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THE BANIANs OF MUSCAT: A SOUTH ASIAN MERCHANT COMMUNITY IN OMAN AND THE GULF, c. 1500–1700¹

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‘Banian’ is derived from ‘*vanija*’ or ‘*banij*’, which are Sanskrit words meaning ‘merchant’.² The Arabs adopted the term ‘Banian’ from the fourteenth century onwards when the term was first mentioned in legal documents to describe the Hindu merchants from Gujarat in the Arabian coastal ports of southern Yemen and Oman. Then when the Portuguese arrived in the region in the sixteenth century they also referred to them as ‘Banian/Banyan’. The term was later used by the Dutch, English and French when they arrived in the western Indian Ocean in the seventeenth century. This chapter is about the Banian – or Banyan – merchant communities in the western Indian Ocean, particularly those on the Omani coast and in the Gulf before the al-Bu Sa’idī era in Oman. Recently, we have seen increasing interest in research into this community, its economic influence in the Indian Ocean and its traditions and social structure.³

Most of the Banian merchants were Hindus of the Vaishya caste (the third caste, also called the *Vani* or *Vania* in western India). The Persian term for a Hindu merchant was *gaur/gur* (pl. *gauran/guran*) – which means ‘infidel’ – or *gabr* (pl. *gabran*) (‘fire-worshipper’) – the word used to describe Zoroastrians.⁴ The Banians, however, were not Zoroastrians. It was possible

they were identified as such in order to provide them with protected status under Islam.

We can best understand the history of the Banian community in the Gulf region and in Oman if we consider it within the context of three periods:

1. The pre-Portuguese era. Studies on this period are mainly based on historical or archaeological sources. They are usually sketchy because, as the Banians' primary interest was in business and trade between the Indian Ocean ports (they would often return back to India after making their fortunes), they appear to have left few buildings or physical traces of their presence in other lands.
2. The Portuguese era during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The role of the Banian in the events of this period can be studied through documents and other archival materials which are still a significant source of information on the European presence in the region at the dawn of the sixteenth century.
3. The British era from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. During this period relations blossomed between the Banian communities and the British as a result of their close ties with the British Empire's trading stations. Consequently, most information about these communities can be found in chronicles or other British sources.

The main focus of this chapter will be on the Banian presence in Oman and the Arabian Gulf during the second period (i.e. the Portuguese-Ya'riba era, 1624–1741 CE) before the Al-Bu Sa'īd dynasty, still the ruling family in Oman, came to power in the 1740s. Our primary sources are Omani and Portuguese documents containing information about the local Banians and their socio-economic systems. In his 1981 paper on the Indian merchant community in Muscat, Calvin H. Allen Jr discussed the Banians in Muscat who had established an economic power base there, particularly during the reign of Sultan Ḥamad b. Sa'īd al-Bu Sa'īdī (r. 1786–92).⁵ After Sultan Ḥamad took power in Muscat from his father Sayyid Sa'īd b. Ahmad in 1785, he made it his capital, while his father kept the old capital, Rustaq in the interior of Oman. Ḥamad operated a firm policy of securing trade routes to and through the Arabian Peninsula, particularly the route between Oman

and Afghanistan via the Indus river, where the Sindi Bhattias were in direct competition with Ḥamad's state commercial activity.⁶

During the Portuguese-Ya'riba period another group of merchants also arrived in Muscat. Commonly known as 'Hydrabadis', these were the Lawatiya – a community who had formerly been Ismaili Shiite Muslims and later became Twelver Shiites.⁷ (This change of sectarian allegiance attracted the interest of the Sunni and Ibadī schools.⁸) Cosmopolitanism, and the coexistence between the different communities that was a feature of life in Muscat during the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries, are recorded in Portuguese documents, where we read that Christians, Jews, Armenians, Hindus, Sindis, Persians, Africans and Arabs lived inside the Muscat walls, with each group residing in its own quarter. This intriguing fact offers an important clue to researchers investigating the reasons behind Muscat's transformation into Arabia's main port on the Indian Ocean.

