

Significance of the Silk Routes in the Cross Cultural contacts and Exchanges between Europe and Asia

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Since ancient times, the social, religious, cultural, economic and political history of most of the South Asian countries is closely linked to the silk routes. In south Asia, the geography played most important part in determining the promotion of trade and silk trade routes because of diversity of its physical features. The travelogues and writings of Hiuen-Tsang (602- 664 A.D), Abu Rehan Muhammad-bin-Ahmed Alberuni (973-1048 A.D), Sheikh Ali Hujwairi, (1009-1077 A.D) Ibn Batuta (1304-1369 A.D)-and Shihab al-Umari (1300-1384 A.D) are of great importance in this regard. In the Indian subcontinent, without going through the studies of these travellers and writers of early medieval and medieval times, one cannot think of India's trade, trade items like silk etc. and commerce, modes of trade, transport, communication, postal system, means of exchange, trade routes, caravans, and caravan serais, towns, cities and markets, attitude of the Rulers towards trade and trade routes, impact of Trade and commerce on the Politico-Economic strengths on the South countries. The Silk routes connecting India, with South Asian, Central countries, Europe and China played an important role in history. The splendid civilizations and cultures of India, China, Persia, Greece and Rome came in contact with each other along Silk routes inspiring the scholars to call it a 'cultural bridge' between Asia and Europe. Silk routes played a sheet anchor role in promoting socio-cultural and harmonious trade and travel in medieval Asiatic world. Against this backdrop, the present paper highlights various points like origin of the silk route, its linking routes, cities and markets on the routes, caravans and serais in India and other countries. The paper also describes the philosophical transformation and ideas in the social and cultural dynamics of trade.

The Silk Route originated around 206 B.C. The term Silk Route was coined by a German Geographer scientist and explorer Ferdinand Von Richtofen in 1877.¹ The Route originally established between Rome and China. Modern historians and researchers term 'Silk



Route' or 'Silk Road' using as a metaphor of European and Asian cultural exchange. The linking silk routes have captured the passionate desire of travellers, scholars, artists, tourists and adventurers since nineteenth century. Silk was China's contribution to the World. Most Chinese scholars regarded the silk routes as a channel for silk textiles and yarn that flowed out from the north-west borders of the ancient empires-the Han Dynasty (206 B.C to 220 A.D) to the T'ang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.) to the west India, Persia and the Mediterranean world. The most extensive part of the Silk Route passed via the territory of Central Asia and Kazakhstan. In Nineteen nineties (UNSECO) United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organisation organised and sponsored large-scale expeditions to explore the cultural and textile transactions that took place ancient times on Silk routes. Indian, Chinese, European and scholars from Islamic countries view the silk trade from various angles.² Split branches of the caravan routes linked Europe and Asia from Mediterranean Sea to China and served as significant means of trade dealings and channel of communication of cultures between West and East in the ancient, early medieval and medieval times.³

The first most important in opening the Silk route between the East and the West came with the expansion of Alexander's empire into Central Asia. In August 329 B.C, he founded the city of Alexandria at the mouth of the Fergana Valley in Tajikistan the northern Silk route. Later on Alexandria became a foremost point on the northern Silk route.⁴ Certain political and cultural events heralded a period of regular communication and interaction among the few cultural regions- East Asia, South Asia, West and Central Asia, the Mediterranean and West Europe.⁵ Between the East and West, the rise of Islam as well as Islamic enfolded Mesopotamia, Egypt and Persia, all ancient civilizations, into a new political domain by the mid-seventh century, and this subsequently rise to a new social, religious, political, economic and cultural domain. Pilgrimage, missionary and religious activities and the cultural exchanges had the deepest impact on the South Asian cultural domains.⁶

In the beginning of early medieval and medieval times the formation of the largest world empires; India, Persia, China and Byzantium also symbolized certain types of culture and out of the ordinary system of statehood and command. These countries closely associated with the largest natural resources. The formation of these empires, situated in the directions of four parts of the world, closely connected with each other. India was considered as the



country of elephants (South); Iran and Byzantium as the countries of jewellers (West); Turk Khanate (North) as the country of horses; and China as the country of people (East).⁷

