

*Of Sarhad and Calcutta: The English East India Company, Khwāja Israel di Sarhad and the Foundation of Modern Calcutta*

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This paper focuses on the role of go-betweens in the establishment and development of the trade of the English East India Company in India and especially on the exemplary role played by the Armenian merchant Khwāja Israel di Sarhad in helping to establish the foundations of modern Calcutta. Armenian intermediaries played an important role in managing a wide range of business transactions and relations. Some of these transactions were material in nature but there were also transactions between European merchants and political authorities that were symbolic and ritualistic in content. In the impressive expansion of British trade in India, it seems that the role of Armenians as *vakils* or representatives was a crucial if neglected dimension of early modern economy of South Asia.

Soon after the advent of the English in India, we find them being assisted by Armenians in the capacity of couriers, *qasids* (messengers) and notably as interpreters. The English being new to the set up were unacquainted with the languages and cultural environment, hence the Armenians with their command of languages and their thorough understanding of the local stage, were the natural resort of the English, in both commercial and non-commercial activities. They relied on the Armenians among other things, for the purchase of commodities, for negotiations at the Mughal Court and with the local Mughal administration and for gaining concessions at both the levels. Armenians were frequently employed by the English as their representatives (*vakils*) at the Mughal Court and the courts of regional governors. Some very important *farmans* and *nishans* were obtained by the English through their services. Prince Azimu-sha Shan's *nishan* granting the zamindari rights of Suttanuti, Govindpur and Dilhi-Kolkata was procured with the assistance of Khoja Sarhad in 1689. The procurement of this contact zone was a very important steppingstone towards the foundation of Calcutta. It was finally through Khwāja Israel di Sarhad's endeavors that the English were able to obtain the *farman* of 1717, which is often known as the Magna Carta of English Trade in India, granting the English customs-free trade in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. Khwāja Israel di Sarhad, in fact, was very close to not only the dignitaries at the imperial court but also with the influential nobles at the court of the Governor of Bengal, which made him invaluable to the English.