

MERCHANTS AND MARKETS: THE SAGA OF BENGAL TRADE IN THE OTTOMAN ECONOMIC NETWORK

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Abstract

This research investigates the trade connections between Bengal and the Ottoman Empire from the 16th to the 18th centuries. It examines how British companies, Armenian traders, and Turkish merchants utilized a range of inland and maritime routes to facilitate the flow of goods from Bengal to Ottoman territories. Initially, the British-Armenian traders, recognized for their extensive networks in Bengal, served as primary intermediaries. At the same time, Turkish merchants played a crucial role in transporting commodities such as silk, indigo, and textiles. Moreover, the study highlights the strategic significance of the Jeddah port in linking Bengal to Istanbul, thereby bolstering the Ottoman economy. Additionally, it highlights the profound economic impact on the Ottoman Empire, including the influx of luxury goods and the introduction of new trade practices, demonstrating how Bengal's trade played a crucial role in shaping the Ottoman economic framework. This research analyses historical records and secondary sources, providing a detailed account of the Bengal-Ottoman trade relationship within early modern global trade networks.

Keywords: *Bengal-Ottoman Trade, Armenian Traders, Turkish Traders, Jeddah Port, Istanbul.*

Öz

Tüccarlar ve Pazarlar: Osmanlı Ekonomik Ağı İçinde Bengal Ticaretinin Serüveni

Bu araştırma, 16. yüzyıldan 18. yüzyıla kadar Bengal ve Osmanlı İmparatorluğu arasındaki ticaret bağlantılarını incelemektedir. Araştırma, İngiliz şirketlerinin, Ermeni tüccarlarının ve Türk tüccarlarının, Bengal mallarının Osmanlı topraklarına akışını sağlamak için çeşitli kara ve deniz yollarını nasıl kullandıklarını ortaya koymaktadır. Başlangıçta, Bengal'deki geniş ağlarıyla tanınan İngiliz-Ermeni tüccarları ana aracı olarak görev yapmışlardır. Aynı zamanda, Türk tüccarları, ipek, enfiye ve tekstil gibi ürünlerin taşınmasında önemli bir rol oynamışlardır. Ayrıca, çalışma, Bengal'i İstanbul'a bağlayan Cidde limanının stratejik önemini vurgulayarak, Osmanlı

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ekonomisini güçlendirdiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Ek olarak, Bengal ticaretinin Osmanlı İmparatorluğu üzerindeki derin ekonomik etkilerine dikkat çekilmekte; lüks malların akışı ve yeni ticaret uygulamalarının tanıtılması gibi unsurlar ele alınarak, Bengal ticaretinin Osmanlı ekonomik yapısının şekillenmesinde nasıl önemli bir rol oynadığı gösterilmektedir. Bu araştırma, tarihsel kayıtlar ve ikincil kaynaklar üzerinde yapılan bir analizle, erken modern dönemdeki küresel ticaret ağlarında Bengal-Osmanlı ticaret ilişkisinin detaylı bir hesabını sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Bengal-Osmanlı Ticareti, Ermeni Tüccarlar, Türk Tüccarlar, Cidde Limanı, İstanbul.*

Introduction

The south-Asian Bengal and Ottoman trade networks during the medieval and early modern periods represent a significant yet often underexplored chapter in the history of global commerce. This trade interaction connected the East and the West, facilitated by the Bay of Bengal's robust maritime routes.¹ The Bengal region, known for its rich resources, and the Ottoman Empire (1300-1922), strategically positioned as a hub between Europe and Asia, engaged in extensive trade with far-reaching economic implications. However, when the Ottoman Empire extended its borders to reach the Indian Ocean for trade in the first half of the 16th century, significant efforts were made to enhance trade and particular importance was given to this trade route. Meanwhile, the Ottoman State took various measures to protect the trade routes and the revenues.²

On the other hand, by the early 18th century, the once-great Indian Mughal Empire had lost all its territory, resulting in political chaos and economic decline in much of Northern India. The Bengal region stood out as an exception where trade, commerce, and the economy thrived under its nearly independent Nawabs (rulers). Notably, its textiles, silk, and other commodities were highly sought after worldwide.³ After the Nawabi period (1717-1757), the English East India Company (hereafter EEIC) swiftly took control of Bengal in 1757, although it had already established a solid trade base before this. From here, they established a makeshift empire that dominated half of India. Besides, the rivalry between British and French trading entities in India became part of the Seven Years War (1756-1763), extending its impact to the eastern Mediterranean.⁴

However, starting in the early 18th century, the Ottoman economy developed a flexible and pragmatic structure, gradually aligning itself with the

¹ Casale 2010, pp. 74, 116, 184; Fuad and Polat 2025, p. 192.

² Berkan 1939, pp. 454-455; İnalcık 1951, pp. 663-664.

³ Chaudhury 2007, p. 149.

⁴ Howard 2017, n. 34; Kütükoğlu 2022, p. 25.

globally oriented economy, such as that centred around the Atlantic. During this period, transportation relationships seemed to be coordinated.⁵ The strategic importance of these trade relations cannot be overlooked. Bengal's ports, such as Calcutta and Hooghly, served as crucial nodes in the Indian Ocean trade network, connecting with the Red Sea and Mediterranean trade routes controlled by the Ottomans.

In this sense, as the leading trade centres, the Turkish merchants of Calcutta (Bengal) sent a demand letter to the Ottoman Ministry of Foreign Affairs through the Bombay Chief Ambassador, Ismail Zuhdi Efendi, regarding the establishment of an Honorary Consulate in Calcutta and Madras.⁶ Although late, in 1848, Haji Mehmed was appointed as the Ottoman consul for Calcutta to alleviate the difficulties faced by its merchants traveling from Hijaz to Calcutta (see Appendix 3).⁷

A systematic review of the research methodology

The initial phase grounds the research in existing literature, identifies the study gap, and establishes the research questions and objectives. A thorough review of existing literature is instrumental in understanding the trends of the Bengal trade in Ottoman territory. While extensive research exists on Indian-Ottoman trade relations both in Turkish and English, none of the studies that correlate to the following research questions have yet to be explored:

RQ. 1: How did the trade network involving Armenian and Turkish traders, utilizing both inland and maritime routes, facilitate the movement of Bengali goods to the Ottoman Empire?

RQ. 2: What was the consequent impact on the Ottoman economy and the role of the Jeddah port in linking these trade routes to Istanbul and elsewhere?

More similar scholarly works are available in research databases such as Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, JSTOR, and ProQuest, which are needed to elucidate the running title. That is why the study provides a unique perspective on the Bengal-Ottoman trade connection. For instance, to ensure greater reliability and authenticity, the study utilized WoS metadata to identify the research gap (see Table 1 in Appendix 1).

The main keywords in the Web of Science (WoS) database are "Ottoman trade" and "Bengal trade." Out of the initial 129 sources from 1970 to 2024 (as of May), we identified duplicates, irrelevant studies, and non-English publications (in Italian, Bulgarian, and French), except for Turkish, which was

⁵ Aygün 2021, p. 479.

