

# A Histo-Geographical Account Of 'Silk Route': The Caravan Of Trade, Culture And Political Hegemony

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*Abstract: The 'Silk Route' consisted of many crisscrossing caravan routes stretched about 5000 miles of mostly inhospitable mountains and desert tracts. The movements of traders, porters, artisans and priests had created the dissemination of culture both materially and spiritually. The trading cities like Kashgarh, Samarkhand, Bukhara, and Xinxiang had become the hub of commodity and cultural exchange between the Greeks, Scythians, Cimmerians, Chinese and Indians. So, the Indo-Chinese trade and cultural relations are century old and Buddhism had been the major amalgamative factor. The northern, southern and central silk routes encircling China, India and adjacent nations played pivotal role towards spreading of inter-mixed cultural practices like, the 'Gandhara' or Greko-Indian art, Mahayana Buddhism, 'Karez' system of irrigation etc. However in recent times, ethnic tensions engulfed in Xinxiang among the Chinese authorities and Uyghur minorities resulted into the rebirth of religious fanaticism. Besides, China's strategic decision for rebuilding Silk Road Economic Belt created geopolitical dilemma among its neighbours notably India and adjacent nations. So, the changing dynamics of Silk Route in context to its revival strategies and the urge for re-creation of cultural ties among states are the focal themes which the present paper addresses.*

**Keywords:** Silk Route, caravan, Greko-Indian, Buddhism, Karez, Xinxiang, Uyghur.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The term 'Silk Route' was coined by Geographer Ferdinand Von Rikhtofen. The band of traders from both Europe and Asian continents used to travel criss-crossing caravan routes for exchanging of commodities and ideas. In the western market of Cairo and Constantinople, the Greek and Babylonian traders meet their Han and Indian counterparts. There were two possible land routes developed between these trading centres, One through North Eastern land routes by crossing the Hindukush and gorges of Tsangpo River; the other through the Irrawaddy-Mekong valley between Kamrup, Arakan and Nanking. Though, the previous route was mostly preferred by the traders.

The vast landmass of central Asia ranging from eastern Iran to Dunhuang and can be entered through Hindukush and Karakoram ranges were inhabited by various stocks of ethnic groups like, Scythians, Bactrians, Sogdians, Han, later the Persians and Arabians. The oasis cities of Kashgar,

Turpan, Hami, Xian, Keriya, and Urumqi had become the economic and commodity exchange hubs of central Asian 'Silk Route'.

However in recent times, these areas lost their cultural and economic privilege due to shifting of trading priorities from landlocked to maritime Silk Road belt. China's 'One Belt one Road' policy added controversial dimensions towards the existing socio-political scenario of the area consisting of erstwhile Soviet states like- Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Xinxiang autonomous region of Western China. Uprising of ethnic and religious tension in these portions are triggering the hard time ahead. The ethnic tension between Uyghurs and the incoming Han majority are critical incidences which China needs to look after in a less orthodox perspective. It can be helpful for tackling the global threats of religious fanaticism over the 'Silk Route'.

II. GEOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNT OF THE ‘SILK ROUTE’

The beginning of the long Silk Route was at Xian or modern day Changhan city. From Xian, the travelers used to move towards Dunhuang and Lan Zhou as these places served as the junction point of the Northern and southern Silk Route. Then the deadly portions of Taklamakan desert arrive. Possibly the merchants and traders follow the Northern silk route going through the oasis cities of Hami, Turfan, Karashahr, Kucha, Tumchuk and finally reach Kashgarh (Kashi). So, these oasis kingdoms along Taklamakan desert and Tarim basin became flourishing commercial and cultural centres. The diversified human stock along the road gave birth to rich inter-exchanging cultural practices, like the ‘Gandhara’ art or Greko-Indian art form and the ‘Karez’ system of deep irrigation. Buddhism spread through the Silk Road from India towards China through these central Asian caravan points. These were the major cities which the great monk Xuangzang had visited during his ‘Journey of eternal enlightenment’. The oasis kingdoms of Xian, Hami, Turfan are blessed with the fertile lands flooded by the perennial rivers originated from Tianshan mountain ranges. Xuangzang had witnessed the glorious days of these trading towns and seen the influence of both Hinayana and Mahayana sect as the rulers and worthy merchant class were the patrons behind the spreading of Buddhism in these areas.

