

Overland Connectivity Between India and Central Asia in Delhi Sultanate and the Early Mughal Period.

A detailed analysis of the Trade Routes

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Central Asia's pivotal role as a crossroads of civilizations has historically shaped the patterns of commerce, cultural exchange, and diplomatic relations across the Asian continent. This study focuses on the development and impact of overland connectivity between Central Asia and India during the Delhi Sultanate and early Mughal period (8th-16th centuries CE), examining how these historical networks established enduring frameworks for regional interaction. Through analysis of primary sources, and contemporary accounts, the article explores the complex web of trade routes, commercial infrastructure, and merchant communities that facilitated cross-regional exchanges. It reveals how Central Asian trade routes, particularly through the strategic Khyber, Bolan, and Gomal passes, served not merely as commercial arteries but as vital channels for cultural diffusion and technological transfer. These corridors fostered sophisticated systems of commercial organization, including standardized financial instruments like the hundi system, elaborate trading networks maintained by communities such as the Khatri and Marwari merchants, and advanced infrastructure exemplified by strategically placed caravanserais and fortified trading posts. The article is devoted to examining the complex network of overland trade connectivity between India and Central Asia during the Delhi Sultanate and early Mughal period.

Keywords: Connectivity, India, Central Asia, Overland Trade Routes, Delhi Sultanate, Caravanserais, Merchant Communities, Cultural Exchange, Khyber Pass, Medieval Commerce, Indo-Central Asian Trade, Commercial Infrastructure, Trade Commodities

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Introduction

Connectivity, broadly defined as the integrated networks of physical routes, economic exchanges, and cultural interactions linking different regions, represents a fundamental paradigm in historical and contemporary international relations (Abu-Lughod, 1989). Its theoretical significance lies in understanding patterns of inter-regional interactions and civilizational development, while its practical importance emerges from its role in shaping modern trade corridors and diplomatic relationships (Sachdeva, 2023; World Bank Group, 2023). For India, historically positioned at the crossroads of Asian trade routes, connectivity has been particularly crucial in shaping its economic and cultural landscape (Pradhan, 2022).

Indian connectivity has evolved through distinct historical phases – from ancient Silk Route connections (through 8th century CE) (Liu, 1988), through medieval Indo-Islamic networks (8th-16th centuries) (Wink, 1990), to colonial-era trade systems (16th-20th centuries) (Markovits, 2002), and finally to modern multilateral initiatives (Anand, 2023). The experiences and patterns established during these earlier periods continue to influence contemporary connectivity priorities and challenges.

This historical perspective gains particular relevance in light of recent developments in India-Central Asia relations. As evidenced in bilateral agreements between India and Uzbekistan (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2015, 2020, 2024), there is renewed focus on enhancing regional connectivity through multiple channels. Recent diplomatic initiatives have emphasized expanding civil aviation connectivity between Tashkent and Indian cities, exploring new surface connectivity options, and utilizing strategic points like the Chabahar port as connectivity hubs for Central Asia (Singh, 2023; Roy-Chaudhury, 2024).

Scholarly examination of historical connectivity has been extensive, with significant contributions from Abu-Lughod (1989) on medieval trade systems, Chaudhuri (1985) on Indian Ocean networks, and Levi (2002) on Indo-Central Asian connections. The works by Wink (1990), Alam and Subrahmanyam (2012), and contemporary analysts like Sachdeva (2023) have further enriched our understanding of these historical networks. This article examines the complex networks of overland trade routes connecting Central and South Asia during the Delhi Sultanate and early Mughal period, analyzing their pivotal role in shaping regional commercial infrastructure and cultural exchange.

The medieval period witnessed an unprecedented flourishing of overland trade networks between India and Central Asia (Jackson, 1999), creating a complex web of commercial, cultural, and diplomatic relationships that would shape the development of both regions for centuries to come. From the 8th to the 16th centuries CE, these trade routes served not merely as commercial arteries but as vital channels for the exchange of ideas, technologies, and cultural practices (Wink, 1990). The period saw the rise and fall of several major dynasties in the Indian Subcontinent – from the Ghaznavids (977-1186) through the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526) to the early Mughal Empire (Richards, 1993) – each leaving its distinct imprint on the patterns of trade and commerce between India and Central Asia.