Of the Omani material available to us on the Banians during the post-Ya'riba period (1624–1721), the writings of Ibn Ruzayq (d. 1874) are an invaluable source. While on the one hand informing his readers that he benefited personally from his close relationship with the Al-Bu Sa'idī dynasty, Ibn Ruzayq also documented the establishment of the different religious and merchant communities in Muscat during the Ya'riba and post-Ya'riba periods. In his description of the recapture of the last Portuguese strongholds by the Omanis and the Portuguese expulsion from Oman (1649–50) during the reign of Imam Sultan b. Sayf Al-Yar'ubī in his books '*Al-Fath Al-Mubin fi sirat Al-Sādah Al-Bu Sa'idīyyin*', '*Al-Ṣahīfa al-Qaḥṭāniyya*' and '*Shi'a' al-Shā'i b. lama'an bi sirat āhl 'Umān*',⁹ he stated that the Banians supported the Omanis during the capture of Muscat.

Ibn Ruzayq reported that his account of the capture of Muscat by the Omanis was taken orally from Ma'ruf b. Salim al-Ṣā'ighī, Ḥumayd b. Sālīm and Khāṭir b. Ḥumayd al-Bada'i. According to him, the account (which he paraphrased in his book) was passed on by word of mouth from what these men had heard from their ancestors, who had heard it from eyewitnesses.¹⁰

Banians, Omanis and the Conquest of Muscat: Legend and History

The story goes that the Banians began helping the Omanis when the Portuguese garrison commander – a man called Pereira – tried to marry the

daughter of the head of the Banian community. His efforts were rejected because the Portuguese drank alcohol and ate meat – habits that the Banian religion regarded as profane. After Pereira (or in Arabic ‘Farira’) made it clear that he insisted on marrying the Banian girl, her father managed to persuade him that it would be advisable to drain the water from the garrison and discharge the gunpowder since its ‘shelf-life’ had expired. He (the head of the Banians) then told the Omanis what he had done, and this enabled them to capture the garrison after they had laid siege to Muscat for some time. Surrounded by high cliffs and guarded by formidable defences they had themselves established, the Portuguese were then unable to recapture the city. Thus, if we are to believe the story, the Omanis were able to expel the Portuguese from Oman only with the assistance of the Hindu Banians.

Remarkably, neither of the two most renowned historical works of the later Ya’riba period during the eighteenth century – Sarḥān al-Sarḥanī’s *Kashf al-Ghumma* and Muhammad al-Ma’walī’s *Qiṣaṣ wa ākhhbār jarat fi ‘Umān* – reported this incident.¹¹ In fact, this story did not appear in Omani historical literature for nearly one and a half centuries. Ibn Ruzayq recorded it in around the third decade of the nineteenth century during the reign of Sultan Sa’īd b. Sulṭān (r. 1804–56). Nūr al-Dīn ‘Abd Allah b. Ḥumayd Al-Sālimī (d. 1914) also reported it, apparently quoting from Ibn Ruzayq, since he refers to the three men who gave Ibn Ruzayq the details of what had happened.¹²

This story was also not mentioned in the Portuguese documents that have come into our possession so far.¹³ The British Captain Alexander Hamilton (c. 1688–1733 CE) stated that details of the Omanis’ capture of Muscat are mentioned in British and early European sources,¹⁴ though his account of the incident does not suggest that the Banians played a role. Instead, he referred to the part played by Imam Sultan b. Sayf (r. 1649–80)’s wife, who he claimed was descended from ‘the Prophet’s house’ (presumably he meant the Prophet’s tribe Quraysh). According to Hamilton’s version, the war started because the Portuguese governor of Muscat sent pork as a gift to the Imam, which angered him; the Imam’s wife then swore she would never move until Muscat was back in Omani hands. The Imam’s army was stirred to action by her oath and battled its way into Muscat. This cost the Omani army the death of thousands of men.¹⁵

