India's Encounter with the Silk Road

Exploring the evolution of the Silk Road and its connection with India, brings out the dynamics of cross-cultural relation between India and the rest of the Silk Road countries in a historical perspective. What is the present symbolism of the Silk Road for India vis-a-vis other countries?

SUBHAKANTA BEHERA

The Silk Road is an unique example from history, of inter-continental cooperation and collaboration not only in the field of trade and commerce but also in the realm of ideas and culture. Highly romanticised and sometimes fictionalised in the literature of the countries through which the Silk Road passed, and in innumerable travelogues produced over the centuries, this great Silk Road spanned a distance of almost 7,000 miles from China through central Asia, northern India and the Parthian Empire, to the Roman Empire during the period from 200 BC to 14th century AD circa. It connected the Yellow River valley in China to the Mediterranean Sea, virtually connecting two continents, Asia and Europe, the east and the west. The phrase Silk Road was coined by the German scholar and geographer Baron von Richtofen in 1877 and since then it has been the subject of much investigation, research, survey and academic debate and dither across the world.

The physio-geographical connection between the Silk Road and ancient India cannot be properly understood unless the Silk Road is geographically contextualised. This brings out the fact that the Silk Road as such does not refer to a single, clearly-defined road or highway, connecting Rome and Syria in the west to the Yellow River valley in China in the east. Rather it is a series of caravan routes, a network of trails and trading posts, oases and emporia scattered all across the vast Eurasia, with the eastern terminus at the old Chinese capital city of Chang'an or the present-day Xian, and the western termini at Byzantium or Constantinople (present-day Istanbul), Antioch, Damascus and other west Asian cities. All along this vast stretch, branch routes at different points led to destinations off to either side of the main road. For example, a branch left the southern route at the far end of the Taklamakan and took in Balkh, today in northern Afghanistan, rejoining the west bound Silk Road at Merv. Another such important branch left southern route at Yarkand and travelled south and across the Karakoram passes to the town of Leh and Srinagar, before finally reaching the north-western Indian and thus to other routes throughout the Indian subcontinent. This is how India became geographically connected with the Silk Road and occupied a prominent place in the whole Silk Road phenomenon. The Eurasia geographical context of the Road itself played an important role in the cultural exchange between India and the rest of the Silk Road countries.

From the Indian perspective, the importance of the Silk Road was not so much because of its trade and commercial value as because of its being the highway for the movement of cultures and ideas. This brings us to consider the nature and purpose of the Silk Road. It was first of all, not a trade route that existed solely for the purpose of trading in silk; many other commodities were also traded, from gold and ivory to even exotic animals and plants. But of course, silk was the predominant trading commodity and for Romans, and westerners this was the most remarkable item. Till quite recently, the discovery of silk weaving and its merchandising were considered to be related to the first millennium BC. But the archaeological excavation of silk cloths, girdles and yarns in the Chinese province of Zhenjian near the Taihu Lake has proved that silkworm breeding and cloth-weaving had been well-developed nearly 5,000 years ago. The export of the Chinese silk and trading in this commodity however, began in the fourth fifth centuries BC, but it is the Han dynasty (202 BC-220 AD) which largely came to be associated with the rise and development of the Silk Road as a trading phenomenon. More specifically, the Han emperor Wu-ti (141-87 AD) in his attempt to forge a broad alliance of central Asian nomads against common enemies like Xiongnus and Tibetan bandits, dispatched his general Chang Chie'n who, although failed in his mission, managed to travel westward as far as Bactria, traversed the regions of today's Afghanistan and pioneered a direct way to the central Asian regions. Chie'n's information about these new lands, peoples, products and ways eventually led to the development of the Silk Road, and hence he is rightly credited as the founder of this great road. Over the years, the Silk Road developed to a trade highway as, along side silk textiles, medical herbs, carved jade, furs, ceramics, and a wide variety of luxury goods travelled from China, and valuable commodities like horses, glassware, raw jade, frankincense, gold, silver, etc, were imported to China. But trade was indirect as goods passed from one trader to another in short segments. Sometimes, traders would exchange their goods for other goods without the use of money. Thus, trade along the Silk Road was of peddling and barter nature.

