

Kashmir at the Crossroads: Historical Linkages and Geopolitical Shifts along the Silk Road

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Abstract:

The following research paper is an attempt to explore and examine the ways in which transmission of men, materials and knowledge along the Silk Roads helped in the political, economic and cultural evolution of the Kashmir region from ancient to modern times. The study aims to understand the geographical continuity and cultural affinity between Kashmir and the rest of Central Asia. It focuses on the dominant position acquired by Kashmir and Ladakh in the trans-Himalayan trade networks. However, with the onset of the Great Game these traditional trade and cultural linkages between Central Asia and Kashmir were greatly disconnected. As colonial influence gradually extended over the Princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, these historic ties were fragmented, representing a significant geopolitical shift in the region's prominent role along the Silk Roads.

Keywords: Silk- Roads, Great Game, Kashmir, Central Asia, Trade, Geopolitics.

Introduction:

The term 'Silk Road' was first coined by German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen to signify the intricate web of trade routes spanning from China, Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent and Middle East to Europe. These routes originated as early as second century BCE under the rule of Han dynasty in China. These networks of long-distance trade and exchanges have continued for thousands of years transcending political boundaries. The incessant movement of people and goods along these routes resulted in an unprecedented transmission and exchange of knowledge, ideas, beliefs, languages, religions, customs and traditions. The movement of ideas and people along the Silk roads between Central Asia and North India is not a new phenomenon. Situated at the intersection of South and Central Asia, the valley of Kashmir held a unique position within these transcontinental networks. Its geographic proximity to the passes of the Pamirs and its location between the Tibetan Plateau and the plains of the Indian subcontinent made it a crucial junction in the overland caravan trade. Hence, Kashmir has always played an important role in the process of Central Asia's intercourse with India in the political, commercial and cultural domains both in the ancient and medieval times¹.

The testament of Kashmir's long-standing and multidimensional connections to Central Asia could be attested through large-scale investigations of archaeological sites in Central Asia and Northern India which reveal a certain typographical affinity between their cultures going as far back as the Old Stone Age². Neolithic finds in Burzahom and Gufkral in Kashmir such as stone and bone tools including axes, chisels, harpoons, needles etc bear close resemblance to those found at Tesma and Tashkent in Central Asia³. These deep-rooted exchanges continued into the early modern period, particularly under the Mughals and Afghans, who preserved and expanded Kashmir's commercial and cultural links with Central Asia, Persia and even some parts of the Ottoman Empire. However, as the shadow of colonial

rule lengthened over Kashmir and the Great Game entered in to a more contentious phase during the second half of the nineteenth century, these age-old, vibrant networks of trade and shared heritage gradually lost their pre-eminence. This Imperial rivalry of the 19th century not only disrupted traditional caravan routes and patterns of trade but also re-mapped regional boundaries, ultimately leading to fragmentation and undermining Kashmir's historical significance in the Silk Road trade network.

Historical Linkages: From Antiquity to the Early Modern Era

The history of the region's connection with Central Asia is deeply embedded in its geography, archaeology, religion, and culture. Long before formal historical records were maintained, Kashmir served as a major conduit connecting the Indian subcontinent with the broader Trans-Himalayan world. During the Kushan period (1st-3rd century CE) under prominent rulers like Kanishka, Central Asia and north-western India were integrated into a single kingdom. This political unification led to robust cultural and commercial integration as well. One finds major Silk Road cities like Khotan, Kashgar, Balkh and Bamiyan developed into important centres of Buddhism.⁴ Kashmir acted as the cradle through which Buddhism spread to China and Central Asia. Many Kashmiri scholars like Kumarajiva, Sanghabuti, Buddhayasas, and Gunaverman journeyed to Central Asia, China and South- East Asia for propagation of Buddhism in these regions.⁵

In the post- Kushan period Kashmir's direct trans-regional engagements were witnessed during the reign of powerful Karkota dynasty ruler Lalitaditya Muktapida (eighth century CE). After his victory over the Tukhars, he extended his control over Tukharistan which has been identified by M.A. Stein as the area comprising modern-day Badakhshan and the upper reaches of the Oxus River⁶. Lalitaditya is reported to have appointed a Turkish Chief Minister, Cankuna in his court. Kalhana attributes several meritorious works including the building of *Stupas* and *Viharas* to Cankuna⁷.

In the medieval period with the advent of Islam many Sufi orders of Central Asian origin such as the Kubrawi and Nakshbandiya spread across the valley. Under the influence of Sufism, relations between Central Asia and Kashmir deepened. Many Central Asian scholars came to Kashmir to advocate their beliefs and many Kashmiri Scholars travelled to cities like Balkh, Bukhara and Samarkand to learn Islamic Theology. During the reign of Sultan Zain- ul-Abidin the socio-cultural and economic connections with Central Asia reached their zenith. He not only maintained cordial relations with the Timurid rulers but also sent some Kashmiris to Central Asia to get trained in the art of bookbinding and Paper Mache⁸. His reign was characterised by flourishing industries like silk, shawl and carpet weaving, stone cutting etc.

