

Indian & Central Asian Trade Routes and Communication

From Ancient to the Pre Colonial Period

ABSTRACT

The 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.

1. TRADE ROUTES DURING ANCIENT PERIOD

India and Central Asia have maintained close cultural, political and commercial ties since times immemorial. Archaeological excavations have revealed typological affinity between the cultures of South Tajikistan and the Soan culture of North-West India as early as in the Palaeolithic age. Similarities have been found in agricultural practices followed in Central Asia and Northern India in the Neolithic period. Soviet archaeological researches show that during the period of the Harappan culture, close relations between South Turkmenia and the Indus Valley towns were in existence. Various metal and ivory, pottery as well as a silver seal in the shape of a three-headed monster quite resembling the Harappan seals that were found in South Turkmenia clearly depict the influence of Harappan civilization of India.

During the Gupta period from 4th century to 6th century A.D., the international trade of India had developed with the West especially with Rome. The important Northern land route used by the traders was

from Taxila via Kapisa, Bactria, Hekatompylos and Ecbatana onwards to India which was considered as the sole supplier of precious stones.

Fahien and Hiuen Tsang visited India in the 5th and 7th century A.D. respectively, through a great North-Western route that ran via Central Asia and Bactria through the passes of the Sulaiman range to India. Besides it, there was a less frequented route as well in the North-East from Tonkin through Kamarupa (Assam) across Pundraravhana (North Bengal) to Magadha (Bihar).

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.

2. TRADE ROUTES DURING EARLY MEDIAEVAL AND MEDIAEVAL PERIOD

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Indian traders supplied their products like sugar, indigo and cotton etc. to the foreign merchants on a higher price than to the Indians whereas received 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 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 Indian armies in irrespective of who the ruler was. Malik Mohammad Jaisi, the poet of Hindi in his work *Padmavat* described 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, Peshawar, Shikarpur, and Multan functioned as important trade marts in India.

3. TRADE ROUTES DURING THE 17TH AND 18TH CENTURY

A document of the second half of the 17th century contains the information regarding the shortest route from Bukhara to India. In an answer to the question asked by the Foreign Department, the Indian govt. replied that the route as given by Boris Pazukhian which was Astrakhan to India is long, and journey by this route is dangerous because of steppes and large number of robbers. It is better to go to India through Bukharan territory. From Astrakhan to Bukhara one could go by boat up to

Kargan as stated by Pazukhian. From Kargan without going to Khiva, one should go to Urgengh and from Urgengh to Bukhara. The journey from Kargan to Bukhara by fast Astrakhan to Kargan takes about three weeks, depending upon the weather. From Bukhara, the journey to Balkh takes two weeks. The Khans of Urgengh and Balkh were brothers of the Khan of Bukhara and was obedient to him.

The journey from Balkh to Kabul, the border town of India, takes three weeks or more, and from this city one could go through other Indian towns to the city of Shahajahanabad, where the contemporary Indian ruler lives, this would take four weeks.

During the 40's of the 18th century land routes from Russia to India and the trade of the Indian merchants in Russia took place basically through four routes -

1. The first route, via Kandhar on the Persian frontier. The journey from Delhi to Kandhar took three months; they went in caravans of camels and horses. Several varieties of goods were exported from there via the Persian kingdom. From Kandhar to Crilan, the journey by land-route took three months; the journey was on camels, horses and small horses but mostly by ponies which were found there in large numbers.
2. The second route was through the Bukharan territory. The journey from Delhi to Kabul took one and a half month, from Kabul Badakshan and then through the Bukharan territory to Khiva in two months or less, from Khiva to Astrakhan by land-route took fifteen days. Goods were transported on camels and horses were engaged only by the loading people for themselves from Khiva to the Caspian seaport of Mangislak or Tyruk-Kurgan, the journey on camels through the steppes took fifteen days and from there by sea to Astrakhan.

3. The third route was mainly through sea and ocean. From Delhi to the port of Thatta, the journey took three months by camels or horses. From there the distance of 60 vests was upto the shipyard and by ship to the city of Macheli-Bandar or Kum-Bandar in the Persian Kingdom. In good weather this journey took about one month.

4. The fourth route was through the Indian city of Kalat. The journey from Delhi to Kalat took four months and from Kalat to the Persian city of Kerman in 45 days, from Kerman to Kashan in 35 days and from there to Fahan in 5 days and Crilan in 20 days.

Though, in former times the trade was free from hindrances and troubles, yet due to the anarchy in Persia, these journeys became unsafe because of robbers. The route via Bukhara was subject to attacks of Kirghizs, Kara-Kalpak and Turkemans.

4. TRADE ROUTES DURING THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY

During the period of early 19th century, the trade relations with India, Bukhara, and Khiva were becoming organized. A report made it clear that for securing Indian, Bukharan, and Khivan goods in Russia and exporting foreign goods to these places, there were three routes; the first route, on which there was very little trade at the time, ran from the northern border of India to Kabul which was in the land of the Afghans, to Bukhara via Balkh, Samarkand and Tashkent to Orenburgh, Kazan and further.

The second route, from the Island of the East Indies and both the Peninsulas of India to the Persian Gulf by sea-route, to Basra and from there by land-route via Persia to the southern banks of the Caspian Sea to Resht and Astrabad and again by the water-route to Astrakhan, the journey from

Multan and Kabul via Kandhar and Meshed by the land-route to Astrabad.

