

## 5 Minorities, Commerce and the Legacy of Muslim Asia's Urban Cosmopolitanism: Afghanistan's Hindus and Sikhs

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### Introduction

In the years following the Soviet invasion in December 1979, Afghanistan has come to be associated in the scholarly literature and more popular discourse with ultra-conservative forms of Islam – including, most especially, those espoused by the Taliban and ISIS.<sup>1</sup> There is little if any place in the imaginaries of such groups either of the Afghan nation or of Muslim identity for non-Muslim minorities; indeed, Islamists in Afghanistan as elsewhere are often directly hostile to the forging of social, commercial and emotional relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Hostility towards non-Muslim minorities in Afghanistan is not confined to active participants in Islamist movements such as ISIS and the Taliban; it is, rather, a pervasive aspect of everyday life in the country. I have often encountered animosity towards non-Muslim minority communities during my visits to Afghanistan. After I told a Kabul-based money exchange agent in September 2018 that I had spent the day visiting Hindu and Sikh Afghans in the 'old city' (*shahr-e kohna*), for instance, he told me that 'they should return to India – that is where they are from'. The man's remark is a reflection of the extent to which an exclusive form of autochthonous nationalism in which claims to belonging made on the basis of being from the 'soil' (*khakh*) is a prevalent feature of Afghan political discourse.

At the same time, I have also seen how Afghans from a variety of backgrounds hold and foster a deep interest in the past presence of ethno-religious minority communities in the country. Many people with whom I spoke in the country were keen to discover what had happened to the country's religious minorities after they left Afghanistan. Along with a local host, I visited a street (the *kucha-ye musawiha*) that had formerly been a site of Jewish community life in the historic city of Herat in western

<sup>1</sup> For a nuanced treatment of the historic role of Islam in Afghanistan, see Green 2017. On the form of Islam adopted by the Taliban, see, for example, Maley 1997 and Crews and Tarzi 2009.

Afghanistan. My host took me to a synagogue (renovated in the 2010s by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture) and a Jewish bathhouse. During a later visit to Herat, I visited the city's Jewish cemetery and was shown tombstones recently renovated with the support of Afghan Jews who had travelled to the city from North America.

My visit to the neighbourhood prompted me to explore various form of cultural production by Afghans in the country and its diasporas concerning the country's Jewish community. Afghan travellers to the city, I discovered, had written internet blogs about Herat's Jewish community; these blogs and other pieces by journalists advocated 'the Jewish street' (*kucha-ye musawiha*) as a must-see place for Afghan tourists visiting Herat. As in other parts of the world, Afghanistan's cultural elite regards acts of positively identifying with the country's historic cultural diversity as an effective way of demonstrating open-mindedness and cultural sophistication (*motamadin*).<sup>2</sup> In Afghanistan and within the country's diaspora, there is an interest among the elite in historic expressions of cultural and religious diversity. This results in forms of cultural production – including posts, articles, online videos, professionally produced documentaries and published books – that circulate widely among Afghans at home and abroad and are a source of comment, reflection and debate.<sup>3</sup>

The preceding chapters have demonstrated that Afghan trading networks are ethnolinguistically and ideologically diverse. This diversity reflects the layered histories of distinct trading networks and imprints itself in their structure and dynamics, as well as the traders' collective and individual cultural and political identities. Rather than mitigating against the cultivation of relationships of trust, internal diversity, I have argued, enables traders to cultivate an attitude of critical responsivity towards the multiple geopolitical projects that affect the worlds across which they operate.

This chapter's focus is on an equally important and perhaps surprising aspect of the historically layered and culturally complex composition of trading networks – their religious diversity. Long-term conflict and displacement in Afghanistan has resulted in the bleaching of 'ethno-religious minorities' from the country's social fabric.<sup>4</sup> Historians argue, indeed, that such processes are visible in many settings across Muslim Asia and reflect the broader 'de-cosmopolitanisation' of the region's urban centres. Green uses the term 'de-cosmopolitanisation' to identify the bleaching of ethno-religious diversity in Muslim Asia's historic cities, arguing that declining

<sup>2</sup> Ziaratjaye 2017. <sup>3</sup> Jawad 2019 and Ziaratjaye 2017.

<sup>4</sup> The use of the notion of 'minority' to describe and analyse such communities is problematic in a variety of ways, not least because it fails to recognise the role played by the state in determining the basis of the identities of 'minority' and 'majority' communities. See, for example, Mahmood 2013.

levels of cultural diversity have arisen in the context of the persecution and subsequent migration of minority communities over the past century. In addition to having become less diverse in cultural and religious terms, space in Muslim Asia's cities is increasingly ordered in relationship to social, economic and ethnic boundaries – a process that has been enhanced by waves of migrants arriving in urban centres from rural regions and smaller towns, often in the context of war and persistent civil conflict.<sup>5</sup>

By engaging with debates in the social sciences and humanities about the relevance of the category of cosmopolitanism to the analysis of Muslim societies, the chapter argues that processes of 'de-cosmopolitanisation' are best understood alongside recognition of the persistence in new settings of the legacy of past modes of doing commerce widely documented in multi-religious Muslim-majority societies. I explore the role traders play in cultivating and maintaining nuanced modes of engaging with religious diversity in the various settings in which they work, exploring the afterlife of Afghanistan's legacy of cosmopolitan modes of urban living in the geographies and sociality of contemporary forms of trade. In order to do so, the ethnographic focus of the chapter is on relationships between Muslim traders from Afghanistan and those who identify with the country's historic and substantial – but today geographically dispersed – Hindu and Sikh communities. Before discussing theoretical debates on cosmopolitanism in Muslim contexts and empirical material addressing Muslim–Hindu relationships in Afghan trading networks, I will first briefly outline some intersections of trade and religion in modern Afghanistan's history.

### Religious Diversity in Modern Afghanistan

Afghanistan was home to several communities that were active in the field of commerce and did not identify as being Muslim; the most prominent of the country's non-Muslim trading communities was composed of Jews, Hindus, Sikhs and Armenian Christians. Armenians living in Afghanistan had mostly left the country by the early twentieth century;<sup>6</sup> communities of Hindus, Sikhs and Jews remained active in its cities and small towns until the onset of civil war in the 1990s. The north, central and western parts of Afghanistan were home to a substantial Jewish community that was involved in the trade of pelt, leather and cloth, items of great significance to regional and national economies.<sup>7</sup> Jewish communities in Afghanistan

<sup>5</sup> Green 2016. <sup>6</sup> Lee 2002.

