

# Silk Road

## Know the Trade Routes and Significance of the Silk Route for UPSC!

The **Silk Road** was a network of historic trade routes that connected the ancient globe through trade between 130 BCE and 1453 CE. It was originally created under the Han Dynasty of China. Although the term "Silk Road" is frequently used, historians prefer the term "Silk Routes" because the Silk Road was not a single route that connected the east and the west. These routes were traveled by the European adventurer Marco Polo (1254–1324 CE), who wrote a comprehensive account of them in his well-known work.

In this article, let us look at what is silk road, its trade routes, significance, goods traded via the silk road, silk road legacy, silk road and India as required for the [UPSC](#) Examination since the topic is important from the context of the International Relation section which is a part of UPSC mains GS 2 paper and prelims GS paper 1.

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## What is Silk Road?



Source: *The Hindu*

<https://blogmedia.testbook.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/one-belt-one-road-4010499a.jpg>

The Silk Road, also known as the Silk Route, was a network of ancient commercial routes that connected East and West from China to the Mediterranean Sea and served as a major conduit for cultural exchange.

- The flourishing traffic in Chinese silk that took place across its length beginning in the Han era (207 BCE – 220 CE) gave rise to the term "Silk Road". Around 114 BCE, the Han dynasty extended the trade routes through Central Asia, primarily as a result of the travels and missions of Zhang Qian, a Chinese imperial envoy.
- As a result of trade along the Silk Road, long-distance political and economic ties between the civilizations of China, the Indian subcontinent, Persia, Europe, the [Horn of Africa](#), and Arabia were established.

- Although silk was undoubtedly the main export from China, the Silk Routes also saw the exchange of several other items, as well as syncretic ideas, numerous technology, religions, and diseases. The Silk Road was used by the civilizations along its network to conduct cultural exchange alongside commercial trade.

## Trade Routes of the Silk Road

Several routes made up the Silk Road. The Northern route, the Southern route, and the Southwestern route were the most popular overland routes.

### Northern route

The Chinese Emperor Wu of Han, who ruled from 141 to 87 BC, employed his army to prevent nomadic tribes from harming travelers inside his zone of influence, which led to the northern route becoming more and more popular during the first century BC.

### Southern route

The southern route from China passed through the Karakoram mountains. As a result, it was sometimes referred to as the Karakoram route. The Karakoram mountain range stretches into Afghanistan and Tajikistan in the northwest and crosses the frontiers of Pakistan, India, and China.

Since many travelers preferred to continue by ship rather than traveling overland, the southern route had numerous spurs reaching south to the sea, west of the Karakoram mountains.

### Southwestern route

The Ganges Delta was traversed on the southwesterly route between China and India. Archaeological digs in this delta region, which served as a significant commerce hub, uncovered a staggering variety of items from all over the world, including antique Roman beads and gemstones from Thailand and Java.

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## Significance of the Silk Road in Ancient Times

The Silk Road emerged as the most significant access route in the globalization of the ancient world.

- From 600 to 1200 AD, the Silk Road served as the main route for trade and the connection between Eastern and Western cultures.
- The roadway provided once-in-a-lifetime opportunities for traders, pilgrims, soldiers, explorers, and adventure seekers.

- With departure points in Asia, India, and gradually connecting sea channels all over the region, the ancient Silk Road, a network of commerce routes that spanned more than 4,600 miles, served as a conduit for trade.
- The Silk Road was the most significant and extensive land trade route in human history that connected the most developed and mighty civilizations of the world, the majority of which were concentrated on the Mediterranean and the Yellow and Yangtze River basins.
- Over the course of the centuries-long Silk Road trade, silk and porcelain that belonged to China were the two most popular goods. Given its lightweight, ease of transportation, and reputation of being worth its weight in gold during the Roman era, silk became the most valuable export along the Silk Road. The road, thus aided China's economic growth and wealth creation.
- Technologies that changed the world spread westward along the Silk Road from the Han era, around 139 BC till the end of the Yuan Empire, in 1368.
- Religions traveled along the Silk Road routes in an eastward direction despite the general westward movement of technology. From the Han era onward, Buddhism had a significant impact on China owing to the introduction of Central Asian-style Buddhism. The advent of Western religions altered civilization as a result.
- While major crops and domesticated animals moved mostly eastward, technology spread primarily westward. To acquire the larger horse breeds, the Han Emperor launched trade along the Silk Road in the year 139 BC. Population increase was largely driven by the eastward spread of crops and animals.
- During the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1912), ships moved goods much more efficiently and quickly, rendering the Silk Road land routes obsolete. The Silk Road was then forcibly reopened during the Japanese conquest of China in the 1930s since the Japanese controlled the sea lanes and ports. The Soviet Union provided the Chinese troops with weapons from 1937 to 1941. China was therefore saved which could directly be attributed to the Silk Road.

