

# **ORIGINS AND ESTABLISHMENT OF THE INDIAN BUSINESS COMMUNITY IN MALTA<sup>§</sup>**

***Mark-Anthony Falzon\****

**Abstract.** In Malta, there is currently a well-established business community of Indian descent. Its origins lie in the development that characterised the history of “the Indian sub-continent” which led to various migrating waves across the world. Its establishment and further development in Malta were however strongly influenced by the environment of the host country. This article analyses how the combination of these factors contributed to the present situation of the Maltese business community of Indian descent.

## **Introduction**

A number of shops in Valletta, Malta’s capital city, are owned and run by persons of Indian origin. These people belong to a well-established and respected business community which has integrated fully into Maltese society and at the same time remains proud of its roots. This article is an investigation into the origins and growth of Indian business in Malta. It locates the Indians of Malta within the wider historical and geographical framework within which they belong. It focuses specifically on the local development of Indian business in terms of lines of trade, links with other localities in the Mediterranean and elsewhere, and social relations. This approach reflects the fact that a proper understanding of Indian business in Malta can only be gained by looking at the wider picture of the global

---

<sup>§</sup> This article is derived from a broader study on Sindhi commerce and diaspora. The author is deeply indebted to Dr. James Laidlaw of King’s College, Cambridge, for his long-term support and scholarly guidance. This field research was funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and the Emslie Horniman Scholarship Fund of the Royal Anthropological Institute.

\* Mark-Anthony Falzon, Ph.D. (Cantab.) is a graduate and life member of Clare Hall in the University of Cambridge.

diaspora of Indian traders. Information for this article derives from two sources. The first is the Malta National Archives, which yields 88 records pertaining to 10 Indian firms and dating from 1887 to 1928.<sup>1</sup> The second is anthropological fieldwork conducted intermittently between 1995 and 2000 in Malta, London, and Bombay (Mumbai) which relies extensively on oral history as narrated by several senior traders.

## The Hindu Sindhis

All Indian traders living and working in Malta belong to the *bhaiband jati*<sup>2</sup> within the Hindu Sindhi ethno-linguistic group. Locally they are known simply by the generic term '*l-Indjani*' ('the Indians') – this is due to the fact that, as opposed to places such as London or Bombay, there are no significant populations of Indians from other ethnic groups to compare them with.

Hindu Sindhis (henceforth 'Sindhis') originate in the province of Sind which from 1843 to 1947 was the northwesternmost province of British India; Sind became part of the newly-formed nation-state of Pakistan with the Independence of India and the Partition of the country in 1947. When the British conquered Sind and annexed it to their Indian possessions in 1843, the province had for several hundred years been ruled by a series of Muslim dynasties. Prior to the Muslim conquest, the population of Sind was predominantly Hindu with a strong Buddhist presence (Maclean 1989: 12-4); by the time of the British annexation however, it was mainly Muslim with roughly one fifth of the population being Hindu. The Hindus of Sind were mostly employed in trade and small business, although a very small number of them served as administrators to the Muslim Talpur Mirs and aristocracy and, later, to the British.

In a nutshell, there were two major waves of population movement out of Sind. The first, which originated with the British annexation of the province in 1843, was confined to a group of merchants from the small

---

1. Petitions to the Chief Secretary of Government (CSG), 1885 to 1930.

2. The word 'jati' may broadly be translated as 'sub-caste' in which case the 'caste' would be Hindu Sindhis as a whole. One should keep in mind however that 'jati' simply means 'type' and that in the Indian context the terms 'caste', 'sub-caste', 'jati', 'ethnic group', 'linguistic group', and 'regionality' are often used interchangeably.

town of Hyderabad (to be distinguished from the city of Hyderabad in central India) who, leaving their families behind, struck out in search of business opportunities to places as far apart as Panama and the Straits Settlements (today's Singapore). Because the wares they sold and traded in originally were the handicrafts of Sind ('Sind works'), these migrants were known as 'Sindworkis' and the type of long-distance translocal commerce they practised as 'Sindwork'. This first significant population movement therefore was centred solely around trade and may be described as a 'trade diaspora' (see Cohen 1971).

The second migration on the other hand was a direct result of the political and social strife that came with the Partition of India in 1947. Sindhis left their homes in the fledgling Pakistan en masse and moved to India or to locations such as Malta where they already had considerable business interests. Since then the Sindhis that had settled in India after Partition have participated in a third migration: the so-called 'Indian diaspora' which has seen millions of people move out of the subcontinent in search of opportunity.

Sindhi migration therefore is typical of modern mass migrations from India (and South Asia generally), which have taken place within two broad contexts: the first, that of Imperialism within which Indians left the subcontinent as indentured labourers or (as in the case of the Sindhis) independent traders; the second, that of free migration to western countries and the Middle East in search of better job opportunities in all sectors (Jayawardena 1973, Clarke *et al.* 1990). As a result of this series of migrations, Sindhis today are dispersed in well over a hundred countries. They retain a degree of cohesion that manifests itself in marriage and kinship practices, in the politics of group identity and, most notably, in the types of business relations they engage in.

