

An Armenian Merchant Family of New Julfa in Isfahan under the Safavid Empire: A Case Study of the Valijanian Family

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Armenian merchants had an important role of raw silk export trade from Safavid Iran. They were emigrants from Old Julfa on the riverside of Aras to a newly constructed district of New Julfa at Isfahan in the early seventeenth century. They were the major actors who could freely travel to European or Christian countries and handle goods without any religious taboos, by making use of their world-wide network.

Among these Julfan Armenians, the Valijanian Family was one of the most prominent and wealthy merchants. They were engaged in family business until the fall of the Safavid dynasty. Petros Valijanian was an emigrant from Old Julfa at the time of the campaign of Shah 'Abbas (r. 1588-1629) in the early seventeenth century and built a church in New Julfa after twenty years of his settlement. Their family business network covered large areas from India in the east to Izmir and Venice in the west. Through the trading business, they could accumulate enormous amount of money and real estates in and around Isfahan in two generations. Although one of their family members converted to Islam from Armenian Apostolic Church and broke off the patriarchal family network, they kept their great wealth largely maintained in New Julfa. After the siege of Isfahan by the Afghans in 1722, the last member of the Valijanian Family had to move to Madras with his huge amount of properties and became a counsellor to the British East India Company.

By this case study of the Valijanian Family of New Julfa of Isfahan, we will trace the family firm of Armenian merchants who lived in the heyday of the Safavid Empire during the seventeenth century.