The quantum of trade was very insignificant from Orenburgh by the land route to Khiva, Bukhara, and India because of long distances and difficulties in transporting goods and because of the waterless steppes through out the journey and severe danger from robbers and the nomad Kirghizs of the small hords and Kara Kalpak.

Regarding the convenient route for journey, and other information of trade between Russia and India a report was made by Lieutenant General Count V.A.Zubov, that for their trade with India through the Caspian Sea, the most advantageous base was Astrabad. The place was healthy and the port was very good. The journey through the province of Khorasan and Kandhar up to the borders of India by the most convenient path, running through mountains which separated India from Persia came to 1,000 Versts. In spite of great heights and other difficulties, there existed a very convenient road to Kabul, situated in the centre of the fine province of Jabulistan in Afghanistan. Since Kabul Island was on the bank of the river Begat and Amu Darya was not far from the area, the above route was very ancient and convenient and it was through that route that goods were received from India.

The trade between British India and Central Asia during the period carried on by means of *kafilas*, and in some few cases by independent parties of traders. Mongomerie made it clear that the great routes used for this trade were:-

The first route was from Sukur, via the Bolan Pass into Afghanistan; second via Dehra Ismail Khan, and the Derbund Pall, into Afghanistan; third from Peshawar via the Khyber Pass, to Afghanistan (or Kabul);

fourth from Amritsar via Kashmir and Ladakh, to Yarkand and Eastern Turkistan generally; fifth from Amritsar, Jullandhar, or Ludhiana via Nurpur, Mandi and Kullu from there by Ladakh to Yarkand and Eastern Turkistan; sixth varies from other routes from the plains across the Himalayas to Ladakh; seventh route between India and eastern Turkistan avoiding Ladakh and the territories of Maharaja Jammu altogether; eighth route between India and Lassa.

India was trading with Western Turkistan generally under more unfavourable circumstances than Russia, for Khiva, Bukhara, Herat, Samarkand, Kohan and balk can communicate more easily with the Caspian sea than with Peshawar and indeed were generally closer to the Caspian than they were to Peshawar. The Russians had a capital communication with the Caspian by means of the Volga and the navigation of the Caspian was entirely in their hands.

The routes between India and Eastern Turkistan or Little Bukhara were less known. It consisted of those from the Punjab and the North-West provinces. Only three among the several were available for traffic, the first via Kashmir and Leh, the second via Mandi, Kullu and Leh, and the third via Shivela, Garo and Rudok.

The natural channels of trade between Afghanistan, Persia, Western Turkistan and India were the passes of the Sulimani range and those leading to Peshawar. First, among these, was the Mulla Pass near Gandava, in the Khelati Hills level which was completely safe, and one that could be travelled in all seasons. Second was the Bolan Pass, leading through Shikarpur to Sukur on the Indus, through which the trade of Afghanistan passed from Kandhar into Sindh, a distance of 400 miles. This road was generally levelled and the trade through it was at Rs.50,000 per annum. Third was the Ghulwaire or Guleri

Pass, opposite Dehra Ismail Khan. This, though somewhat unsafe, was the chief trade route between Afghanistan and the Punjab, which was estimated at an amount of £ 291,000 per annum, and was in the hands of hereditary clans of merchants called *provindahas*. The fourth was, Tatara and Abkhava Passes leading from Kabul to Peshawar; these were practicable all the year and the trade was on the increase, approximately valued £2,77,150 per annum. Through these passes was the route from Bukhara which was 820 miles way or from 40 to 45 days journey by the Hajigak Pass of the Bamian range, the route was usually preferred and some what by the passes of the Hindukush.

The natural and the most direct channel of trade for the countries of Eastern Turkistan, including Kashgar, Yarkand and Khotan, would be through the territories of the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir via Leh and Shrinagar to Amritsar. In distance in all, it was 1,100 miles, if the route to Leh through the valleys of the Shayak River and the Karakoram Pass was taken, and 983 miles through the very difficult route over the Sasor Kitian Passes. But owing to the insecurity of the road between Yarkand and Leh and heavy import duty upon goods passing through Kashmir territory, the trade for the most part passed into India via Bukhara and Kabul. A considerable portion of trade was brought by a more circuitous and difficult road through Kulu and Mandi, simply to avoid the exaction of the Kashmir custom-house. The trade between Eastern Turkistan and India by the Leh route was estimated at £ 23, 504.

5. CENTRALASIAN TRADE VIA CASPIN

The trade from Astrakhan via Caspian Sea during the period could be divided into two main branches-goods sent to the west and south west coast of the sea

from Persia, and trade on the eastern coast with the nomad Turkemans with Khiva and Bukhara. Indian goods went to Caspian Sea via Shigaz and Isfahan only when there was complete quiet in Persia. They went via Kandhar and Astrabad through Balkh, and Bukhara and when caravans could come back in peace and security through the territory of Afghans, who lived on the northern borders of India. The entire trade carried on the Caspian Sea remained in the hands of Asians but due to their interests in personal profits it was declining. The

quantum of trade underwent regular fluctuation and it never had a stone foundation. There were proposals for construction of a strong and secure trading base at the gulf of Astrabad which was the most convenient centre with all proper facilities and routes from other cities. Second thing that had to develop was the establishment of a trading company with experienced experts. The proposal in this respect was establish and maintain good relations with Afghanistan and other frontier provinces of northern Indian land.

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