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Some of the Stations of Silk Route between India and Central Asia

The largest trade route to bring silk from China to Persia and to the Levantine market is known as Silk Route and the history of the traces of this route goes back to 1st century BC. The route was also used for diplomatic mission from the eastern shores of the Mediterranean across the Middle East, India, and the Central Asian region to China.

The Central Asia lies on almost insuperable mountain ranges of about four thousand miles running from China to the Black Sea. Kashghar was the important junction of the routes from Kashmir via Leh. The southern flank leading to the Yarqand River served as the only line of communication and access to the upper valley of Indus in Ladakh area. Yarqand is also the most important town on the Central Asian side of the route. It is on the direct line between Kashghar and Leh in Kashmir.

From Leh to Yarqand or Yarqand to Leh there are several routes and one amongst them is also the route

mentioned in the travel account of Mehta Sher Singh. This article is concerned, in the main with this travel account.

Mehta Sher Singh was a Kashmiri Brahman and served as Tehsildar of Sopore under Maharaja Ranbir Singh (1857-1885). At the direction of British rulers in India, he was sent by Maharaja as a British spy to Central Asia for collecting information about the actual military position of Russians in Kokand and also the system of Government and administration prevalent in the Khanate of Kokand and those places of the Khanate that had been occupied by the Russians. He undertook his secret fact finding journey on September 9, 1866 and came back after sixteen months on 23 November 1867 via Kashghar, Yarqand and Laddakh.

In his travel account he has given a description of one hundred seventy two stations with special reference to Yarqand, an important town on the Silk Route. From Kokand the traveler takes the silk route for his return journey to Kashmir. This paper aims at presenting the geographical, commercial and socio-political analysis of some of the stations with special reference to Yarqand. The study of these stations will be a forward step to reconstruct and recapture the Route.

Kokand as described by Mehta Sher Singh

In Kokand the traveler had stayed for eleven days and found it a big city with gardens in plenty. The city is also reputed

for its good quality horses and silk. The silk is exported to India. Small canals flow in the town and in the agricultural lands.

Fruits are available in abundance. Water courses are several in number and all of them suffice for local needs. Wheat is sowed in the month of chait(March-April) but some sow the seed in the month of Asuj (September-October) The wheatplanted in the month of Asuj is of low quality and is locally known as Barra Mahi. The bread made of it becomes black in color.

Some Jews and some Shikarpuri Hindus live as minority. The Hindus have established their trade there. A Hindu saint namely Baba Mohan Das Bairagi commands good respect and is revered by the ruler Khuda Yar Khan for his laudable character. Baba Mohan Das Bairagi lives in an orchard on the northern outskirts of city of Kokand. The royal palace is situated to the north and the gate of the palace opens towards south. Outside the gate there is an extensive field wherein a water course flows. On both sides of the palace garrisoned cantonment with twenty canons are set up.

Stations and Halts from Kokand to Yaqand and Laddakh mentioned in the Traveler's Account

From Kokand the traveler took the route to Laddakh via Yaqand. As the road was closed for the caravans, the traveler

took the corridor and reached Karawal Tappa.

1) Karawal Tappa: It is a small town with few shops and houses. A Hindu caravanserai is also built there. Weekly market is held. The town is known for its silk.

2) Marghlan: This is a city with several brooks. The city is known for silk and other agricultural crops. Here also a Hindu caravanserai is built.

3) Kova or Kur: This is a very small place without city walls. Some small canals flow in the middle of the town.

4) Andijan: Also spelled Andizhan, or Andižan, It is situated in the extreme eastern Uzbekistan and lies in the southeastern part of the Fergana Valley. The city, which stands on ancient deposits of the Andijon River, dates back at least to the 9th century. In the 15th century it became the capital of the Fergana Valley and, being on the Silk Road caravan route to China, it was its chief centre of trade and handicrafts. In the 18th century it became part of the Khanate of Kokand, and in 1876 Andijon was captured by the Russians. In 1898 it was the scene of an abortive native rebellion against the Tsarist rule. Andijon is subject to frequent earth tremors and was leveled by an earthquake in 1902 that took more than 4,000 lives.