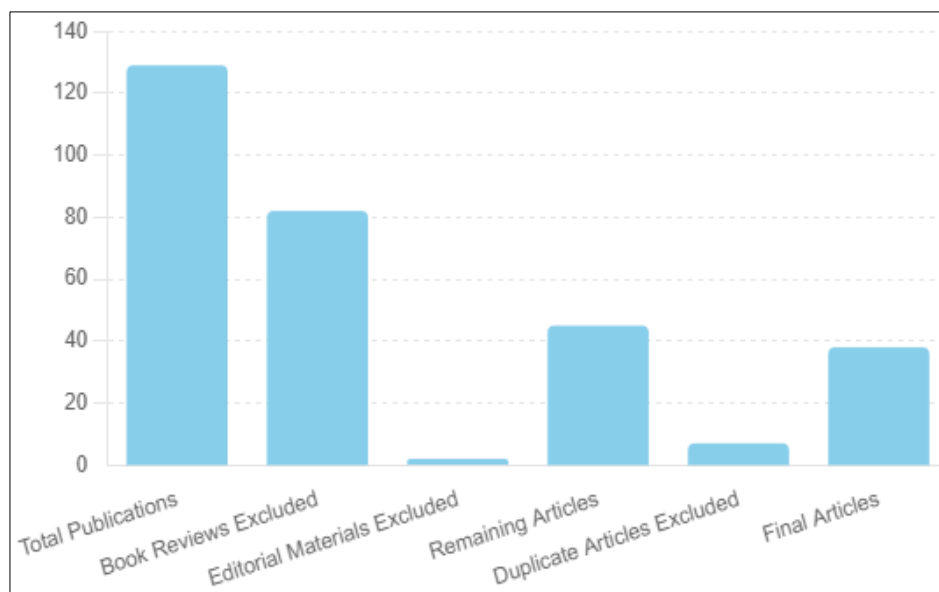
⁶ 'HR.SFR.3...' 1887.

⁷ 'A.AMD.' p. 1264.

excluded from the analysis due to its inclusion in the Turkish language. It is noted that other databases, including Scopus and JSTOR, yielded similar results for the same purpose.

According to Table 1, the study utilized the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines to apply inclusion and exclusion criteria, ensuring the selection of the most pertinent and credible literature for analysis.

Table 1:



Source: WoS database (Prepared by the author).

From this point of view, the Ottoman trade-related existing works from Table 1 can be categorized into five sub-themes: the dynamic nature of Ottoman trade and its adaptability to changing economic conditions; trade routes and networks connecting Europe and the Ottoman Levant; the Empire's naval capabilities and commercial strategies; the regulatory frameworks governing trade, particularly with Germany and Safavid Iran; and the lives of traders in Moscow and Erzurum, as well as the economic environments in which they operated. Conversely, Bengal's trade activities can be categorized as the central trade hub in the region, with its multicultural and interconnected nature within Southeast Asia. So, both categorical discussions emphasize that an active

literary gap exists. The study aims to contribute and address a perspective on Bengal-Ottoman trade relations that has yet to be recorded.

According to the new findings, the allocated databases and related research titles will first examine Armenian and Turkish trade activities in Bengal to address the mentioned research questions, detailing the trade routes and policies used to transport goods to the Ottoman Empire. The second segment focuses on Bengal products that met Ottoman demand. The third one will primarily discuss the transit activities of Bengal goods through the Ottoman port of Jeddah, outlining the procedures involved. Additionally, it examines the impact of the Bengal trade on the Ottoman economy.

In the second phase, the study adopts a historical research design, which systematically collects and evaluates data related to past trade activities between these two regions. From this perspective, the study aims to identify key terms and establish a unique coding system to facilitate its progress.

Table 2: Some (coding) keywords frequently used in the various databases to search for the relevant data (prepared by the author).

Database	Keywords	Axial Coding
Web of Science, Scopus, JSTOR, Digital archives	"Bengal," "Calcutta," "Bihar," "Ottoman," "Turkey," "Turks," "Istanbul," "Edirne," "Izmir," "Bursa," "Basra," "Baghdad"	"Traders," "trade routes," "goods traded," "economic impact."

Lastly, previous research has provided a robust foundation for understanding trade from various perspectives. Some studies have focused on Levant-Europe trade relations, while others have examined the connections between the Ottoman Empire, Russia, and Germany. However, academic research must pay more attention to trade with the Bengal region. This paper introduces a new dimension to the research databases by exploring Bengal-Ottoman trade networks. To explain these networks, we have considered two dimensions: a) the demand for Indian goods within the Ottoman Empire and b) the use of Ottoman ports as transit points.

Table 3: Two dimensions in Bengal-Ottoman trade networks (prepared by the author)

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Significance</i>	<i>Examples/Details</i>
Ottoman Internal Demand	Indian goods were highly sought after within the Ottoman Empire.	One of the largest consumers of Indian goods is the high internal demand.	Textiles, spices, etc.
Transit Trade and Customs Revenue	Served as a transit center for East-West trade routes.	Key ports are utilized as storage and distribution points, as well as for customs revenue.	Ports: Istanbul, Basra, Alexandria, Iskenderun. Revenue from customs.

The previous data visualizations are based on a comprehensive qualitative content analysis. Klaus Krippendorff states, “Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use.”⁸ In his view, it provides new insights, increases a researcher’s understanding of phenomena, or informs practical actions. Moreover, it focuses on interpreting and understanding the content's meaning. It is more subjective and involves identifying themes and patterns. The stated keywords and coding system trace primary sources, including trade records, compiled books, Ottoman and Indian archives, travelogues, and diaries. Secondary sources such as scholarly books, journal articles, and comparative studies will provide contextual insights.

Discussions

The Ottoman-Indian trade generally occurred through two main routes. The northern route (overland) passes through Anatolia and extends to Iran, reaching as far as India and Central Asia, and can even extend to China. The southern route (maritime) begins in Suez or Basra, traveling to the Middle and South India and Southeast Asia via the Red Sea or the Persian Gulf.⁹ At the initial stage, despite the ease of taking a ship from Gombroon (Bandar Abbas), many merchants preferred the overland route because it brought the finest Indian textiles. This preference persisted partly due to the difficulty of changing established trade routes unless faced with exceptionally high odds. Additionally, until the mid-1630s, conflicts among European companies and their attempts to reduce Asian merchants' market share favored the continued use of overland routes.¹⁰

⁸ Krippendorff 2018, p. 24.

⁹ Lybyer 1987, p. 142.

¹⁰ Hussain 2005, s. 1.

The trade volume on the overland route can be inferred from the number of camels traversing it. Various travelers in the seventeenth century provided different estimates. According to Steel, Lahore, as the hub of all Indian trade before the British landing, saw an increase in merchant activity, with twelve to fourteen thousand camels laden with goods, compared to a previous count of barely three thousand.¹¹ On the other hand, to illustrate the issue, in a 1617 letter to his loving mother, Thomas Coryate mentioned that his journey between Isfahan and India included a caravan of 2,000 camels, 1,500 horses, over 1,000 mules, 800 donkeys, and 6,000 people.¹² Thomas Roe also clarifies Coryate's view. He noted that 20,000 camels transported spices, indigo, sugar, and goods annually from Agra and other regions, especially Bengal, to Persia. In his opinion, most merchants preferred using camels to transport their goods, sell them, and reinvest the proceeds for the return journey rather than opting for sea routes unless those routes were open and secure.¹³

The Armenians and the Turks in the Bengal trade

This segment aims to provide an overview of the commercial activities of the Turks and Armenians in Bengal. In this case, the first recognition goes with the Armenian traders. A group of merchants from Armenia had settled in Baghdad, Aleppo, Damascus, Bursa, and Istanbul, serving as mediators of trade between Basra and India, as well as intermediaries between Iran and Turkish cities, including those facilitating caravans to Aleppo.¹⁴ The Ottoman lands played a key role as transit zones in that period.¹⁵ This mediating role might encourage them to travel to India and Bengal.¹⁶

According to Choudhury, there is no doubt that Armenians were active in settlement in Bengal from at least the late 16th and early 17th centuries. As a significant trading group, they were a familiar presence in all major centres of trade and manufacture, including cities and ports. Their broad network matched Bengal's dispersed textile industry, making them a major and competitive merchant group, often rivalling influential local and European traders.¹⁷ Hence, it can be said that they competed not only with Indian and other Asian merchants but also with the European trading companies in Bengal.

