

Trade and Urbanisation- India's North East in the ancient Silk Route

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Abstract: *The Silk Routes were trans-continental routes, criss-crossing through the heart of Asia stretching across Central Asia into Europe for more than two thousand years. It is an interesting epoch in the history of the world. The Silk Route which passed through Asia into Europe has always captivated the imagination of the people since time immemorial. This ancient silk route which featured a network of routes across the continents of the world for purposes of trade and commerce is also part of the ancient globalisation process. Silk being the primary item of trade which was brought from China along with other items like precious stones were continuously sent across these ancient highways.*

These networks of roads touching all the countries of the world had a special yet not so explored route running through North East India and had trade connections with China, Burma, Bhutan and the vast expanse of South East Asia. The paper centers on the case of the growth of towns and cities which developed along the silk route due to commercial activities along this route passing through North East India. The constant commercial activities along the road from the North East of India to Tibet and beyond have enabled the growth of urbanisation in the North East Region of India.

Key Words: *Silk Route, Trade, Cities, Urbanisation, Cultural exchanges*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Silk Route is a network of roads which in ancient times linked the east with the west. This trans-continental route, criss-crossing through the heart of Asia stretching across Central Asia into Europe for more than two thousand years is an interesting epoch in the history of ancient globalisation. It was these routes which featured trade beyond national boundaries encompassing Asia, Europe and Africa, whereby money, goods and people were circulated. The silk routes connected ancient civilisations. Silk was a gift of China to the ancient world and the silk route was the channel through which silk textiles and yarn were exported from ancient China to the world through the network of routes.

Trade was the primary engagement through these routes which was carried by camel trains laden with bales of fine Chinese silk, spices and perfume, moving through desert oases surrounded by snowcapped mountains and bustling markets which were thronged by travellers. Along this route, not only silk was sent from China to Rome and other distant lands, but also princesses were sent in marriage to far off lands.

Apart from being a trade route, the silk route also witnessed the exchange of cultural ideas, artistic motifs, styles, paintings, dance, even musical instruments, games like polo, chess, fashions and food, travelled across the many cities and towns through which the caravans passed by. The growth of civilisations, the spread of religions along the distant deserts passing through sand dunes and lonely deserts were a part of the extravaganza of the ancient silk route (Whitefield, S, 2015). The silk route was a cross web of human connectedness (adopted this term from Theodore Levin mentioned in Music and Musicians along the Silk Road in Smithsonian Folklife Festival, 2002)

The silk route connected China (through Tarim Basin, Taklamakan Desert, Kashgar, Pamir, Samarqand, Balkh) to India and eastern Mediterranean from about 100 BcE to 1350 CE. Places like Korea, Japan, North Africa, Europe, India, Arabia, and South East Asia were all interconnected by the silk route. Whenever and wherever the caravan stopped merchants, monks, and pilgrims exchanged intelligence (Andrea, J.A. and Levi, S.C).

The 19th century saw a renewed interest in the silk route when all the continents of the world were colonised by the Portuguese, Dutch, French and the British.

The term "Silk Road" was coined by a German geologist, geographer, and pioneer explorer, Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833-1905) in 1877 when he established that Chinese silk was the commodity that initiated pre-modern commerce along the routes that passes through the oases towns of Tarim Basin's Taklamakan Desert.

Recent studies have revealed that the silk routes may have originally been the paths through which nomadic societies in ancient times travelled with their herds across the highlands in search of best grazing places along the way.

“The routes of Silk Road interaction were never static, and certainly not in the mountains,” “Caravans traversing Asia were oriented by diverse factors, yet in the mountains their routes likely grew out of historically ingrained pathways of nomads, who were knowledgeable and strategic in mountain mobility” (Michael Frachetti, 2017).

II. SPREAD OF BUDDHISM

This ancient international highway besides being a trade route was the primary vehicle for the spread of Buddhism through Central Asia. Besides silk, paper, precious metals, ceramics etc, Buddhism travelled from India to China and transformed the look of the silk roads by the construction of monasteries and pagodas throughout North Western India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Central Asia, Xinjiang, China, Korea and Japan.