<sup>7</sup> For a survey of Afghanistan's Jewish history, see Aharon 2011. On the community's fortunes in the twentieth centuries see: Brauer 1942, Jawad 2019, Koplik 2015, Mehrdad 2018, O'Halpin 2016

were connected to Jews living in Iranian cities, especially in Mashhad, as well as to co-religionists in Central Asia (across the Emirate of Bukhara) and British India (especially in Peshawar, Bombay and Karachi). A combination of nativistic economic policies and political tensions surrounding the Jewish presence in Afghanistan meant that most of Afghanistan's Jewish families migrated to Israel and the United States from the early 1950s onwards.<sup>8</sup>

This chapter's focus is on two ethno-religious minority communities in Afghanistan that were active in the field of trade: Sikhs and Hindus. As in the case of Afghanistan's Jews, Sikhs and Hindus have played a critical role in trade between Central and South Asia over several centuries. Historians have documented the geographical expanse and reach of Hindu and Sikh trading networks – what Shah Mahmoud Hanifi refers to collectively as 'Hindkis' – as well as the effect that Russian imperial policy and Bolshevik Sovietisation had on their activities in Central Asia.<sup>9</sup> In the late 1930s, Afghanistan's Hindu and Sikh communities were subject to government-imposed resettlement in urban centres, reflecting hostility among the country's rulers at the time towards Hindus and Sikhs (as well as Jews).<sup>10</sup> Yet Hindus and Sikhs continued to thrive economically in most of Afghanistan's major cities – especially Kabul, Ghazni, Jalalabad, Kandahar and Kunduz. Relatively little is known about the varying identities of different Sikh and Hindu communities within Afghanistan, though long-term residence in particular cities is reflected in whether they are fluent in either Farsi or Pashto. Similarly, particular communities are also said to have emerged in specific contexts – a notable example being that of the 'Hindu' community in the eastern region of Khost that I was told by Hindus and Sikhs in Kabul actually practise a particular form of Sikhism that has adapted to the complexity of life in a Muslim-majority context.

Hindus and Sikhs were especially active in foreign exchange markets, the import of goods from Asia, the official barter trade with the Soviet Union and the export of dried fruits to South Asia.<sup>11</sup> Sikhs were also especially active in the sale of medicinal plants used in the 'Greek' Perso-Arabic (or 'yunani') medical tradition. In the 1970s, a series of Hindu and Sikh temples (*mandir*; *gurdwara*) were constructed in Afghanistan's cities with the support of the government of President Mohammad Khan Daud. (Daud had seized power from King Zahir Shah in 1973 and established a republic.) During the 1980s, legislation introduced by the PDPA resulted in Sikhs and Hindus sending representatives to the

<sup>8</sup> See Marsden 2020b. <sup>9</sup> Hanifi, 2012, Levi 2002, Markovits 2000.

<sup>10</sup> O'Halpin 2016. <sup>11</sup> Fry 1974.

Afghan parliament; individuals from these communities served as high-ranking government officials during the 1980s.

In the context of the mujahidin's rise to power in Kabul in 1992, however, both Sikhs and Hindus began to leave Afghanistan, most especially to Russia, India, Germany, North America and the United Kingdom. Many saw their properties in well-to-do areas of Kabul illegally occupied by mujahidin leaders; mujahidin 'commanders' forced others to sell their property at low prices, and their one-time Muslim employees increasingly operated the range of businesses that Sikhs and Hindus had owned. Such properties continue to function as the residences of influential mujahidin figures affiliated to powerful political movements. In August 2019, for example, I was taken for a walk in the neighbourhood by Seth, one of the few remaining Hindu men who continue to reside in this part of the city with his family. Seth was in his mid-fifties and continued to import cloth to Afghanistan from India even during the years of Taliban rule. While his brothers and cousins live outside Afghanistan, in settings ranging from Long Island in New York to Southall in London, Seth decided to stay in the country, often remarking that if he did not, there would not be anyone to act as a guardian for its temples and sites of Hindu religious heritage. As we walked through the backstreets, the bodyguards of one of the neighbourhood's most powerful residents stopped and asked where we were going. After we replied, my Hindu friend remarked, 'this whole area used to be full of Sikh and Hindu families, now we can't even step on to the street without being asked by armed men, not even the police, where we are going'.

The modern history of Afghanistan's ethno-religious minorities points, then, towards the demise of the country's urban centres as seats of cosmopolitan urban life. Fieldwork sometimes brings surprises, however. In what follows, I explore how I came to see that commercial relationships between Hindu, Sikh and Muslim Afghans played a critical role in the establishment of Afghan networks, especially in the Eurasian corridor of connectivity, from the late 1980s onwards. The significance to these commercial networks of relationships that cross the boundaries of religious affiliation persist into the present day in post-Soviet settings but also in the new contexts in which such trading communities are currently active.

### **Are Trading Networks Cosmopolitan?**

Recognition of the flexible nature of the social identities of the individuals making up trading networks leads many scholars to conceptualise them as 'cosmopolitan'.<sup>12</sup> The term cosmopolitanism has been used since the

<sup>12</sup> Werbner 1999.

Enlightenment to identify human openness to difference. A key issue raised by its use in much scholarship, however, is the concept's association with Western social thought and the vision of a particularly liberal kind of society and polity.<sup>13</sup> In the context of this critique, scholars have directly addressed the need to wrestle cosmopolitanism from the history of the Enlightenment and the normative understandings of society and politics with which it is connected. Scholarly studies focusing on the cosmopolitan openness of trading networks have brought attention to two dynamics that have been of relevance for these wider debates. First, they have challenged the inherent utopianism in the use of the term cosmopolitanism, emphasising instead the ways in which mobile traders' identities are 'closed' and 'local' in some ways while being 'global' and 'open' in others.<sup>14</sup> Second, critical social theorists have shed light on the celebratory deployment of the term cosmopolitanism and brought attention to its intersections with violence and coercion. Paul Gilroy, for example, refers to 'armoured cosmopolitanism' in order to define the forms of international intervention in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan that took place in the context of the 'war on terror'. Ho draws parallels between the sites of cultural interaction that emerged in the context of nineteenth-century imperial rule and those evident in settings such as Dubai today.<sup>15</sup> As Ho and other scholars have noted, the interstices between imperial projects were key and often creative contexts in which 'transimperial cosmopolitan' subjectivities, identities and communities emerged.<sup>16</sup> Attention has also focused on the importance of moving beyond normative understandings of cosmopolitanism and recognising instead the 'co-presence of cosmopolitanism and its opposite, ethnic violence, ... over time' in specific settings.<sup>17</sup> Rather than identifying unchanging forms of utopian cosmopolitanism, scholars deploy the notion of 'post-cosmopolitanism' to emphasise the specific practices that people living in fragile and diverse social settings use in order to live a life that is simultaneously both 'together and apart'.

Another way in which scholarship has sought to detach the notion of cosmopolitanism from political liberalism has been to identify its culturally diverse histories, trajectories and contexts. Most relevant to this chapter are the attempts of scholars to define specifically 'Islamic' expressions of cosmopolitanism. A range of studies depicts 'Islamic cosmopolitanism' as emerging over the course of centuries of Islamic history and in the context of mobility and interaction resulting from Islamic teachings and practices (especially those referred to as 'Sufi') and the importance of

<sup>13</sup> Marsden and Reeves 2018. <sup>14</sup> Ho 2002. <sup>15</sup> Gilroy 2004. <sup>16</sup> Aslanian 2014: 66.