The prominent towns and cities in India famous for economic and cultural momentum on the Southern Silk Routes since ancient times are Tamrlipta or Tamluk, Leh, Jaisalmer, Mathura, Varanasi and Patliputra. In Pakistan, Multan, Quetta, Peshawar, Taxila, and Debal are famous cities on the Silk Route. Silk Route is crossed from Katmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur (Nepal). Jakar and Paro cities of Bhutan are also associated with silk route. It runs through Bangladesh linked to many cities like Wari-Bateshwar, Pundranagora, Vikrampur, Somapura, Bhictargarh, Sonargaon, Chittagong, Samatata and Dhaka.⁸

One of these routes turns northwest entered into famous cities of Afghanistan like Balkh, Herat, Qandahar, Bamyan and Kabul along the Amu River including Bukhara and Samarkand the centre of Silk Route to the Aral Sea, the present site of Astrakhan on Volga River in southern Russia. The southern silk route ran through northern India, then to the Turkestan-Khorasan area into Mesopotamia and Anatolia. In India silk routes travels west along the Brahmaputra and Ganges river plains, probably joining the Grand Trunk Road west of Varanasi. It runs through northern Pakistan and over the Hindu Kush Mountains to rejoin the northern route briefly near Merv (Turkmenistan).⁹ Then, it followed an almost straight line from the west through the mountains northern Iran and the northern tip of Syrian Desert to the Levant (eastern Mediterranean). From there Mediterranean ships to Italy.¹⁰

The role of sea routes in connecting the East and the West gained importance during the T'ang dynasty. After mid-ninth century sea routes superseded the land routes through Central Asia to China. The Muslims, Zoroastrians, Christians, Nestorians and Sogdians were the conveyors of silk on the sea routes.¹¹ Trade between East and West also developed through the sea, between Alexandria in Egypt and Guangzhou in China, and it supported the expansion of Roman trading posts in India.¹² In short, from East to West, no single route was taken; crossing Central Asia different branches developed, passing through different oases settlements. Some other routes were also used for trade and travelling. Kashghar (China) became the important crossroad of Asia from where the route was again divided.¹³

Since ancient times, silk route was the primary source of trade and communication among civilized nations of Eurasia; it was also served as the means for trans-cultural



dialogues and international many-sided connections. The immeasurable area covered by the Silk routes touched upon all the most important centres of serving to unite and join together the nations and preserving their cultural heritage.¹⁴ The spread of Buddhism from India to China triggered a profession of cross-cultural exchanges that a profound impact on Asia and world history. Christianity also made an early appearance on the scone. In northern Iran, merchants brought their belief along the silk route.¹⁵ On the eve of Islamic expansion into Central Asia, many people were trading along the silk routes from China to Europe.¹⁶ We have significant evidences that the various Sufi orders were also developed through the connecting silk routes in the adjacent parts of the silk route countries.

The caravan Serais on the linking silk routes played very significant role for the promotion of trade and cultural relations. Caravan Serais on roads were the most important buildings of commercial life. Multan and Kabul were the main gathering places of the caravans from West and Central Asia. By and large, traders returned from Persia, Khorasan and other countries came within the company of Mughal caravans.¹⁷ There is enough evidence in contemporary literature about the existence of serais or rest-houses for travellers. These were maintained by the religious orders or set up by the kings or members of the royal family or the aristocratic order.¹⁸

Ibn Batutta writes that at every post from Delhi to Daultabad, there was a serai which catered to the needs of the travellers and merchants. He also noticed a fine serai at Bhakkar (Pakistan) which was constructed by Kishlu Khan, younger brother of Sultan Ghiyasuddin Muhammad Balban (1266-1287 A.D). It provided food for travellers. The famous Khanqah of Sheikh Farid (1173-1265 A.D) at Ajodhan (Pakistan) was used as a serai where travellers and traders used to lodge their mounts or pack animals.¹⁹ According to Shams-i-Siraj Afif, in Firozabad and Delhi there were one hundred and twenty-one serais. The travellers were allowed to stay as guests for three days.²⁰ During the Sultanate period, the entire northern and western India had trade relations with west Asia and extending through it to the Mediterranean world, as also to central Asia, south-east Asia and China, both by over-seas and over-land routes. The thirteenth century opened a new chapter in the world history, particularly in Asia. It witnessed the rise and fall of different dynasties, finally allowed the Mongols to carry on as the vast power in central Asia, Persia and China for more than a century.