Later, however, in his commentary and introduction to his translation of Ibn Ruzayq's *K. al-Fatḥ al-Mubiyn*, G. Badger, who named the Banian leader as 'Narutem', tells a different story from Hamilton's and agrees with the Omani historians that the Banian helped the Omanis from the inside.¹⁶ The British traveller Grattan Geary's account of his Muscat trip in 1878 mentioned the name Narrotum.¹⁷ However, although the Banian leader appears as Narutem in Badger's translation, Ibn Ruzayk called him Sakabilla. This discrepancy could be explained by the fact that Badger's footnotes refer to early European sources which give an account of the capture of Muscat, so the name Narutem could have come from there.¹⁸

By contrast, Nūr al-Dīn Al-Sālimī (d. 1914) mentioned that there were two Banians working as agents for the Portuguese – Purshottam/Narrottum and the head of the Banian community, who was called Sakkabilla. However, in this version of events it was Narrotum's daughter (not Sakkabilla's) that the Portuguese commander proposed to marry. Although I have not been able to identify the source of Nūr al-Dīn al-Sālimī's reference to the two names, his account appears more likely to be correct since it is compatible with several other accounts.¹⁹ Possibly due to its assistance against the Portuguese, the Banian community was exempted from paying the poll tax (*jizya*) by Imam Şultan b. Sayf Al-Yarabi (r. 1649–80), who also gave the community certain privileges. This situation continued under subsequent rulers.²⁰

The Open Gate: The Banian Legend in Omani Literature

This was the inspiration for a story by the famous writer Abd Allah al-Ta'ī (d. 1972), who retold it in '*Al-Shira' al-Kabir*' ('Big Sail') in a fictionalised version in which the Banian leader's daughter – Tchandra/Tshandra – opened the gate of the garrison for the Omanis. In writing this story, Abd Allah al-Ta'ī's intention was to highlight the blend of traditions and peoples among the Gulf population as well as the way the Gulf tribes co-operated to expel the Portuguese during the reign of Imam Sayf b. Şultan. At the time he wrote it, al-Ta'ī was inspired by Arab nationalism and its goal of Arab unity, which was a major feature of the region's politics in the 1950s and 1960s.²¹ In addition to the sources mentioned previously, Al-Ta'ī also used Portuguese documents to illuminate the role of Banians in Muscat society.

Banian in the Sixteenth-century Gulf

If we examine the Portuguese documents that have been published recently, they will reveal the cosmopolitan relationships described by al-Ta'ī and enable us to trace the way they developed. On the basis of the recorded documents currently available to us, we can conclude that these connections and working relationships between diverse peoples and Gulf tribes began in 1522 and continued until the defeat of the Portuguese in the Battle of Diu in 1669.²² Although aspects of the story of the Banian helping the Omanis may have been fictional, they were probably based on a very real set of relationships of mutual dependence and co-operation between Omanis and Banians that had continued for centuries.

A report issued in Hormuz covering the period from 29 November 1521 to 23 July 1522 lists the booty seized by the Portuguese fleet under the command of the 'Captain-Major of the Sea of Hormuz/Sea of Oman' D. Luis de Meneses. In this document, which is highly significant in view of its content, all the booty seized by the Portuguese from Masirah Island, off the coast of Oman, to Bahrain is described. Included in the documents were twenty-two Banian prisoners. The report gave their total value as 59,400 Ryan. According to the report, D. Luis de Meneses sold two Banian prisoners in Hormuz for 30,000 Ryans, which was equal to 100 Pardaus. He then sold another Banian prisoner for thirty Pardaus, which was equal to 9,000 Ryans.²³ This showed that Banians were very much a part of Omani society in this early period.