<sup>17</sup> Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2012.

long-distance trade to Asia's Muslim societies.<sup>18</sup> A problem with this approach is that it emphasises the ways in which Islamic history and teachings shape believers' attitudes to difference and diversity and downplays the role that multiple religious and cultural influences have had on the cultural composition of Muslim societies. World historian Marshall Hodgson sought to avoid the tendency to reify Islam's role in the fashioning of cosmopolitan cultural sensibilities by distinguishing between 'Islamic' and 'Islamicate': Hodgson uses the term 'Islamic' to refer to the religious tradition and 'Islamicate' to identify the culture that had emerged in the context of a historically durable and geographically expansive 'Afro-Eurasian' Muslim dominion in which Muslims were dominant but not lone agents.<sup>19</sup> More recently, Shahab Ahmed has argued that this distinction reproduces orientalist understandings of 'pure' Islam being a religious tradition centrally defined by a bounded legal tradition, relegating wider forms of Muslim faith, identity and theological argument to the realm of 'culture'.<sup>20</sup> Ahmed asserts, instead, that Islam has historically been culturally capacious: it is a religious tradition that is able to embrace multiple and contradictory influences. An emergent area of debate within the study of Islamic cosmopolitanism concerns the role played by language. In her study of Persianate selfhood, Kia argues that Islam's geographic extension across multiple Asian societies depended on 'the transregional reach of the Persian language'. According to Kia, if 'Islam permeated the beings of Persian-speakers in multiple settings', then it did not do so in any 'totalising fashion': 'Persians', rather, 'could profess other faiths, or even be hostile to Islam, without necessarily being outside of it.'<sup>21</sup> By contrast, in a recent study of the transregional reach of Bukhara as a centre for education, James Pickett argues that it is impossible to separate out either Islam or Arabic from the Persian cosmopolis.<sup>22</sup> At stake in these debates, then, is how scholarship on Muslim societies might recognise the importance of cosmopolitan modes of dealing with diversity to Islamic history without reasserting a totalising understanding of 'Islamic culture' or leaving insufficient space for recognition of the influence of non-Muslim traditions, languages and beliefs on the dynamics of Muslim-majority societies.

What is the relationship between such historic forms of Islamic cosmopolitanism and the state of Muslim-majority settings today, many of which, as we have seen, have been bleached of their religious diversity? Green, a historian of the Muslim world, argues that a consideration of the dynamics of Muslim Asia today puts into stark relief the celebratory tone

<sup>18</sup> Lawrence 2012. <sup>19</sup> Hodgson 1997. <sup>20</sup> Ahmed 2015. <sup>21</sup> Kia 2020: 14.

<sup>22</sup> Pickett 2020.



of scholarly work on Islamic pluralism. Green argues that Asia's Muslim-majority cities in the first decades of the twenty-first century are characterised by their 'de-cosmopolitanisation'. Muslim societies across Asia have witnessed and participated in the emigration of ethno-religious minorities and the emergence of increasingly rigidly segregated urban landscapes. As such forms of segregation have become further enhanced across Muslim Asia, ethno-religious minorities that lived in once culturally composite urban centres have increasingly moved out of the region, especially to Western Europe and North America.<sup>23</sup>

The traders explored in this chapter showcase not only the ability to manage heterogeneous social relationships that comprise Hindus and Muslims but also to reflect on the importance of histories of interreligious engagement to Afghanistan – histories that the country's political dynamics over the past four decades have rendered increasingly 'hidden'.<sup>24</sup> Afghan Muslim merchants active in the forms of trade described in this book cultivate, nurture and sustain modes of trading and living together with members of Afghanistan's small yet commercially influential Hindu and Sikh minorities. At the same time, relationships between Muslims and Sikh and Hindu traders are more prevalent to the commercial activities of Afghans outside of Afghanistan than those working within it. This finding corroborates Green's argument about the 'de-cosmopolitanisation' of Asia's Muslim cities. Yet the ethnographic material discussed in what follows demonstrates that forms of co-existence once important in Asia's Muslim cities have not simply been lost as a result of the migration of ethno-religious minorities. Challenging the notion that migration one-dimensionally results in the cultivation of distinct and bounded forms of religious identity, my ethnographic material instead brings attention to the relocation of complex sensibilities cultivated in diverse urban environments from cities in Muslim Asia to new contexts in the wider world.

### **Afghanistan's Sikh and Hindu Communities: From Transnational Merchants to Religious Minority**

A gurdwara located in the western London neighbourhood of Southall – home to migrants from the Indian subcontinent for much of the twentieth century – is the ritual focus of the lives of the 50,000 or so UK-based Afghan Sikhs. I made an initial visit to the gurdwara in the spring of 2018; during the day, I chatted to several elderly Sikh men from Afghanistan who had been living in the United Kingdom for between five and twenty-five

<sup>23</sup> Green 2016. <sup>24</sup> Schneider and Rapp 1995.



years. They told me how they had mostly left Afghanistan in the 1980s and spent the years between that point and their move to the United Kingdom in commercial nodes across Eurasia, including Tashkent, Moscow and Odessa. Many had also spent time in India, where there are sizeable communities of Afghan Sikhs and Hindus. During later visits, I also spoke with Afghan Sikhs living in London who had served in high-level positions in the Afghan government during the 1980s. Officials at the gurdwara in London put me in touch with senior figures in Kabul's central Sikh gurdwara in the city's historic Shor Bazaar neighbourhood, close to the Mandawi wholesale market that I discuss in Chapter 6. A short walk from the gurdwara in Southall is the Asamai Hindu temple, the institutional home of Afghanistan's Hindus in the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom's Afghan Hindu community is smaller than that of their co-national Sikhs – numbering around 500. Members of the congregation told me of their commercial activities in Afghanistan until the 1980s, many of which focused on money exchange and the trade in Afghanistan of Indian textiles and the export to India of dried fruits and medicines, including liquorice (*shirin buya*). Sharma, for example, is in his mid-forties and works in an accountancy firm. Until leaving Afghanistan in the mid-1990s, however, he had worked in his family business, which was concerned with the export of Afghan dried fruits to India. Today, only one of Sharma's close relatives continues to live in Afghanistan – Seth, the Hindu merchant I introduced earlier in the chapter who showed me around his neighbourhood.

I had for long been interested in seeing first-hand the collective life of Kabul's Sikh and Hindu communities – communities that were historically significant actors in Afghanistan's economy – and was delighted to have the opportunity of doing so during a visit to Kabul in the autumn of 2018. I interacted with around thirty Sikh individuals from a variety of ages and backgrounds, including influential community leaders, shopkeepers who run small businesses in the neighbourhood and in Kabul's wholesale market (Mandawi), religious education instructors, as well as women currently living in one or other of Kabul's gurdwaras. On a return visit to Kabul in August 2019, I visited sites important to the city's Hindu minority, including the Asamai temple located in Shor Bazaar.

In terms of size, the number of Sikh and Hindu families is minuscule in comparison with the period before the onset of major conflict in the country in the late 1970s. As a result of their dwindling population, most if not all of the Sikhs consider their future in the country to be tenuous and insecure. While Sikhs were once a pillar of the Afghan merchant community, successful Sikh merchants have left the country and conduct business abroad: between 400 and 500 Sikh and Hindu

families remain across Afghanistan today. The number of families located in Kabul has increased since 2016, as cities such as Jalalabad in the east have become increasingly violent because of the Taliban insurgency and the activities of ISIS in Khorasan.<sup>25</sup> As a result, a mere thirty-five families remained in Jalalabad in 2018 – this important centre of Sikh and Hindu life and commerce located miles from the important commercial border post with Pakistan at the head of the Khyber Pass in Torkham is now increasingly peripheral to the communities' activities. Similarly, central Afghanistan's historic commercial city of Ghazni – briefly overrun by Taliban insurgents in August 2018 – is home to as few as fifteen Sikh families, most having fled to India in recent years. Other urban centres in the country have even smaller Sikh and Hindu communities. Afghanistan's southern commercial hub of Kandahar (for many years the base of a sizeable Hindu trading community) now hosts around six Sikh families, while the northern city of Kunduz – an important geographical bridge into the Central Asian states and a formerly important industrial centre in Afghanistan – hosts a mere two. A handful of families continue to live in Parwan province (a politically important and agriculturally rich region famed for its dried raisins in the north of Kabul). I was told that access to the country's rural areas – previously a common feature of Sikh and Hindu commerce, especially for those families involved in purveying traditional 'Greek' or *yunani* medicine – had all but disappeared.

