One of the main benefits when focusing a study on a sea rather than on a civilization—which is still the common way of looking to both the Asian and the African pasts—is to perceive more clearly the inconsistencies and, perhaps, the biases of the various established area-study traditions.

South Asian, or for that matter Indian Ocean historians, such as Subrahmanyam, have emphasized the importance of Persian portfolio capitalism to the development of the Indian Ocean trade as a whole. Another South Asianist, Stephen Dale, recognized that Indian merchants appear to have earned a great deal of money in Safavid and Afshar Iran. This position, however, does not mesh well with present analytical trends in the specialized niche of Safavid studies.¹

As to the merchants, for example, with the major exception of the Armenians who were obviously much capitalist, the literature on Safavid Iran has stressed the relative hostility of this society toward the accumulation of wealth. This was one dominated by the ethos of the ulama and of the warrior qizilbas—not the best environment for capitalist accumulation. Furthermore the Safavid Empire is much perceived as a command economy—in the terminology of John Hicks—where the few products that were traded internationally—by and large only silk—were monopolized by the state. Merchant activity was closely monitored by the Safavid state and the few successful ones were constantly vexed by arbitrary exactions. There were little opportunities for traders to invest in land. Foreigners swallowed what little trade and banking there was, the Banias and Khatris in particular, who, however, were merely petty usurers and loan sharks. The lack of private mercantile initiative left the Safavid state as an entrepreneur, which however conducted trade as but an adjunct to its international diplomacy and as a way to rapidly gain and exploit funds; while the few manufacturing industries in Iran were

¹ S. Dale, Indian Merchants and Eurasian Trade 1600–1750 (Cambridge, 1994).
also entirely run by the state. Those few products traded by Safavid Iran—except silk—were of little importance to international trade and the internal market of Iran was almost non-existent.

Now, it is extremely difficult—even compared to India—to make overall generalizations on Iran as a whole, because the Safavid Empire was not only huge but the various populated regions were also far apart, separated by days or weeks of marching through empty waste. Kerman was almost a separate economy by itself but so were Yazd or Kashan. It makes more sense to think of the Empire as an array of local economies bridged by pilgrimage, tribute, and trade-flows rather than as a single market.

There were also vast socioeconomic gaps between regions. While Gilan, for example, struck the Italian Carmelite missionaries in 1616 as “another Lombardy,” viewed as “all magnificent gardens, rich plains and delightful hills, full of cities,” the Armenian peasants in the region of Lake Urumiyah lived in “utter, wretched, poverty.” So did the unfortunate missionaries there, as in the hamlet of Qazveh where “the father lives in extreme misery without even ever having any wine.” This was a land where money made virtually no appearance and where the missionaries had to be paid by a share in a poor grain harvest, which barely allowed the peasants themselves to survive. “They are even devoid of animals to do work in the fields,” so that peasants had to rent beasts of burden, which pulled them ever deeper into debt. Next to the poverty of the land itself the peasants were afflicted by crushing taxes. In the village of Abkhanvar, for example, “most land is uncultivated because the peasants can not pay any taxes to the king.” This was a deep poverty only exacerbated by the shah billeting many of his troops in the villages: what little they still had, peasants had to yield to his qizilbas.

Yet with this major caveat I still have to venture on a few overall generalizations because the established view on Safavid Iran as a rather backward economy also raises basic questions on the Arabian seas as a whole. If according to the three criteria of Migration, Commerce and Conquest the Persian-Indian core of the Arabian seas was a closely knit unit, how can we explain this supposed divergence between Persia and

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