¹¹ Samuel 1905, 4: p. 269.

¹² Foster 1921, p. 260.

¹³ Foster 1926, p. 446.

¹⁴ Goffman 2002, p. 182; Yılmaz 1992, p. 36.

¹⁵ Veinstein 1999, p. 104.

¹⁶ İnalçik 1979, p. 10.

¹⁷ Chaudhury 2007, pp. 149, 160.

The traffic on the mentioned land route was significant because of the low prices. It significantly impacted the Persian markets, particularly in the textile and indigo industries. Bernier's 1663 observation claims that Armenian competition for cotton cloth in the inland markets of Jalalpur in Bihar and Lucknow (greater Bengal) forced the Dutch to withdraw. This was likely because Armenians could buy their goods at lower prices than the Dutch, owing to the significant distance between Agra and Surat.¹⁸ Besides, they had established a strong position in Bengal, prompting the British East India Company to seek an agreement with them. The Armenians would supply Bengal goods for the Company's regional investments, using their capital and bearing the risk in exchange for a guaranteed profit.¹⁹ Moreover, they utilized their profitable network not only in Persia but also in various centres of Asia.²⁰

It is undisputedly argued that the Armenians had a prominent role in Bengal's silk and textile trade. While we cannot yet provide a comprehensive estimate, Taylor's 1747 estimate of Dhaka's cloth production indicates that Armenians accounted for as much as 23 percent of the textile exports among Asian merchants, valued at Rs. 0.5 million.²¹ Another documentation of 1755 suggests that Armenians, Greeks, and other minor trading groups typically exported textiles from Dhaka to Surat, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf, averaging Rs. 0.7 to 0.8 million annually.²² In the silk market, along with them, other Asian merchants were the dominant buyers. Their substantial purchases, often made despite high prices, frequently drove up prices and disadvantaged European companies.²³

Moreover, the Armenian merchants settled in Hooghly, a place with a rich tradition of managing Bengal's maritime trade. In the first half of the 18th century, they dispatched their trading vessels to various parts of India and West Asia, carrying valuable Bengal commodities and returning with bullion and other goods. The Bengal Armenians owned six ships: *Salamat Rissan*, *Salamat Manzil*, *Mobarak*, *Gensamer*, *Medina Baksh*, and *Mubarak Manzil*, which operated routes from Hooghly to Jeddah, Mecca, Basra, Masulipatnam, and Surat.²⁴

In the 1770s, Armenians were highly influential in Bengal's trade. Archival records from 1775 reveal that Armenians were "a very wealthy group,

¹⁸ Bernier 1916, p. 292.

¹⁹ Chaudhury 2007, p. 150.

²⁰ Pelsaert 1925, pp. 30–31.

²¹ India Office Records (IOR), n.d., vol. 456.

²² Algemeen Rijksarchief (AR) 1755; Jan Kerseboom's *Memorie* 1755.

²³ Chaudhury 1995a, pp. 228–236.

²⁴ Chaudhury 2007, p. 154.

whose wide-ranging transactions and global connections render them especially valuable in this region.” Armenians and British merchants also controlled most of Bengal’s foreign trade.²⁵ For this reason, they were attracted to these primary centres, such as Bengal, to acquire lower-priced commodities, including certain varieties of textiles, like Indigo.²⁶ Typically, the designs, weaves, measurements, and colours needed to be customized to meet the demands of Turkey and Persia. Therefore, these items had to be specially ordered or contracted at the production centres.²⁷

During this period, it was evident that cotton goods from regions such as Patna and Bengal were the primary commodities in which Persian and Armenian merchants invested significant amounts of money in India. Some merchants sold these goods immediately at Bandar Abbas, where they were redistributed and sold to other merchants in Isfahan, Basra, Baghdad, and beyond. These goods were then transported to a third market in Istanbul and other locations, incurring significant costs for camel transport, customs, and other fees. Despite these expenses, each transaction at the first, second, and third stages yielded substantial profits for the merchants.²⁸

Regarding the seventeenth-century Turkish merchants, trade between India and the Ottoman Empire was quite active. Indo-Turkish maritime trade was conducted primarily via the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. Meanwhile, Turkish merchants favoured overland routes, such as the Armenian route through northern Iran, passing through Qazvin and Tabriz, to reach India.²⁹ However, it is never observed that Turks frequently travel to foreign countries, except for some who embark on adventures to India and Iran, the starting point of significant caravans that include a few Persians and Armenians, to reach Istanbul for trade purposes, and others who incidentally travel to Cairo, Aleppo, and Izmir.³⁰

On the other hand, the Red Sea route had the advantage of facilitating Hajj traffic. It is essential to note that the Hajj was not merely an annual pilgrimage, but also provided a significant opportunity for large-scale trade, often regarded as the world’s richest fair. Numerous commodities were exchanged rapidly, attracting participants from the Islamic trading world.

²⁵ India Office Records (IOR) 1775, 289–91.

²⁶ Indigo is the general term for dyes extracted from the leaves. It stems from the plants *Indigofera tinctoria* or *Indigofera anil*, or synthetically produced dyes, commonly used for dyeing the warp threads of denim fabrics or the yarns of handwoven carpets.

²⁷ Hussain 2005, p. 39.

²⁸ Hussain 2005, pp. 42, 106.

²⁹ Hussain 2014, pp. 43–44.

³⁰ Mantran 1987, p. 1437.

Customs records indicate a strong connection between the Hajj trade and the Western Coast of India (Surat), where many Turkish merchants had settled.³¹ However, as Portuguese dominance in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean increased, the ancient trade routes encountered significant crises. In response, the Delhi Sultan, Sher Shah (1540-45), proposed in 1544 that the Ottoman Sultan assign a designated ambassador to Istanbul. The mission aimed to negotiate an alliance with the Ottoman Sultan against the Persians, who were obstructing the pilgrimage to the holy place of Mecca and interfering with established religious practices.³² The outcome of this proposal remains unknown, but it had a significant impact on trade, which can be firmly identified.

