

Modern 'Silk Road' and its Relevance in Trade Relations of India with Present Central Asian States

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Abstract

The Silk Road was an interconnected series of routes through Southern Asia traversed by caravans and ocean vessels, and connecting Chang'an (present Xi'an), China, with Antioch, Syria, as well as other countries. Its influence carried over into Korea and Japan. These exchanges were critical not only for the development and flowering of the great civilizations of Ancient Egypt, China, India and Rome but also laid the foundations of our modern world.

Malik Mohammad Jaisi, the poet of Hindi in his work Padmavat describes Alauddin Khilji with Central Asian horses. In the middle Ages, especially under the Mughals a regular flow of trade through the overland caravan routes was established. During the reign of Akbar two caravan routes to Central Asia were in usage, one from Lahore to Kabul and the other from Multan to Kandhar, whereas Bukhara, Samarkand, Khiva and Merv were important centres of trade in Central Asia, and Peshawar, Shikarpur, and Multan functioned as important trade marts in India.

The ancient Silk Road was once unsurpassed in the trade it took across continents, the cultures that were linked by the camel caravans and donkey who wended their way through its dust. Nowadays, as the old thoroughfare falls into poor condition and forgetfulness, regions along it are also suffering. They are falling victim to poverty, isolation and even terrorism.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the establishment of intensive trade relations between the Far-East and the West and beyond up to the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, via the overland trade route known as the 'Silk Road', the economy of Central Asia linked up with India. The Central Asian traders did not confine their trading activities to the East and West only. They conducted trade with their Indian counterparts via the routes that branched off towards the main Silk Route towards India. As such the development of this overland trade gave an impetus to the process of urbanization as numerous towns skirting the trade routes developed into main trading centres dealing with internal as well as international trade (Alexander Belenitsky, *Central Asia, London, 1969, p.97*).

2. ROLE OF TRADE- ROUTE IN DEVELOPMENT OF TRADE:

Caravan and trade routes played a great role

in the world's history being at the same time bearers of progress and doors for conquests. Not only, they promoted economic prosperity of interlinked territories through trade of goods. In Central and Inner Asia, the region being permanently of great interest to surrounding States due to its miraculous resources and significance as a buffer between competing powers, caravan routes were the turn for connecting the distant isolated oases and the whole region to the outer world. In times of Silk Road and during the Great Game they played as routes of diplomacy, they opened access to new resources and promote local economic development by bringing innovations, structuring settlement systems around large trade nodes, opening new employment opportunities for locals by involvement in trade and services. Disappearing in sands and high snows, the network of roads directed nomads, pilgrims, merchants, travellers, researchers and soldiers to various destinations. Myths and factual knowledge appeared and spread. Mutual influence and

enrichment of cultures and religions followed the development of trade. Military conflicts, migrations, uninterrupted smuggling are other facets of the phenomena.

A network of caravan routes crossing Central and Inner Asia and their role in regional and local development changed in the course of time. Some routes disappeared, and others were replaced by digressed route; owing to periods of decline followed by the periods of blossoming. In general the history of land communications in Asia is much wider than the history of Silk Route itself. A complete study of the trade communication network evolution and its role in regional development and its evaluation is the aim of this research.

Material remains from sites along the silk routes reflect close relations between long-distance trade and patterns of cultural and religious transmission. Demand for Chinese silk and luxury commodities which were high in value but low in volume stimulated commerce. Valuable items such as lapis lazuli, rubies, and other precious stones from the mountains of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Kashmir probably led travellers to venture into these difficult regions. Some of these products became popular items for Buddhist donations, as attested in Buddhist literary references to the "seven jewels" (*saptaratna*) and reliquary deposits (see Xinru Liu, *Ancient India and Ancient China*, pp. 92-102). Long-distance trade in luxury commodities, which were linked with the transmission of Buddhism, led to increased cultural interaction between South Asia, Central Asia and China.

Overland routes led from the Mediterranean through Syria to Mesopotamia, ancient Iran, and Margiana (Merv) in Western Central Asia. Routes from Margiana reached Bactria in the Oxus valley, or branched northwards to Sogdia and continued through the Ferghana valley and across the Alai range to Kashgar. Capillary routes through the Karakoram Mountains directly linked the silk routes of eastern Central Asia with the major arteries of the Indian subcontinent. The "northern route" (*Uttarapatha*) extending from Bactria to northern India was connected to the "southern route" (*Dakshinapatha*)

in the Deccan plateau and seaports on the western coast of India.

3. TRADE DURING ADVERSE POLITICAL CONDITION OF FORIEGN INVASIONS

Movement of commodities and articles was continued between the two regions during the period even in the disturbed political conditions of Mongol invasion. Mongols themselves were very keen to ensure smooth flow of commodities and tried to make roads safe for traders and caravans. *Khurasani* and *Multani* were the two popular words to foreign merchants and Indian merchants respectively (K.A. Nizami, p.164). A written document of Abu Bakr Muhammad Narshaki refers to the export of a type of cloth named Zandaniji manufactured in Zandana near Bukhara to India (K.A. Nizami p.164) This cloth was used by the rulers and nobles for making garments and was bought at the same price as brocade (R.N.Frye, *The History of Bukhara*) Indian traders supplied their products like sugar, indigo and cotton etc. to the foreign merchants on a higher price than to the Indians in exchange of horses of good breed, dried fruits, pearls etc. from foreigners especially Central Asians. For horses Indian rulers were very much dependent on Central Asia. Barani (Barani, *Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi*, p.53) points out a situation developed during the rule of Balban, the Slave ruler of Delhi Sultnate when supply of the horses from Central Asia was interrupted due to certain political changes there. There was no substitute at all, and Central Asian horses were always in much demand in Indian armies irrespective of who the ruler was.