III. DISCUSSION

INDIA'S PARTICIPATION IN THE SILK ROUTE TRADE

Beyond the North West of India continuing towards the east are roads which fall on the silk route. Mention may be made of Kabul, Peshawar, Attari, Amritsar, Kashmir, Ambala, Kurukshetra, Delhi, Mathura, Patna, Kolkata. They were important trade networks for long distance and local trade as well and were also routes through which Buddhist monks passed by on their way to pilgrimages. There are many pre historic sites all along this route like the Harappan sites, Buddhist stupas and monasteries Kos Minars (Mile Stones), Baolis (wells) etc. Other sites nominated for the UNESCO World Heritage site and which fall on the silk route in India are Vikramshila, Vaishali, Kushinagar, Ahichchhatra, Indraprastha, Arikamedu in Pondicherry (Fonia, R.S).

When Buddhist monks travelled to India on pilgrimages they carried silk textiles which could be used as cash. These silk which came to them in the form of religious donations were exchanged for lodgings and other facilities. The pilgrims gave silk to monasteries along the routes. This system of bringing silk by Buddhist pilgrims was initiated by Xuanzang who was initially denied travel documents to India by the Chinese Emperor (Tang Dynasty). However he soon received 30 horse loads of treasure mostly silk textile from the ruler of Gaochang just outside the Tang frontier. This system was followed by other pilgrims for a long time (Liu, X, 2010).

ASSAM AND THE ANCIENT SILK ROUTE

North Eastern Region of India is the north eastern border of South and South Eastern Asia. Assam which was understood to be today's North Eastern Region of India before each of the demarcated areas of the tribes of the region attained independent statehood status is at the head of the arrow pointing towards the large expanse of South and South Eastern Asia. The border of India's North East by virtue of sharing her international boundary with South and South Eastern Asia is not limited, but it extends even ahead of this international boundary. Rather she is closely connected with South and South Eastern Asia since time immemorial through historical, cultural, social and economic ties.

The paper centers on the case of North East India and beyond which though conjured to be a landlocked region is in fact not an isolated entity. North East region of India was on the south western track of the ancient silk route through which there were trade connections between ancient Kamrupa (as Assam was known then) and South West China and India. This was in existence since the 2nd century BC. The route which connected India with China, Tibet and Burma (Myanmar) was through Assam. The traders traded on items like silk, pearls, cowries, musks, vermillion, cotton fabrics, china ware, lead, copper, silver etc. According to CA Bruce silver which was used in Assam was brought from China.

The primary silk routes through land and water have almost eclipsed the third silk route connecting China mainland, South east Asia, India and beyond. DP Singhal mentions about overland routes through Nepal and Tibet to China and through Assam and Upper Burma to Yunnan. Yunnan opens upto a wide variety of mountains and valleys which led to economic and cultural development of the region. The geographic location of Yunnan enables her to have close ties with China, South East Asia and beyond.

The South West Silk route was an important point of contact between the great civilisations of China and India. The lesser known south west silk route consisted of four main sub branches. (1) Sichuan-Yunnan via Burma to India, (2) Vietnam with Yunnan, (3) Yunnan with Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, (4) Yunnan via Sichuan to Tibet and India. There was however another route Burma, Assam and the Indian states which are characterised by mountainous range. This South West silk route was an important trade route for the economic lifeline of China, Tibet and the Himalayan Kingdoms of North East India for almost 1900 years (Chavan, 2017).

Rugged mountains were not huge barriers that forced regional communities into isolation, but acted as channels for economic and political forms of participation that supported long-standing connections between

neighbouring communities,” “It illustrates that civilisation's greatest accomplishments - evidenced in the amazing scale of Silk Road connectivity - often arise organically in environments where connectivity is the norm; isolation here would be a formula for disaster” (Frachetti, 2017).