The vitality of these trade connections reached its apex during the 13th and 14th centuries, coinciding with the period of relative stability under the Delhi Sultanate. Contemporary accounts from this period, particularly those of Ibn Battuta who traveled through the region in the 1330s, provide vivid descriptions of bustling marketplaces, sophisticated financial networks, and the complex interplay of various merchant communities. The establishment of the Mongol Empire to the north, despite its initial disruption of trade routes, ultimately created

what historians have termed the ‘Pax Mongolica,’ a period of unprecedented security and standardization across Asian trade routes.

Geographic Framework and Trade Routes

The geographic complexity of these overland trade routes cannot be overstated. The prominent passages – the Khyber Pass, Bolan Pass, Gomal Pass, and Karakoram route – each presented a unique set of challenges and opportunities for the travelling merchants. The Khyber Pass, cutting through the Hindu Kush at an elevation of 1,070 meters, served as the primary artery for trade, particularly in horses, textiles, and precious stones. Archaeological evidence from sites along the pass reveals a sophisticated infrastructure of caravanserais, water storage systems, and defensive structures dating back to the early medieval period. Excavations at Jamrud, at the Indian terminus of the Khyber Pass, have uncovered extensive storage facilities and monetary deposits, indicating the volume and value of trade flowing through this route.

The Bolan Pass, while less frequented than the Khyber, played a crucial role in connecting the Indian subcontinent to Kandahar and beyond. Archaeological evidence from the 11th and 12th centuries suggests that this route gained particular importance during periods when the Khyber Pass faced political instability. The remains of fortified warehouses and coin hoards found along the Bolan route indicate substantial commercial activity, particularly during the Ghurid period (1148-1215). The Gomal Pass, meanwhile, served as a vital alternative route, especially favored by merchants trading in bulk goods due to its gentler gradient, despite the increased risk of banditry that contemporary accounts frequently mention.

Merchant Communities and Trading Groups

Merchant communities operating along these routes demonstrated remarkable adaptability and organizational sophistication. The Khatri merchants, emerging from Punjab’s commercial heartland, established what might be termed the first multinational trading networks of medieval South Asia. Their success stemmed from several innovative practices: the development of an early form of double-entry bookkeeping, the establishment of familial trading houses that spread across Central Asia, and the creation of sophisticated credit instruments. Recent research into preserved Khatri account books from the 14th century reveals complex financial arrangements, including early forms of insurance for goods in transit and standardized interest rates for commercial loans. The East India Company records from the late 17th century document the specific qualities of these textiles. Commercial reports describe how the finest varieties of Dhaka muslin, known as “*mulmul khas*” (king’s muslin), were tested by passing them through a small ring (Chaudhuri 1978: 238-240). These records indicate that such fine muslins commanded exceptional prices in international markets, particularly in China and the Middle East. This personal exchange provides intimate insights into how merchants marketed their wares.

Beyond the Khatri, other merchant communities played equally vital roles in this commercial ecosystem. The Marwari traders, originating from Rajasthan’s desert regions, specialized in the transportation and trade of salt, textiles, and precious stones. Their expertise in desert navigation made them indispensable partners in trans-regional trade. The Gujarat-based Bania merchants, meanwhile, developed sophisticated methods of price arbitrage between coastal and inland markets, effectively linking maritime and overland trade routes. Archaeological evidence from trading settlements in Gujarat reveals the presence of Central

Asian goods alongside maritime imports, suggesting their role in integrating different trading networks.

The Muslim merchant communities, particularly the Bohras and various Afghan trading groups, brought their own innovations to this commercial landscape. The introduction of Islamic commercial law and banking practices, particularly the prohibition of usury, led to the development of creative financial instruments that would influence Indian commercial practices for centuries. The *mudaraba* system of profit-sharing partnerships, for instance, became widely adopted even among non-Muslim merchants, as evidenced by commercial documents from 13th-century Multan.

Trade Commodities and Material Culture

Textile Trade

The medieval trade network between India and Central Asia was characterized by a remarkable diversity of commodities (Chaudhuri, 1985). Archaeological evidence from medieval trading posts reveals the presence of specialized storage facilities designed specifically for different grades of textiles (Pearson, 1976). Marco Polo's detailed descriptions of Indian textile trade provide remarkable insights about how certain cotton fabrics from Gujarat were so fine that "when laid on the grass and the dew has fallen, they become invisible" (Pearson, 1976). This reflects the remarkable quality of Indian textiles that commanded extraordinary prices in foreign markets.