### **The Sindwork Diaspora and the Mediterranean Link**

It is mainly the first wave of diaspora that concerns us here. Sindwork and its long-distance networks of trade emanating from Hyderabad was also but not only the product of historical contingency: a number of causal factors were at play. First, the deposal of the Talpur Mirs by the British caused a sudden breakdown in the patterns of consumption of high-

quality handicrafts by local ruling elites with the result that established Hindu Sindhi traders had to locate new markets for their goods. Second, the world in the second half of the nineteenth century was one of rapidly growing opportunities and a British-dominated, expanding world economy. This happened on two levels: first, the growing ease of communication and transport in north-west India and Sind itself, and second, the global reality of a growing exchange of goods and people often across vast distances.

British rule expanded the limits of communications and transport in Sind. In 1889 for example, the Indus Valley Railways that linked up with major lines in India to connect Karachi to Delhi was completed. In 1864, the Indo-European Telegraph Department laid a submarine cable between Karachi and Fao (in what was then Turkish Arabia), joining the Turkish line of telegraph and therefore linking up Sind (Karachi) with Europe (Baillie 1899; Choksey 1983; Hughes, 1874). The efficiency of the telegraph as a means of communication was quickly realised in the subcontinent.

More importantly the Suez Canal, opened in 1871, proved a major impetus behind the increasing level of transport and communication. In 1891-2 for instance, Sind participated in some sort of foreign trade with 37 countries as compared to 18 in 1871-2.<sup>3</sup>

The argument here is not merely that Sind was linked up with the world in terms of enterprise and trade, but that this world was itself expanding rapidly due partly to the British 'policy of adventure' and cultivation of free trade. Besides, the case of Sind is typical in that the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed the beginning of large scale communication technologies with the diffusion of the telegraph and the invention of the telephone. The electric telegraph in particular had been widely in existence since 1837 but grew into a communication network, connecting the world on a large scale, as soon as it could rely on the diffusion of electricity (Castells 1996: 34-9). The period, that has been described as the 'second Industrial Revolution' (see for instance Singer *et al*, 1958), was one of confluence of different technological developments that created new ways of producing, travelling, and communicating. This

---

3. Annual Statement of the Trade and Navigation of the Province of Sind, 1870-1, 1890-1 (Royal Commonwealth Society Collection, Cambridge).

point is essential in order to understand the link between a small landlocked town in Sind and a Mediterranean island: although the move out of Sind by Hyderabad traders was a reaction to local circumstances, it was feasible only because of the global realities of the latter half of the nineteenth century. This then was the infrastructure which made possible the bridging of geographical boundaries through trade and brought the first Sindworkis to Maltese shores.

The first Sindwork firms were established in Hyderabad around 1860. After this date one comes across Hyderabad traders setting up business in several places around the world. They arrived in Japan a few years after the 1868 Meiji Restoration (Chugani 1995: 23); in 1890 Bulchand, a *bhaiband* from Hyderabad, landed on the shores of the Gold Coast in what today is Ghana (Mahtani, 1997); around 1880, Sindhi traders went to Ceylon (Chattopadhyaya 1979); in 1870, Sindhi firms established themselves in Gibraltar, and in Sierra Leone via Mediterranean routes in 1893 (Merani and Van Der Laan 1979: 240); and in Hong Kong, a small Sindhi community was active by the late nineteenth century (White 1994: 5).