In the latter half of the seventeenth century, merchants traveling between the Ottoman Empire and India sought to avoid Iran due to high taxes and political crises. They preferred the Ottoman-controlled Basra. Some Turkish merchants traveled to Bandar Abbas and then continued overland to Isfahan, before proceeding to Aleppo. There was also an overland route from Bandar Abbas to Istanbul, passing through Erzurum and Tabriz.³³

Of them, someone engaged with the *abaca*³⁴ production. Typically, Bursa, Amasya, Izmir, Kayseri, Erzurum, and Diyarbakir offered opportunities for entrepreneurial *abaca* producers. However, some traders have found ways to reach more distant markets, including Syria and even India. In the 18th century, a company established by *abaca* producers was represented in cities such as Damascus and other parts of Syria. Another company engaged in trade with the port of Calcutta in East India had been liquidated by the early 1780s. *Abaca* was likely utilized in tents and other spaces rather than clothing in the warm climate of Bengal. The primary market of this product was Istanbul and Anatolia.³⁵

According to Gupta, the Turkish merchants of India were more organized than the Persians and the Arabs, who were guided by the Awlia Chelebi's clan. The Chelebies likely arrived in India from Iraq, possibly around the mid-17th century.³⁶ However, the Challebi family of India was a significant ship-owning merchant dynasty in Gujarat, with their vessels frequently traveling to the Red Sea and Southeast Asia. Among them, Saleh and Ibrahim Chelebi's ships were notably involved in the Surat-Bengal route. Ibrahim's ship, which the Dutch

³¹ Faroqhi 1994, pp. 516–517.

³² Farooqi 1988, pp. 201–202.

³³ Hussain 2014, p. 45; Tavernier 1925, 1: p. 19.

³⁴ *Abaca*, plant of the family *Musaceae*, and its fibre is second in importance among the leaf fibre group. *Abaca* fibre, unlike most other leaf fibres, is obtained from the plant leaf stalks.

³⁵ Faroqhi 2016, 3: p. 436.

³⁶ Gupta 1979, p. 76.

chartered, sailed from Surat to Bengal and Batavia.³⁷ As mentioned earlier, these ships were likely transporting Bengal products to Surat before the Calcutta port became operational. Later, Turkish merchants began to use the Calcutta port more frequently than the port of Surat. They primarily transported goods from Bengal to Jeddah and occasionally to Istanbul. Due to the increasing trade activity, a Turkish consulate was eventually established in Calcutta.

Bengal products in the Ottoman territory and beyond

The English and Dutch recognized Bengal's agricultural wealth after the Portuguese were expelled in 1632. Moreover, they quickly established trading posts in great Bengal, such as Pipili, Balasore, Hooghly, and Dhaka. Bengal's extensive waterways facilitated easy transportation, boosting trade in cotton, raw silk, saltpeter, and luxurious muslins (a type of plain cotton fabric).³⁸ However, from the early seventeenth century, the primary regions supplying cotton textiles remained consistent: Gujarat, Bengal, and Coromandel were critical global trade sources. Therefore, their relative significance shifted over time, with Bengal becoming the most prominent among these textile-producing areas.

It would not be needless to share that, in 1617, the British ambassador, Sir Thomas Roe of Mughal India, sent a representative to Iran to negotiate the redirection of the silk trade through Turkey. The aim was to establish a more economical and secure silk route than Ottoman ports. The EEIC had high hopes for this initiative. Despite abandoning the Levant trade, they believed they could obtain essential goods like cotton and madder through other European merchants.³⁹ This step may have a positive impact on the land trade. Riello and Roy narrate that in the 1660s, India exported 25–30,000 camel loads of cotton textiles, mainly from Bengal to Persia, annually. These cotton textiles exchanged hands multiple times, eventually reaching Central Asia, the Ottoman Empire, and Eastern Europe.⁴⁰

While commerce continued at such a pace, one might wonder where the shipments were loaded in India and what can be explicitly said about Bengal products. Initially, most Indian goods were collected in northwestern India for export, particularly in regions such as Gujarat and Lahore. As earlier mentioned, transportation ships operated by the Turkish Chelebi family facilitated trade between Gujarat and Bengal. These ships gathered Bengal products in Gujarat for shipment to Turkey. However, inland transportation was available. Later, the

³⁷ Hussain 2005, pp. 287, 289.

³⁸ Chaudhuri 1985, p. 93.

³⁹ Sainsbury 1870, pp. xxvi–xxviii, 155–161.

⁴⁰ (Riello and Roy 2009, p. 6.

Calcutta port (in Bengal) became prominent for its overseas operations, and the British made it a key trade hub. By the 1750s, the EEIC's mercantile dominance in Bengal was firmly established, making it the region's leading economic force. It surpassed France's influence in Bengal and monopolized the textile trade.⁴¹

Bengal's silk market saw active participation from merchants from Lahore, Multan, Benares, Gorakhpur, Hyderabad, Delhi, and Agra. The connection between North India and the Bengal silk market remained notably strong, even in the mid-seventeenth century. As for outsiders, Armenians were also involved. Furthermore, numerous active Asian merchants dominated Bengal's silk market, surpassing the influence of European merchants.⁴² As additional information, the Punjabi and Coromandel products were extensively shipped to Southeast Asia, whereas, by the mid-17th century, the fabrics woven in Bengal and Gujarat were being sold in Ottoman markets.⁴³

We can consider historical claims from contemporary European travelers to substantiate the authenticity of Bengal textiles. Their witnesses in this regard are very essential. Robert Orme's comment comes first. In his view, Bengal's cotton manufacturing is about to make a national industry. He observed that it was rare to find a village in Bengal where almost every man, woman, or child was not producing cloth.⁴⁴ In contrast, during his travels in India in 1583, Ralph Fitch discovered the production and trade of cotton in various locations throughout Bengal, including Gaur, Saptagram, and Sonargaon. He described Sonargaon, a village near Dhaka, as producing India's best and finest quality cotton cloth.⁴⁵ Additionally, the *Ain-i-Akbari* mentions that Sonargaon was known for manufacturing a large quantity of very fine Muslin.⁴⁶

Consequently, the Ottoman markets gradually developed with the development of multiple Bengal products. During the 1543-1659 period, Edirne featured Bihari cotton, with records indicating 300 silver coins (*akça*) in 1637 and 200 in 1641. Moreover, in 1658, chintz⁴⁷ fabric was readily available, priced at 120 silver coins.⁴⁸ At the same time, luxurious Muslins (an outstanding tulle variety used in turbans and women's headwear or coverings) of Bengal were available in diverse markets across Istanbul at 1600 silver coins. Besides,

⁴¹ Mukherjee 2007, p. 167–172.

⁴² Chaudhury 1995b, pp. 374–375.

⁴³ Kütükoğlu 1983, p. 65; Machado 2009, p. 72.

⁴⁴ Orme 1805, p. 409.

⁴⁵ Foster 1921, pp. 24–28.

⁴⁶ Abul Fazl 1949, 2: p. 136.

⁴⁷ Chintz is a plain-woven, printed or solid-coloured glazed cotton fabric, frequently a highly glazed printed calico.

⁴⁸ İnalçik 1979, p. 16–17.

Kummum, as high-quality, white-colored daily clothes, were priced at 800 coins, and Sherbet could be obtained for 720 silver coins. These items were commonly bought as gifts.⁴⁹ Moreover, Bengal silk was considered to be at a very high price due to the disruptions in trade with Turkey caused by the French War. Subsequently, following the failure of the silk crop in France, Italy, and Turkey, orders issued in 1693 and 1694 instructed the factors to acquire and send as much silk as possible.⁵⁰

In the mid-eighteenth century, Bengal cotton fabrics were transported by ship to Ottoman territories. In this case, by analysing British ship records, especially those docked at the port of Izmir, Kütükoğlu presents the following data: In 1773, a single loaded ship arrived, followed by a significant gap in time. Between 1825 and 1837, he records a total of 20 boats. Additionally, outside the Izmir port, in 1778, a British ship carrying cotton arrived at the port of Jeddah, having sailed from Bengal.⁵¹ The Izmir and Istanbul ports probably supplied cotton, especially Muslin, to Edirne. According to the customs records of Edirne, 160 bolts of different types of Muslin were imported from Bengal by non-Muslim merchants in 1785 and 334 bolts in 1798. Various muslins from India, such as Masulipatam and Bihar, found buyers in Istanbul.⁵² Before goods arrived by ship, they were transported by land to markets in cities such as Istanbul and Edirne.