Horse Trade

The horse trade fundamentally shaped military capabilities and political relations across South Asia (Gommans, 1994). Archaeological records from cavalry encampments near Delhi reveal sophisticated systems for horse maintenance, including specialized feeding regimens and exercise routines adapted from Central Asian practices (Jackson, 1999). The scale of this trade was immense – historical records from the Delhi Sultanate period indicate annual imports of up to 25,000 horses (Richards, 1993). According to Babur's memoirs (Alam & Subrahmanyam, 2012), in 1526, a single high-quality Turkic horse could be exchanged for ten slaves or the equivalent of two years' worth of fine textile production. He describes the sophisticated evaluation system used by horse traders, including specific criteria for assessing speed, stamina, and bloodline.

Luxury Goods and Crafts

The luxury goods trade represented another vital component of medieval commercial exchange (Chaudhuri, 1985). Persian carpets, Chinese silks, and Central Asian metalwork became essential markers of elite status in Indian courts (Subrahmanyam, 1990A). Archaeological discoveries from medieval urban centers like Lahore and Multan have revealed workshops where Indian artisans worked alongside Central Asian masters (Levi, 2002), producing goods that reflected this cultural synthesis.

Spice Trade

The spice trade, while often associated with maritime routes, maintained significant overland components through Central Asia. Beyond their culinary applications, spices played crucial roles in medieval medicine and religious rituals. The transport of these valuable

commodities led to innovations in packaging and preservation techniques. Merchants developed sophisticated methods for maintaining the potency of spices during long overland journeys, including the use of sealed ceramic containers with specific coating treatments, evidence of which has been found along major trade routes. The economic significance of the spice trade extended beyond mere profits, influencing diplomatic relations and leading to the development of specialized trading communities with expertise in spice grading and handling.

Precious Stones and Metallurgy

Precious stones and metallurgy formed another crucial segment of the medieval trade network. Indian diamonds, particularly those from the Golconda region, were highly prized in Central Asian markets. The trade in precious stones fostered the development of sophisticated cutting and polishing techniques, with evidence of specialized workshop districts in major trading cities. Metallurgical exchange was equally significant, with Central Asian innovations in steel-making techniques transforming Indian weapon production. The famous Damascus steel, produced using Indian wootz steel, represents one of the most notable examples of technological transfer facilitated by these trade routes.

Commercial Infrastructure

The commercial infrastructure supporting this vast trading network was remarkably sophisticated. Caravanserais, spaced at regular intervals along major routes, evolved from simple rest stops into complex commercial centers (Dale, 1994). These structures typically followed standardized architectural patterns, with distinct areas for goods storage, animal care, merchant accommodation, and commercial transactions. Archaeological evidence reveals the gradual evolution of these facilities (Wink, 1990), with later structures incorporating advanced features like ventilated storage areas, secure strong rooms, and sophisticated water management systems. Many caravanserais also housed permanent markets and workshops, serving as crucial nodes in the commercial network. Ibn Battuta's description (Abu-Lughod, 1989) of a caravanserai near Delhi shows the sophistication of medieval trade infrastructure. He described how the building had separate sections for different types of merchants, specialized storage areas based on commodity types, and even a systematic method of recording arrivals and departures. He was particularly impressed by the presence of official interpreters who helped facilitate trade between merchants speaking different languages.

Urban development along trade routes followed distinct patterns (Jackson, 1999). Archaeological evidence from medieval Multan shows clearly defined areas for textile trading, metalworking, and horse markets (Levi, 2002), each with its own storage facilities and commercial infrastructure. The development of these urban centers was closely tied to innovations in water management, with sophisticated systems of wells, aqueducts, and storage tanks ensuring reliable water supply for both commercial and domestic use. These water management systems often incorporated technologies from both regions, such as the Persian qanat system adapted to Indian geological conditions. Amir Khusrau's detailed descriptions (Alam & Subrahmanyam, 2012) of Delhi's markets paint a vivid picture of medieval commerce. He described how the market day would begin with the 'calling of prices' – a systematic announcement of daily rates for different commodities. He mentioned specialized markets where merchants could find everything from Kashmir shawls to Central Asian horses, each with its own quality control systems and price regulators.