Name of the places along Silk Route	Geographical characteristic	Contemporary significance
Changhan (Xian)	The possible starting point of northern silk road and probably China’s best town at previous times.	Presently one of the cultural hubs of China.
Hami	Adjacent depression fault basin region with Turfan.	Situated at vicinity of Lake Barkol, a region of strategic importance linked via a narrow mountain gorge with the southern parts of Silk Road.
Turfan	An oasis city with fault bounded depression trough. Hottest and driest place in China.	Falls under the Xinxiang autonomous region. Famous for the old underground deep irrigational technique known as ‘Karez’ in central Asia.
Karakul	Means ‘Black Wrist’, located near the Tianshan mountains and lake Issyk-Kul.	Presently one of the largest cities of eastern Kyrgyzstan.
Kucha	Nearer to the Tianshan mountains and Xuangzang entered through the	Birthplace of the great scholar monk Kumarajiva. Joining the silk

	Bedal pass.	road trading points along all the central Asian nations.
Bishkek	Situated at the bottom of the Tianshan mountains.	Main city of Kyrgyzstan, presently disturbed by the uprising of Jihadi militant movements against the central Asian states.
Khotan	Situated at the southern Silk Road, adjacent with other trading towns such as, Loulan, Niya and Yechang.	Nearer to the Pamir plateau and Hindukush mountains. First city to embrace Buddhism through the Kashmiri monks.
Kashgarh (Kashi)	An oasis city near Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan border with western China.	Ancient hub of Silk Road economy. Presently a SEZ, situated over the proposed China-Pakistan Economic corridor (CPEC).

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silk\\_Road](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silk_Road). (Accessed on 12.9.2015).

Table 1: Spatial significance of Silk Route

III. SILK ROUTE AND INDIA – AN INSEPARABLE NOTION

According to available Jain literatures like ‘Bhihadkalpasutrashasha’, several routes traversing different parts of India connected with the remaining northern and southern landlocked ‘Silk Road’ with parts of the Maritime Silk Road like, Kaliyadwipa (Eastern coast of Africa) to Champa (Eastern part of Bihar). A roadway via north of the Black sea to the Caspian through the mountain ranges of central Asia criss-crossed another from Kashgar to Iran via, Kaushambi, Mathura, Pamir, Hindukush and finally reach to Persia (Present day Iran). (Srivastava 2010: 270).

There are five kinds of merchants were found along these routes:

Merchant category	Specific characteristic
Mandisarthas	Who used to carry their goods on their own
Bahalika	Those who used camels, ponies, bulls to carry loads
Bharvaha	Who used to carry others loads
Audorika	Who were the managers or merchants of labours
Karpathika Sarthas	Includes businessman and Monks

Source- Srivastava 2010: 271

Table 2: variation of Indian Merchants along Silk Route

Varanasi was one of the important trading hubs of Indian Silk Road as the Indian traders import raw silk from their Chinese counterparts. After creating excellent embroidery works and painting, they export those stuffs to Persia (Iran). Varanasi was also one of the important place for both Buddhist and Jain merchants as it was very nearer to the birthplace of lord Buddha and eventually the birthplace of four Jain Tirthankaras. (Srivastava 2010: 272).

