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TRADE ROUTES IN HIMALAYAN INDIA

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The term Silk Road was first used in the 19th century to signify the trunk road crossing Central Asia and connecting China in the East and Rome in the West. Today the term is used in a more general manner and includes the oasis land route, the steppe route, and the sea route. The steppe route was mainly used by the nomadic tribes which lived in the steppe region. The sea route linked the China Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean.

Among these three routes, the oasis route is the most well-known as it developed with constant and consistent human movement. For a thousand years, and more, people travelled on this route, even risking their lives for trade, religion, conquest, livelihood and adventure, personages such as Alexander of Macedon, Marco Polo, Fa Xian and Xuan Zang. But while this route was being used mainly by traders, many lateral routes connected the inland centres and cities and accelerated commerce between far flung centres of produce not only of silk but a variety of other goods such as pepper and other spices, textiles, precious metals, gems, ivory and timber and livestock, including horses, and slaves. These branch routes also helped in spreading the Buddhist religion and influenced philosophical ideas and the world of arts and crafts.

The better known ancient route from India is the one westward through what is now Pakistan towards Central Asia via Iran, Asian Minor and on to Greece and Rome. To the North West of the Indian peninsula, at significant junctures of this route rose, in the footsteps of Alexander the Great, the splendid Hellenistic cultures of Bactria and Gandhara in an area controlled successively by the Achaemids, Seleucids and Parthians, and later by the Yueh-Chi/ Tokarian/Sakyas, who came to establish a great dynasty which was to be known as the Kushanas. With the establishment of the Kushana rule, Hadda, Taxila and Kapisha became centres of a vigorous hybrid culture which under Kanishka was to spread down the Gangetic plain up to Mathura in north-central India. The influence of this culture also spread along the main Silk Route through Central Asia to China where it showed its first signs in the work of the Han artists.

Caravans carried goods, and vibrant cultural and intellectual exchanges to and from China and India through an intricate network of trade routes and sub-routes.

An old road linked the Bay of Bengal through Champa, Pataliputra, the Mauryan capital of the Great Ashoka, Mathura, which flourished as a centre of art through the successive rule of the Kushanas, Mauryas and Guptas, further through Taxila and Kapisha (Begram), and crossing the Hindukush reached Ecbatana, with links southward to Egypt and the North via Damascus and Phoenicia, or Antioch through Asia Minor on to Ionia and further westwards to Rome. In the third century B.C., Ashoka the Great Mauryan ruler sent Buddhist embassies as far as Marseilles in France and was responsible for the founding of a settlement of Indian Buddhists in Alexandria in Egypt. His rock inscription at Kalsi in North India mentions his cordial relations with contemporary rulers of Egypt, Syria, Corinth and Macedonia.

In the first century A.D., around the time when the monsoon sea route of the Indian Ocean was discovered (as mentioned in the Periplus of the Eritrean Sea), the merchants of Taxila and other parts of Northern India found greater benefits from the transit trade by finding a way to bypass Bactria and established a more direct route to China through Khotan.

It was through these routes that traversed the north Indian Plains and the Himalayas that Buddhism spread from the time of Ashoka in the third century B.C. to the Northwest, and later Graeco-Buddhist art travelled in the reverse direction through the Gangetic Plains. For Gandhara's most magnificent contribution to Buddhism and to Indian art was in the creation of a perfect and acceptable image of Buddha (who, till then, could be shown in the Hinayana phase, only through symbols) with his thirty signs of greatness and a visage and figure endowed with ethereal, yet very human, grace, vitality and beauty. This marked the advent of the Mahayana Buddhism.

Curiously, in a different sense, the same ingenious way, as found in creating a wonderful image through contact with a foreign influence, was to be shown by Indian culture in the later Islamic period, in Kashmir and other centres of art and craft, in adapting Persian aesthetics, which largely did not involve creation of human images, in the form of patterns in carpet weaving, embroidery, painting, calligraphy, metal-work and stone carving under the encouragement of the Mughal emperors from the 15th century onwards. The Mughal court adopted Persian as its formal language and along with it came other Persian influences too such as formal etiquette, clothing, jewelry and cuisine which have left an impact on Indian

manners that can be seen as living, just as in the case of art and craft, to the present day. The Persian language, which had also led to the development centuries earlier of Kharoshthi, one of the earliest Indian languages, refined Urdu, which had been born of a marriage, in medieval pre-Mughal times, of Arabic and early Hindi. This personalized language now called Hindusthani, is the spoken language of the cultured classes of large areas of north India to this date.