Security arrangements along trade routes reflected the high value of transported goods

and the complex political landscape. Merchant guilds maintained their own armed escorts, while local rulers provided additional protection in exchange for transit taxes. Archaeological evidence indicates the presence of fortified warehouses at key points along trade routes, with sophisticated systems for goods protection (Asian Development Bank Institute, 2024). These security arrangements extended to financial security as well, with the development of complex systems for risk management and insurance.

Financial Systems

The evolution of financial systems during this period was particularly noteworthy (Prakash, 1985). The hundi system of bills of exchange reached new levels of sophistication (Markovits, 2002), enabling complex financial transactions across vast distances. These financial instruments were backed by elaborate networks of merchant bankers who maintained branches in major trading centers across both regions. Evidence from preserved merchant accounts indicates the development of standardized interest rates and complex financial partnerships that crossed religious and cultural boundaries (Subrahmanyam, 1990B). The system of commercial partnerships known as *mudaraba*, originally an Islamic financial institution, was adapted and widely adopted by Hindu and Jain merchants, demonstrating the pragmatic approach to business that characterized the period.

Cultural and Religious Exchange

Religious Institutions

The cultural and religious exchanges facilitated by these trade routes had far-reaching implications that transcend geographic, mere commercial relationships. Buddhist monasteries had long served as waypoints along trade routes (Liu, 1988), and evolved into sophisticated centers of cultural exchange. These institutions often maintained extensive libraries and scriptoriums where texts were not only preserved but also translated, leading to the development of hybrid scholarly traditions. Archaeological evidence from monastery sites reveals the presence of multiple script systems and linguistic traditions (Thapar, 2002), suggesting their role as centers of multilingual scholarship. The discovery of Buddhist texts written in Central Asian scripts alongside Sanskrit manuscripts demonstrates the complex web of cultural interaction that characterized these institutions. Xuanzang's detailed accounts (Liu, 1988) show remarkable continuity into the medieval period. He described how merchants maintained price equilibrium across different markets through a network of swift messengers who would regularly update traders about prices in different cities. This system, known as 'price-matching' (*mul-santolon*), continued well into the *mudaraba* medieval period.

Islamic commercial practices had a transformative effect on existing trading systems (Wink, 1990). The concept of *shirkat* (partnership) and (profit-sharing) were adapted and modified by Indian merchants, leading to innovative hybrid forms of business organization. Documentary evidence from the 14th century reveals the existence of complex business partnerships that combined elements of both Islamic and Hindu commercial practices. These partnerships often transcended religious boundaries, with Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist merchants participating in joint ventures. The development of standardized commercial documentation in multiple languages – Persian, Sanskrit, and various regional scripts, indicates the emergence of a sophisticated multilingual commercial culture. Al-Biruni's detailed observations (Kuwabara, 1928) provide fascinating insights into cultural exchange, noting how Hindu merchants had

adapted to Islamic banking practices while maintaining their own accounting systems, creating a unique hybrid system of commerce. His accounts specifically mention how merchants would maintain parallel books – one in Sanskrit using traditional Hindu numerical systems and another in Persian using Arabic numerals.

Linguistic Developments

Linguistic developments along trade routes were particularly significant. The emergence of hybrid trading vocabularies that combined elements from Sanskrit, Persian, Turkish, and various regional languages reflected the intensive cultural interaction of the period. These trade pidgins eventually evolved into more stable forms of commercial communication, some of which influenced the development of regional languages. Merchant accounts and commercial documents from the period reveal the gradual standardization of commercial terminology across different linguistic traditions. The development of specialized commercial scripts, designed for rapid recording of transactions and adapted to multiple language systems, represents another significant linguistic innovation of this period.

Artistic Exchange

Artistic exchanges facilitated by trade routes led to the emergence of distinctive hybrid styles in various crafts. The development of Indo-Persian miniature painting styles, for instance, can be traced to the movement of artists along trade routes. Archaeological evidence from urban centers reveals workshops where artists from different traditions worked together, leading to the development of new techniques and aesthetic approaches. The influence of Central Asian metalworking techniques on Indian jewelry design, particularly in the use of precious stones and enamel work, demonstrates the deep impact of these artistic exchanges. Similarly, textile patterns show clear evidence of cross-cultural influence, with Indian motifs appearing on Central Asian fabrics and vice versa.