The number of Hindus continuing to live in the country is even fewer: only a handful of families remain in Kabul; even fewer lived in the towns and cities that had previously been centres of the community, especially Khost in eastern Afghanistan and Kandahar in the south. Most Hindus based in Kabul, members of the community told me, are single men who visit the country from India in order to maintain business operations, especially in the import of Indian-manufactured medicine.

Several serious security incidents directly affected the lives of Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan in the months leading up to my visit in September 2018. In Jalalabad in May 2018, a Sikh candidate for the parliamentary elections was killed along with fourteen other members of the community and their Muslim driver. The killings took place during a visit they were making to Jalalabad to hold a meeting with Ashraf Ghani, Afghanistan's president. Criminal gangs active in Afghanistan also target Sikhs. Reported cases include those of a Sikh shopkeeper being shot in the western city of Herat and the abduction and murder of a Sikh shopkeeper in Kabul. Moreover, a Sikh man in his early thirties from the city of

<sup>25</sup> Giustozzi 2018.

Jalalabad showed me a letter – written in Pashto – that threatened the Sikh community with reprisals if they did not hand over 3 million US dollars to the Islamic State organisation. Against this backdrop, the community had taken steps to maintain their collective security: armed guards (Muslim Afghans employed by the gurdwara) were stationed outside each of the religious buildings I visited.

It was not only public threats to community safety and security that the Sikhs and Hindus with whom I spoke highlighted as their most pressing concerns. A further key concern was the well-being of families from the communities. As internally displaced persons, migrants from different parts of Afghanistan and families facing economic difficulties are permitted to temporarily use the gurdwara and temple complexes I visited. In the central gurdwara in Shor Bazaar, for example, up to thirty-seven families lived in small rooms inside the complex – some had recently moved there from other Afghan cities, especially Jalalabad. Another gurdwara that I visited in the nearby 'Hindu Guzar' neighbourhood – the name indicating the importance of long-term Sikh and Hindu residency in this part of Kabul's old city – acted as the home of eight further Sikh families. Similarly, the Asamai temple – a large structure built in the 1970s when the community numbered in the thousands – is now the residence of around seven Hindu families that had left their homes in the town of Khost in eastern Afghanistan.

The education of children from the community was a pressing concern for the people I spoke to. By contrast to the situation of earlier generations of Afghanistan's Sikhs and Hindus, which had seen individuals educated to university degree level and rising to high-level positions in government, Sikh children and youth today find it difficult to avail themselves of even basic education. It was reported to me that children were taunted by passers-by on the streets who recognised them as non-Muslims by dint of their wearing turbans. Some children reportedly even had their hair pulled during such encounters as well as being called *kafir* (infidels). As a result of such experiences, my Sikh hosts told me that they increasingly sought to educate their young within the confines of their own community spaces, and I was shown a room in the gurdwara in which a class of around fifteen children was being instructed by a teacher from the community.<sup>26</sup>

Members of the community also face difficulties carrying out key religious rituals, especially cremation. The piece of land in the city in which they had historically carried out cremations (the *hindu sazan*) was donated by a wealthy Sikh merchant in the era of President Daud

<sup>26</sup> The Afghan government opened a single school in 2017 for the Afghan Hindu and Sikh communities in Kabul.

(d. 1978). Houses inhabited by Muslims now encircle the cemetery. At least some of the Muslims living close to the cemetery were said to be openly hostile to cremations being conducted close to their homes. As a result, the community needs to inform Afghan security forces before conducting a cremation, and the forces are responsible for maintaining security during the ritual. Recognising the difficulties facing Sikhs and Hindus, the Afghan government had provided them with land, but it was in a far-off part of the wider province of Kabul in which the city is located. Community members complained, however, that this area was even less secure than the older site in the city centre: Muslim residents living nearby purportedly threatened a group of Sikhs visiting the site, telling them not to return and that, if they did, they would do so at risk to their lives. Various activist groups are seeking to strengthen the case for Afghanistan's remaining communities of Hindus and Sikhs to be recognised in Western Europe and North America as belonging to a group with specific claims to refugee status.<sup>27</sup> More generally, the community's current size in Afghanistan points towards the significant 'de-cosmopolitanisation' of Kabul and other historic urban centres in the country.

### **Hindu and Muslim Afghan Commercial Cooperation in the Eurasian Corridor**

In contrast to the declining significance of Sikhs and Hindus in trade within Afghanistan, men from these communities continue to play a visible role in many of the commercial nodes in which I have conducted fieldwork, most especially those located in the Eurasian corridor. Most of the traders from Afghanistan who deal in Chinese commodities in various settings across post-Soviet contexts identify as Muslim. However, it is impossible to understand the emergence of the activities of Muslim Afghan traders in Eurasia over the past forty years without considering the role played by traders who identify as being Afghans of Sikh and Hindu background. Dubai is also home to a small but commercially active community of Afghan Sikhs that engages in multiple relationships with traders of a Muslim background from Afghanistan also doing business in the city.

While conducting fieldwork in Yiwu, I noticed that there were regular gatherings of Hindus and Sikhs from Afghanistan in 'the Maida' (the part of the city that is known by locals and foreigners alike for its 'Middle

<sup>27</sup> United Sikhs is one UN-affiliated organisation that has been active in promoting the human rights issues affecting Afghanistan's Sikh community.

Eastern' ambience). The men who gathered at these events – often up to twenty-five in number – spoke mostly in Pashtu and Dari, occasionally breaking out into Punjabi or English. During my conversations with them, I discovered that most were visiting the city on purchasing trips from Moscow, Dubai and London. The families of many of the men with whom I spoke were based in New Delhi, while they worked and traded between Russia, Ukraine and China. During visits to Moscow in 2012 and 2014, I had spoken to many Sikh and Hindu traders working in the hotel-cum-trading complex discussed in Chapter 3, the Sevastopol Hotel. In Odessa, I also met Sikhs and Hindus from Afghanistan who traded in Chinese-made commodities in the Seventh-Kilometre Market. Muslim traders in Odessa told me that support from Sikhs and Hindus in the form of loans of credit and commodities had allowed them to establish the businesses they run and own today. Although the Sikh and Hindu communities in the nodes of the Eurasian commodity are numerically small in comparison to Muslims from Afghanistan, they nevertheless exert considerable influence along this commercial corridor, something that is recognised by Afghan traders of a wide variety of backgrounds. In both Odessa and Moscow, traders of Sikh and Hindu backgrounds were active participants in commercial and social relations with Afghan Muslim traders. On one occasion, for example, I observed a Hindu trader entering a business in Moscow run by an Afghan Muslim and loudly telling the Muslim shopkeeper that unless he paid his loan soon he would 'face consequences'.

The number of Sikhs and Hindus working in the Eurasian corridor has declined in recent years. Sikh and Hindu traders I met in Yiwu often told me that the weakening of the Russian rouble (precipitated by international sanctions following the annexation of Crimea in 2014) had made their activities as suppliers of credit – in the form of cash and commodities – to Afghan Muslim traders in Russia increasingly difficult. At the same time, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine had diminished the size of the market in Odessa: by 2018, only a handful of Sikh and Hindu traders of Afghan origin maintained businesses in the Seventh-Kilometre Market. As a result of the difficult economic environments affecting trade in the Eurasian corridor, Sikh and Hindu traders of Afghan nationality working in Russia and Ukraine were increasingly seeking to move to London.