Andijon is now a road and rail junction and has engineering, electro-technical, textile, and food-processing industries. Its cultural assets include teacher-training, medical, and

cotton-growing institutes, an Uzbek theatre of musical drama and comedy, a puppet theatre, and a museum.

The surrounding area is the most densely populated part of Uzbekistan. Several major irrigation canals provide water for crops of cotton, grapes, and fruit. The region is also the main petroleum-producing area of Uzbekistan. Other industries are mainly concerned with processing raw cotton and other agricultural products. Its population as estimated in 1991 is 298,300.

In nineteenth century as described by the traveler it was a populated city and was known for cotton crop. The cotton is exported to Russia. At this place the traveler had to stay for forty days as the passages for travelers were closed due to the dispute between Khoda Yar Khan, the ruler of Khokand and Amir Yaqub Khan, the ruler of Yargand. A Hindu caravanserai is also built there.

5) Marus: It is a decent town. The river Saya Kar flows through the town and a wooden bridge is built over it. A Hindu caravanserai is also built there. In the central part of the town there is a hillock on which a mosque is built. Climbing on this hillock on horse back is almost impossible. Fruits are brought here from Andijan.

6) Kazil Kargan: In the spring season Kirghiz tribe comes here for cattle grazing and cultivation. Wheat is the main crop but it is produced in a small quantity.

7) Koe Lanka Taghai: The town is situated near the river Gul Shah. The traveler informs that at a distance of two Kos (about two English miles) a garrison has been deployed by the chief of Khokand to keep vigilance on the corridor. From here four roads go to Kashghar. Alla Tirak is towards east and joins the main road towards Lesi Kechi. This road is very difficult to be covered by riding and can only be covered on foot. The second road is towards west. This road takes turn towards east and gets connected with Lesi Kechi through Tirak. The road is broad. Even loaded camels can use this road. The third is longer by one station or half and at places is uneven. Sart, the fourth one is comparatively shorter. Horses with load cannot pass through it. People of Kirghiz tribe migrate to this place in spring for cattle grazing.

8) Ali Ala, Aula, Nora, Haken Saya: Mostly the tribe of Kirghiz lives in Ai Ala Aula but Nora and Haken Saya are in a desolate state.

9) Lesi Kechi: It is situated at the bank of a river which flows very fast.

10) Bash Krawal: This place has a fort built by Cathy clan. A garrison of forty troops is on duty there to give secret information to Amir Yaqub Khan.

11) Kashghar: Presently in Xinjiang and under People's Republic of China Kashghar is an oasis city with a population of 350,000

residents and area of 16 square Km. It came under the Arab rule in 8th century. It was in the tenth century under Ughur kingdom when Islam was fully established with Sultan Satuq Bughra Khan's conversion to Islam. Kashgar is regarded as the best traditional Islamic city in Central Asia. The huge Idgah mosque is located in the heart of city. The town is a trade center of furs and spices, silk and carpets. Sunday market is very lively. In 19th century, as narrated by the traveler, it was a town with several caravanserais. It was a town well protected by walls. The walls were so wide that two canons at a time were placed and operated. According to the traveler, it was a well populated town but suffered from the paucity of fruits. It was a town known for cotton crops and salt. The cotton made items were exported to Russia and Turkistan. Canals of the river Lesikechi flow on the three sides of the city.

12) Nek Sarai and Kazil: Some shops were noticed there. Periodic market is also held at these two places. In Nek Sarai a fort was also built by Cathy clan.

13) Kangar: Some houses of the farmers and land holders were noticed there. The river Yarkand flows through this place. The river may be crossed by wooden bridge.

14) Yarkand: At present the town is part of Xinjiang and under the control of China. To day it is a Uyghur city located between Kashgar and Khotan. It has also been the terminus for caravans from Kashmir via Ladakh. It a town with the population of 373,492

people and is one of the eleven towns administered under Kashgar Prefecture.