During this period of the Silk Road history roughly in the early Christian era, north-western Indians who lived near the Ganges river started playing prominent role as middlemen in the China-Mediterranean silk trade as soon as they understood that silk was a lucrative product of the Chinese Empire. The trading relationship between China and India mostly in barter form, developed with increased Han expansion into the central Asia. The Chinese traded their silk with Indians for precious stones and metals such as gold, silver and jade, and then Indians would trade silk with the Roman empire. Thus, in a sense India came to be the middle point for trade and commerce between China and Rome, the east and the west. The antiquity of India's participation in the silk trade can be attested by the use of word 'Sinapatta' for the Chinese equivalent of silk in the great Indian text of political economy *Arthashastra*, written by Kautilya in the 4th century BC.

The Silk Road's importance for India mainly came from its becoming a major channel for cultural and religious exchange between India and other countries. It is now established that brahaminism of ancient India had influenced religions of the peoples of this road. For example, in Zoroastrianism, the use of fire as the symbol

of the purifying power of good was supposedly borrowed from brahaminism. Over the centuries for almost 2,000 years, the Silk Road provided the most important and credible means for the travel and dissemination of religious beliefs across Eurasia. That is why with the growth and regularity of the road in terms of travel and trade, original religious orientation and beliefs of the people along side the road changed. With traders and caravans, missionaries also travelled carrying with them their faith and persuasions and spreading it along the trade routes. One such great religion was Buddhism which originating from India, took advantage of the great extent and mobility of the Silk Road to extend its reach far beyond its native land.

Buddhism and Islam

Buddhism, originating in the 6th century BC became the dominant religion in India during the Mauryan emperor Ashoka (273-232 BC) and spread throughout his empire from Bengal to Afghanistan. As a result, Buddhism eventually reached the Hellenised neighbour, the Kushana/Bactria kingdom which under the Kushanas dominated the areas of Hindukush into Kabul, Gandhara, northern Pakistan and north-western India after the decline of the Mauryan empire. Under the great Kushana king Kanishka (144-172 AD), Buddhism further flourished and spread, and Gandhara, now in Pakistan became not only a great Buddhist settlement but also served as a cradle to a distinctive Graceo-Buddhist art form. During next few centuries, Buddhism along the Silk Road spread to Hadda, Bamiyan and Kondukistan. Bamiyan now in Afghanistan became one of the most important Buddhist centres by the 4th century AD because of its strategic location at the intersection of roads to Persia, India, Tarim Basin and China.

By the 7th century AD, the small kingdoms around the Tarim Basin region in the western part of China had been swept over by Buddhism which had brought with it so much of Indian culture that Sanskrit became the religious language. As Buddhism advanced eastwards towards the Tarim Basin, Kashgania with Yarkand and Khotan in the west, Tumsuk, Aksu and Kizil in the north, Loulan, Karasahr and Dunhuang in the east, and Miran and Cherchen in the south became important centres of Buddhism. Buddhist texts were translated from Sanskrit into various local Indo-European dialects such as Tocharian.

It is said that the most significant commodity carried along the Silk Road was not silk, but religion and no doubt, Buddhism was the most important. Travelling across the Silk Road, it finally reached China. The Chinese empire had extended its frontier into central Asia during the 1st century BC and since then and perhaps even earlier, China had contact with Buddhism through the movement of traders and missionaries along the Silk Road. But with the Han emperor Mingti (57-75 AD) we have evidence of the Chinese contacts with Buddhism. He sent his emissary Cai Yin to central Asia and India to learn more about Buddhism. After three years, Yin returned to China not only with images of the Buddha and Buddhist scriptures but also with two Indian Buddhist monks to preach in China. It is from about this time onwards that Buddhist missionaries and pilgrims began to travel between China, central Asia and India. Simultaneously also started the translation of Buddhist *Shravakayana* and other sacred texts into Chinese, and missions to India by Chinese priests and monks in search of texts and doctrinal instructions. The greatest flux of Buddhism into China occurred under the Northern Wei dynasty, during the 4th-5th centuries AD which actively promoted Buddhism. It has been recorded that in the early 6th century AD, there were almost two million Buddhists in China with marvellous monasteries, temples and grottos built all across. Buddhism in China reached its apogee during the Sui and Tang dynasties (581-907 AD) and thereafter it declined due to a combination of factors including the collapse of the Tang dynasty and the Arab invasion. But from China, Buddhism spread to Korea and then to Japan.