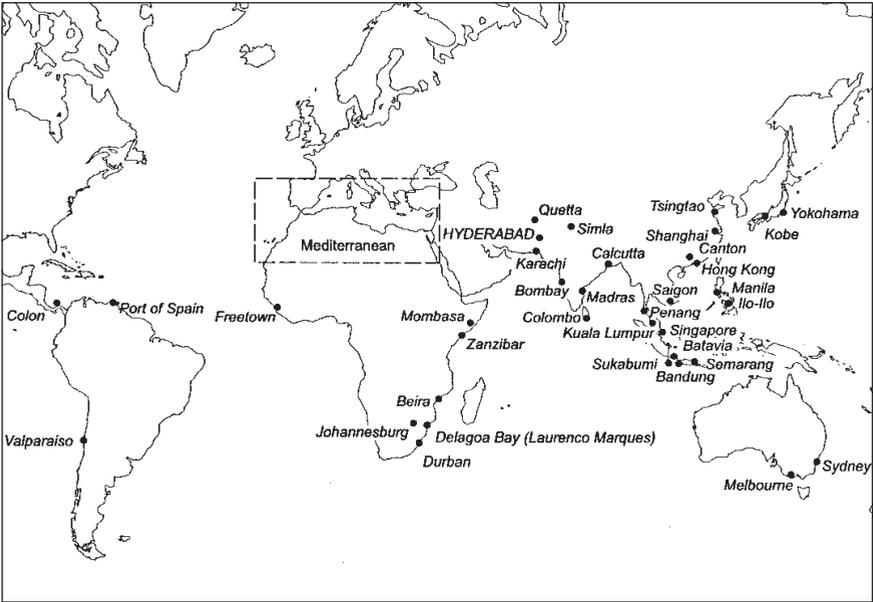
The first thrust of the diaspora seems to have been in the direction of the Mediterranean – Markovits (2000: 117) holds that their first destination was Egypt – and later through India to the Far East. The Mediterranean then as now was a favourite destination with travellers and tourists from Britain and the industrial countries of northern Europe, and as such constituted a profitable market for the handicrafts of Sind – which were of high repute among connoisseurs of ‘Oriental’ (in Edward Said’s sense) artefacts. Around the same time the ‘overland route’ to India through the Mediterranean and the Red Sea (rather than round the Cape of Good Hope) became popular with the coming of steamers – P. & O. vessels, for example, began plying this route in 1840. Passengers would embark at the ports of the north and sail round through Gibraltar, disembarking at Alexandria and proceeding by Nile steamer to Cairo; from Cairo they went by carriage to Suez where they embarked on another boat down the Red Sea and frequently changed into a third one at Aden according to whether their final destination was Bombay, Calcutta, or Madras (Tindall 1982: 93, 175). The names of these places come up again and again in the papers of Sindworki firms from the mid-nineteenth century. The Mediterranean, then, with its shiploads of travellers eager to buy into the idea of ‘authentic’ souvenirs, provided an attractive market for the Sindworkis.

Later, as Sindworkis diversified into curios and silk and started to draw upon sources other than the local production of Sind, they found excellent centres of production and sourcing in India and the Far East, particularly Bombay (where many Sindwork firms set up depots and, in some cases, offices functioning in conjunction with Hyderabad) and Japan. The main line of trade of Sindwork was the export of silk and curios from the East to the West. (Here the points of the compass pertain to the provenance of producers / consumers rather than their location – in the geographical sense, an Indian-made curio sold to a British traveller in Singapore, for instance, was moving from West to East.) Firms were quick to open new branches and expand their network to places as far away as Panama and Australia, generally following the lines of international travel – not surprisingly, their expansion often converged with the advance of the British Empire, itself the major actor in the large-scale international human interactions of the time. Maps 1 (and its inset Map 2), compiled from the letterheads of 10 firms that had a branch in Malta around 1917, show the locations of Sindwork activities during that period. Note that, even allowing for the limitations of these maps (by no means all Hyderabad firms were represented in Malta), Sindwork appears as a truly global trade diaspora.

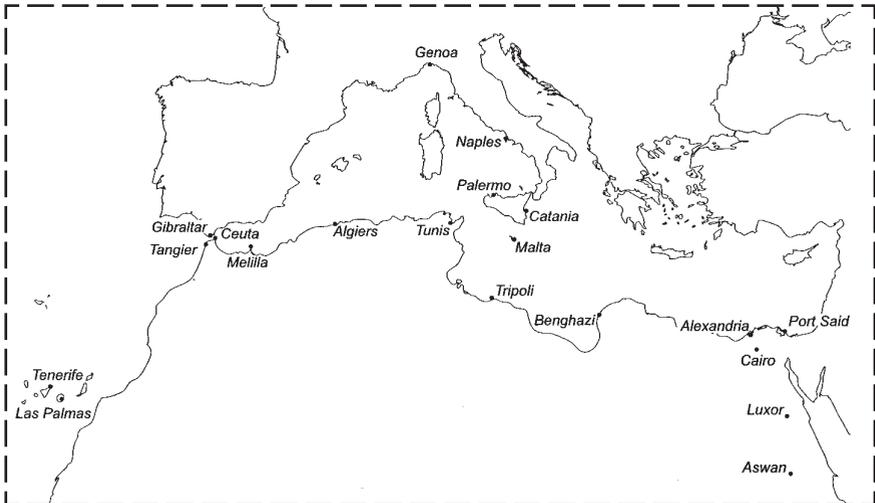
### **Sindworkis in Malta: Tourism and the Trade in ‘Curios’**

The earliest record of Sindworki activities in Malta dates from 1887; then, the firm Pohoomull Brothers applied to the colonial authorities for the release from customs of one case containing ‘oriental goods and some fancy weapons as knives, daggers, etc.’ Since the application states the firm’s intention to sell these wares in its shop, it is evident that it had been operating in Malta for some time to move established a shop (CSG No. 4949 / 1887). By the first decade of the twentieth century, at least 10 Sindwork firms had set up business in Malta. For many of these firms, Malta was one node in a trade network spanning the Far East, the Mediterranean, East and West Africa, and South America.