The decisive battle of Panipat 1526 A.D laid the foundation of Mughal Empire in India. With the establishment of Turkish rule, India enjoyed the status of a powerful state in the next two centuries. During this time India had maintained trade relations with Persia, Egypt, Europe and Africa. The trade was fostered by the Arab settlements along with the east Africa. *Ibn Battuta* and *Barbosa* both have described this trade.²¹ In 1441 A.D., Abdur Razak, a Persian, arrived at the port of Calicut during the reign of Sayyids. He mentioned that traders of seven climates resorted to it from Egypt, Turkey, Azarbaijan, Iraq, Khurasan, and China.²² Punjab, the land of five rivers had always been of decisive significance for trade and cultural exchanges on the linking silk routes. Before the discovery of sea-routes between the East and the West, all the main trade-routes connecting India with Central Asia, Persia, China and other far-away regions of west Asia and Europe lay across this strip. The well frequented passes viz. Khybar, Khurram, Tochi, Gomal, Bolan etc. enabled the concentration of camels and caravans for cementing commercial contact of India with the neighbouring countries.

There were many significant connecting routes which can be divided into different categories. The prominent route was Delhi-Hansi-Sarsuti-Abhor- Ajudhan, and Multan which joined Sind through Uch, Bhakkhar. It was followed by Ibn Battuta. Zafarnamah of Maulana Sharfuddin Yazdi gives us an idea of the route followed Timur which ran from Multan to Delhi via Tulamba-Janjani-Sahwal-Aswan, Jahwal-Ajudhan-Bhatnir-Sarsuti-Tohana-Samana-Kaithal and Panipat.²³ Multan was further well linked with Kandhar via popular Bolan Pass which ran through Sukkhar and Quetta. Multan occupied an important place being the capital of north-west frontier during the Mughals. It was linked with Kandahar through land and with sea via river Indus. The city had also regular contacts with native trading centres in northern India. Delhi-Uch route was another regular route which was covered either from Lahore side or via Hansi and Sarsuti.

The Turks, realizing the strategic and mercantile value of good communications repaired existing roads and built new ones. Lahore-Attock route was used by Mughal emperors Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur, (1526-1530 A.D) Nasiruddin Muhammd Humayun (1530-1539 and 1555-1556 A.D), Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar (1556-1605 A.D) and Salimuddin Muhammad Jahangir (1605-1628 A.D) led to Kabul.²⁴ It is needless to mention that Kabul, Ghazni and Kandahar were the main gates to India which were well connected with the towns in Central Asia and Persia. Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur, the founder of



Mughal Empire in India was well aware of the significance of foreign trade and communication through these trade routes. He had particularly ensured the regular flow of reinforcements from Kabul. Thus, soon after the occupation, he measured his conquered territory from Kabul to Agra. Square towers were erected after every eighteen miles, while horse chowkis were established every 36 miles in order to create an efficient communication system. These measures proved their worth even during Babur's brief reign. Nasiruddin Muhammad Humayun had insufficient opportunity to show his capability as an administrator.²⁵

Travel for men and commercial items became easier and safer during Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar's reign. He constructed the new roads, bridges and military posts which encouraged the trade on the connecting silk routes with foreign countries. Salimuddin Muhammad Jahangir ordered Zamindars to plant trees on the routes between Agra -Attock and other roads in Bengal. During his time, local chiefs were responsible for the maintenance of the roads. Whenever any disturbance took place in the areas given to the local chiefs then the latter's were supposed to be answerable for the safety measures of traders and trade routes.²⁶

We can easily classify the items of trade among the countries connecting through these silk routes into two main categories-luxury and non-luxury. The descriptions left by medieval travellers and Persian chroniclers reveals that horses, furs, precious stones, silk, silk stuffs and slaves were among the first category which were imported from Central Asia and Persia. Among other goods, various types of clothes, fruits, plants, herbs, gold, silver, olive oil, rose water, glass etc. being to the second category. In barter India exported several articles which were in demand not only in Central Asia and Persia, but also in other Asian and European countries. Among luxury items, these were few apart from some varieties of cloth, pearls, elephants, tusks, horns and peacocks etc. Non-luxury items included spices, musk, different types of wood, sugar candy, food grains, dry fruits and dye-products etc.²⁷

The caravan was both the oldest and the most popular way of travelling in large groups on these trade routes. It provided the maximum protection, safety measures and made a significant involvement to the social, cultural, religious, political and commercial life of the country. The size of caravan depended on the existing conditions. The caravan selected up



groups of pilgrims along the way like a rolling snow-ball, some of the walking, others riding horses, mules, donkeys or camels, the number reaching thousands.²⁸

Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur in his *Tuzuk-i-Baburi* mentions about the caravan coming from Hindustan consisted of 10, 15 or 20 thousand herbs of houses bringing slaves, white cloth, sugar candy, refined and common sugars and aromatics. Multan and Kabul were the main meeting places of the caravans in the north-west India and central Asia.²⁹ The main body of a caravan usually consisted of traders with large materials of goods. Other travellers-individuals, Muslim faqirs, Hindu yogis and some time pilgrims joined large caravans for their own safety purposes.³⁰ The members of the caravan had to safeguard against both kind of fears like attacks from outside and infidelity from within the caravan.³¹ The leader of the caravan was called Mir, Salar or Bakshi. His authority, familiarity of the route and good organization were of remarkable help to other members of the caravan.³² He was responsible for selecting halts, and for announcing the departure of the caravans. He was also specialist at the art of managing complicated and delicate matters, particularly dealing with the custom officers.³³

The Banjaras were the most travelled tribe on these connecting routes in Mughal times. The term Banjara is mainly functional to those who indulge in trade of grain, salt and cattle, and who lived in tents moved with their livestock and carts.³⁴ They were the major suppliers of grain and other products to the Royal camp.³⁵ Next to the Banjaras, there was another group of transport contactors known as Adavivas. They were an organized group mainly functional in western India. They were big assets to traders. They were paid a lump sum to accompany a caravan and provide important items such as bullocks and camels. At the time of need, they also supplied to the caravans with all kinds of transport like cart, camel, and bullock etc.³⁶ The foreign traders travels on these routes seems to have gained reputation and authority to such an level during the reigns of Akbar and Jahangir. According to Tavernier, the foreign traders' viz. Khurasanis, Europeans, the Dutch were enjoying a variety of privileges and honours amongst the traders coming to India via these routes. He further informs us that the foreign traders after committing any crime when brought to the sovereign were never put in chains like other criminals.³⁷

Indian oxen were used for the use of carriage and were swifter then their overseas counterparts and would carry a man 20-30 miles per day. Horses were preferred to other



beasts for their swiftness, remarkable look and comfortable journey. They were employed for riding and carrying goods from one place to another. The kings had a great desire for the Persian horses and were ready to give maximum trade concessions for the procurement of Persian horses.³⁸ The camels normally used in sandy places like Rajasthan, Sind and Multan. Camels were frequently employed to cover distances as they could work without water for days together. The swiftest camels came from Ajmer while the best in carrying burden, were from Sind. The Jamamza and Lok were two important varieties of camels.³⁹

Abul Fazl wrote in *Ain-i-Akbari* that camel came from Jodhpur, Nagour, Bikaner, Jaisalmer. The use of camels in caravans was not popular on all routes. They were in good demand from Surat to Agra, Sind and Baluchistan connecting roads. The routes connecting India, Persia and Central Asia were surrounded by the uppermost mountainous ranges and the Jungles and caravans routes themselves through one pass or another depending on the reports of snow, rock slides etc.⁴⁰ Caravans, usually, travelled during the dry season, starting the journeys three hours before sunrise and resting before noon. In the morning drums were beaten to announce the departure of the caravans.⁴¹

To ensure added security of the caravan, armed sentries and guards were hired. The Mughal emperors were aware of hazards of the travel and ordered physically powerful measures to maintain peace and security in the empire. William Finch (1608-1611 A.D), British traveller came across many police posts whose purpose was to prevent robbery and to attend to them for the welfare of travellers.⁴² During Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar's reign, if some robbery took place on the highway, it was considered to be due to the negligence of the local Kotwal or Zamindar, as he had either to recover the stolen property or pay compensation to the victim.⁴³

In Shahabuddin Muhammad Shah Jahan's period the overland routes from Multan and Kashmir had lost their importance on account of the disturbances on the frontier. The Indo-Persian wars regarding the occupation and maintenance of Qandahar had caused great trouble to these trade routes and other routes which linked to them.⁴⁴ Towards the end of seventeenth century, Muhiuddin Muhammad Aurangzeb's constant wars in the Deccan, economic failure of the administration and collapse of the imperial treasury, caused confusion and resulted in the ruin of trade and trade routes. The Mughals tried hard to make travel safe, but more or less it was the duty of the caravans to make precautions for themselves like employing guards



to escort them during journeys, not only from highway robbers but from wild animals also especially when the caravan halted near some forest or hilly places. In the process of transportation of goods, risk of wild animals, dangers on the roads, problems of food and fodder and natural calamities were the main challenges. Extensive trade suffered from two most important dangers-robbers on land, pirates on sea. Due to the insecurity of roads, the caravans moved with armed escorts. The expenses on the transport were increased and loss of goods on account of robberies increased the prices, same in the case of sea trade. The articles in Europe were sold at prices five times more than what they cost in India.