## Goods Traded via the Silk Road

Silk was transported by traders from China to Europe, where it was worn by aristocrats and wealthy clients. The Silk Road network was crucial for the migration of people, the transmission of philosophy, science, technology, and creative ideas, in addition to the trading of a broad variety of items other than just silk.

Other items that were exchanged over the Silk Road include:

- Ginger, lacquerware, porcelain, and silk fabrics from China
- Sandalwood from India
- Persian dates, pistachios, and saffron from Persia



- frankincense and myrrh from Somalia
- Glass bottles from Egypt
- Fur from Caucasian steppe's animals
- Spices from the East Indies
- Rome-made glass beads
- A terrible slave trade also took place along the magnificent Silk Road.
- Along the Silk Road, in addition to tangible goods, religion and technology were also "traded."

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## The Silk Road Legacy

- The Silk Road was most valuable for its cultural exchange.
- Each and every aspect of civilization including art, religion, philosophy, technology, language, science, and architecture was shared along these trade routes together with the goods that merchants transported from one nation to another.
- The outbreak of the bubonic plague, which is assumed to have reached Constantinople via the Silk Road and devastated the Byzantine Empire in 542 CE, is proof that diseases also traveled along this route.
- Due to the closure of the Silk Road, traders were compelled to conduct their business through the sea, which ushered in the Age of Discovery and the emergence of a global community.
- The shutdown of the Silk Road prompted Europeans to discover and ultimately conquer the so-called New World of the Americas, thereby establishing the so-called Columbian Exchange, through which commodities and values were carried from those in the Old World to those in the New World, always to the detriment of the native people of the New World.
- The Silk Road served to widen people's perception of the world they lived in.

## Silk Road and India

Through the first millennium B.C., the Silk road served as a significant trade route.

- It linked the Kamboja kingdom, which encompasses modern-day Afghanistan and Tajikistan, to ancient Pratishthana, which included Paithan on the Godavari in the south, towns and cultural hubs in northern India, and Tamralipti or Tamluk on the eastern coastline.
- India had three potential pathways that linked to the Silk Road. The Silk Road was eventually joined by three routes, first which went through Hadda, Kapisa, and Bamiyan, the second passed through Srinagar, Gilgit, and the

Karakoram Range and the last route passed through Purushapura. The aforementioned routes were used for trade and pilgrimage by both foreigners and Indians.

- From Uttarapatha, a significant route connected the Silk Road via Yunnan and Burma. The trade with south-western China was conducted over this route. This is demonstrated by the story of King Chiang Kein (c. 127 BC), who discovered textiles and bamboo from southwest China being sold in the Gandhara market. He discovered via personal research that these products were transported from Yunnan, Burma, to Bengal in eastern India, where they were subsequently transported through the Uttarapatha via Afghanistan and India to Bactria.
- It was not silk that was the most important item transported along this route, but rather, religion. Along the northern branch of the road, Buddhism migrated from India to China and central Asian nations. The first influences appeared during the initial exploration of the passes across the Karakoram.

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### Is the Silk Road Still Used Today?

- Over the course of around 1,500 years, trade along the Silk Road persisted. When the Mongols ruled throughout Eurasia from the Chinese Yuan Empire (1279–1368) to Eastern Europe, trade increased and reached a peak.
- The Silk Road trade in the 1400s was effectively put to an end by the fall of the Yuan Empire, growing isolationism during the reign of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), growth of silk manufacturing in Europe and other regions, and expansion of marine trade.
- A new Silk Road is emerging within the Silk Road's historical background. The [Belt and Road Initiative](#), also known as the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, was introduced by China in 2013. It focuses on encouraging shared wealth and progress.
- **Infrastructure for new trans-Asian transportation:** The first freight trains from Europe to China started operating in 2011, reducing the 50-day maritime transit time from Germany to China to just 18 days.
- A significant 5,400-kilometer motorway from St. Petersburg to the Yellow Sea was constructed in 2018, enabling travel across the route to take just ten days. This is a new means of transportation for sightseeing and affordable tourism across Silk Road locations.
- The Silk Road is now a well-liked travel route. Silk Road tourism is expanding in Xinjiang as well as all along the route from Xi'an to Kashgar and Altay in Xinjiang to Greece and Albania.

We hope that all your doubts regarding the topic Silk Road have been addressed after going through this article. Testbook offers excellent quality study material for various competitive exams. Be successful in your UPSC exam preparations by downloading and using the [Testbook App](#) right away!

