars, and religious preachers.

Indian scholars frequently used to go to Kashgar. Bagchi records that Kumarajiva who was born in Kucha, had gone to Kashmir for his education during the last decade of the fourth century. On his way back from Kashmir he came to Kashgar and stayed there for nearly a year. His records show that Kashgar was a center of Brahminical studies also. Bagchi points to this and other such instances to illustrate the continuous intercourse between India, the Central Asian kingdoms and China, which necessitated the compilation of not just bi-lingual lexicons but also conversational primers. He cites the text of such a primer in the Sanskrit-Khotanese text to show how this bilingual need was being fulfilled. The selected lines cited here, part of a conversation between an Indian Bhikshu and a man from western China, is also an interesting illustration of what must have been a constant movement

 Whence have you come?

 I have come from Khotan.

 When did you come from India?

 Two years ago.

 Now where are you going?

 I am going to China. [[17]](#footnote-17)

Bagchi notes that this interconnection meant that the region beyond the Himalayas was never as isolated from India as it is assumed to be. The people of Northern India, and specially the people of Punjab possessed some knowledge of this region and were in contact with the nomads almost in every age. He argues, “They did not consider them foreigners as we do now, simply because the distinction between them, both physical and cultural was not so great as to create a sharp difference between them.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Bagchi argues that the migration of the Central Asian nomads to India is an essential corollary to the Indo-Iranian conquest which brought the Vedic civilization to this country. Hence, their contribution to the development of Indian civilization increased its complexity by introducing traits that were analogous but distinct in forms. This phenomenon repeated itself in almost every age. Therefore, not just the political history but also the history of art, society and religion of the entire region has to be studied against this background. Concluding his section on “Nomadic Movements in Central Asia,” Bagchi notes, “The cultural exchange between various nations during almost a millennium along the ‘silk route’ throws into background their commercial interest.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

Yet, by far the largest numbers who traveled were traders. Travel was facilitated by the large number of entry points. Mohan Lal quotes forty routes between the two regions in the middle of the nineteenth century.[[20]](#footnote-20) By the beginning of the eighteenth century, four main exit points existed. According to Surendra Gopal, the wide dispersal of Indian traders in Afghanistan and Iran and their concentration in Astrakhan enabled them to extend their trading activities to the Uzbek cities.[[21]](#footnote-21) While the presence of Indian traders and trading communities has been noted in a number of writings, Mohan Lal’s accounts of his journey to Turkestan, Balkh, Bokhara and Heratin the middle of the nineteenth century remains the most authentic record of how the region was perceived at a time when the ‘great game’ had just commenced. Mohan Lal’s great grandfather Raja Mani Ram of Kashmir held a high rank at the Moghul court in Delhi. His father joined British service and Mohan Lal himself joined the first English class established at the Persian College in Delhi. He was well versed in Persian and Urdu and was invited to join Lieutenant Alexander Burns to Turkestan as his ‘Persian munshi’. Mohan Lal’s *Travels* is based on the journal he recorded during his journey. The aim of the journal was to provide military, strategic, commercial and geographical information to the superior officers of the company, and as such Mohan Lal definitely had a part to play in the ‘great game’. Yet, it is also a record of Turkestan and its connections with South Asia through the eyes of an Indian traveler. The most significant aspect of his record is his account of the continuous presence of Hindu trader communities along the way as in Kabul where, he writes, they number nearly two thousand and have shops spread over the streets and bazaars. Further on in Khulum he notes the presence of Chiman Das, a Hindu, and in Peshawar of Atma Ram, the Prime Minister. Similarly, he notes the presence of Hindus residing in *serais in* Balkh. In Bokhara he talks about his encounter with a ‘crowd of Hindus’ who come to enquire about the purpose of his journey.[[22]](#footnote-22) Apart from economic relations through trade, it was the presence of groups of traders and trading communities in the entire region that provided connections between communities in the entire region to the north-west of India and created perceptions of an extended neighbourhood. This linkage, forged in ancient times, is said to have flourished in the medieval period and continued unabated despite colonial rivalry in the era of the Great Game.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Travel was facilitated by the large number of entry points. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Mohan Lal quotes forty routes between the two regions. The starting point for a journey to the northernmost extremity was from the valley of Kashmir, to Leh, Yarkand, Kashgar, then onto the Ferghana Valley. The second exit point was Kabul, from where traders, principally from the Punjab, and generally known as Lahoris, assembled before going on to Balkh, Khulm, Kargan, Kunduz, and other cities on the Oxus. The third exit point was Multan. From Multan the merchants could generally go on to Kandahar in Afghanistan. From there they could go on to the Persian territory directly or take the Kandahar-Ghazni-Kabul route to Bukhara. The Indian merchants using Multan as the point of departure were known as Multanis, though they hailed from a much wider area, which roughly covered western and lower Punjab as also Rajasthan. Another group of Indian merchants were known as Shikarpuris, and derived their name from Shikarpur, a small town in Sindh. They either went to Multan or straight to Kandahar from where they took the road either to Persia or to the Uzbek territory.[[24]](#footnote-24) Trade flourished particularly for groups like the Shikarpuris who developed elaborate credit networks and letters of credit that was accepted across the entire region. Shikarpuris were involved in both finance and trade and exemplified the tie-up that existed between local capital markets in India and markets for financial services and goods situated outside the sub-continent. Shikarpur was the center of a financial network, which developed in the second half of the eighteenth century in direct relation to the rise of the Durrani Empire. The traders who had to travel along inhospitable terrain were greatly benefited by the fact that Hindu traders were present in all the major trading centers and halting places. A continuous chain of Indian traders on the roads leading from the borders of India to Central Asia existed. This kept the traders line of contact back home intact and also provided him with business intelligence, and support in terms of food, shelter, merchandise, etc. [[25]](#footnote-25)