The sixteenth century witnessed the establishment of Mughal rule in Kashmir. During this period, the Persian influence in painting, calligraphy, carpet weaving etc was greatly intensified. Central Asian influence in Kashmir even continued with the advent of Afghan rule. By this time the shawl industry had become the mainstay of Kashmir's trade with the outside world. During his visit to Kashmir in 1783 A.D, George Forster, an official of the East India Company who journeyed from Bengal to Central Asia via Kashmir, noticed several merchants and commercial agents who had come to the valley from such far-off places as Georgia, Turkey, Persia and Tartary⁹. Meanwhile, the ruler of Lahore Durbar, Maharaja Ranjit Singh also set his sights on Kashmir and its lucrative trade resulting in his conquest of Kashmir in 1819. When William Moorcroft, the Superintendent of the Stud of the East India Company, visited Kashmir in the year 1820, he took extraordinary interest in the study of shawl industry in the area. He saw numerous merchants of Turkestan, Kabul and Persia getting shawl goods prepared in

Kashmir in conformity with the requirements of their customers¹⁰. Kashmir and Ladakh on account of their geographical proximity to the Silk Roads had become entrepôts of trade in the Indo- Central Asian exchanges but with the coming of British rule these trade and cultural linkages were greatly affected by the rapidly changing dynamics between the British, Chinese and Russian empires.

Kashmir at the Crossroads of Three empires: Colonial Intrusions and the Great Game:

The struggle for power and political supremacy in Central Asia which took place between Victorian Britain and Tsarist Russia came to be known as 'The Great Game'. The Nineteenth century witnessed the British reaching the zenith of their power in India. With the signing of Treaty of Amritsar (1846), which invariably brought the whole of Jammu and Kashmir State under British influence, the colonial rule had expanded till the northernmost frontiers of India. This treaty marked a watershed moment in the history of the state because diverse geographical entities, stretching from the lofty peaks of the Karakoram in Gilgit- Baltistan in the North to the plains of Jammu in the South and from the Kashmir valley in the West to the rugged mountainous terrain of Ladakh in the East, were brought under the aegis of Dogra rule.

Meanwhile, the Russian defeat in the Crimean War (1856) started a new phase in the history of the Great Game. In order to compensate for their loss in Europe and also to counter the British, Russia embarked on a more aggressive expansionist policy in Central Asia occupying Tashkent (1865), Bukhara (1866) and Samarkand (1868). Afghanistan now became the buffer state between the two imperial powers with both trying to extend their diplomatic footprint in the area. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, more than two thousand miles separated the British and Russian empires in Asia. By the end of it this had shrunk to a few hundred and in parts of the Pamir region to less than twenty.¹¹

Amidst this struggle for political and commercial superiority between British and Tsarist empires, the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir became an important strategic area for defense and to protect it became the prime concern of the colonial government. The state was of immense strategic importance to the British and was created on the premise that it would provide protection against any possible intrusions from the North. The state, on the Northern edge of the subcontinent was located at the crossroads of three empires - Russian, Chinese and the British Indian Empire. The Colonial government also used the northern most areas of state to keep an eye on Russian expansion in the area.

The British, constantly wary of Russian designs on India, realized the strategic importance of the frontier regions of the state and started increasing their influence in the area. During this period many British officials like Thomas Gordon, George Hayward, John Biddulph, Douglas Forsyth, William Lockhart and Francis Younghusband explored the area between Chitral in the west and Hunza and beyond in the east and mapped the passes with a view to prevent Russian advancement in the region. They soon realized the vulnerability of the Ishkoman and Baroghil passes North West of Gilgit. It was discovered that these passes were not as inaccessible as previously thought to be and in the event of hostilities with Tsarist Russia they could be captured by an invading army. Another startling discovery made by the British explorers was that in the Pamir region between the borders of Afghanistan in the West and Sinkiang in the East there existed, a no man's land which could be claimed by the Russians through their possession of Khokhand thus bringing them even closer to Kashmir.¹²

In the event of these alarming discoveries two important developments took place. First was the proposal of appointment of a British agent at Gilgit to keep a closer eye on the frontier. Second was the decision by Calcutta to encourage Maharaja Ranbir Singh, the Dogra Ruler to extend his political authority

towards Yasin and Chitral so that the passes could be brought under his control. To achieve these ends Viceroy Lord Lytton met Maharaja Ranbir Singh at Madhopur on 17th and 18th November 1876 and impressed upon him the need to conquer these areas and to position a British officer at Gilgit. Finally, British presence on the frontier was institutionalized with the establishment of the Gilgit agency in 1877 and Major John Biddulph became the first political agent to be stationed at the Gilgit.¹³

Maharaja Ranbir Singh, the Dogra ruler did not remain a silent spectator of these events and tried to pursue an independent foreign policy. He maintained a keen interest in expanding his political and commercial interests in Central Asia. He established a Russian language school at Srinagar, the first of its kind in India, where Russian and other languages were taught¹⁴. Continuing with his expansionist policy, in 1865 Maharaja despatched troops across the Karakoram and conquered the post of Shahidulla. In the same year he employed a British officer named W.H. Johnson who surveyed the area from Leh to Sinkiang. The Dogra Maharaja also despatched officers to the Central Asian khanates to keep himself informed of the latest developments in these regions. In 1866 he sent an envoy, Mehta Sher Singh, on a special survey mission to Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkand and Kashgar. Singh brought back valuable information regarding geographical, political and economic conditions of these regions.¹⁵ However, soon after the death of Maharaja Ranbir Singh in 1885 the British took advantage of the interregnum posted a resident at the Dogra court further solidifying their influence in the state. In the coming decades the colonial government continued with their forward policy and their intervention in frontier affairs continued unabated till 1947.