Although the main trade was that of the export of silk and curio items from the Far East and India respectively to the tourist and visitor entrepôts of the Mediterranean and South America, there were significant subsidiary currents of a more localised aspect. Thus, for example,



**Map 1. Combined branches of ten Sindwork firms as listed in business letterheads printed in Malta (see also inset on below)**



**Map 2. The Mediterranean (inset to Map 1)**

there were circum-Mediterranean networks which were engaged in the re-export of goods that did not sell well in a particular place, or in the export of locally-manufactured products. In 1916, for instance, one Ramchand Kilumal applied for permission to export to Salonika (Greece) £25 worth of silver filigree, £50 worth of artificial silk goods, £50 worth of Maltese lace, £25 worth of ‘fancy’ embroidery, £10 worth of curios, and £50 in cash – the intention was to open a shop in Salonika, ostensibly on the grounds of slack sales in Malta (CSG No. 1466 /1916).

The typical Sindhi establishment in Malta was an import business and a retail outlet on the main shopping thoroughfare of the Island, Strada Reale (later Kingsway and today Republic Street) in the capital Valletta. As photographs from the period show, the shops were generally well laid-out and the wares arranged in an attractive way – this was a luxury tourist market that required central locations and a quality image. Apart from the main shop and business premises, many firms ran smaller secondary shops as well as peddling operations; records show that Sindhi *bhaibands* from Hyderabad were brought over to Malta to work as pedlars – these operated as ‘bumboatmen’, itinerant waterborne retailers who plied the harbour of Valletta and sold their wares on board ships.

It is worth keeping in mind that the factor behind the presence of Sindhis in Malta was the geographical location of the island within the context of the British Empire. Most Mediterranean shipping routes included Malta on their itinerary and this meant a large presence of travellers, troops, and administrators stopping over briefly and exploring Valletta, including the main shopping area that was situated a couple of streets away from the harbour. The dependence of Sindhi firms on tourists and stop-overs was evident in the spatial location of their businesses. It represented a three-pronged effort aimed at maximising on the time the visitors spent in Malta: the main shop/s on Strada Reale, a secondary shop/s on the streets leading from the harbour to Strada Reale (such as the area around Victoria Gate), and pedlars plying their wares around the harbour itself. From the time a ship dropped anchor to the time it left Malta, the visitor was tempted constantly by the Sindworkis’ wares.

Their dependence on the tourist sector was also evident in the type of goods they sold. Up to around 1930 Sindhi shops in Malta were mostly engaged in the curio and luxury textiles trade; a typical Sindwork

shopfront sign from 1907, for instance, read 'Grand Indo-Egyptian Persian Bazaar – Suppliers to the German Imperial Family.' They catered for the Orientalist tastes of tourists and visitors and made little effort to explore the local market. This is not to say that they had no Maltese customers; turn of the century Japanese ceramics, one of the lines that Sindhis dealt in, survive in many a Maltese home today. Shops were stocked with Japanese ceramics and antimony wares, brassware, silk items of clothing such as kimonos imported mainly from Japan, silver filigree, embroideries, and curiosities.

Interestingly, another popular item was Maltese lace. The local lace industry had gained in profile during the latter half of the nineteenth century through exposition at various International Exhibitions and the much-publicised personal liking to Maltese lace of Queen Victoria. This created an international demand and by the turn of the century it is estimated that up to 7,000 Gozitan (Maltese lace was in fact mainly produced in Gozo, Malta's sister island) women were involved in the cottage industry of lace-making (Azzopardi 1991, 1998). Sindwork firms were quick to capitalise on this demand and, apart from selling it in their shops in Malta, used their international networks to export substantial quantities of lace mainly to North Africa but also to places as far apart as Batavia (Java) and Johannesburg.<sup>4</sup> By the first decade of the century, in fact, most Sindwork firms in Malta were advertising themselves as commission agents and/or retailers of Maltese lace. It is also possible that some of them were contracting the manufacture of lace specifically for export.

The Sindworki firms seem to have been well-organised: they had letter-heads printed professionally for their correspondence for instance, and they also enrolled the services of the town's more established lawyers when relating to the colonial government. In all cases the head-offices, where the important decisions regarding the firm network were taken and personnel enrolled, were in Hyderabad; the telegraph was widely used for rapid communication between Malta and Sind. Most Sindworkis present in Malta at the time were salaried employees.

---

4. CSG Nos 2941/1917, 1886/1917 respectively. The firm Dhunamall Chellaram, then one of the major Sindwork firms, applied for permission to export a parcel containing Maltese lace to Batavia; the firm Tarachand and Sons applied for permission to mail Maltese lace to P. Lalchand in Johannesburg through the medium of the Anglo-Egyptian Bank of Malta.