Numerous contemporary accounts and documents throw light on the state of this bilateral trade during the seventeenth century (S.Gopal, *Indians in Russia in the 17th and 18th century*, New Delhi, pp.36-51). Two traders named Rodion and Ivan Mikitin, the agents of the Tsar of Russia were sent to the Mughal emperor Shahjahan, with presents and enquiries as to whether they produced golden velvet and satin or plain velvet and satin, or whether they imported these in India. Also if produced, at what price did they purchase them? Further, what sort of velvet, satin, silken brocade, and *taffeta* and other saleable

goods were found in India or otherwise from which kingdom they were imported and through what routes-land route or water route, from which kingdom did they import them and how near or far were those kingdoms. The traders were asked to personally and correctly verify all these details in the capital city of Lahore and in other cities through which they would pass (S.Gopal, *Indians in Russia in the 17th and 18th century*, New Delhi, pp.36-51). They were supposed to collect information about the goods and their availability, prices on which Indians purchased and sold them. They were also advised to purchase some quantity of goods or barter the goods carried by them. They should inform correctly about German or other merchants who come to India and the goods they brought and the routes, water or land, they followed and to which kingdoms and cities they went and the amount they pay for transportation from city by weight or by animal.

There were invitations for Indian craftsmen for manufacturing and dyeing cotton textiles in Moscow. It indicates that there was the possibility of development in production and trade items. They were trying to systematize and regulate it (S.Gopal, *Indians in Russia in the 17th and 18th century*, New Delhi, pp.72-73)

Foreigners from across the sea; Persians, Indians, Bukharans, Armenians, Kumikis, Charkasi, and those living in Astrakhan and others went with their goods to Moscow and other cities. Russians charged customs duties from these foreigners at the rate of 10% in Roubles on goods sold by them. If these foreigners resided and carried on business in Astrakhan, custom duties were charged from them at the rate of 10% in Roubles. If they (foreign merchants) exchanged money or goods for any Russian commodity and carried goods from Moscow or other cities, they were charged transit duty at the rate of 10% in Rubbles in Astrakhan. The Russian authorities even searched their bales of goods and boxes carefully so that they did not possess undeclared or forbidden goods. In Moscow and other cities all over the kingdom (the Russian empire) the foreigners were not allowed to sell any foreign goods in retail. They were allowed neither to go to the fairs

held in different cities with their goods or money nor to send their agents to these fairs. If the foreigners were found selling their goods in retail or in wholesale, their goods and money were confiscated on behalf of the Great Rule.

A document (cited in S.Gopal, *Indians in Russia in the 17th and 18th century*, New Delhi, pp.72-73) containing the notes of the discussion of Bukhara envoy Farrukha with director A.S. Metveyer of the foreign department about the trade of Bukhara with India and about goods in demand in the Khanate of Bukhara makes it clear that the trade was well established during the 80's of the 17th century. About the routes, journey and trade items the envoy was asked how long the journey would take to the Siberian cities in the empire of the Great Tsar from his country (Bukhara), and what were the goods required by him from the kingdom of the Great Tsar? The envoy replied that it took 40 days to go to Tobolsk in the kingdom of Tsar. In Bukhara, they had goods viz- raw silk, red stone, *kindyak* (i.e. cotton cloth) Chinese goods- silk, silver and tin ore, salt and other goods that were brought there by Indian traders who brought among other items precious stones, pearls and variety of precious goods.

4. POSSIBILITY OF RESTORATION NEW SILK ROAD AND ITS MODERN CHANNEL

The region's landscape is generally harsh and poses substantial barriers to transportation and communication. The terrain varies from the second-lowest point on earth, in the Turpan basin (154 meters below sea level), to mountain peaks that rise 7,400 meters in the Kyrgyz Republic and form the border with China. Inhospitable deserts cover much of western Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The Taklamakan Desert in southern Xinjiang was particularly dangerous to ancient travelers and continues to present great hindrance to modern trade and transit. The dry grass plains of Kazakhstan run into the towering mountains of the Tian Shan Mountains in the Kyrgyz Republic. More than 90 percent of Tajikistan is mountainous. Through borders and the mountains traders have limited access to only a few corridors and passes. Despite

the roughness of the land, it has been moderately populated for thousands of years.

China and seven other countries in central Asia have reached a preliminary agreement to build a \$19.2 bn modern equivalent of the “Silk Road” trade route between China and Europe. A plan was agreed in 2007 in Manila, location of the headquarters of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) which is expected to be formally approved in November at a ministerial meeting in Tajikistan. It is supported by the ADB, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Islamic Development Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank.

5. CONCLUSION

There are strategies afoot to rebuild this ancient highway. Instead of roads linking the states and regions, China is promoting the use of a “bridge” that has been in use since 1992. The “Eurasian Continental

Bridge” links continents by rail. It is dubbed the New Silk Road. China has already confirmed it is keen and willing to participate in developing the use of the route. It needs to develop its own western regions by co-operating with Central Asian and European countries. As building international transport throughways, there is hope that all the countries including India can share and unite in developing tourist facilities along the New Silk Road, and be actively engaged in the construction of the new Eurasian Continental Bridge. Construction of the Marmaray project is also a milestone in this direction. The Marmaray tunnel was completed on September 23, 2008. On October 29, 2013 the first stage of Marmaray project, covering the underground connection between Europe and Asia, was inaugurated. Opening of this tunnel is also considered as the ‘New Silk Road’ which is very relevant in respect of Indian and Central Asian trade too.

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