Economic Linkages: Kashmir, Ladakh and Central Asian Trade Networks:

The trade networks which connected Kashmir with the rest of Central Asia had been in use for centuries before they found mention in any documented sources and attracted European attention. The seemingly insurmountable mountain barriers had not prevented the region from becoming an amalgamation of varied cultural interactions, overland trade and communication. Leh became an entrepot for trade between India, Central Asia and Tibet. Srinagar- Leh-Yarkand route remained the most important trade route between India and Central Asia through which Kashmir received the supply of Pashm wool from Tibet and Yarkand. The Shawl industry scaled new heights during this period with increasing European demand. The shawl became a symbol of power and prestige and its trade best exemplified the essence of the Silk Roads. The raw material for the shawls was procured from Ladakh and Tibet; they were woven by the shawl weavers in Kashmir and then travelled along the Silk Roads to reach markets in Central Asia and Europe. Commercial and religious ties between Kashmir, Ladakh and Tibet, which had continued for centuries, were regularized by a treaty signed in 1842 by the Dogra rulers which was a reiteration of the Treaty of Tingmosgang signed in 1684. The traditional commercial missions of Lapchak and Chaba between Leh and Lhasa also continued as before. Ladakh had the exclusive right to receive Pashmina wool from Tibet in exchange for Brick-tea. Ladakh's exports to Tibet included cotton cloth, saffron, apricots, rice, barley etc whereas Ladakhi imports from Tibet comprised of fine pashm wool, coarse wool, brick tea, hemp, paper and musk. Henry Strachey, a British officer of the Bengal army who visited and surveyed Ladakh in 1847, estimated the value of such imports as one and a quarter lakh rupees.¹⁶ Another contemporary estimate of trade passing through Ladakh has been provided by Alexander Cunningham, who visited Leh twice during the years 1846–47. According to him annual Indian imports into Ladakh averaged 2.2 lakh rupees, whereas the Central Asian exports to India via Ladakh were valued at 2.38 lakh rupees¹⁷. The volume and pattern of trade across the Karakoram

fluctuated through the years depending upon on the level of political stability in region.

The historical trade links between India and Central Asia via Kashmir and Ladakh ceased to function after Communist takeover of China in 1949 and incorporation of Tibet in the People's Republic of China in 1951.

Conclusion:

The History of the Himalayan region is clearly indicative of the fact that the Himalayas have never been an insurmountable barrier rather they have acted as bridge. For thousands of years people have traversed these mountains braving danger, defying harsh climatic conditions for trade, adventure and spread of new ideas. Kashmir through the ages has been a melting pot of different cultures and influences that have shaped its identity. The coalescing of varied influences resulted in the creation of a composite culture in the area.

The colonial partitioning of space during the 19th century, especially during the Great Game led to transformation of Kashmir from a corridor of exchange to a frontier of surveillance. The traditional trade routes were often disrupted by the fluctuating political dynamics between the British, Chinese and Russian empires. The colonial government gradually overtook and closely monitored Kashmir and Ladakh's contacts with the rest of Central Asia by appointing Officers on Special Duty, Trade commissioners and finally a resident at the Dogra Court. The traditional linkages inspired by the Silk Road were greatly affected by the emergence of modern Geopolitics. These disruptions further intensified in the postcolonial era. The Partition of India in 1947 brought about a fundamental shift in the geographical situation of the Indian subcontinent especially its links with Central Asia, which were greatly disconnected.

Kashmir's strategic location at the crossroads of empires and prominent trade routes has long been defined by the ebbs and flows of exchanges along the Silk Roads. These traditional routes of commerce and cultural cohesion remain relevant in the contemporary geopolitical context as well. In modern times, the quest for strategic dominance among regional powers has redefined the dynamics of this historical region. The revival of China's Belt and Road Initiative, aims to renew connectivity between Central and South Asia but in the process, India's frontier security has been jeopardized.

The Silk Roads' historical and traditional heritage provides not only a window into the commonalties of shared heritage that transcends contemporary political geography, but also a paradigm for envisioning peaceful world cooperation. There is a need to revisit these historical connections with a forward-looking perspective that acknowledges the changing geopolitical realities while attempting to reinstate Kashmir's historic role as a conduit of dialogue, commerce, and cultural reciprocity along the evolving Silk Roads.

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