With the spread of Buddhism from India to central Asia and eventually to China, the Indian art and culture also travelled along the Silk Road to different countries. The Chinese travellers like Fa-Hsien (399-414 AD), Hiuen Tsang (629-645 AD) and I-Tsing (671-695 AD) and others greatly helped in this process. They visited India in search of original sources, scriptures and holy sites of Buddhism. They carried with them a plethora of information on the Indian society, polity and culture thereby familiarising and revealing to the outside world what the great Indologist A L Basham would say 'the wonder that was India'. They themselves translated many Sanskrit texts, and Hiuen Tsang is credited to have translated over 75 Sanskrit texts into Chinese. It not only promoted Buddhism in a big way but also was instrumental in creating an extensive Buddhist vocabulary in Chinese.

The historical engagement of India with the Silk Road is best manifested in the realm of art, as seen in the Graeco-Indian or Gandharan tradition. The Gandharan art that flourished in the Peshawar valley of the present north-western Pakistan was essentially a fusion of the Indian Buddhist art imported by the ruling Kushanas and the Greek art introduced by Alexander the Great in that region, and also to some extent the Persian elements were discernible in this fusion. The most revolutionary outcome of this syncretic art was the depiction of the Buddha in human form with straight chiselled nose and brow, classical lips and wavy hair and dressed in toga-like robe – all Hellenistic influences. At the same time, the Buddha's eyes were heavy-lidded and protruding, lobes of the ears elongated and face oval-shaped and fleshy – all elements of the Indian iconography. The resultant Buddha, either in sculpture, mural painting or stucco clay, came to be known as the Buddha image. It was predominantly this Gandharan art with a high mix of Indian art elements that travelled into China, central Asia and further eastwards, gradually absorbing new influences including those of China. With the eastward development of Buddhism along the Silk Road, the Gandharan art left its imprints in monasteries, grottoes, viharas and stupas that proliferated on the way. Observing the importance of the transmission of Buddhism and the resultant fusion and movement of the art, Peter Hopkirk (1780) writes 'this great trans-Asian highway carried yet another commodity which was to prove far more significant than silk. It was to revolutionise art and thought not only in China but throughout the entire Far East. This was the gentle creed of Buddhism'.

Buddhism may be the most important area of mutual interaction between India and the Silk Road countries but there were also other religions and areas in which such interaction took place. For example, Manichaeism, established by the Persian prophet Mani in the third century AD consciously incorporated elements of Buddhism and Hinduism like asceticism and symbolism. Although its influence and hold was short-lived, it had its followings all along the Silk Road.

But in an historical context, India's encounter with Islam was highly significant from the Silk Road perspective. Although relatively late in arriving the Silk Road, Islam is at present the faith of the majority of people in the countries spanned by this road. It was definitely the result of the work of Muslim preachers, traders and rulers. It is important and pertinent to point out that the full diversity of Islamic traditions, schools of thought and civilising influences flourished along the Silk Road. Sufism was one of the most important Islamic traditions which got expressed in all vernaculars and cultures of the Silk Road peoples. In India, Sufism came to symbolise the intensive and multidirectional process of inter-civilisational dialogue. Sufism strove to achieve the inner realisation of divine unity by arousing initiative and spiritual faculties and plunging into contemplation and meditation. Immediately after the death of Prophet Mohammad, Sufism started developing in Persia (modern Iran), Iraq and other neighboring regions [Rizvi 1978].