There is another ancient route further east that linked India with China through Ladakh and that has been less taken note of. This route emerged predominantly with the spread of Buddhism into Ladakh on the one side, from Tibet, which by the end of the sixth century A.D. had been established as a stronghold of Buddhism, and on the other from Kashmir where due to various pressures, it was on the decline. Tantric Vajrayana Buddhism began to flourish in Ladakh from the eighth century A.D., but was most prominent from the end of the tenth century when it was in the hands of great masters such as Rinchen Langpo, Atisha alias Dipankara, and Dharmapala, who were trained in Magadha and Bengal.

Ladakh, known in Tibetan as La-tag or land of many passes, is a mountainous area. It covers approximately an area of a million square kilometers, and lies between the two highest mountain ranges in the world, the Himalayas in the South, and the Karakorum (along with the Kunlun range) in the North. Ladakh is divided into five regions: Leh, Nubra, Rupshu, Zaskar and lower Ladakh. Leh is the administrative headquarter of Ladakh and is situated in the big, flat valley of the Indus River. Nubra lies in the north/north-eastern direction on the ancient route linking the Kashmir valley to Yarkand.

The valley of the river Nubra in the region of the same name is one of the more easily accessible areas which were traversed by caravans bearing a great range of goods, crossing steep terrain and making use of natural mountain passes in their journeys between Yarkand and Kashmir.

Nubra, a veritable Paradise on earth among the snowy Himalayas, is endowed with a mild climate clear water streams, and plenty in the form of bounteous harvests of the fields and orchards. It lies south of the Karakorum Range and north of the Kailas Himalayan range where the rivers Indus and Shyok almost meet, covering the area from Baltistan eastwards to the source of the Shyok.

While it can be said that the Nubra Valley route has two branches, one for the summer and the other for passage through winter, the differences are minor and we will describe some of the places on the mainly summer route. Starting from Le, this passes through Digar, Satti, Panamik, Changlung, Brangsa, Saser (Saser Polu) Brangsa (Balti Brangsa), Karakorum, Aktagh or Malik Shah, Chibra, Suget and Shahidula. Beyond Shahidula, three passes, that is Sunju, Kilian and Kilik, give direct access to Yarkand which was a flourishing junction once for the trade caravans. The winter route from Malik Shah approached Yarkand either through Yangidawan or Kugiar.

The mountainous summer and winter routes of the Nubra area have played a vital role in the ancient times in linking the traders passing through Ladhakh with the main Central Asian Silk Road via Khotan, Yarkand and Kashgar. These routes remained open till 1950, but the last major caravan that went this way was in 1939-40. Ladhakh remained closed to foreign citizens for reasons of national security from 1947, but since 1975 it has been increasingly opened up for promoting tourism as a major economic activity in the region.

Trade was a considerable source of revenue for Ladhakh in the ancient times and two kinds of trading was conducted: internal and external. The internal trade was mainly carried on between the districts within the region. Thus, the people of Rupshu brought salt to Zanskar and took barely in exchange. The Zanskaries exchanged salt with the inhabitants of Suru for winter clothing. The external trade was maintained through Central Asian trade routes and other roads which connected Ladhakh with various points in the lower Himalayas. Traders coming from Yarkand used to stay in Leh for a month or two during the harvest season that falls during the period August to October.

These trade exchanges inevitably contributed to the great interchange of influences in religion and art during the heyday of Buddhism in India. The ancient monasteries of the Western Himalayas such as Tsabo, Alchi, Hemis, etc. and those in Sikkim are living evidence of this. But in India today Buddhism survives in few other parts, whereas it flourishes in China, Korea, and Japan and in South-East Asia where it travelled from India in the centuries after Buddha.

The route via the Nubra Valley was extant up to the middle of this century. In the intervening centuries, Western missionaries and explorers also reached these remote recesses of Ladhakh, from the Portuguese merchant Diogo d'Almiera in the beginning of the 17th century, through Jesuit priests like Frs. Francisco de Azevedo and Giovanni de Oliviera soon

afterwards on to European adventurers such as Ipolito Desidieri in the 18th century. Alexander Cunningham, who was the first to assume the office of the Archaeological Survey of India when it was founded in 1861, explored Ladhakh in 1846. In the 20th century, Francke, Tucci and Retch made exhaustive studies of the monuments in Ladhakh. Nubra valley south route saw, as late as between 1937 and 1949 three instances of exodus of the Khazakhi people fleeing as a result of the disturbances that emerged on the Sino-Russian border. These refugees from the Khazakhi area entered through the Nubra valley into Chushul-Ladhakh through western Tibet via the Spungar gap after traversing one of two routes from opposite sides of the great Gobi desert, the western via Kashgar and Khotan, and the Eastern via the Taklamakan desert and Lopnor. These people travelled with a large entourage and a good number of animals such as horses, mules, sheep, yaks and double-humped camels. A large number of the refugees with their animals remained and settled in the Nubra valley and mingled with the local population.