Trade flourished along the Ganges, Jamuna, Jhelum and Indus rivers. It was easier and cheaper to send commodities by river than by land, and a huge volume of trade was carried on by river between Agra and eastern provinces. The overland transportation of goods was no less important than river transportation, but followed a different model. In Sultanate and Mughal times, there is a long list of the cities which were frequently visited by the merchants. Some of the major towns' and cities like Balkh, Tirmiz, Kish, Samarkand and Bukhara were very significant for trade and linking routes. In addition to the town of Kabul since it was a link between India and central Asia from earlier times.⁴⁵ Zafarnama gives an idea of the route followed by Timur, which ran from Multan to Delhi via Tulamba, Sahwal, Jahwal, Tohana, Samana, and Panipat.⁴⁶

Despite the less adequate facilities of communication, transportation and travelling on these silk routes connecting East to West, the medieval traders, missionaries, preachers, pilgrims, adventures and other travellers continued journey. The state machinery of the period applied all its authority to overcome these difficulties and the network of roads, post houses, Caravan sarais, bridges and plantations of trees provided safety and security to the caravans and their commodities. This period witnessed a large network of trading centres like Mansura, Ajodhan, Debal, Uch, Sarsuti, and Hansi were the main centres of trading activities with Delhi. Lahore and Multan as the international marts where the Indian and foreign merchants exchanged their goods. On the basis of information given by early medieval and medieval travellers and contemporary accounts Kabul, Samarkand, Bukhara, Kish, Isfahan, Baghdad, Tabriz, Ray, Shiraz, Nishapur, Hurmuz, Ghazni, Qandhar, Tus, Qazwin, Yazd, and Hamadan were the prominent trade centres of connecting silk routes Central Asia and Persia with East



and West. For commercial and political causes these trade centres had kept in good condition by the rulers of South Asian countries.

In course of time, silk route and its connecting roads promoted inter cultural relations between India and other countries of Asia, Europe, Africa and China. Almost throughout history, Silk Route has the greatest commercial and cultural communicative roads. Communication between India and Asia increased in ancient times, because of the popularity of Buddhism in the Central Asian countries. It helped for the spread of Islam in India through the contact between Asia and India during early medieval times. Most of the Arab, Turkish, Persian, and Afghani Muslim scholars and intellectuals travelled to India by the Silk Route to spread Islam. Intellectuals have also all along played very significant role in the transformation of society, shaping the consciousness of the people, revolutionizing ideas of the people of countries on the silk routes. The institutions of Caravan serais and Khanqah also contributed as vehicles of intellectual ship, composite culture and spread the dissemination of the religious, cultural and commercial life of the people of these countries. Caravan serais located on the silk route were one of the significant mechanisms of economic and social growth as they do not served as the place of sojourn and for the storage of goods of traders from neighbouring countries. Caravan serais also worked as cosmopolitan cultural centres of gravity and a nodal institute for bringing collectively people from different regions together.⁴⁷ Muslim rule in India brought the country into closer contact with Asia, enriching Trade, Architecture, tourism and Culture.

In the history of East and West, particularly Eurasia, Silk Route was in its glorious days a great route of trade, understanding, folklore, wittiness, technology, science, astronomy, stories, philosophies of religions, beliefs, fairs, customs and commodities etc. The ideas of the west amalgamated with the ideas of East through the silk routes. Wisdom of different cultures met through the Silk routes in higher levels of understanding. Many religions including Buddhism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Islam have exchanged their ideas among the people East and West through Silk routes. Sufism emerged as a devotional movement within Islam that was also spread through the Silk routes and reached various parts of India. The Silk Routes changed the life style of the people. It made nomads into city dwellers. The vigorous exchange of ideas through the ages between India with other countries and interchange and communication in the spheres of society, economy,



polity, culture, fine arts, learning, medical science, astrology, languages, literature, music, painting, sculpture and various other arts and sometimes diseases throughout its history is well established.

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