The emergence of the ‘Shikarpuris’ gives rise to what Markovits identifies as a terminological problem, i.e. the undifferentiated use of the terms ‘Multani’ and ‘Shikarpuri’ to characterize a community which he identifies as ethnically and geographically distinct.[[26]](#footnote-26) Markovits argues that the change reflects more than simply a change in the ‘home base’ of these traders from Multan to Shikarpur, though he stresses that Levi is correct in emphasizing long term continuities. While Shikarpuris were involved in both finance and trade, by the latter half of the nineteenth century, with a decline in the caravan trade they became principally involved in financing rural agriculture. The substantial estates left by the Shikarpuris in Russian Central Asia tend to suggest that the profitability of the money lending business was fairly high. Apart from money lending they were also involved in other kinds of banking activities such as money changing, deposit taking and remittance business. All contemporary travelers agree that the significance of Shikarpur was more of a financial center than a trading center. In fact, travelers attest to the fact that in the nineteenth century the Shikarpuries had a monopoly over *hundis* (bills of exchange) in Bukhara. The Shikarpuri *hundi*, that was said to circulate from Nijni-Novrogod to Calcutta, fulfilled the role of the letter of credit or bill of exchange given by bankers to traders, basically allowing the latter to tide over the period between the conclusion of the transaction and the delivery of the goods. *Hundis* circulated mostly within the Shikarpuri community and the profits of the trade was regularly remitted to Shikarpur. The Shikarpuri network operated on a specific system of partnership known in Shikarpur as *shah-gumasth.* This allowed a small group of men located in Shikarpur to control and finance commercial transactions over a vast area extending to Khorrassan and Turkestan. Each of these men had a number of agents spread over various localities. The system was developed to deal with the fact that it was difficult to travel to Central Asia. The existence of a sophisticated *hundi* system made it possible to avoid transporting currency in large quantities along dangerous routes. It also limited the necessity of the bankers themselves to travel frequently to the area.[[27]](#footnote-27)

With the recognition of the fragility of connects in the immediate neighbourhood, connections are now being sought with regions to India’s north and west that go back to antiquity and where there had traditionally been exchange of populations at different levels—as traders, scholars, and religious preachers. Politically many of these places are now no longer accessible to India, bringing to the forefront the necessity of connects with its immediate neighbourhood as a precursor to connectivity to a wider region. The ‘Connect Central Asia’ initiative has to be viewed within this context where both the traditional continental trade routes and the maritime multi modal routes would come into play. There also remains the alternative to connect Indian initiatives with other existing (like Turkey-Iran-Pakistan railway) or proposed routes (branches of the Silk Road Economic Belt). A multi modal link to Central Asia through the Iranian port of Chabahar could then link through existing and newer links to Russia and Europe. These include both transport corridors like the INSTC and pipeline projects like TAPI. The potential for both, if linked to the South East Asian states, would be manifold. Similarly, the BCIM corridor could link to a broader Asian network. The development of a network of Indian Ocean ports to serve as regional shipping hubs for littoral states with connecting highways and rail routes would mean leveraging India’s location in one of the most strategic stretches of ocean space. The launching of a Spice Route, Cotton Route and the Mausam Project, all of which are attempts to tie together countries around the Indian Ocean assumes significance in this context. At the macro level the aim of Project Mausam is to re-connect and re-establish communication between countries of the Indian Ocean world which would lead to enhanced understanding of cultural values and concerns while at the micro level the focus is on understanding national cultures in their regional maritime milieu. The aim is not just to examine connections that linked parts of the Indian Ocean littoral but also the connections of these coastal centers to their hinterlands. The ‘Spice Project’ aims to explore the multi-faceted Indo-Pacific Ocean World collating archeological and historical research to document the diversity of cultural, commercial and religious interactions in the Indian Ocean, extending from East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the Indian sub-continent and Sri Lanka to the Southeast Asian archipelago. The broader aim is to connect these with ‘Information Silk Route’ where telecom connectivity between the countries would be made possible. Partly propelled by the advancement in informational technology in India and partly by the fact that connectivity on the ground has been restricted by political reasons these strategies need to be visualized as integrated aspects of both domestic and foreign policy.[[28]](#footnote-28)