Other cotton products were also exported to Ottoman territories. For example, high-quality white Muslin, known as Hammami, was sent to the Ottomans in the 17th to 18th centuries for everyday use. Seerbettes, another type of luxurious Bengal Muslin, were also available in Ottoman markets.⁵³ That is why the 1640 price registry book proves that expensive varieties of Muslin from Bengal dominated the Ottoman market.⁵⁴ Although no ships carrying Bengal chintz arrived in Izmir before the eighteenth century, between 1825 and 1835, 35 vessels carrying chintz reached the port of Izmir.⁵⁵ This suggests that the land route through Basra to Istanbul might have met the Ottoman market demands before ships docked in Izmir.

The primary reason for the availability and supply of Bengal products was their lower cost. Additionally, the highest quality silk from Bengal, sought after by Europe's growing industries, led to a decline in demand for silk from

⁴⁹ İncelik 1979, pp. 20–34.

⁵⁰ Chaudhury 1975, p. 185.

⁵¹ Kütükoğlu 2022, p. 340; Uzunçarşılı 1962, p. 154.

⁵² Kütükoğlu 2018, p. 22.

⁵³ İncelik 1979, pp. 32–37.

⁵⁴ Kütükoğlu 1983, p. 64–65.

⁵⁵ Chaudhuri 1978, p. 503; Kütükoğlu 2022, p. 340.

Iran. This shift weakened the relationship between Ottoman textile producers and their European customers.⁵⁶ Timely, the British began to withdraw from the Ottoman market because the supply of Iranian raw silk became unreliable and eventually nearly vanished due to the wars surrounding the fall of the Safavid dynasty (1501-1736).

The situation above compelled the Ottomans to import textiles from India, predominantly procuring cotton cloth from Bengal. In 1768, the huge Ottoman market demands encouraged the British to export various goods, including white cloth, silk, and cotton fabrics, utilizing 5-6 British ships departing from Bengal annually. These goods were transported to Basra.⁵⁷ In the meantime, Ottoman-Indian trade was decentralized across various locations, reaching three significant Ottoman cities via transit. Yilmaz notes that Istanbul, Aleppo, and Cairo were the most important ports of entry for these products. Then, it reached Istanbul through Diyarbakir, Aleppo through Basra, and Cairo through Jeddah via the Red Sea route.⁵⁸

The total expenses incurred by an Ottoman merchant for transporting goods from Basra to Istanbul amounted to 500 *kuruş*⁵⁹ per load, plus an additional 50%. The weight of each load varied between 150 and 180 *okkas*. Basra's trading law states that one *okka* equals 1821 grams, although this measurement could vary by location.⁶⁰ Official reports to Istanbul revealed that almost half of Basra's revenues came from transit duties, mainly from ships arriving from India. This trade involved Indian goods like spices, rice, sugar, and textiles from Bengal, as well as chintz and cotton products.⁶¹

A concern may arise about how the British monopolized trade from Bengal to Basra. The following observation could offer a simple hypothesis: *"... the bustling city of Basra, home to around 70,000 residents including Arabs, Persians, Turks, Americans, and Jews, saw a significant English presence. The English, who were the only ones with a well-established trading post, annually dispatched five to six ships from Bengal, Madras, Bombay, or Surat. These vessels were laden with 500 to 600 bales of cloth, 600 to 700 bales of white textiles, 400 to 500 bales of silk and cotton fabrics, and pepper, sugar, and other goods ..."*⁶²

⁵⁶ Faroqhi 2004, p. 149.

⁵⁷ Bayur 1987, 2: p. 542; Yilmaz 1992, pp. 34, 44.

⁵⁸ Yilmaz 1992, p. 40.

⁵⁹ It was the primary currency of the Ottoman Empire between 1687 and 1879.

⁶⁰ Kallek 2007, p. 338; Yilmaz 1992, p. 42. Although it varied depending on the city and region, it was standardized as 1.282945 kg in the metric system in the last years of the empire.

⁶¹ Howard 2017, n. 91.

⁶² Masson 1911, p. 543.

What was the distribution procedure after transit in Basra? Masson noted this in his footnote. Only a small portion, approximately one-sixteenth, of the Indian goods arriving in Basra were used within the city. Most were transported to Baghdad via the Tigris River in December or January. In the 1760s, Baghdad was the departure point for caravans and a storage hub for Indian goods. This transport was managed by large ships, each capable of carrying 300 to 400 bales and fitted with at least 30 to 40 sails, forming a convoy protected by janissaries (the Turkish infantry forming the Sultan's guard between the 14th and 19th centuries). Upon reaching Baghdad, goods were distributed as follows: two-thirds of the white Bengal cloths were sent to Istanbul. At the same time, the remaining third was dispatched to cities such as Damascus and Aleppo.⁶³

Nevertheless, one might question why the Ottomans relied on Indian textiles, primarily produced in Bengal. The remarks of two prominent historians can address this inquiry. Faroqhi connects the import of Indian textiles into Turkey with the decline of the Turkish textile industry, attributing it to the low wages of Indian artisans, which made Ottoman cloth less competitive in the market.⁶⁴ On the one hand, Veinstein suggests that the rise in Indian textile production and quality was due to increased demand from the Ottoman Empire. However, she argues that Indian textile imports did not hinder domestic production but stimulated it by providing patterns.⁶⁵

Besides, in comparison to fabrics and textiles from Anatolia, Baghdad, Bursa, Aleppo, and Damascus, those of Indian origin held a relatively minor presence, both in the inventories of textile merchants and in household items. Nevertheless, according to records such as the Istanbul price book and the Basra Customs book from 1640, Bengal Muslins, particularly turbans made from them, played a significant role in the market. Moreover, it can be inferred from here that Istanbul, as the capital of the Ottoman Empire, along with other important cities, constituted the primary consumer market for imported Indian goods.⁶⁶

Like textiles, the Ottomans were familiar with Indian Indigo because it had a wider global popularity. As with other parts of India, Kumar claims Bengal played a crucial role in cultivating indigo. Although it was less cultivated, large-scale indigo cultivation in Bengal began in the 1770s with the assistance of the East India Company, driven by Europe's demand for blue dye, and spread to Bengal's Burdwan, Bankura, Birbhum, Murshidabad, and later to

⁶³ Masson 1911, p. 543–44.

⁶⁴ Faroqhi 1994, p. 476.

⁶⁵ Veinstein 1999, p. 107.

⁶⁶ İnalçik 1979, p. 37.