According to available documents dating from the beginning of the sixteenth century, there appeared to have been Banians living in Oman's coastal cities well before the arrival of the Portuguese. Portuguese often treated the Banians as prisoners and sold them as slaves. The reason for this was that the Portuguese saw them as allies with the Portuguese adversaries. Banian fighters actively engaged in hostilities against the Portuguese and other outsiders alongside the Omanis. Thus, Banians were, in many cases, treated as combatants, not as vassals or protected subjects.

At this early stage, it seems the Portuguese vision of empire was still evolving and their overall objectives were not yet determined. We have not come across any documents which can cast much light on the Gulf Banian situation in the sixteenth century; those that we have found generally suggest

that the Portuguese were trying to devise the most effective way of achieving supremacy in the western Indian Ocean region over rival powers such as the Ottomans and Persians and that the Banians were one piece on the strategic chessboard.

Banian in the Seventeenth-century Gulf

From the seventeenth century onward, the Portuguese attitude to Muscat and its residents reflected Portugal's ambitions for greater overseas expansion. A major factor was the impact of economic and political events in Western Europe. Importantly, many Portuguese rivals were beginning to embrace the capitalist system, and the imperial Portuguese system now faced rivals for markets and influence. In particular, the Portuguese faced competition from the Dutch and the British, who were using the power and influence of their respective East India Companies in order to mould the trade system in the region in accordance with their own rules.

The Portuguese had imposed a system of citizen taxation in which residents under their colonial rule had to pay tax, regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliation; indeed, the tax regulations were the most important issue dealt with in the documents in our possession. According to a document issued in Goa on 26 October 1620, separate rules applied to the levying of taxes upon residents, settlers and foreigners. Portuguese who were coming from India paid a 5 per cent tax, while Portuguese resident in Muscat paid 3.5 per cent; Muslims and Banians paid 8.5 per cent in Muscat and on the coast, 7.5 per cent of which was payable to local sheikhs. This was a clear indication that the Portuguese established a direct relationship with the country's sheikhs, who became their agents and direct employees alongside those state officials who were Portuguese or other European nationals. In classic colonialist fashion, they co-opted the local leadership. This resulted in a broad partnership of interests; the sheikhs, for instance, used to deliver grain grown in Oman to the Portuguese.²⁴

Dynamic Catholic missionary activities were also highly effective in spreading Portuguese influence. A document issued in Muscat on 22 August 1626 listed the names of people who had converted to Christianity through the preaching of the Augustinian order during the previous three years. The list of converts – including, among others, Arabs, Persians, Armenians, Jews,

Turks, Sindis, Malabaris, Dius, Goans and Bengalis – reflected the ethnic and religious diversity of Muscat’s residents at that time. The list also included Banians who had converted to Christianity, though the majority of converts were coastal dwellers from Persia.²⁵

During this period a gradual shift was seen in the relationship between the Portuguese and many of the Banians. Muscat fortress had become a significant centre of military and naval funding for the Portuguese, as well as a hub for trade and the distribution of medical and food supplies, and this encouraged close interaction between all the resident communities. A document issued in Goa on 10 October 1624 shows that a Banian named Raghau was financing Muscat fortress by selling opium (a piece of opium was worth 35 Ashrafis). This was the first tangible sign of the Banian community’s gradual rise to prominence as merchants. The opium had not been produced in Oman; it appears that it had been imported from north-western India.²⁶

The Banians were becoming major financial players in Muscat port, where the local Portuguese authorities employed them as collectors of customs and anchorage duties. Interestingly, a document issued in Goa on 12 April 1628 noted that the Portuguese captain Luis de Sequeira refused to pay 1,009 Pardaus in dues to a Banian because of a cash loan. This shows that the Banians were actively involved in banking just years before the fall of Muscat to the Omanis.²⁷

The struggle against the Portuguese in Oman began in the 1630s, according to a report issued in Goa in January 1636. Gaspar de Melode Sampaio, a Portuguese writer, spoke of the possibility of creating the office of Castellan (Castle Governor) in Muscat. The report, which was sent to the King of Portugal, contained references to the following:

1. The Omani revolution and the Omanis’ siege of the Portuguese fortress.
2. A misunderstanding between the Captain-Major of Muscat and the Captain-Major of Muscat fortress that had led to commercial unrest.