Trade was carried into the heart of Bhutan from Kamrup through the duars or mountain passes and there are evidences that the trading routes did not terminate in Kamrup. Kamrup was on the trading route between South West China and India. From Hieun Tsang's records in the 7th century, it can be learnt that south west borders of China were a distance of two months journey. This was possible because of the porous boundary of Assam. Long distance caravans by some enterprising merchants and movement of Buddhist pilgrims along this route was also popular. The Assam Bhutan trade as has been mentioned earlier was common in West Assam. The Bhutias exchanged lac, woollens, yak tails, salt and Chinese silk for Assam muga, dried fish etc. The Bhutias acted as middleman in the Assam-Tibetan trade.

This route was brought to fame once again by the British...during World War II, when the Allied Army built the famous Stillwell Road connecting Ledo from Assam to Yunnan in China through Burma.

South western trade route finds mention in *Periplus of the Erythraen Sea* (1st century A.D) and the Geography of Ptolemy and also from the Chinese explorer in Central Asia in the 2nd century BC, Chang K'ien.

Assam was considered as the Eastern Gateway for the passage of people, goods and ideas and this happened between India, Burma and China. The *Periplus of the Erythraen Sea* records trade on malabathrum from the Himalayan region and raw silk from China. This silk which came from south west China through Assam to India was exported through North-West trade routes into Central Asia.

Bhaskar Varman who was the greatest ruler of ancient Kamrup was a highly intelligent and a farsighted person who encouraged Sino-Indian co-operation in commerce and culture. He sent valuable presents to Chinese envoys such as a map of Assam, eastern India and Bengal. Silk textiles and books on aloe bark were sent as gifts to Harsha Vardhana by Bhaskar Varman from Assam. Scholars identified such fabrics with muga and pat, the traditional silk of Assam which suggests that these were locally produced as early as the 7th century.

The reports of Kia-Tan (785-805 A.D) mention that a trade route existed from Tonkin to Kamrupa. The Tabaqat-i-Nasiri in the 13th century mentions about 35 mountain routes between Kamrup and Tibet. According to Tavernier, shellac was exported to China and Japan while cinnamon and tejpat was brought into Assam from China. It has been mentioned that trade relation both by land and sea was known to the merchants from Kamrup. In the case of Assam another very popular trade route was the Patkai route which starts from Jaypur in Sivasagar in Eastern Assam and after passing through the territories of the Singphos and the Patkai the road reaches upto the Irrawady from where the travellers to Ava went downstream. While those who went to China proceeded another 200 miles to reach the frontier of China. From this route, the Mishimis carried on barter trade with the Kachins and the Chinese. (Barpujari. H.K, 1994)

The art of rearing silk worms and manufacturing and weaving silk cloth may have come to Assam and India through the South West China route. However it can be pointed out here that although Assam imported silk from China she also had her own indigenous variety of silk. Assam and other parts of North East India transported local handicrafts, natural products, silk and other textile products to Burma (Myanmar) and South East China.

IV. FINDINGS

GROWTH OF CITIES (BEYOND) SW CHINA AND CITIES IN ASSAM

The largest cities in the world during the silk route trade were located primarily in China and the Middle East. Urban center of gravity shifted from contemporary Iran to Europe, South Asia, Middle East, East Asia and North West Europe. These places started having some of the largest cities (Frank, 1992, 44). Growth of trade, network of roads, access to wealth, knowledge, cultures, technological ideas, made possible the spread of urbanisation due to the bustling trade activities which fell on the trade route.

Yunnan was a center for cross regional trade by unifying South Western Silk Road (SSR). It became the gateway to the outside world. A cross section of cities which benefitted from the frequent trade missions along the South Western Silk Road was Yonchang. Its popularity grew. Cities like Pyu (Biao), Pagan (Pugan), Miruo, Michen, Kunlun, Kamrup developed along this silk route between South East Asia, Yunnan, Vietnam and Burma. These cities flourished both due to maritime and continental trade.