**Table 1**  
**Sindwork Firms Operating in Malta during Given Periods of Review, and Number of Relative Personnel**

Firm	Period under Review	Number of Personnel
N. Tarachand & Sons	1917 to 1922	3
K. Gopaldas	1918 to 1920	2
Tahilram & Sons	1918 to 1921	7
N. Ramsami	1919 to 1922	6
Pohoomull Bros	1899 to 1922	17
Hotchand & Co.	1917 to 1922	23
Ramchand & Thanvardas	1916 to 1920	9
Dhunamall Chellaram	1912 to 1928	14
Udhavadas & Co.	1916 to 1922	11
G. Seeromal	1918 to 1920	4

Each firm had a manager and a number of shop assistants (who apparently often doubled as cooks and servants to the managers) depending on the size of the firm. The owners of the firms are recorded as visiting Malta from time to time, presumably to check on the progress of the branch and scout for new ideas/markets.

Table 1 shows the number of personnel associated with each firm during particular review periods (generally these records derive from requests for permission for the movement of personnel during wartime and/or periods of restrictions). Some of the firms were clearly sizeable, generally those with a wide international network and well-established business – Pohoomull Bros, Dhunamall Chellaram, and Udhavadas & Co, for instance, were all major Sindwork companies with branches in several countries.

Employees were recruited on a two-and-a-half or three year contract basis. Potential recruits were generally located by word of mouth, inevitable in a small town like Hyderabad; one case mentions specifically that an employee was enrolled through an uncle of his who was on good terms with the owner of the firm, (CSG No. 1822/1906). The passage to and from Hyderabad was paid for by the firm; in the few cases in which salary is mentioned, it appears that half the employees' monthly salary was sent back home to Hyderabad, and the other half given to the

employees in lump sum when their contracts ended (this was probably only the case with junior employees). During their period of employment they lived together in housing provided by the firm, usually in Valletta itself or its suburb, Floriana. Neither managers nor junior employees were allowed to bring their wives and dependents over from Hyderabad and it was only after Partition in 1947 that Sindhi men in Malta were joined by their families. There are several instances of relatives working together in the same firm: one Metharam Kirpalani, for instance, was working with his brother-in-law Thanvardas Nanumal, the proprietor of the firm N. Ramsami; Khushir Tahilram, the son of Tahilram Thanvardas of Tahilram & Sons, worked in Malta for at least a year in 1915; in 1919 Parmanand Udhavadas petitioned for his nephew to be allowed to travel to Malta in order to manage affairs; Ramchand Kilumal, of Ramchand & Thanvardas, was in joint business with his brother Gopaldas Kilumal (CSG Nos 726/1919, 2486/1916, 1499/1919, 698/1920).

Relations between employees and their managers were not without their tensions. There are instances of employees complaining to the authorities for being treated badly or sacked summarily by their managers. Two examples are particularly interesting. In the first case the pleader is the employee's brother and is writing from Hyderabad to the colonial authorities in Malta; he holds that 'it is a well known fact here (in Hyderabad), even the local papers here decry these Sind Work merchants as notoriously cruel and a regular source of harassment for their servants (employees), whose services they secure with great inducements and promises, which they honour more in breach than in fulfilment,' (CSG No. 1822/1906, my parentheses). In the second case, a number of employees working for four different firms combined to write a letter complaining about their conditions of work. They held that the average duration of their working day was of more than fifteen hours (7a.m. to 10/11p.m.), and that they were not allowed days of rest such as Sundays and religious holidays; they also said that they had to shoulder 'heavy responsibilities.' They asked the authorities to intervene on their behalf so that they could be given 'half a day off on Sundays and the other important days of our religion', and added that some other Sindworki firms already provided these benefits. The workers complained that their managers kept them in line by threatening to report any insubordination to the firms' headquarters in Hyderabad (CSG No. 1149 / 1918).

## The Corporacy of the Pre-Partition Sindwork Diaspora

One of the author's first encounters with a Sindhi in Malta was with a former trader in his 90s who had himself established a Sindwork business spanning over fifteen countries and who had spent most of his life travelling. During the conversation we were surrounded by a lively troupe of great-grandchildren and other relatives, who were being kept in order by his sprightly wife. Something had kept the man's life together as a member of a group and a family. In order to exchange information and goods, people need to communicate; in order to employ people and to trade, they need long-term relations of trust; and in order to reproduce their way of life they require institutions such as the family. How did human interaction and the establishment of stable social relations of various sorts function in a society where men were constantly on the move in search of trading opportunities? In order to find answers to these questions we must once again broaden our analysis and think of the Sindwork diaspora as a global whole.

First, it is important to understand that Sindwork in pre-Partition times was a trade diaspora with a centre. Although the men involved in Sindwork spent most of their lives visiting their various branches, it was in Hyderabad that their homing instincts converged. It is simply not correct to say, as some Sindhis do today, that Hyderabad was 'a sort of retirement home' – it was that and much more. The head-offices of the Sindwork *kothis* (firms) were mostly located in the Shahi Bazaar area of the town, where the heads of the firms sat in their *pedhis*<sup>5</sup> and directed their affairs. The pre-Partition Sindwork diaspora, therefore, was a trade network whose social relations came together in Hyderabad.