It was stated earlier that a second road through Kamrup and Arakan was being utilised by the Indian traders to reach Nanking through present day Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Xuangxang's visit to India through the mountainous and desert tracks of central Asia had provided an alternative way of Silk Road trading. Steady state of regular trade encouraged the merchants of East Asia to barter with the Chinese and Sogdians along the route through Kamarupa, Arakan, Nepal and Garhwal. A piece of that century old path still exists between West Bengal's Silerigaon and Lhasa (Tibet), by crossing Aritar, Zuluk loops, Jelep La pass, Gnathang, Rumtek and Nathu La pass.

#### IV. EXCHANGE OF IDEAS, CRAFTS, COMMODITIES AND SPREAD OF BUDDHISM

Through the Silk Road, the Buddhist Kashmiri monks spread the religion near the portions of Khotan. During his visit, Xuangxang witnessed grand reception of him at the monastery in Khotan. Between the Pamir plateau and Mediterranean Sea, Khotan was a trading and cultural hub of exchange of ideas and practices between different clan of people.

Loulan or Shanshan was also a major trading and exchange point along the southern Silk Road where silk from China, perfumes from Anxi and glass works from Farghana valley were circulated. However the city was lost under the approaching sand dunes of adjacent desert and rediscovered by Swedish explorer Sven Hedin in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (Pathak 2010: 04).

The Buddhist came into contact with the Athenian and Yavana Greeks, Bactrians, Sogdians and Parthians. The greater envisage of Mahayana Buddhism came through the religious and cultural assimilation among them. Suiye was one of the powerful provinces at the time of the Tang dynasty. Most of the inscriptional evidences prove that it was a flourishing Buddhist empire along the Silk Road. (Pathak 2010: 06). Bazeklik, which mean the city of painting in Uighur terms, had some of the rarest Buddhist murals. It was one of the biggest complexes of Buddhist caves dating between 5<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D. (Pathak 2010: 07).

Even at Hidda in Afganistan, Xuangxung had witnessed Buddhist hegemony and seen the skull bone, eyes and other body stuffs of the Lord at this place. Until the Islamic invasion, Hidda was an important Silk Road market town with Mahayana Buddhism as its soulful feature. Today the area of Xinxiang autonomous region is facing serious rebellion from the Uyghur ethnic crisis and ISIS has been found backing those rebels. However, it is the Uyghur's who had mastered on world's most splendid Buddhist art.

#### V. INVASION AND RELIGIOUS FANATICISM – THE DARK PART OF ‘SILK ROUTE’

Till date, one can remember even by closing eyes about the barbaric and destructive act of demolition of giant Bamiyan Buddha statues by the Taliban's in 2001. Thousands of valuable murals, ivory panels, priceless glass work collection and Gandhara style Buddha statues were destroyed by the religious fanatics since 1990's. It was not the first time that the Buddhist signs along West and south West Asia had been plundered. In the tenth century, the Muslim Crusaders wiped out Buddhist Khotan and hammered all the monasteries and Buddha cravings. (Pathak 2010: 07)

In Xinxiang, various ethnic minorities such as Uyghur, Kazakh, Uzbek, and Tazik live for centuries with strong cultural bonding with the people of central Asia (Bisla 2016: 01). Presently, this region faces crisis of the Uighur ethnic claims towards the places near the Tarim basin. The whole central Asian states, which were under Soviet invasion in the pre-cold war period, are threatened today with the revival of Islamic 'Jihadi' movements. The Uighur minority of Xinxiang province demands separate 'Eastern Turkistan' and the situation is quite serious there. The leaders of this movement pointed the Chinese rule on Xinxiang-Uighur autonomous region as the 'Chinese imperialism'.

Besides that, the partial treatment of the PRC administration with different Muslim groups is one of the reasons of conflict as the Uyghurs are not offered privileges as like the Hui Muslims. Under development in the western provinces of China, including Xinxiang is also one of the favourable causes behind the Uighur separatist movement, once backed by the Soviet Union.