The document also pointed out that Muscat had a large population of Muslims, Christians, Jews and Banians, all of whom coexisted peaceably in the city, and that each religious community had its own quarter inside

Muscat's city wall.²⁸ The Portuguese Captain-Major of Muscat's responsibilities included dealing with these groups on a day-to-day basis as well as protecting them. The major topic in this document was taxation, especially the issue of how to deal with the multiplicity of Muscat's religious and ethnic groups, including converts; in particular, who should be treated as protected subjects and who should come under the direct authority of the Portuguese administration in Muscat.

On 12 February 1636 a Portuguese Royal Decree was issued in Lisbon in the name of King Philip, laying down the regulations for Muscat fortress, its factory, the tax and how to implement it.²⁹ This decree was among the most significant documents to be issued on administrative regulation in the western Indian Ocean during the seventeenth century, particularly since it showed the impact of changes taking place in Europe upon Portuguese colonies overseas. We shall here consider the following items or clauses in the Royal Decree that concern the Banians:

1. Arab Muslims or Banians were of the same class, quite distinct from the Portuguese living in Muscat: *'The clerk of the said customs house, my accountant, the remaining Moorish officials and banyans of the said sheikh.'*
2. Tax revenue mentioned the Banians. *'As for the tax collected and the revenue from rice output and from the custom of the banyans [Banians], residents of the villages of Kalbuh [and] Riyam in Muscat.'* However, the Banians became the region's major rice suppliers.
3. Banians were involved in the reform of financial control and supervision on how the money is spent: *'When the dispatches of the said customs house are issued the overseer of the treasury, if any, will always be present, and in his absence my factor, and Sheikh Keys, the judge and vizier, or whoever succeeds them.'*
4. Fraudulent behaviour by Portuguese businessmen to evade custom duties involved Banians. The Royal Decree said: *'I have been informed that some Portuguese merchants or captains of vessels dispatch under their titles and names some goods belonging to banians and heathens to help themselves of the two and a half percent that banians and other people wearing turbans pay in excess of the Portuguese, because the Portuguese pay five percent, as stated above, and the banians pay seven and a half percent. From now on, when*

the officials of the customs house believe and assume that some people do such collusion they will swear them in to declare if those goods are theirs, and they will open some fardels [and] search for the loading passes that usually are inside [penned] in banian writing or in Portuguese, and in which the name of the owners are declared. And the same procedure will be followed as regards the burghers of Muscat, who also do the same in collusion with the banians, to receive four percent.'

5. The Decree appointing the Sheikh of Muscat, Sheikh Rashid, to be the overseer of non-Portuguese, both Arabs and Banians, and to be responsible for them before the authorities.
6. The tax law distinguished between Muslim and Banian merchants living in Muscat and those outside Muscat. Customs duties for exported goods belonging to a Banian merchant living outside Muscat were to be charged at the rate of 0.5 per cent according to the assessment made by the custom house.
7. Customs duties on ships at the port are to be paid to the Muscat Sheikh, whether the ships come from the Arabian Peninsula or India, and whether they belong to Muslims, Banians or others.