Champanan and Kheda in Bihar.⁶⁷ The high demand for indigo in Ottoman markets appeared in the 19th century. A brief conversation is enough to understand Bengal's indigo production. For instance, 7,000 km² of land was dedicated to indigo cultivation, producing 19,000 tons. The Calcutta port alone exported approximately 4,000 tons of indigo annually.⁶⁸

Based on the Indigo freight, a ship carrying indigo seemed to be docked in Izmir in 1773. However, records show that 18 boats arrived at this port between 1800 and 1836.⁶⁹ Due to the high production, quality, and craftsmanship, the Ottomans likely intended to import from this source. In this sense, the Ottomans were not late in contacting the Indian (Bengal) Indigo Industry. Then, a letter issued by the Ottoman Iraq governor of 1856 states that,

“... the indigo dye produced in the Egyptian regions is not suitable for things like the dyeing above, and, in Egypt, little attention and care is given to its cultivation. Therefore, there are no skilled masters as required. It was noted that the best indigo comes from India. Given the proximity of India to Basra and Basra to Baghdad, the indigo to be obtained from there would be superior and most suitable for dyeing such things. Along with the transportation of indigo from those regions, it would not be difficult to bring a few masters from India. It was indicated that bringing laborers from Egypt for this matter would not yield the desired benefit and that the expenses and road costs would be wasted. Since it is possible to get them from India, efforts should be directed in that manner...”⁷⁰

Halil İnalçık points out that the transportation route of Bengal Indigo involved ships from both Hormuz and India, which either transported their goods directly or made stops in Basra or Baghdad during transit. These shipments typically included indigo and spices.⁷¹

Jeddah: The Transit hub of the Bengal trade to Istanbul

As a strategic customs point, Jeddah was a key port for Eastern and Western commerce. Trade ships from Europe to India, and vice versa, typically stopped at the port of Jeddah. However, the Portuguese policy in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, which endangered the cities and Muslim population there, likely accelerated the arrival of Ottoman protection in these regions. In 1558,

⁶⁷ Kumar 2013, pp. 77–83.

⁶⁸ ‘Gaatha’ 2013; Prasad 2018, pp. 297–298.

⁶⁹ Kütükoğlu 2022, p. 342.

⁷⁰ BOA 1272.

⁷¹ İnalçık 1979, p. 18–19.

Sinan Pasha successfully led a campaign to Yemen, making the port of Jeddah more secure.⁷²

Generally, the Governor of Jeddah was responsible for collecting customs duties on goods from various destinations. The customs revenues of Jeddah were of great economic importance to both the Sharif of Mecca and the Pasha of Egypt. So, conflicts and struggles arose between Sharif and Pasha regarding the administration of the Jeddah port. This was because if another significant port in the Red Sea, such as the Suez Canal, could directly participate in Indian trade, the strategic importance of Jeddah might diminish. Hence, the Sharifs of Mecca endeavored to establish Jeddah as the primary center for trade with India.⁷³

In the meantime, in 1768, Warren Hastings, the Governor General of Bengal, sent gifts to Ali Bey, the Governor of Egypt, and extended an invitation to establish commercial relations. He also promised to send a ship to Egypt the following year.⁷⁴ After Ali Bey, the British visited Muhammad Bey, where they successfully negotiated with the local authorities in Cairo to reduce the customs duty on goods they brought to Egypt. Previously, in Jeddah, they agreed to reduce the rate by six percentage points from 14%.⁷⁵ This policy likely yielded results by the 1807s. Until that time, it was known that only one or two loaded ships from Bengal arrived in Jeddah each year. Now, Ali Bey's recordings claim that the arrival of a boat loaded with rice from Bengal. Such bearing red flagships, carrying rice and other Indian products, began arriving four or five times a year.⁷⁶

A 1778 report stated that ships leaving Surat probably carried products of Ahmedabad, such as Beldar, Kutni, desdar, and Bruc. Meanwhile, Frenk ships (French, British, and Dutch vessels that used to come from Bengal) arriving from Bengal transported cloth, cheesecloth, Shahi cloths, and similar items.⁷⁷ From this perspective, "Frenk ships" had some advantages in Jeddah. The owners of the predominantly textile goods on these ships were the captains. Unlike the goods from Surat, which were sold retail, the goods on these ships were sold wholesale by the captain to a prominent and wealthy merchant of Jeddah. Regardless of the ship's load, whether it contained 500, 1000, or even 2000 bales, the entire cargo was sold wholesale to a single individual. This detail provides insight into the wealth and status of the buyers. The affluent merchant who purchased the goods wholesale from the captain would then

⁷² Bilge 1993, p. 524.

⁷³ Üçüncü 2021, pp. 29–30; Freitag 2020, pp. 40–44.

⁷⁴ Livingston 1968, pp. 120–130.

⁷⁵ Orhunlu 1996, p. 136.

⁷⁶ Bey 1816, 2: p.134.

⁷⁷ Uzunçarşılı 1962, p. 154.

distribute them to local traders with a 10% markup. As for customs duties at the port of Jeddah, they varied depending on the ship's departure point. The duties on Indian goods brought by Europeans from Bengal likely differed from those brought by Indians from Surat.⁷⁸

In this case, Jeddah served as the port of Mecca, where regulatory customs were imposed on goods arriving from the mentioned region.⁷⁹ After the port procedures, Indian goods were distributed to other Ottoman cities.⁸⁰ Indian goods arriving in Istanbul by caravans from Jeddah were exempt from taxes. The transportation costs amounted to 110 *kuruş* per load. If the exemption between Jeddah and Istanbul were specified, a comparison with the Basra-Istanbul transportation costs would show 30 *kuruş* for the Baghdad-Diyarbakir segment and 40 *kuruş* for the Diyarbakir-Istanbul segment, totaling 70 *kuruş*. This suggests that the Basra-Istanbul route may be more advantageous for transportation expenses related to Indian trade.⁸¹

After reviewing Bengal's trade within Ottoman territories, it is necessary to discuss the economic impact on the Empire. Although Bengal may not have had a major economic influence as a region, its effect was enduring. This trade significantly enhanced the wealth of the Ottomans and facilitated their integration into global trade networks. As mentioned earlier, spices, silk, cotton textiles, and other luxury goods from Bengal and other parts of India were in high demand in Ottoman markets, generating substantial revenues. Additionally, the goods transported through trade routes and ports gave the Ottoman economy vitality through customs duties and trade activities. Estimating the value (in *kuruş*) of the Empire's imports from India is challenging, as it requires knowledge of the volume of imports and the consumption of Indian goods in Egypt, Syria, and Anatolia (Istanbul and Izmir). It is believed that Istanbul alone consumed Indian goods worth approximately 1,000,000 *kuruş* annually. Based on this, one could speculate on the approximate total consumption.⁸²

In terms of individual goods, since the 17th century, India's cotton goods have been one of the most significant developments impacting the imperial economy.⁸³ This statement can be exemplified by the following quantities: a document from 1785, cited by Fukasawa, estimates the total annual value of Indian merchandise imported into Istanbul at 5 million piastres isolates,

⁷⁸ Yılmaz 1992, p. 54.

⁷⁹ Uzunçarşılı 1962, p. 151.

⁸⁰ Faroqhi 1995, pp. 175–178.

⁸¹ Yılmaz 1992, p. 43.

⁸² Yılmaz 1992, pp.47–48.