London is home to around 25,000 Afghan Sikhs as well as a major gurdwara and Hindu temple established by and for the community. Sikh and Hindu Afghans also recognise that London in particular and the United Kingdom in general are excellent places in which to do business. There are several wholesale markets in which traders sell goods they

import from China, including notable ones in London and Manchester. The move to London is also precipitated by concerns over the future viability of the community in the towns and cities of Eurasia. As in the case of Afghanistan's Central Asian émigrés discussed in Chapter 1, the Afghan Hindus and Sikhs with whom I spoke emphasised the importance to their community of establishing neighbourhoods that play a central role in both their cultural and sociological reproduction and their commercial activities. 'We Sikhs like to live together around those from the same background', they often remark. Indeed, Sikh and Hindu traders also told me that the size of their communities in Russia and Ukraine had become too small to support their sociological reproduction. 'We only give our daughters within our communities', remarked a trader in Odessa in his late thirties, 'so if our families are scattered and spread and we cannot move easily from one place to another we find it difficult.' The emphasis that Sikhs and Hindus place on living collectively among people from their specific communities is similar to the desire of Central Asian émigrés to congregate in specific neighbourhoods but distinct from the tendency among Afghan Muslims working in Eurasia to scatter across multiple lives. In several respects, then, Afghan Sikh and Hindu trading communities closely resemble the mononodal model of the trading network.

### *Dheepak in Odessa*

A consideration of one trader – whom I shall call Dheepak – and his familial life over the past forty years exemplifies especially vividly the continued significance of interreligious relationships to the broader activities of Afghan trading networks. Dheepak is a trader based in Odessa who is in his early forties and belongs to a family that identifies as being Afghan Hindu. Dheepak's father told me that the family's ancestral home was in a small village in Afghanistan's eastern Kunar province, situated close to the border with British India and, after 1947, the newly created state of Pakistan. The family had moved to Jalalabad in the context of Hindus living in what was at the time referred to as Afghanistan's 'Eastern Province' being required to settle in urban centres rather than being based in outlying rural regions.<sup>28</sup> After trading and growing his business in Jalalabad, which eventually meant that he was able to operate an agency for a major brand of international cigarettes – an important marker of status and commercial success at the time – Dheepak's father moved to Kabul in the 1980s. In Kabul, the family business distributed Japanese

<sup>28</sup> O'Halpin 2016.

products imported from Japan by an Afghan Sikh agency. Dheepak's father fondly remembered the diversity of life in Kabul's markets at the time. He told me how he would buy cigarettes wholesale from a fastidious Jewish merchant who traded in this important product in such a manner as to ensure that the market was never flooded with his products, which meant that the prices were stable and his profit margins high. By contrast, sighed the man now aged in his mid-seventies, Afghan traders today only know how to undercut one another by importing large volumes of goods and selling these at minuscule profit margins.

The family had been active in various types of commercial activity in Afghanistan, including the official barter trade in dried fruits and wood that took place between Kabul and the Soviet Union – it was in connection to this trade that one of Dheepak's father's brothers had visited Ukraine in the late 1970s. By the beginning of the 1980s, in addition to working in Soviet–Afghanistan commerce, the family had become the sole sale agent in Afghanistan for Toshiba electronic products. A Kabul-based Sikh imported the products to Afghanistan from Japan; the trading agency belonging to Dheepak's father was responsible for the wholesale of the goods in Afghanistan. Doing so allowed him to make a name for himself and his family as trustworthy operators in Kabul's central wholesale market, the Mandawi. During the 1980s, other family members started to travel to and from Kabul and cities in East Asia, most especially Hong Kong, which traders from Afghanistan who are based in the city told me was home to around forty Afghan trading companies in the 1980s. During the 1980s, Dheepak's family members purchased digital watches that were especially popular among Soviet soldiers stationed in Afghanistan. A barter-style trade involving Hong Kong-made modern watches and Soviet-made timepieces that army personnel bought with them from the USSR did brisk business in Afghanistan in the 1980s. As with many other Hindu families, Dheepak lived in a street in Kabul's Kart-e Parwan neighbourhood in the environs of the Hindu temples (*mandir*) and Sikh gurdwaras discussed earlier in this chapter. The family's various trading activities were sufficiently successful to allow them to own their own property in this part of the city by the mid-1980s.

According to officials in the pro-Soviet government of Dr Najibullah Ahmadzai (d. 1996), the administration made efforts to maintain the presence of Hindus and Sikhs in Afghanistan, not least because of their skills as traders and money exchange agents. However, after the collapse of Najibullah's government in 1992 and the rise to power of mujahidin groups, many of the country's Sikh and Hindu traders left the country. Most moved to India. They either took flights on commercial airlines or used clandestine routes that passed through Pakistan. After the capture of



Kabul, influential figures in the mujahidin occupied or forcibly bought many houses owned by Sikhs and Hindus in Kabul (especially in the Kart-e Parwan neighbourhood that I visited with Seth in 2019). After returning to Kabul in the context of the defeat of the Taliban by the US military and a range of mujahidin groups aligned to it, these men rented out properties they had seized in earlier years at inflated US dollar prices. The years of the Taliban's control of Kabul saw restrictions placed on Afghanistan's Hindu and Sikh communities: Hindus were instructed, for example, to wear insignia that identified them as non-Muslim *dhimmis* (minorities).

The family's commercial activities continued to be concentrated in Afghanistan until the collapse of Najibullah's government in 1992. Dheepak, however, left Afghanistan in the early eighties, moving to New Delhi, the city in which he had gone on to be raised and schooled. Dheepak's family were permanently based in India for over a decade after leaving Kabul. Yet, as was the case for many other Hindus and Sikhs who had moved to the country from Afghanistan, they found conditions of life and business in India difficult. On the one hand, access to official permits and citizenship was difficult if not impossible for these historic Indian diasporic communities that had long ties to Afghanistan and India's North West Frontier. On the other hand, business conditions in India were not favourable to the types of trading activities in which such families specialised: there were high levels of competition in India's markets, and major Indian traders were able to run businesses on minucule profit margins. In the face of these difficulties, Dheepak and his father moved from Delhi to Tashkent, having heard from Afghan traders based in Central Asia of the types of business opportunities that Uzbekistan offered in the years following the Soviet collapse. In Tashkent, Dheepak and his father (the family's women stayed on in Delhi along with Dheepak's elder brother, who was training to be a doctor) functioned as 'shuttle traders': they brought 'all types of goods' from Dubai to Tashkent on a regular flight. While Dheepak remembers working conditions as having been 'difficult', largely as a result of the local police force's hostility to the presence of foreign traders in the city, the business was successful: father and son were able to make a decent living for themselves while also sending funds back to India for their families.

After working for three years in Tashkent, Dheepak moved to Moscow. Until the end of the nineteenth century, Sikh and Hindu communities from Afghanistan had stationed themselves in Moscow in order to arrange the money transfers that made trade between Kabul and Russia possible.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> See Hanifi 2012. For the early modern period, see Dale 1995.