Hyderabad was the centre of life in another way. Before 1947 very few women used to join their husbands overseas. The few men who were accompanied on their travels by their wives were generally managers or senior employees who had been trading in a particular place for a long period of time. Since the Sindworkis' business was so spatially-shifty it made more sense for men to commute between Hyderabad and their

---

5. A *pedhi* is the Indian counterpart of the business office, usually consisting of a room with a floor-mat where the businessman squats surrounded by correspondence, samples, and account books, and conducts his affairs with employees, customers or other businessmen. It is a common sight in business districts in India.

various destinations than for them to become serial home-movers. In terms of the long-term stability of family and society therefore, leaving the women behind was probably the most feasible option. It has to be remembered that the women who were left behind were still part of a functional family – in the sense of the patrilocal extended family, with the families of married brothers living together under one roof and eating from the same kitchen.

Hyderabad was also the place where the personnel of the diaspora were recruited. There were two means by which employees were located. The first was through kinship links: a Sindwork boss looking to expand his network would first hive his sons off to the various branches, then take on young blood relatives or men related to him by marriage. The second means was through circles of patronage within the *bhaiband* community in Hyderabad. It is clear that the more successful firm owners were under a constant pressure to take on young men known to them or their managers or families through personal contact in Hyderabad itself. It was common for an older member of the community, or someone with social connections, to plead for employment on behalf of a son or a younger member of the family – this was done by both men and women.

As regards employment itself, there were two systems in operation. The first was based on the old *gumashta* (agent) system whereby the owner of the firm employed agents to run his various branches. These agents were a type of working partners – they worked on a commission basis, and had some degree of autonomy. The second and by far the commonest type was that of the salaried employee. Employees were recruited generally on a three-year written contract that bound both employer and employee for the duration of that period. *Bhaiband* boys were enrolled at a young age (fifteen or so was a typical age for a son, slightly older for a relative/acquaintance, to leave school and join a business) and assigned to a particular branch.

Life as a junior employee of a Sindwork firm was not easy. The men were usually housed in dormitory-style accommodation although senior employees often had separate quarters. Working hours were long (typically 12 to 15 hours a day) and employees usually had only half a day off on Sunday – although, as the litigations from Malta show, this was by no means a fixture. Informants who remember life in the firms told me that

rather than a job in the conventional sense, Sindwork was an all-embracing way of life. Employees were expected to be at the service of their managers round the clock – one informant even remembers having to massage his manager’s feet after a day’s work, and another told me how his manager would rob him of his few free hours on Sunday to help him sort out the correspondence.

It is evident that as Sindwork developed the gap between employers and employees, the ‘bosses’ and those who were ‘in service’, widened. The former had business experience, trading capital, established networks of patronage, and all the trappings of prestige and affluence; the latter lived more modest lives that rested upon the hope of accumulating enough capital and experience to be able to set up their own business. Although *bhaiband* literally means ‘brotherhood’, it is clear that the brothers were on unequal terms.

Originally, wherever the Sindworkis went, they tended to keep to themselves and form little enclaves. They did not necessarily mix with other groups of Indians present in their destinations as traders or indentured workers. By the mid-twentieth century, trading associations were being formed by Sindhis around the world, usually aimed at protecting their interests as a group. Yet even within these enclaves, competition was rife. Individual firms expected complete loyalty from their employees and did not encourage them to socialise widely, especially not with the employees of other firms.

Again, as the joint petition for better conditions from Malta shows, the employees did not necessarily subscribe to this idea. Members of particular firms ate and worked together, slept under the same roof, and sometimes did puja (worship) together – this was partly because the risk of trade information leaking to another Sindwork firm was a constant worry to the employers and considered to be too great to encourage a wider socialisation.

## **Post-1930s Diversification**

To return to a more localised perspective, around the early 1930s a change took place in the Sindwork business based in Malta: the main

companies withdrew their interests. According to the memory of Sindhis living in Malta today, this was due to falling profits. This explanation is probably correct given that the worldwide economic recession and the resulting flop in tourism dealt a heavy blow to the silk and curio industry – the firm Udhavadas & Co, for instance, was one of the casualties (Markovits 2000: 143). However, the shops that had belonged to these firms did not close down; rather, they were sold to the former employees (generally to the managers) of the firms, who were ready to operate at smaller profits.

From the late 1930s onwards therefore, Sindhi business in Malta was in the hands of the erstwhile managers of the Sindwork firms who had become owners of the retail outlets, and their descendants. Apart from the close relatives of the traders who moved from Hyderabad to Malta (often via a number of intermediate stops in India or elsewhere) to join their menfolk permanently, Partition produced no significant influx of Sindhis along the established model of ‘splintering off’ the major firms and recruiting new people from India. There were two reasons behind this. First, Malta being a very small island with limited market possibilities, it was not seen as a land of opportunity as were places such as Hong Kong and Africa. Second, and more importantly, from 1952 to 1985 tight immigration laws meant that the only Sindhi men who could move to Malta from elsewhere were those who got married to local Sindhi girls. As one informant complained, ‘we wanted to do favours to our cousins, but we couldn’t. In 1952, the doors were closed and we couldn’t bring anyone to Malta. For 33 years not a single person came from India.’ Sindhi business in Malta has therefore tended to be passed down and / or to change hands within / between the same 8-10 families. The local development of Sindhi business is therefore a very interesting case study in that it shows a closed system in terms of number of personnel – even if these people remained well-connected in terms of both family (through marriage, that is) and business to Sindhis across the world.