The Indian influence on Sufism came from the Upanishads and Yoga philosophy. But it was not the one-way traffic; the medieval devotionalism or Bhakti movement of India also came under the influence of Sufism – a fact well-revealed in the Nirguna school of mystics of northern India. By the end of the first millennium AD, many eminent Sufis had moved to India and the adjoining regions. One of the first orders or silsilas of Sufism to be popular and well-spread was the Suhrawardiyya silsila (founder Bahaud-Din-Zakariyya) which travelling from Multan spread to Gujarat, the Punjab, Kashmir and Delhi. In the 14th century, a collateral line of the Suhrawardiyyas, known as Firdawsiyya emerged in northern India and became very popular. But the most dominant and well known Sufi order in India was the Chistiyya silsila which was founded by Khwaja Muinud-Din (1142-1236 AD) who brought with him both Persian upbringing and intellectual-religious tradition. The Chistiyya mission of inculcating piety, humility and devotion to god influenced the teachings of the Bhakti movement. One of the greatest Sufis of this silsila, Nizammud-Din Awliya was greatly impressed and influenced by the Shaivite Natha followers of Gorakhnath. Their theory of the division of the human body into the regions of Shiva and Shakti, the yogic practice of growing long hair, yogic postures and breath control became an integral part of the Chishtiyya Sufi order. Of course, controlled breathing was incorporated finally as a vital aspect in almost all the Sufi orders. The influence of the Natha tradition on Sufism is again attested by the Sufi theory of creation which says, 'I was a Hidden Treasure and I wished to be known, so I created Creation that I might be known'. One can even notice the influence of Hindu tantricism in the Chishtiyya saint Abdul Quddus Gangohi's (16th century AD) belief that the union of Shakti, the Sun and Shiva, the moon is symbolised by prayers performed hanging upside down with the legs suspended from a roof or branch of a tree. A few more examples may be cited here to show the Indian influence on Sufism. The famous Hatha Yoga text *Amritakunda*, translated into Arabic and Persia had a lasting effect on Sufi practices. Secondly, Hindi poetry came to be increasingly used by Sufism to transport Sufis to mystical ecstasy. It was the result of the Vaishnavite influence over Sufism, through its devotional poetry. Vaishnavite elements and themes came to be used in Sufi rituals, particularly to induce ecstasy. The great Sufi saint Abdul-Wahid Bilgarami(16-17th century AD) tried to justify this practice by giving Islamic equivalents for features of the Krishna legend such as Krishna, Radha, Gopi, Gokul, Jamuna, Mathura and even Krishna's flute. He even compiled a Persian dictionary of Hindi songs, titled *Haqa'iq-i Hind*. Last but not least, the Mughal emperor Jahangir identified the highest form of Sufism with the Hindu philosophy of Vedanta. All these developments have remained in the Indian cultural repository. India's encounter with Sufism and the resulting fusion contributed greatly to the evolution of a tolerant, humanistic, syncretic cultural ethos.

The Sufi orders in India made use of vernacular languages from Bengali and Tamil, and participated in the widespread Bhakti style of religion of the period. In Bengal, the rise of the Chistiyya silsila synchronised with the birth of the Bhakti movement. However, the Sufis, wherever they went, involved themselves in social rites to provide a counterpoint to the Hindu society.

Culturally, the Silk Road was a medium of inter-cultural dialogue. This can be best exemplified in the Indian context when it came in contact with Islam. In the vast production of mystic literature, both Bhakti and Sufi in important Indian languages and dialects during the medieval period, the Muslim form of love narratives and lyrics, and meters, motifs and assorted rhetorical features of Persian 'masnavis' and 'ghazals' were extensively used. But by far, the most momentous development during this period was a linguistic synthesis between Hindi, Arabic and Persian leading to the birth of Urdu, a literary variant of Hindi laden with words of Arabo-Persian stock and written in an adapted