It is rich in cotton, wheat, corn, fruits (especially pomegranates, pears and apricots), natural gas, gold, copper, lead, bauxite, granite and coal. Once upon a time Yarkand was also the seat of an ancient Buddhist Kingdom on the southern branch of the Silk Road. It came under Muslims in tenth century after Kashgar was annexed.

According to the traveler, Yarkand was the largest place as compared to other halts and stations. The markets were big and covered though not like Bokhara. The markets were built on both sides of canals. It was a city adorned with gardens. Fruits were found in plenty. The city was rich in all kind of crops. There was a large fort built by the Cathy clan in the west of the city. Kashmir traders also lived there in large numbers.

Yaqub Khan¹ was the ruler. He took over the city when Mulla Gul Alam, the army chief was killed in Tashqand war. At that time Amir Yaqub Khan was in Pastak. He with fifty solders reached Kashgar where Tughani clan and four Cathy clans, namely Mekhu Cathy, Qara Cathy, Qamlaq Cathy, Slon Cathy were in combat. In those days a Peerzada (religious head man or Sufi) from Sarhind was in Yarkand. Tughani army chief made him the ruler of Yarkand and appointed Haji Habib Ullah the head of Khotan. Amir Yakub Khan reached Yarkand and from there with some Kirghiz people proceeded to Kashghar and drove out Tughaniyan.

After that he returned to Yarkand and

1- Mohammed Yakub (also known as Yakub Beg), 1820-1877 conquered Khotan, Aksu, Kashgar, and neighbouring towns with the help of the Russians in 1860s. The capital was Yarkant, where he received embassies from England in 1870 and 1873. The Qing dynasty defeated Yakub at Turpan in 1877 and he committed suicide, thus ending the kingdom of Kashgaria, and returning the region to Qing Chinese control that established his control there. He wrote a letter to Haji Habib Ullah to come to see him. Habib Ullah sent his son who was received warmly and treated with kindness and favor. After few days Amir Yakub Khan took the son of Habib Ullah along with him and left for Khotan. After two or three stations he permitted the son of Habib Ullah to depart and go to his father. The son commended Amir Yakub for his good manners to his mother. This inspired Habib Ullah to go to see Amir Yakub with his officers and relatives but as soon as he met Amir Yakub he was arrested by him. Amir Yakub sent him to Yarkand and himself marched to Maqak to conquer the town. Due to bitter relations with Khoda Yar Khan about two thousand Muslims were appointed to keep vigilance and protect the town. Amir Yakub Khan tried to develop friendly relations with Amir of Badakhan. An ambassador of Amir of Badakhan Shan had also arrived in Yarkand in the month of Sawan in samvat 1923 (1866) All in all the administrative affairs are not as satisfactory as they should have been The traveler also informs us that Hindus there

are not taken very kindly, rather they are humiliated.

15) After Yarkand Poshgran is indicated as the next station. At this place some houses, shops and a caravanserai at the bank of a river were noticed. The periodical market of this place is brisk. A river also flows through this town and falls into Lesikechi.

16) Karargil: There are four different ways to reach this town. They are Doband, Koknark Kalan, Sajud and Kadakh. A government police station and few caravans in addition to houses and shops were noticed there. Weekly market is also held on Saturday. Wheat, opium, and maza are the main agricultural products. From here the traveler after passing through Akhchak, Khurram Khil, Saraknor, Korjaliga, Armahan reached Mazar Sad Ullah. This place is named after Sad Ullah who is buried there. The town is situated above the Karatash River. The river flows from the east of the Khotan Mountain and turns toward west and finally merges into Lesikechi River. From here the traveler passed through Malik Shah, Bran Saplo, Oladolat Begi, Akhmadan, Tagar, Khurdang, and reached Laddakh. Nothing special is described about these places. The stations from Korjaliga to Laddakh were under the control of the ruler of Kashmir.