This shift in the personnel structure coincided with a general change of line. Although a few shops continued to deal in the old line of curios and luxury textiles, many of them started to diversify and explore the local market, concentrating on a wider variety of textiles. By the beginning of World War Two the strength of Sindhi businesses in Malta had become the import, wholesale, and retail of textiles mainly for the local market.

Many of the shops specialising in curios and luxury textiles had shifted towards and diversified into the general textile sector. This proved to be a wise choice. The post-War period in Malta was characterised by the growing affluence and changing expectations of Maltese society – indeed, old people in Malta today tend to differentiate strongly between the lifestyle which they led before and that which they led after the War. The textiles sector gained steadily in importance as Maltese women generally (as opposed to a small urban elite, that is) became aware of fashions and started making clothes that went beyond utilitarian principles and experimented with styles and type of textiles. In the period between the late 1950s and the mid-1970s Sindhi retailers enjoyed a veritable bonanza of business. Through their family and trading connections in the Far East and notably Japan, they had access to affordable and good quality sources of textiles. During that period they had little competition from Maltese businessmen and monopolised the textiles market almost completely – the saying among Maltese seamstresses was that “if you are looking for quality textiles, ask for them at the Indians’ shops”.

Things were to change yet again, however. During the last quarter of the century Malta’s female workforce increased and diversified even as sex discrimination was erased officially from wages in 1971. This meant more women with less time and more cash to spare who needed smart clothes for everyday use, and who were therefore prone to buying ready-mades. Sindhi businesses were quick to respond: by the mid-1980s, almost all of the textile shops in Valletta had changed their line to ready-mades, with an emphasis on the lower-middle end of the market. This time competition with Maltese-owned businesses was intense but the Sindhis were able to combine competitive prices with relatively good quality and managed to hold their ground in this new sector very well indeed. The proliferation of Maltese-owned boutiques in fact offered new opportunities for Sindhis, since almost all of them became large-scale wholesalers as well as retailers; previously they had tended to concentrate on import and retail. Most boutiques owned and run by Maltese were and still are small local ventures that rely on wholesalers with established import links for their stocks. Sindhis relied on their knowledge and established networks of translocal trade (one should keep in mind that they could draw upon a long history of Sindwork) to supply these small retailers. Today around 19 Sindhi-owned businesses deal in ready-mades while four deal in textiles (see Table 2). The latter specialise in high quality textiles – there is still a demand for this upper end of the

**Table 2**  
**Number of Shops in Different Lines of Trade Operated**  
**and Owned by Sindhis in Malta, 1999**

Line	Number of Shops/Concerns
Women's Clothing	14
General Clothing	5
Souvenirs	5
Bazaar-type / Gifts / Nick-Nacks	5
Textiles	4
Children's Clothing	2
Fashion Accessories	2
Restaurant	4
Commission Agent	2
Toys	1
Supplier to Industry	1
Real Estate	1

market since Maltese women prefer to have clothes made to measure for special occasions such as weddings.

Not all Sindhi businesses made the shift from curios to textiles to ready-mades, however. Two or three continued to operate in the bazaar-type line and to cater for tourists as well as for an increasing number of Maltese people looking for off-beat gifts or cheap home decorations. These bazaar-type shops were very explorative and innovative in their choice of lines. In the early 1980s for instance, cheap electronics such as watches, calculators, and games sold very well indeed; again, the Sindhis' connections in Hong Kong and other mass-production centres of the Far East placed them in an excellent position to import, retail, and wholesale to Maltese shopkeepers. Their shops, situated as they were on Malta's prime shopping street, were almost assured brisk business provided the product was attractive.

The central location of their shops also meant that the Sindhis were excellently placed to tap one major economic boom when it came. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s tourism grew dramatically from an insignificant trickle and by 1989 the annual figure of one million visitors had been reached. A number of Sindhi businessmen (generally those in the bazaar-type line) ventured into souvenirs and at present a significant

number of souvenir shops in Valletta belong to Sindhis – at one point, one enterprising individual ran a chain of four shops, all situated on the main street and all of which had belonged at one time to the Sindwork firms.