Perso-Arabic script. In a later stage, due to tremendous Indian influence, an Indian school of Persian poetry developed and poetry in Afghanistan and Tadjikistan also came to be profoundly influenced by India. The earliest known masnavis composed in Hindi are *Chanda'in* by Mulla Dawud (14th century) and *Mrigawati* by Qutb Ali Qutban (16th century). Even in Bengal, a corpus of mystical poetry based on masnavis composed by such poets like Nizami Ganjawi, Abdur Rahman Jami and so on. Similar type of example of cross-cultural influence can be cited with reference to musical instruments some of which were readily adaptable to a variety of musical styles and genres; like the violin which is used in music as disparate as south Indian raga, Celtic dance tune and jazz, all on the Silk Road countries. Again in case of string instrument, an one-stringed instrument is called 'tar' meaning string; the concept of 'tar' travelled to Persia where one string became two and it came to be know as 'dutar'. And in India, it reached as 'Sitar'. In Arabic countries, it became 'quintara' with five strings. Finally it became 'guitar' as it travelled further west in the form of stringed lute.

Although representing two different and divergent cultures and mentalities, the contact of Islam with India resulted in the development of a new culture, manifested in art and architecture. Hindu buildings, temples or palaces did not continue to be purely Hindu nor were the buildings erected by Muslims purely Muslim-Syro-Egyptian, Persian or Central Asian. The craftsmanship, ornamental richness and general design remained largely Hindu/Indian, but arcuated form, plain domes, smooth-faced walls and spacious interiors were Muslim superimpositions. Similarly, in new Indian painting, one can see a distinct pattern of symmetry, proportion and spacing from Samarkand and Herat. Even thematically, the new style portrayed features of the face, scenes of war and conquest, hunting, forest, etc.

The Silk Road as we know, declined by the 14th century AD, but its legacy, heritage and spirit still continue to be nurtured and to influence the countries through which it passed in the past. For India, apart from accruing fruits of cross-cultural fusion and inter-civilisational dialogue, it has lent great symbolic value. The Silk Road symbolises India's outward-looking, liberal perspective on the world. It not only culturally outreached the countries of the road but also accepted and assimilated many of their cultural, religious and artistic elements and traditions. This multiculturalism has been a hallmark of the Indian civilisation premised on unity in diversity. India has been all along its history, open, accommodative and liberal to outside influence and at the same time not shied away from exporting the best of its cultural, religious and artistic traditions. And the Silk Road provided the earliest opportunity for this two-way traffic.

Independent India's first prime minister late Pandit Nehru had rediscovered an Asian identity even before India became free. The Silk Road symbolises this identity by the fusion of cultures from the Yellow River Valley to the Mediterranean Sea. If not exaggerated, India, mindful of this Asian identity and the predominant Indian element in it, has always been a key player in the Asian affairs. EPW

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Protecting Migrant Workers

The international convention seeking to protect rights of migrant workers that comes into force in early 2003 is path-breaking in several ways. It seeks to establishes international standards of treatment for migrant workers and their families.

SIBY THARAKAN

On December 10, 2002, the occasion of International Human Rights Day, the national parliament of Timor-Leste (East Timor) decided to accede to the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families adopted on December 18, 1990 by the United Nations. The UN Convention will thus be enforceable by early 2003. Timor Leste's ratification will be the 20th, finally bringing the Convention into force. The Convention was acceded by six Asian countries (Azerbaijan, Philippines, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, Timor Leste, and Tajikistan), six American countries (Belize, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Uruguay), seven African countries (Cape Verde, Egypt, Ghana, Guinea, Morocco, Senegal, and Uganda) and one European country, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Another 12 countries have signed the Convention as the first step towards ratification.

The Special Rapporteur of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Gabriela Rodriguez Pizarro said: "This is a great success for all those who have voiced the suffering of migrants and who have campaigned for the establishment of an international legal framework for the protection of the human rights of migrants. The Convention offers a holistic approach to the human rights of migrants and summarises in a single instrument a broad gamut of rights, including civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. The Convention also takes into account all the aspects of the migration process so as to protect effectively the victims of abuses in countries of origins, transit and destination, be they regular or irregular, documented or undocumented. The Convention also plays an important role in preventing and eradicating exploitation, trafficking and smuggling of migrants.

The Convention, besides establishing some obligations for states party vis-a-vis