While the scope for such activities was dramatically narrowed during the high years of the Soviet Union, traders such as Dheepak's uncle did keep these links alive from the 1960s onwards, mostly through their involvement in official barter trade. During his time in Moscow, Dheepak was involved in the trade of Chinese goods to Russia. In the early 1990s, Sikh and Hindu traders from Afghanistan were among some of the first traders to import goods to Russia from Asia (initially from Hong Kong, where they had established contacts, and in later years Taiwan, Thailand and eventually China). The networks involved in this type of trade, however, were not exclusively 'Hindu': men such as Dheepak's father distributed commodities as loans (*qarz*) to Muslim traders from Afghanistan who had moved to Russia and Ukraine after the collapse of the pro-Soviet regime in which they had served and the subsequent outbreak of a civil war involving the country's mujahidin factions.

However, Dheepak's stay in Moscow was shorter than expected: he was attacked while walking between the market and the apartment he was renting, losing a considerable sum of money as a result. After this, Dheepak moved to Kiev in Ukraine, where his uncle (who as we have already seen had been travelling to Ukraine since the 1970s in connection with the official Afghanistan–USSR barter trade) ran a well-established business in Kiev's Troeshchina wholesale market.<sup>30</sup> Dheepak told me that he initially worked for his uncle for a paltry salary of \$50 a month simply because he wanted to learn the business and find out how to be a successful trader in Ukraine. He went on to tell me, however, that he soon left his uncle's business because he realised that it would be impossible to learn how to trade from a relative: those close to you can never deliver the discipline that a successful master–apprentice relationship requires. For some years, then, Dheepak sold goods on a percentage basis in Kiev, taking the goods from importers based in the bazaar and selling them in the city's markets.

After some months, Dheepak was able to bring his father to Ukraine from Tashkent, helping him to adjust to the city's business practices over the coming years. In the late 1990s, Dheepak and his father entered into a business partnership with a leading Odessa-based Afghan Muslim trader, Riaz, whose funeral I documented in Chapter 2. At the time, aged in his early forties, Riaz had studied in one of Odessa's military academies and only returned to the city in 1992. The Muslim and Hindu traders pooled their capital and travelled to Dubai and Taiwan in order to

<sup>30</sup> The Troeshchina market in Kiev is a centre for the wholesale of goods imported from China. As in the case of Odessa's Seventh-Kilometre Market, Troeshchina is the base of businesses run by Vietnamese and Afghans. A community of Bangladeshis who initially came to Ukraine in the 1990s also operates out of this market.

bring goods for sale in Odessa. Additionally, these traders also formed a 'group' (*gruh*) that brought commodities to Ukraine for other traders of an Afghan background working in Ukraine, charging their clients a percentage of the total costs of the products they bought for them. During this phase of their trading activities, the partnership had to contend with competition from traders newly arriving from Afghanistan: the 'newcomers' sought to take control of a large share of the now very profitable market using finances brought from Kabul. Dheepak recounted to me how during these years some Afghan Muslim traders had sought to force him and his father out of the market. He claimed that the support of the Muslim traders with whom they had developed business partnerships had allowed them to withstand the pressure and continue to trade in the city. By the early 2000s, Dheepak and his father had switched their activities from shuttle trading between Dubai and Taiwan to purchasing commodities in bulk in Yiwu. Rather than selling 'all types of things', father and son had now also moved into a specialist trading operation – work gloves – which they purchased in Yiwu's Futian market as well as directly from factories elsewhere in China. The business has been a high-volume activity for several years, although, he told me in 2016, the financial crisis of 2008 and then the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in 2014 had resulted in the market 'slowing' and ultimately reducing the size of their overall trading activities. Whereas Dheepak had travelled to Yiwu in China around once a month in the mid-2000s, by the time I spoke to him in the summer of August 2016 he only made the trip on three or so occasions each year.

By the time I met him in 2016, Dheepak had started to think seriously about his future in Ukraine given the state of the market in Odessa and as his children were now finishing their schooling and would enrol to study at university. On the one hand, Dheepak told me that his daughter would be expected to marry within the Afghan Hindu community and there were very few marriageable men in Odessa. On the other hand, the bazaar had been 'asleep' (*khow*) for many months; he was now eating into his family savings in order to keep the businesses going and did not know how long this situation would last. Yet Dheepak was also reluctant to move out of Odessa: 'How many times can I go somewhere, find a new house for my family, build up a new business, learn the new culture – it is very tiring and I am tired of moving', he told me one day as we sat in his shop in the market. Despite his reservations about moving his family and business yet again, Dheepak was considering making a visit to London. He was in possession of a UK business visa that he had yet to use and told me that he needed to travel to the United Kingdom should he wish to make a successful visa application for the country in the future – he would

also use the visit to explore business opportunities in the country. Dheepak also told me that he had heard of a new UK government scheme that issued business visas to people who invested in the country. He would also seek legal advice about the scheme during his visit to the United Kingdom and explore the possibility of relocating his family to London – a course of action undertaken by several other Afghan Hindus and Sikhs based in Odessa.

Dheepak's life history demonstrates the importance of interreligious relationships between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims from Afghanistan in the development of present-day commercial networks operating within the conductive tissues of the Eurasian corridor. Cooperation between Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus has proved vital to commercial portfolios established in the context of exile and international migration. Traders such as Dheepak and his father and uncles supported the activities of Muslim Afghans by providing commodities and credit; they also established partnerships that allowed all traders to access commercial suppliers in Asia with the relatively low levels of capital they possessed. Finally, while there are clearly tensions between Afghan Muslims and 'Hindkis' – the term used to refer to Sikh and Hindus collectively – traders mitigated these by offering political, economic and social forms of support to one another, recognising, in a competitive economic environment, the mutually beneficial nature of cooperation.

### **Islamic Cosmopolitanism?**

Hindu and Muslim traders from Afghanistan work alongside one another in Odessa's Seventh-Kilometre Market. Tensions do exist between different religious communities active in the market, yet it is especially notable, given Afghanistan's political dynamics, that cooperation between Muslim, Sikh and Hindu traders plays a critical role in the approach they take to earning a livelihood. It is tempting to assume that the forms of trust and reputation that such relationships require arise as a result of the immediate need for cooperation in the context of exile and migration. Yet evident in the ethnography that follows is the cultivation, maintenance and reproduction in Odessa of interpersonal commercial relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims that have been invested with significance over several generations. In this sense, relationships that cut across boundaries of religious identity and affiliation point towards the vitality of historic sensibilities and modes of doing commerce in Muslim Asia.

Having been born in Afghanistan before being raised in India and intermittently living in Uzbekistan, Russia and China, Dheepak now sat

at the desk in his spacious shop in Odessa's Seventh-Kilometre Market. He counted his earnings for the day and gave instructions to a Muslim labourer from Guinea. Another employee – a Muslim in his thirties from Jhelum in Pakistan's Punjab province – carried boxes of gloves around the interior of the shop. Meanwhile, news from India was beaming out of a television set positioned directly opposite the desk at which we were sitting.

Dheepak was not alone in his shop that day. His father, who ran a small business across the market's 'Kharkivsky Square' (named such because the buses that freight goods from Odessa to Kharkiv park in the square), had not joined his son for their usual cup of mid-morning chilled green tea delivered to the shop by a mobile café run by a Ukrainian. Father and son were at loggerheads over Dheepak's wish to make a substantial payment from their businesses to his elder son – a trained doctor who is based in New Delhi with his family. Dheepak had argued that he had worked hard and over several years to develop the family's business activities: as his brother already owned a home and enjoyed a stable salary, there was little need for him to take a slice of the profits of a company to which he had contributed little. The conflict had grown to such a degree that father and son no longer lived under the same roof: Dheepak's father and mother had moved into a small flat, whereas Dheepak lived with his family in a large and highly valuable detached house with a garden.