Another remarkable Portuguese document from this period was on the pearl trade in the Gulf. Pearls were the Gulf's major export commodity in the pre-oil era. A document issued by the Kunju commercial centre on 26 October 1648 showed that a boom was taking place in the Gulf region's pearl trade, particularly between the Gulf and the Indian sub-continent. The trade was controlled by the Banians, since they were the people who actually exported the pearls to India. Despite differences with the Portuguese mentioned above, the Banians also acted as fund-raisers for the Portuguese and financed their expansion in the Gulf in the face of competition from their Dutch and British rivals.³⁰

According to the account of the British writer J. G. Lorimer, there were two types of pearl merchants in the Gulf: the *musaqqim* and the *tawwāsh*. The *musaqqim* funded the pearling expedition, either partly or wholly, and took a usurious rate of interest from the divers or the ship owner, while the *tawwāsh* was the merchant who bought the pearls directly from the pearling dhows. Both functions were dominated by Banians until the nineteenth century, when they were gradually replaced by Persians

or local Arabs. The trade continued to be run by both these types of merchants – *musaqqim* and *tawwāsh* – until recently.³¹

According to records, after the Muscat incidents a co-operative relationship developed between the Banians and the Omanis. This could be mainly because the Banians were the responsibility of the regional sheikh, who was also responsible for delivering the taxation money collected from the other ethnic groups in Muscat.

The Portuguese presence in Muscat came to an end in the mid-seventeenth century, due to an alliance between Banians and Omanis. However, that was not the end of the story of conflict and interaction between Portugal and Oman. A document from 1669 written by an Augustinian missionary and containing a report on the Battle of the Port city of Diu showed that the Portuguese were still wishing to expand over the western Indian Ocean. The document notes that in the battle for Diu there was clear co-operation between the Omanis and the Banians, to the extent that the latter opened up access to part of their district in the city to enable the Omanis to enter it.³² The Banians helped the Omanis break the outer wall of their quarter in Diu. The Omanis then brought a large number of ladders and scaled another section of the wall of the Banian settlement through to the new St Sebastian bulwark. They seized the parapet walks of the fortress and stationed twenty pieces of artillery along the wall of the Banian settlement. According to the reports, the attitudes of the city's Muslims and Christians were anti-Omani.³³

According to the accounts mentioned above, the Omanis captured around two hundred Banians and took them to Muscat. The Omanis refused ransom. The Omanis may have been keen to re-establish Banians in Muscat, reviving it as a city with an ethnically diverse merchant and trading community, as had been the case during the Ya'riba and Portuguese eras. The Banians, whether captured or not, certainly played an important role during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in administering the customs in the port of Muscat.

The British and the Gulf Banians

By the beginning of the nineteenth century the British arose as the rulers of the Indian subcontinent. Indians of all religions and castes migrated within

the British Empire over the Indian Ocean and across the Pacific, employed and protected under British rule. Under the protection of the British, the Banians, like the Jews of Iraq, had the opportunity to invest their experience and expertise in order to benefit from the emerging modern financial and marketing systems. Meanwhile, the Omanis and Portuguese saw their scattered empires in the Indian Ocean gradually disappear. They yielded to the rising power of the British.

Notes

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27. *Ibid.*, v. 12, p. 5,607; *Fundo Geral*, Códice 1986, fol. 32–34, Goa, 12/04/1628.
28. *Ibid.*, v. 7, p. 3,119; *Documentos Remetidos da Índia*, Livro 35, fol. 60–60v.º [Goa, 01/1636].
29. *Ibid.*, v. 7, p. 3,181; *Documentos Remetidos da Índia*, Livro 45, fol. 309–333v.º Goa, 12/02/1636.
30. *Ibid.*, v. 9, p. 4,213; *Documentos Remetidos da Índia*, Livro 59, fol. 94, Bandar-e Kong, 29/10/1648.

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32. *Ibid.*, v. 10, p. 4,629; *Manuscritos da Livraria*, 1699, fol. 1–146, Goa, 24/12/1669.
33. *Ibid.*, v. 10, p. 4,677, 4,685, 4,693; *Cartório Jesuítico*, Maço 27, N.º 6, fol. 17–20, Goa, 03/06/1676; *Cartório Jesuítico*, Maço 27, N.º 6, fol. 21v.º–24v.º, Diu, 13/06/1676; *Cartório Jesuítico*, Maço 27, N.º 6, fol. 25v.º–29, Diu, 03/07/1676.