Along the Silk Roads, many cities flourished across China, Central Asia, Arabia, India, Persia and modern day Turkey. Trade which brought wealth and richness, enabled excellence in industrial process including printing, glass and paper making; medicine, philosophy, astronomy and agriculture.

The cities which flourished across the central Asian borders were Xi'an (Changan originally), Samarkand, Mosul, Merv (Oasis city), Uzbekistan, Kazakasthan etc. All along the silk route huge architectural edifices were constructed which is proof of not only continuous commercial activity but also of exchanges of cultural and religious and technological ideas.

In the case of Assam, development of urbanisation is identified with the growth of commercial system. Numerous architectural edifices across Assam particularly in places like Tezpur, Golaghat, Dimapur, North Guwahati all show prosperous growth of trade and urban development. These are evidences of an existing trade with China as well as the Bay of Bengal. The discovery of kaolin ceramic and four pieces of rouled pottery of Roman civilisation dated to the 1st and 2nd century AD proves about the existence of a flourishing Brahmaputra civilisation. Regular trade route existed between China and India through the river ports of Guwahati and Pandu.

Hajo was an important market point for the Tibeto- Indian and Bhutan Indian trade through which goods were exported to the entire North Eastern Zone. Gradually this traditional route turned into an overland trade route which brought about socio economic development in the region.

Since Kamrup was a major route through which trade with Bhutan was active, a place called Sualkuchi located a little away from Guwahati city on the north banks of the river Brahmaputra developed as a commercial hub. Sualkuchi is a place which is famous for the manufacturing of silk clothes (Assam Silk). Markets grew around those places where goods were exchanged.

Places like Guwahati, Nowgong, Tezpur, Dimapur, Tinisukia, Dhubri, etc developed as they were the arteries through which trade with China, Tibet and Burma were carried out. Traffic on Assam Bhutan route was seasonal. Fairs were held in these areas which were hotspots of growing commercial activity. Trading activities with the Bhutias and other people living beyond the boundary of Assam were the main features of such fairs. Places like Dhamdhama, Nalbari and other places in the northern side of the Brahmaputra River became busy commercial centers due to the constant transportation of goods and people through the Assam and Bhutan route. This route was also used by the traders from Tibet (Ray & Sarkar, 2005). When the traders met and exchanged goods, it led to commercial activity. Markets developed in these areas. People moved into these places. Business expanded. Township grew and this exchange of goods and ideas gradually led to urbanisation in Assam.

V. CONCLUSION

The places in the Silk Route are marked with remarkable tradition and vibrant heritage resources. Some of these places today fall under UNESCO's World Heritage Site.

To mention about Assam's participation in the ancient Silk Road trade it can be said that a vibrant trade connection existed between Assam and South East Asia. Till the 18th century AD, North East India was self-sufficient. Assam was a meeting ground for various civilisations. People from the vast expanse of South East Asia migrated into this land and settled here, and have formed the composite Assamese culture. Into this North Eastern region of India which was originally Assam before becoming separate independent states, traders from South, South West China and Myanmar (Burma), came for commercial activities. Many travellers have travelled on this road for thousands of years and kept it extremely lively with their commercial and cultural activity. This route forms a wonderful tourist destination and provides a whole array of expectations from large scale tourism and other industrial avenues.

Revival of the ancient Silk Roads today to give the silk route a new lease of life is being hugely considered by a number of countries of the world. The "Go West" and the "New Silk Roads" policies of China are being considered. Nevertheless more efforts are being stressed also for the seamless movement between India's North East, Myanmar, Thailand, Bangladesh and Bhutan.

Regions, transnationalism, and globalisation are to be prioritised today if "looking east and acting thereof" is to take place wholly. As the ancient South Western Silk Road also falls under countries considered under Look East, then region states which are natural economic zones, having shared community and economic interests' needs to be revived which can play a role in the global economy.

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