A further man present in the room was Nasir, a Farsi-speaking trader of Sunni Muslim background in his early forties. Nasir's family is originally from a mountainous region in north-eastern Afghanistan but has been based in Kabul since the early 1970s. Nasir currently lives in Yiwu where he runs a trading company that assists Afghan traders visiting the city from Ukraine in the sourcing, purchase, storage, customs clearance and transportation of commodities. Nasir moved to China from Afghanistan in 1998 having been one of a handful of Afghan students that were awarded Chinese-funded scholarships by Afghan officials connected to the mujahidin government led by Burhanuddin Rabbani (d. 2011). He studied international relations at a respected Chinese-language university in central China and went on to successfully study for an MA at the same institution. It was only in 2006, after failing to secure a position in Afghanistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that Nasir turned his Chinese-language skills (fluency in written and spoken Chinese) to use in the field of trade, opening a trading office in Yiwu. He told me that during his student years he had known that Afghan traders lived and worked in Yiwu, but having focused on his studies he had never had the time to visit the city let alone conduct business there.

Initially, Nasir's main activity centred on the trade in small commodities between Yiwu and Afghanistan: he facilitated (for a commission rate) the shipments of traders based in two of Kabul's main wholesale markets (the Mandawi and the so-called 'Bush market' in which items procured from the US military were available for sale in the early 2000s). This type of business mainly revolved around the types of commodities that are popular among the many private security companies established in Afghanistan in the years of NATO occupation – heavy-duty boots, reporter-style waistcoats and equipment such as torches, for example. Traders from Nasir's home region in eastern Afghanistan were especially active in this trading niche. This was partly because of their connections to former mujahidin commanders who had now moved into the private security sector or successfully sought employment in the Ministry of Defence. Another reason that people from Nasir's region themselves give for being successful in these activities is that their villages are located close to the Afghanistan–Pakistan border; as a result, historic trade routes run through their villages, and people from them are thereby regarded nationally as being expert traders.

Due to the gradual withdrawal of NATO forces after 2014, and restrictions on the activities of private security companies in the country, however, there was a substantial decline in this type of trade between China and Afghanistan. In the context of these changes, Nasir created new geographical niches in his portfolio of trading activities. Nasir assisted, for example, a Pashto-speaking trader based in London with the shipping of bags and suitcases between Yiwu and London. Yet it was in Ukraine where Nasir had developed his business activities most successfully, especially in the eastern city of Kharkiv, the base of several traders from his region of eastern Afghanistan. The traders in Kharkiv used Nasir and his fluent Chinese to buy and arrange for the transportation of goods from Yiwu to Ukraine, benefiting from his services on a commission when they visited Yiwu on annual trips to source and procure commodities to sell in Kharkiv. Additionally, due to his close relations with Chinese suppliers in the Futian market, as well as with the factories that supply them, Nasir is able to arrange for the Kharkiv-based traders' shipments to be delivered on a credit basis. This mostly means that they are expected to make a partial payment on the purchase of the commodities and to meet the remaining costs three months after the despatch of their products from China.

Nasir had travelled to Ukraine in the summer of 2016 along with his wife and their three-year-old son in order to meet with his business clients in the cities of Kharkiv and Odessa. Such visits form an important element of the business activities of such China-based traders and are

an important way in which trading networks are sustained and expanded. These trips are used to explore new markets, make relevant business contacts and follow up on the collection of overdue debts from the previous season's trading. Traders switch the blocks of flats in which they live in Yiwu for the homes of their friends and business associates in Odessa, Moscow and Kharkiv. Nasir also holds a Ukrainian-residence permit, which makes travel between China and the country relatively straightforward, although not without difficulties: he has to remind himself of his children's dates of birth in preparation for the inevitable questioning that Afghans holding such documents face on arrival in Ukraine. He had told me that he was interested in seeking out clients and potentially opening a business in Odessa, and it was partly with this aim in mind that he had visited the city. During his visit to the city, he also visited a Pashto-speaking man from south-eastern Afghanistan who sold cosmetics in Odessa, and with whom one of his associates in Yiwu was involved in a conflict over the costs of shipping goods between Yiwu and Odessa.

In addition to catching up with business partners, smoothing over conflicts that had arisen in the preceding months and recovering unpaid debts, Nasir had also visited Ukraine to arrange his young son's circumcision, an operation that an Azeri doctor based in the city of Kharkiv conducted. According to Nasir, the operation, which he believed was crucial for all Muslim boys, was rarely carried out in China, and, when it was, Chinese surgeons performed the procedure in such a manner that the child's penis did not heal for several months. The young boy and his mother were sitting with us in the shop that day.

Nasir and Dheepak conversed with one another in Farsi, though Dheepak told me he had not learned the language in Afghanistan or from his father, who spoke both Farsi and Pashto fluently, but over the course of the many years that he had worked alongside traders from Afghanistan in Tashkent, Kiev and Odessa. I had come to know about Nasir and Dheepak's relationship in Yiwu when Nasir had remarked that other traders from the same region of eastern Afghanistan as him had been shocked to discover that he preferred to be hosted by a Hindu Afghan than 'one of his own'. Indeed, confirming the important role that the provision of hospitality plays in the enactment of and claims to be cosmopolitan,<sup>31</sup> Nasir chose on his trip to Odessa to accept the hospitality (*mehman nawazi/mehman dusti*) of his Hindu friend and partner rather than the invitations made by men from his ancestral region of Afghanistan. After the shop closed for the day at 12 noon, a group of

<sup>31</sup> Werbner 2016.



traders from Nasir's home region invited Dheepak, Nasir and me for dinner in an Afghan restaurant in Odessa. Having eaten, we returned home to Dheepak's house; Nasir's wife and young child had been there all along with Dheepak's wife and children, chatting and sipping tea – the pot in which it was served, they remarked, had belonged to them in Kabul, and they had carried it with them on leaving the city in the early 1990s.

Nasir and Dheepak's relationship arose not merely from the odd encounter in Yiwu or Odessa but over a generation of interactions between Muslim and Hindu traders in Kabul. One of Nasir's closest friends and associates in Yiwu is Atiq. Aged in his mid-thirties, Atiq is from an established Kabul-based trading family whose ancestral home is in a small town in the east of the country close to Nasir's home region. Atiq has already performed the hajj pilgrimage on several occasions and lives with his Afghan family in Yiwu – both hajj and family life are important public markers of a trader's personal success and reputation for being honest and trustworthy. Atiq's trading skills, however, have a long pedigree: his father is widely regarded by traders in Yiwu and beyond as having been one of Kabul's first merchants to bring commodities from China to Afghanistan, notably the *bicycle-e chinoiyi* (Chinese bicycle) that was popular with city children in the country during the 1980s, which he imported to Kabul from Hong Kong. Dheepak told me how his and Atiq's fathers had worked together closely in Kabul's bazaars in the 1970s and 1980s – Atiq's father would give the goods he brought to Afghanistan from Hong Kong on credit to Dheepak's family business; Dheepak's father would sell these in the bazaar to merchants from across the country. Indeed, I visited Atiq in his trading office in the Mandawi market of Kabul in August 2019, and he pointed to the precise shop from which Dheepak's father had run a business before leaving Afghanistan in the early 1990s. Nasir told me that he had become friends and entered into a business relationship with Dheepak after being introduced to him by Atiq.