⁸³ Inalcik 1979, p. 1.

equivalent to over 10 million LT (Livres Tournois- a basic unit of France currency; as per 1 sterling pound equals 25 LT of the 18th century). Of this, two-thirds were allocated to purchasing Bengal's famous Muslin. This amount was substantial, especially compared to the European imports to Istanbul, valued at 11 or 12 million LT. Notably, 5 to 6 million of this total came from France, one of the Ottoman Empire's primary economic partners.⁸⁴

Similarly, another source claims the Sultan's treasury earned half a million gold coins annually from trade with India. It is estimated that at least half of this revenue came from the Bengal region, if not more. This is supported by the fact that during the 1680s, Armenians engaged in the trade of textiles, indigo, and cotton and travelled as far as Tibet.⁸⁵ To reach Tibet, they had to pass through Bengal. Furthermore, these Armenians even brought goods from there to Izmir. Profits were not limited to the mentioned routes and products. Alpers notes that the influx of Indian textiles, spices, and other commodities into Ottoman markets had a significant impact on the Empire's economy. This trade bolstered the Ottoman economy by providing access to valuable goods that were highly sought after in European markets, thereby enhancing the Empire's wealth and economic stability.⁸⁶

Additionally, the Red Sea region benefited economically from the merchant trade and the passage of pilgrims to Mecca. Merchant seamen frequently capitalized on this opportunity by engaging in profitable commerce with their fellow believers.⁸⁷ In the later period, the decline of Surat port is attributed to the late eighteenth century. The fall of the Safavid Empire significantly hindered Surat's trade. However, the Ottoman Empire, the largest and wealthiest in the region, controlled the Fertile Crescent and the overland trade routes extending from the Gulf to Bengal.⁸⁸

Conclusion

Ottoman traders established a presence in regional and international markets, ensuring a steady flow of commodities between the two regions. Besides, the Armenian traders facilitated a vibrant exchange of goods and culture in Bengal. The role of British traders was pivotal, as they leveraged their colonial foothold in Bengal to influence trade dynamics within the Ottoman Empire. Their involvement bolstered Bengal's economic significance and

⁸⁴ Fukasawa 1987, pp. 37–45.

⁸⁵ Inalcik 1979, p. 10.

⁸⁶ Alpers 2014, pp. 85–112.

⁸⁷ Panzac 1992, p. 190.

⁸⁸ Chandra 1987, p. 22.

integrated Ottoman markets into a broader British-dominated trade framework. This dual engagement by the British in Bengal and the Ottoman regions underscores the interplay of colonial and traditional trade practices.

Inland routes, traversing through the rugged terrains and bustling marketplaces, were as crucial as the maritime routes connecting significant ports. The port of Jeddah emerged as a vital conduit, linking the bustling markets of Bengal with the imperial capital of Constantinople (now Istanbul). This strategic connectivity underscored its importance in the Ottoman maritime infrastructure, ensuring a seamless flow of Bengal's prized Muslin fabrics, spices, and other commodities to Ottoman markets. The influx of Bengal Muslin fabrics, renowned for their exquisite quality, had a profound impact on the Ottoman economy. Ottoman society highly coveted these fabrics and contributed significantly to the Empire's economic vitality by enriching its textile markets. The broader economic interplay facilitated by this trade network fostered a dynamic commercial environment that propelled the financial fortunes of both Bengal and the Ottoman Empire.

Lastly, the Bengal-Ottoman trade network was a remarkable confluence of diverse trading communities, strategic routes, and valuable commodities. It exemplified a sophisticated economic relationship that transcended regional boundaries, leaving an indelible mark on the economic histories of Bengal and the Ottoman Empire.

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Merchants and Markets: The Saga of Bengal Trade in the Ottoman Economic Network

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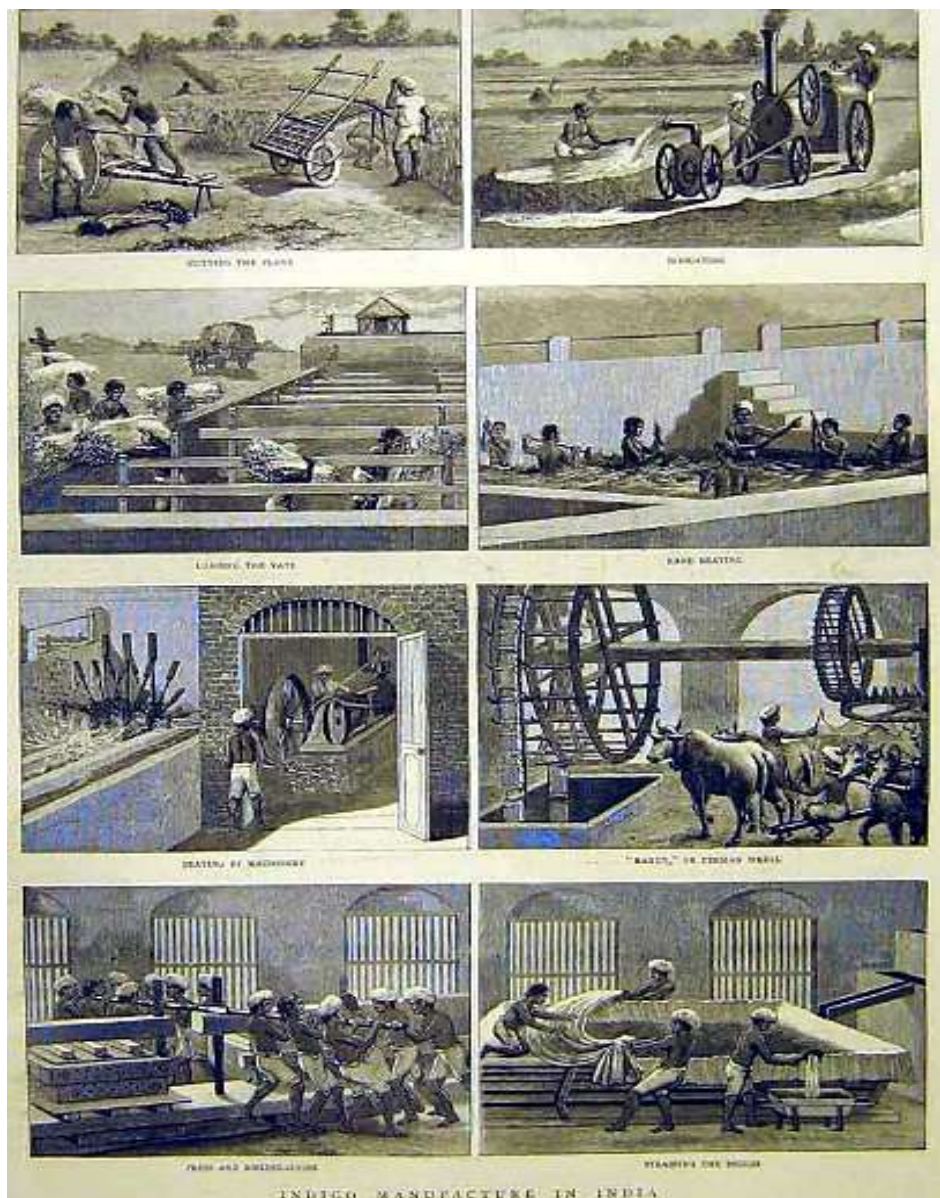
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APPENDIX