**Conclusions**

It is here that the story of India’s natural connect to its immediate neighbourhood in South Asia comes into focus. Complicated by policy decisions and what C. Raja Mohan refers to as “inward economic orientation of socialist India and the neglect of connectivity and commerce at and across frontiers”[[29]](#footnote-29) it remains the first of the concentric circle to which India would need to reconnect. Raja Mohan goes on to argue that the present government in India has made an attempt to compensate but the scope of its initiative is no match to Chinese efforts to reconfigure the economic geography of the continent. The inclusion of both Sri Lanka and Nepal as dialogue partners in the SCO is a recent political expression of Chinese efforts at inclusion of the sub-continent and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor a classic geopolitical statement. While a change in mindset about visualizing its neighbourhood as a ‘backyard’ is a necessity there also remains the need to rethink its strategy of political involvement, learn to compete with other powers when its interests in the neighbourhood is challenged but also collaborate where necessary before India can hope to regain its leverage. The prescriptive logic of this cannot be denied and leads to the question of why ‘regionalism’ remained a non-starter in the region particularly since the story of the merchant diaspora remains a historical fact. While the fractured history of the subcontinent is part of the reason for the tenuous nature of South Asian connections, Partho Ghosh argues that it also remains a fact that a clear concept of the region never emerged either in Indian academic and strategic thinking or in the West. He goes on to argue that the fact that South Asia as a region has remained in the periphery of Indian concerns is evident in organizational set up of the MEA where there is no separate division for the region.[[30]](#footnote-30) Given the fact that the diasporas are today recognized as entities with significant soft power in the realm of foreign strategy this lack of engagement requires attention particularly since the political discourse is replete with references to reconnecting with the region. The need to reconfigure the economic geography of the region brings with it at least the necessity of bringing back into focus the diaspora communities that historically traded across the borders of what is now reframed as a greater South Asia.

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 Banerjee, “Introduction: Routing Diasporas,” p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Banerjee, “Introduction: Routing Diasporas,” p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The first comprehensive study that addressed the question was Stephen Frederic Dale’s, *Indian Merchants and Eurasian Trade 1600-1750*. This was followed by Claude Markovits, *The Global world of Indian Merchants 1750-1947* and Scott C. Levi, *The Indian Diaspora in Central Asia*. More recently a compilation of essays has been edited by Levi, *India and Central Asia Commerce and Culture, 1500-1800*. References to the Indian merchants and moneylenders is also to be found in Devendra Kaushik, *India and Central Asia in Modern Times*; Surendra Gopal, "Indian Traders in Uzbekistan in the Eighteenth Century,", and G.L. Dimitriyev, “From the History of Indian Colony in Central Asia*.*” Of course, these traders have been mentioned in travel accounts and in popular literature. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Levi, “Multanis and Shikarpuris,” pp. 34-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Diener, “Parsing Mobilities in Central Eurasia,” p. 385. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See, for instance, Kirk, “The Inner Asian Frontier of India,” pp. 131-168. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Dale, “The Geography, Economy and Society of Indian Diasporas,” p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Dale, “The Geography, Economy and Society of Indian Diasporas,” p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Levi, The Indian Merchant Diaspora in Early Modern Central Asia and Iran,” pp. 483-512. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Dale, “The Geography, Economy and Society of Indian Diasporas”, p 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Dale, “The Geography, Economy and Society of Indian Diasporas,” p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Cited by Dale, “The Geography, Economy and Society of India,” from Foster (ed.), *The English Factories in India*, p. 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Dale, “The Geography, Economy and Society of India,” p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Dale, “The Geography, Economy and Society of India,” pp. 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For a detailed discussion, see Sengupta, "Diasporas Along the Silk Road.” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Bagchi*, India and Central Asia*. A more recent publication, Roy and Kumar (eds.), *India and Central Asia,* has a section on historical and cultural linkages. See also Sengupta “Situating Indian Studies on Central Asia,” pp. 3-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Bagchi*, India and Central Asia*, p. 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Bagchi*, India and Central Asia,* p. 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Bagchi*, India and Central Asia*, p. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Mohan Lal, *Travels in the Punjab, Afghanistan and Turkistan to Balkh, Bokhara and Herat*. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Gopal, "Indian Traders in Uzbekistan in the Eighteenth Century." [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Mohan Lal, *Travels in the Punjab, Afghanistan and Turkistan to Balkh, Bokhara and Herat.* [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See for instance, Kaushik, "India and Central Asia: Renewing a Traditional Relationship." [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Mohan Lal, *Travels in the Punjab, Afghanistan and Turkistan to Balkh, Bokhara and Herat.* [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. For a detailed study of the Shikarpuri network, see Markovits, *The Global World of Indian Merchants 1750-1947*. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Markovits provides a detailed explanation of why the undifferentiated use of the term can be problematic. See Markovits, “Indian Merchants in Central Asia, The Debate,” pp. 123-151. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See Markovits, *The Global World of Indian Merchants 1750-1947*. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. For a detailed discussion, see Samaddar and Sengupta, Introduction to *Global Governance and India’s North-East*,p. 16-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Raja Mohan, “Raja Mandala: Regional India, Global South Asia.” [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See Sengupta, “Logistical Spaces IV: The Asian Paradigm.” [↑](#footnote-ref-30)