Since the 1970s Sindhis in Malta have ventured increasingly into new lines. One business set up in 1972 specialises in supply to industry – his company employs 19 Maltese people and imports and distributes a range of products used by the local manufacturing industry. A few have opened Indian restaurants as a subsidiary business to their import and wholesale trade; these are staffed by chefs and waiters brought over specially from India (not Sindhis, though) and two are co-owned with Maltese partners. One young entrepreneur whose father is in the import, wholesale, and retail of souvenirs and bazaar-type goods has set up a separate real estate agency, again in partnership with a Maltese businessman.

Worthy of mention is the fact that Sindhi traders in Malta came together in 1955 to form the Indian Merchants' Association (Malta). This indicates a change in the spatial perception of business. Before Partition, when Sindworki firms were for the most part based in Hyderabad, local operations in Malta and elsewhere were seen as 'branches', as extensions of the company that is. The morphological metaphor of the branch linked geographical extensions across space to the main trunk based in Hyderabad: the tree was the firm. After Partition, when it became clear that an eventual return to Sind was unlikely, local operations were visualised as pockets of business, located quanta of firms; there was no longer a 'branch' connecting them to Hyderabad. The Association was never very active in actual terms and in 1989 it was renamed the Maltese-Indian Community, this fact supporting my argument for a shift in perception towards a located ethnic group. Today it concerns itself with community activities such as Diwali parties and running the temple and community centre.

The general trend is that while in the early days of its establishment Sindhi business in Malta was a specialised operation, it has moved in the direction of diversification, higher local investment, and embeddedness in the Maltese business world. The various lines Sindhis have explored are in part a result of local market conditions, but they are also products of connections with Sindhi businessmen living around the world which have enabled them to integrate in local economic structures.

## **Conclusion**

In Malta, the development of Indian (Sindhi) business has to be understood in terms of a small and somewhat-restricted (because of immigration laws) community operating within the context of a small nation-state with limited and shifting local markets. On the other hand, this community is part of a much broader global diaspora spanning well over 100 countries. Historically as well as in the contemporary reality, this translocal connectivity has given Sindhis an edge in business and ensured their long-term survival. *L-Indjani* have been part of Malta's commercial landscape for the last 115-odd years and they look set to endure as such.

## **References**

- AZZOPARDI, C. (1991) *Gozo Lace: An Introduction to Lace-making in the Maltese Islands*. Gozo: The author.
- AZZOPARDI, C. (1998) *Gozo Lace: A Selection of Bobbin Lace Patterns Designed by Dun Guzepp Diacono (1847-1924)*. Gozo: The author.
- BAILLIE, A. F. (1899) "Sind." In *India, Ceylon, Straits Settlements, British North Borneo, Hong Kong*, The British Empire Series, Vol. I: London: KeganPaul, Trench, Trübner: 74-93.
- CHOKSEY, R.D. (1983) "The Story of Sind," *An Economic Survey, 1843-1933*. Pune: Dastane Ramchandra.
- CASTELLS, M. (1996) "The Rise of the Network Society," *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Vol. 1: Oxford: Blackwell.
- CHATTOPADHYAYA, H. (1979) *Indians in Sri Lanka: A Historical Study*. Calcutta: O.P.S. Publishers Private.
- CHUGANI, A.G. (1995) *Indians in Japan: A Case Study of the Sindhis in Kobe*. Unpublished M.A. thesis submitted to the Graduate Division of the University of Hawaii, May 1995.
- CLARKE, C., PEACH, C. and VERTOVEC, S. (1990) "Introduction: Themes in the Study of the South Asian Diaspora." In Clarke *et al.* (eds) *South Asians Overseas: Migration and Ethnicity*. Cambridge: University Press: 1-29.
- COHEN, A. (1971) "Cultural Strategies in the Organization of Trading Diasporas." In Meillassoux, C. (ed.) *The Development of Indigenous Trade and Markets in West Africa*. Oxford: University Press: 266-81.

- HUGHES, A.W. (1874) *A Gazetteer of the Province of Sindh*. London: George Bell.
- JAYAWARDENA, C. (1973) "Migrants, Networks and Identities," *New Community*, Vol. 2: 353-7.
- MACLEAN, D.N. (1989) *Religion and Society in Arab Sind*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- MAHTANI, P. (1997) "Origins of the Indian Community in Ghana," *BR International*, 34 (12): 14-6.
- MARKOVITS, C. (2000) *The Global World of Indian Merchants 1750-1947: Traders of Sind from Bukhara to Panama*. Cambridge: University Press.
- MERANI, H.V. and VAN DER LAAN, H.L. (1979) "The Indian Traders in Sierra Leone," *African Affairs*, Vol. 78: 240-50.
- SINGER, C., HOLMYARD, E.J., HALL, A.R. and WILLIAMS, T.I. (eds) (1958) "A History of Technology," *The Industrial Revolution, c. 1750 to c. 1850*, Vol. 4: Oxford: Clarendon.
- TINDALL, G. (1982) *City of Gold: The Biography of Bombay*. London: Temple Smith.
- WHITE, B.S. (1994) *Turbans and Traders: Hong Kong's Indian Communities*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.