Table 1

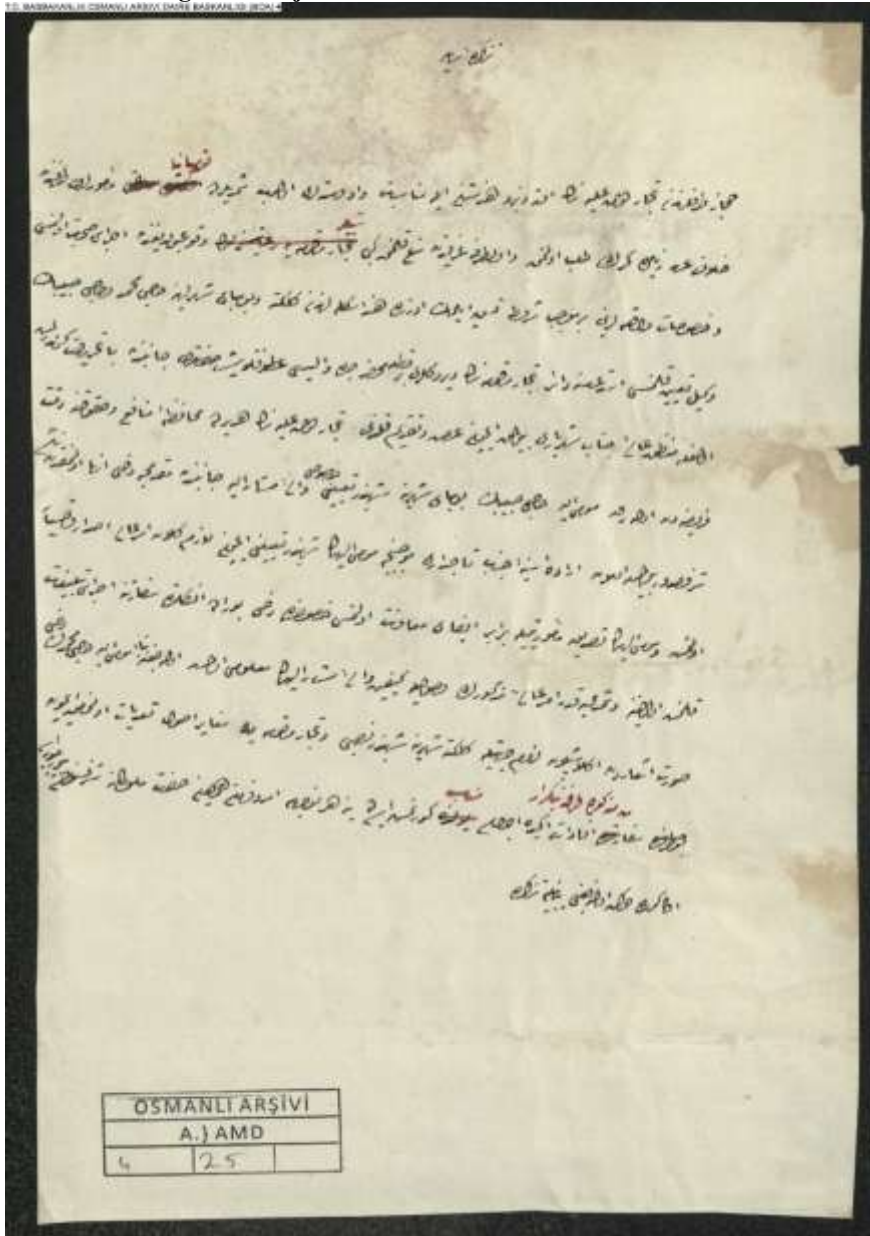
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Author Full Name	Article Title
SUBRAMANYAM, S	NOTES ON THE 16TH-CENTURY BENGAL TRADE
Chenck, Sushanta	Coastal Andries and the Bay of Bengal Trade Network
Chaudhury, Sushil	Armenians in Bengal Trade and Politics in the Eighteenth Century
Rajesh, M. N.	Taxes and Bengal Trade Routes and Long Distance Exchange with Reference to Silver
van den Boogert, Martin H.	Ottoman Shippers in the 16th-Century Levant Trade
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van der Kiste, Julia	Enriching 'Friendship': A Dutch-Ottoman Alliance for Trade and Jewish Settlement Rights
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MARINOSCU, P	THE TRADE OF WALLACHIA WITH THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE BETWEEN 1794 AND 1811
Frangakis-Syrett, Elias	Production and Trade of Cotton in Ottoman Western Anatolia c. 1700-1804
Edinç, Elvan	Change in the Ottoman Maritime Trade and Securities in the 19th century
Perini, Philippe	For Pilgrims and for Trade: Merchants and Public Works in Ottoman Istanbul
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Falst, Albert	The Customs Treaty Records About the Trade between the Ottoman Empire and Germany (1862)
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Table 2: The process of Indigo manufacture in India (Bengal)

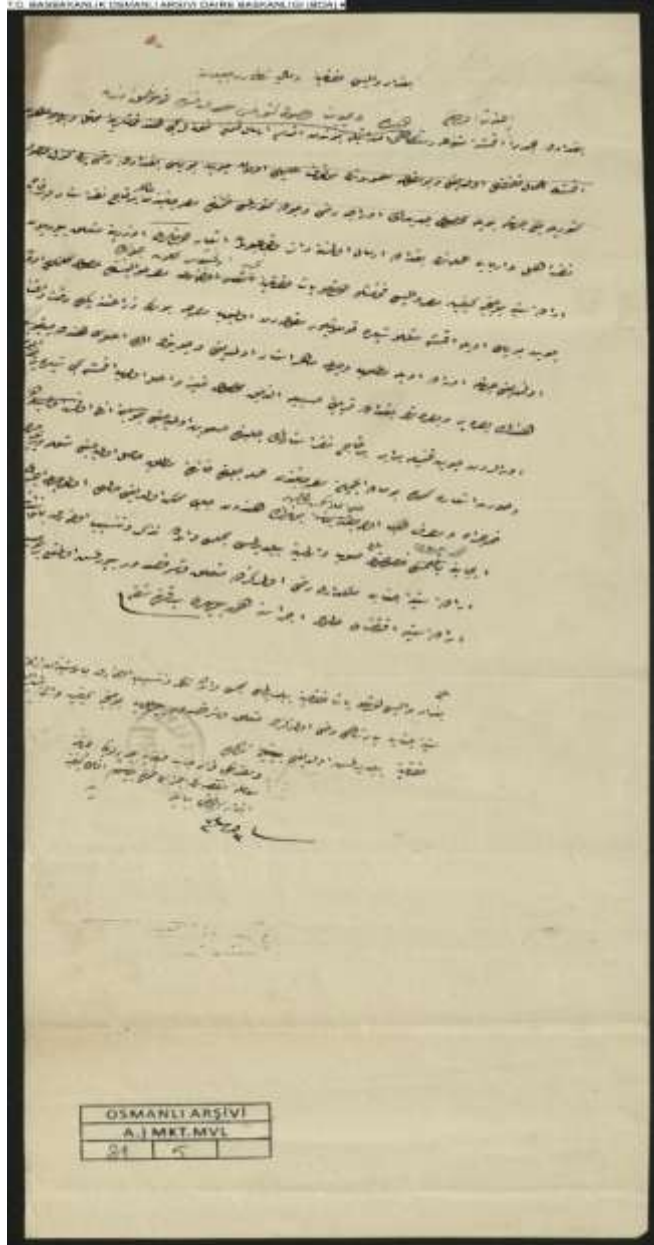


Source: <https://briencounter.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/indigo1887.jpg> (Access: 04.07.2025).

3. Appointment of Consuls in Bombay and Calcutta to Assist Ottoman Merchants Traveling from Hejaz to India



4. Proposal to bring experts from India (Bengal) for Indigo production in Ottoman Baghdad, rather than relying on Egyptian experts.



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