

Professor Magnus Marsden, Sussex Asia Centre, March 2019

Respected officials, honoured guests!

I am very happy to have been invited to this event in London this evening. It is a great honour that the organisers have asked me to speak for a few minutes on the theme: Afghan Traders: Past and Present.

Over the course of the past twenty years I have been following the activities of Afghan traders around the world.

My work started in the late 1990s in Chitral, a small district in northern Pakistan. At the time, some of Chitral's most lively businesses were run by families from Afghanistan, especially the provinces of Badakhshan and Panjshir.

In the mid-2000s, I travelled regularly to Afghanistan and Tajikistan. I saw how traders once active in Pakistan were increasingly involved in the trade in agricultural products between South Asia and Central Asia, largely using Afghanistan as a transit corridor.

In the late 2000s, I began to travel to the countries of the former Soviet Union – especially Russia and Ukraine – where I found that Afghan traders played a major role in the import of Chinese-made commodities.

From 2013 onwards, I have also been a regular visitor to China, especially the city of Yiwu. There are approximately 200 companies registered to Afghans in Yiwu. Based in the city, they trade in commodities between China and the entire world.

I have also visited other important centres of Afghan commercial activity in the present-day and the past: Bukhariya Street in Jeddah and Saudi Arabia, Zeytinburnu in Istanbul, Turkey, not to mention the markets of Deira in Dubai, Hamburg in Germany, and, last but not least, London.

What have I learned from my time spent with Afghan traders around the world?

First, I've discovered the importance of trust to doing business.

And I've come to understand that the trust that binds Afghan traders together crosses the boundaries of ethno-linguistic identity, the family and religious difference. The ongoing significance of ties between Muslim, Sikh and Hindu merchants in the settings in which Afghan traders work is an example of such cooperation. It also speaks to the important role that thinkers associated with the territories making up modern Afghanistan – most notably Al-Biruni – have played in the understanding Asia's religious pluralism. Trust forges cooperation in business in a way rarely as visible in politics. Afghanistan's politicians have a great deal to learn in this regard from the country's traders.

Second, I've learned that wherever Afghans go they integrate themselves into the societies in which they live.

This means they are regarded positively by local populations. It also makes their businesses competitive: integration leads to first-hand knowledge of the changing tastes of their customers. In this respect, it is well worth remembering the great Islamic philosopher of the 11th and 12th centuries, Muhammad Al Ghazali. Al Ghazali emphasised the role that trade played in connecting different cities and societies to one another.

Thirdly, I have come to understand the important role played by institution-building in the story of Afghan trade.

Traders build lasting institutions that coherently pool the types of knowledge and information that are important for business success.

Fourthly, I have learned about the importance of charity to Afghan trade.

Be they in Moscow, Yiwu or London, traders offer support to people in their country, especially in the context of calamitous events, such as natural disasters. Afghan traders support their own families in the countries in which they live. And by sending remittances they are a lifeline for their own extended families in Afghanistan and around the world. Here again it is worth remembering Muhammad al-Ghazali. He emphasised the relationship between ethics and commerce in Islam:

‘One who earns his livelihood, so long as he observes the ethics of learning with its condition ..., and does not aim at acquiring more nor put his reliance in his wealth or in his sufficiency, can also be one who trusts in divine providence’.¹

Fifthly, Afghan traders are politically astute.

They build meaningful relationships with the authorities of the countries in which they work. This allows them to work in some of the most complex political and environments in the world today.

Respected Guests!

It is often remarked that ‘trade is in the blood of Afghans’.

It is true that the transmission of knowledge about how to do business from generation-to-generation plays an important role in Afghan business success today and in the past. It is also the case that Afghans have been involved in trade in all the contexts mentioned above for centuries.

But you know more than I that the full story of Afghan commercial success is much more complicated than this.

Afghan business are successful above all because of the hard work invested into them by individuals and families.

They show extreme dedication to their commercial activities.

Afghan trade has globalised so successfully because Afghan traders are skilfully able to adapt to the settings in which they live.

What is the future of Afghan trade?

There is currently an important debate going-on amongst traders from Afghanistan themselves. Some argue that there is a need to jettison old traditions and ways of doing business and embrace new approaches. Others argue that only by maintaining their traditions will Afghans continue to be successful in their commercial activities.

The answer probably lies somewhere in-between these positions. Success is likely to be maintained both by building on existing knowledge and practices but also by adapting to changing realities. The

¹ Al-Ghazali, *Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence. Kitab al-tawhid wa'l tawakkul. Book XXXV of the Revival of the Religious Sciences Ihya' 'ulum al-din*, translated with an introduction and notes by David B. Burrell, Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2007.

world is changing faster than perhaps ever before. New policies – especially surrounding the need to formalise financial transactions - are impacting upon Afghan businesses wherever they work, from China to India and of course in Europe too. Today's event demonstrates that Afghans are responding effectively to pressures to change, while maintaining an important sense of community and shared purpose at the same time.

Finally, the time has now come for Afghan traders and business people themselves to play a leading role in generating more sustained attention to Afghan trade as an important and vital player in the country's past, present and future.

Such an ambition could be achieved through the careful direction of resources toward national education, heritage preservation, and historical and geographic literacy programmes, both within Afghanistan itself and in the global academy. The remarkable yet little understood achievements of Afghan traders represent an aspect of the country's past and present that should be side-lined from public images of Afghanistan no more. Bringing more attention to this history, will also be of great significance to new generations of Afghans around the world. They will be able to derive great pride from understanding the contributions made by Afghans to economy and culture in so many contexts across the world.

By joining you here this evening, I hope to have played a small role in such an endeavour. But more importantly, I am looking forward to new developments in this field in the years to come.

I would also like to extend my congratulations to the Ariana Group and Mr. Yasir Ahmad in particular for taking the initiative for launching an online remittances platform for Afghanistan in the UK. I am sure this will be an important product with long lasting implications for Afghans in the UK and around the world. I wish you success in your endeavours!

Thank you. I wish you a fruitful and enjoyable evening!