Technological transfers along trade routes had profound implications for both regions. Innovations in irrigation technology, particularly the adaptation of the Persian wheel to Indian conditions, transformed agricultural practices in many regions. The transfer of metallurgical techniques, especially in steel production and precious metal working, led to significant advances in both regions. Documentary evidence suggests the existence of specialized guilds dedicated to the adaptation and dissemination of new technologies. The movement of skilled craftsmen along trade routes facilitated the spread of technical knowledge, leading to the establishment of new manufacturing centers and the development of hybrid technical traditions.

Social and Environmental Impact

Social Transformation

The social impact of these trade networks was equally significant. Urban centers along trade routes became sites of remarkable social mobility, where successful merchants could transcend traditional social boundaries. Documentary evidence from major trading cities reveals the presence of wealthy merchant families from diverse social backgrounds, suggesting that commercial success could override traditional social hierarchies. The emergence of new urban elite groups, often composed of successful merchants from various communities, led to significant changes in social organization and cultural practices.

Women's roles in commerce during this period were more significant than traditionally acknowledged. The diversity of these roles ranged from independent traders and property holders to managers of large-scale textile operations and precious stone dealers, demonstrating women's extensive participation in medieval commerce. Recent research has revealed evidence of women merchants, particularly from trading communities like the Marwaris and Khattris, who managed substantial commercial operations. Surviving legal documents and commercial records indicate that women often held property and conducted business independently, particularly in textile and precious stone trades. The presence of women's quarters in caravanserais and specialized market areas in major trading cities suggests their active participation in commercial activities.

Environmental Factors

Environmental factors played a crucial role in shaping trade patterns. The need to maintain reliable water sources along trade routes led to significant investments in water management infrastructure. Climate variations, particularly monsoon patterns, influenced the timing and routing of trade caravans. Documentary evidence suggests sophisticated understanding of seasonal weather patterns among merchant communities, with trading schedules carefully planned to avoid adverse weather conditions. The impact of trade on local environments was also significant, with some routes showing evidence of environmental stress from overuse.

Conclusions

The long-term regional impact of these medieval trade networks cannot be overstated. The commercial corridors established during this period laid the foundation for lasting patterns of economic and cultural exchange that would persist well into the modern era (Mohan, 2023). The sophisticated financial systems developed by medieval merchants, particularly the hundi system and complex partnership arrangements, influenced the development of modern South Asian banking practices. Urban centers that emerged along these trade routes often evolved into major modern cities, their layout and commercial organization still reflecting their medieval origins (Singh, 2023).

The cultural synthesis achieved through these trade networks created enduring patterns of artistic and technological exchange (Anand, 2023). The hybrid architectural styles, artistic traditions, and craft techniques that emerged during this period continued to evolve, forming the basis for distinctive regional cultural expressions. The multilingual, multi-religious commercial culture that developed along these routes demonstrated the possibility of peaceful coexistence and mutual benefit through trade, a legacy that holds particular relevance in the modern context.

Perhaps most significantly, these medieval trade networks demonstrated the potential for commercial relationships to transcend political, religious, and cultural boundaries. The sophisticated systems of credit, partnership, and risk management developed during this period reflected a remarkable degree of trust and cooperation among diverse communities. This legacy of commercial sophistication and cultural synthesis continues to influence patterns of trade and cultural exchange in modern South and Central Asia (Wagner & Siddharth, 2021).

Looking toward the future, these medieval trade networks offer crucial insights for addressing contemporary challenges in global commerce and cultural exchange. Their resilience in the face of political upheaval, climatic challenges, and technological limitations

demonstrates the adaptability of human commercial relationships. As modern societies navigate issues of sustainable development, cross-cultural cooperation, and financial innovation, the sophisticated solutions developed by medieval South Asian traders provide both inspiration and practical guidance. Their legacy reminds us that commerce, when properly structured, can serve as a powerful force for fostering mutual understanding, technological innovation, and cultural enrichment across diverse communities.

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