The strategically important region of Xinxiang and adjacent portions of central Asian Silk Route poses the answer to global energy resource crisis for upcoming times. This portion of the earth is abundant in crude oil, coal, manganese, copper, lead etc. The region share its boundaries with bordering states like Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Afghanistan, India and Pakistan with a long stretch of over 5600 kilometres (Bisla 2016: 01). So in respect of the Geo-Political impact of the region, China shall always try to grab the pulse of it because of security concerns.

#### VI. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS ALONG THE SILK ROUTE – TRACING FUTURE PROSPECTS

Uniqueness of the Silk Road lies in its multilateral character as no one could ever claim of monopoly over the entire caravan routes. The Silk Road emerged as a result of multifaceted agglomeration of various demands with supplies from various sources of human stocks along the central and East Asia (Fedorenko 2013: 12). However it had lost its economic supremacy after the discoveries of maritime trading routes by the European colonial powers since early half of 17<sup>th</sup> century.

In the present times, the technological innovations, establishment of new markets and improvement of transport infrastructure will certainly strengthen the lost ties between the Silk Road nations. Most of the central Asian republics

along with China and India have agreed about the possibilities of the revival of the century old Silk Road. The Silk Road initiatives are instrumental in laying the base of regional co-operation, creating political flexibility, facilitating financial growth and offering trade diversification (Fedorenko 2013: 13).

The connectivity between the maritime and landlocked Silk Road will be the key of the revival of past supremacy over global trade to the central Asian nations and particularly for the BCIM nations. The One Belt One Road (OBOR) contains the 21<sup>st</sup> century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) and Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB). The MSR is the modernisation of the previous land based Silk Route as maritime base or check posts are intrinsic for the development of land connection or as well as the SREB. The main objectives of China in building MSR are:

- ✓ To connect with the resource rich Indian Ocean region (IOR) with its industrialised eastern sea board in the Pacific.
- ✓ Building new ports and industrial zones in different parts of Indian Ocean.
- ✓ To give alternate maritime access to its land locked SREB through a series of new ports on littoral Asia and new trade routes in inner Asia.

The number of new ports encircling the Indian Ocean starting from Chinese mainland to Port Sudan having maritime civilian infrastructure and is running through several major points, such as the strait of Mandeb, the strait of Malacca, the strait of Hormuz etc.

Last but not the least, revival of Silk Road will also reconstruct the century old cultural connectivity among these nations. Buddhism was the major amalgamative factor between India, China and other East as well as West Asian states. Some of the areas along these nations will certainly boost up the possibilities of cultural and heritage tourism along the Silk Road tracts. Rangamati, Shibsagar, Vikramshila, Raktamrittika are such unique places where Buddhist cultural circuits shall be established in near future. The places like Sarnath, Vaishali, Lumbini, Kushinagar, Bodhgaya, Nalanda, Karnasuvarna can be infrastructurally improved and joined with Kashgarh in western China and Lhasa in eastern China to establish a unique 'Buddhist Highway' for the super flow of culture and commodity interchange.

## VII. CONCLUSION

It is said that, 'A single step of man; a giant step of humanity'. The phrase shall be ideally fitted in respect of the great journey of Xuanzang from China to India in search of eternal enlightenment. It opened up the gates of cultural and commodity exchanges between the Chinese, Indian and

Eurasian kingdoms. The legacy should be continued in the upcoming times to facilitate the bonding among the Asian nations and to check the socio-political unrest among the 'Eurasian heartland'. The two Asian power houses, China and India shall move out of the clutch of political suspicion among them in respect of the recent initiatives taken by China to rebuild the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB). Also China has to take permanent initiatives to sort out the controversial issues related with the proposed China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) over the disputed POK territory. Both the neighbours must keep in mind that, without strong bilateral co-operation, they shall not be able to address the contemporary political and religious tensions clouding over the entire Silk Route region. Buddhism has been the eternal source of wisdom, serenity and peace for the mankind over the globe for centuries and possibly can act as so for the future to dismantle the growing religious and political hegemony.

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