Several dynamics were thus visible in a shop in Odessa in which Chinese-made work gloves were sold at wholesale prices. Most obviously, the shop was a meeting place for traders and workers from countries across 'the global South', ranging from Guinea in Africa to Pakistan, China, Afghanistan and India in Asia. A relation that was central to this site of interaction in long-distance trading networks in Ukraine today, however, was between a Hindu and a Muslim, both of Afghan nationality. While Dheepak's family had left Afghanistan after the mujahidin's rise to power, Nasir had benefited from the same political grouping: they had assisted in him securing a scholarship to study in China. Dheepak and Nasir's relationship has flourished in the context of commercial nodes

that have arisen as a result of 'economic globalisation' and geopolitical projects of Eurasian connectivity. Yet their relationships also stretch back over several generations of Muslim–Hindu commercial interaction in Afghanistan, interactions that are intricately connected to the intergenerational circulation of credit, commodities and reputations.

### **'My Customers Are Christians, Hindus and Jews – Yes, Jews!'**

Relationships between Afghan Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus are also important in London. Far from having been absorbed into one-dimensionally 'religious' immigrant communities in the city, Afghan Sikhs and Hindus continue to construct relationships in the field of commerce with Muslim immigrants from Afghanistan to the United Kingdom.

In January 2018, for example, I travelled from Shanghai airport to Yiwu by bus. During the course of the journey, I spoke to two traders from Afghanistan who had travelled to China from London on the same flight. One of the men was a Muslim from central Afghanistan who held Danish citizenship yet lived and worked in the United Kingdom. He sold prayer mats, telling me, when I visited his shop five months after our meeting in China, that he preferred to work in the United Kingdom because the country's Muslim community was considerably larger than that of Denmark, which meant he could sell larger quantities of the product in which he dealt. The second man on the bus identified himself as being a Hindu from the town of Khost in eastern Afghanistan. As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, no families from the community continue to live in Khost, and even those living in Kabul reside in residences provided to them as a form of charity by the city's Hindu temples. Yet Hindu traders identifying as being from Khost are especially visible in the Sevastopol Hotel market in Moscow and have also established successful businesses in London. Both of these traders worked, however, in the same wholesale market in London; they had planned to travel together to China to keep one another company over the course of their journey and time away from home. For these two traders, religious difference did not impinge on their establishing a commercial relationship with one another or engaging in the intimate and important practice of undertaking a shared journey. As I have explored elsewhere, shared travel is regarded as critical to assessing the trust of a potential business partner and as a mode of cementing a relationship between two traders.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Marsden 2016: 193.

Afghans who work in the United Kingdom's wholesale markets are ethnically and religiously diverse. In all the markets, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs from Afghanistan work side by side. The followers of these different religious traditions are also often engaged in shared commercial partnerships. In the United Kingdom, Afghans have established businesses in parts of British cities long connected to wholesale trade: Cheetham Hill in Manchester, Whitechapel in London's East End and the newer Charles House wholesale market in Southall, West London. The United Kingdom's print media frequently depicts the wholesale markets in which Afghans work as ungoverned spaces populated by illegal immigrants involved in illicit forms of economic activity, ranging from the trade in counterfeits to the smuggling of narcotics and people.<sup>33</sup>

The largest such market complex in the United Kingdom is in Southall – a fifteen-minute walk from the Afghan Sikh and Hindu places of worship – and a lively site of sociality: usually visited by wholesalers, the narrow alleys of the market also teem with Afghan families visiting for the day, buying toys for their children as well as decorative items for their homes. A trader from northern Afghanistan told me that he sold goods at wholesale prices to such visiting Afghan families as doing so was only fair as 'they can't afford to buy at retail price'. Afghans in the United Kingdom emphasise their own agency in fashioning commercial spaces in the country. Merchants from Afghanistan established the wholesale market and warehouse complex at Charles House in Southall – a borough in West London that has been home since the 1950s to various South Asian communities – around twenty years previously. Markets such as these, then, are specific sites in which mobile Afghan merchants cultivate and sustain the legacies and sensibilities of complex forms of Afghan urban living.

In some of these markets (especially in Manchester's Cheetham Hill), Afghan Muslim, Sikh and Hindu merchants have occupied business niches that have been vacated by successive earlier trading networks – Jews from Russia's Pale of Settlement and Eastern Europe, followed by Pakistanis from Kashmir and Punjab, were previously the most visible communities in Cheetham Hill.<sup>34</sup> Importantly, Afghan traders are aware of the complex and religiously plural histories of the neighbourhoods and markets in which they work today. Some, indeed, consciously represent their ways of dealing with diversity in a manner that replicates universalising and utopian understandings of cosmopolitanism. They often also do so in a manner that challenges dominant images of Afghans in the settings in which they work as being ultra-conservative religious fundamentalists.

<sup>33</sup> Manchester Evening News 2017. <sup>34</sup> Cesarani 1998, Halliday 1992, Werbner 1980.

A trader who runs a successful wholesale business in Cheetham Hill that deals in hundreds of ‘lines’ of pound shop items told me in Yiwu in January 2018, for example: ‘I am only interested in humanity: my customers are Christians, Hindus, Sikhs and Jews, yes Jews, and I treat them all in the same way. Go around and tell people that Afghans are not terrorist but hard workers and humans!’ The trader’s remark points to the manner in which the traders not only openly reflect on their ability to establish relationships in culturally diverse settings but also do so in a manner that enables them to contest negative stereotypes of Afghans and Muslims that are of widespread significance in the varying European settings in which they work.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has focused on the ongoing if contested significance of ethno-religious minorities to Eurasian connectivity. It has argued that while there has been an evident decline in levels of religious diversity in cities across Afghanistan, ethno-religious minorities continue to play a role in the make up of long-distance trade networks, especially those active in the Eurasian corridor. This challenges the notion that Afghanistan’s urban ‘de-cosmopolitanisation’ inevitably marks the loss of its population’s nuanced ways of living and working in culturally complex social environments. Older modes of conducting commerce across religious boundaries are being cultivated instead, sustained and nurtured in new and different contexts. It might be tempting to assume that such religiously plural commercial universes and practices are persistent only among an older generation of traders with experience of trade in pre-conflict urban Afghanistan. However, the chapter has suggested that a younger generation of traders has learned about and acquired the linguistic and cultural capacities and skills for such modes of commerce in settings outside of Afghanistan. Afghanistan’s plural past is now the subject of intense focus by intellectuals, students and policymakers in Afghanistan, groups that are playing an active role in initiating debates about the country’s historic religious diversity. Far from being solely located in ‘heritagised’ sites of memory, or assuming the form of utopian projects of society and the self, I have underscored in this chapter the living and pragmatic aspects of such legacies. Wholesale markets dealing in Chinese commodities in Odessa and Manchester may ultimately play a more significant role in the vitalisation of Kabul’s historic legacy of cosmopolitanism than restored buildings in the confines of its old city.

Afghanistan occupies an important place in the imaginations and identities of Sikhs, Jews and Hindus from Afghanistan who work in settings across the Eurasian landmass – and it is the nature of the relationship between Afghan trading networks and the country today that is the focus of Chapter 6.