

## Himalayan Highways and Oceanic Gateways: India's Civilizational Trade Legacy in South Asia

Chahat Dua

Research Scholar, Department of International Politics,  
School of International Studies, Central University of Gujarat  
Email: chahatdua08@gmail.com and

Dr Preeti Sharma

Assistant Professor, Department of International Politics,  
School of International Studies, Central University of Gujarat  
Email: preeti.sharma@cug.ac.in

*India's ancient trade routes, both by land and sea, were not just used for business, but also for sharing culture and ideas. Based on the belief that the world is one big family, trade in India was connected to ethical and spiritual values. This paper studies how India's trade system shaped civilization, using historical records, literature, and archaeology. It examines major trade routes like Uttarapatha, Dakshinapatha, and the Great Route, as well as important ports such as Tamralipti, Kaveripattinam, and Kalinga. These routes connected India with Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Rome, and Persia, allowing not only the exchange of goods, but also traditions, and religions like Buddhism and Hinduism. The paper further explores how invasions and colonial rule, especially the British Raj, disrupted these trade networks and shifted India's economy to serve imperial interests. After independence, especially since 1991's economic reforms, India has worked to revive these routes with projects like the Act East Policy, Sagarmala, Bharatmala, and the Chabahar Port. These efforts aim not just to boost the economy but also to restore India's cultural influence. Examining India's trade history from a civilizational perspective, the paper underscores the profound connection it has to the country's identity and way of thinking. Restoring and strengthening these trade routes in the 21st century provides India with an opportunity to reclaim its position as a global hub for business, education, and cultural exchange.*

**Keywords:** Trade Routes, Ancient India, Grand route, Uttarapatha, Dakshinapatha, Maritime Routes, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam

## INTRODUCTION:

The United Nations, in its recent report, mentioned that India's economy is expanding at the fastest rate in 2025. The UN assessment indicated that the Indian economy will grow at a rate of 6.2%<sup>1</sup> in the current fiscal year and 6.3% in 2026, surpassing that of the US, China, and the EU. India's status as a major global financial system and a cultural force is evidence of the enduring essence of "*Sone ki Chidiya*". Geography plays an important role in the evolution of the culture and economy of a country. Referring to the above report, it is imperative to find out the roots of India's economic growth in the 77 years after independence. Due to its advantageous geographic location and wealth of natural resources, India has a long and illustrious economic history. It played a significant role in the ancient and medieval world economies because of its extensive mineral richness, fertile regions, and bustling trade routes.

The changing climate not only affects the lives of people but also influences their thought processes and the trade of a country. The routes passing through mountains in deserts are naturally very difficult; on the other hand, the routes passing through open valleys, rivers, and vast plains become easier. Trade route development demonstrates that, since ancient times, nomadic tribes in search of nourishment for their flocks must have gradually learned about the nation's natural pathways. However, prehistoric hunters must have traded the natural pathways that are now known as roads even before these tribes existed. This continuous search for natural channels must have resulted in a network of trade routes across the country<sup>2</sup>.

The Vedic literature constantly remembers these early path-finders. Agni is designated as *Pathikrit*, "path-maker" or "guide" in Satapatha-Brahmana (Kanda 12. Adhyaya 4. Brahmana 4) because the burning of vast jungle tracks created routes following which the Vedic culture entered the farther corners of India.

अग्निर्वै पथिकृत्। पथामपि नेता। स एवैनं यज्ञपथमपिनयति। एतदेव तत्र कर्म॥<sup>3</sup>

India's trade routes have a long and illustrious history, acting as the veins through which the lifeblood of commerce, culture, and civilization flowed across the Indian subcontinent and

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<sup>1</sup>News On Air. (2025, May 21). India continues to be fastest growing major economy in 2025, ahead of China, US, European Union, says UN report. News On Air. <https://www.newsonair.gov.in/indian-economy-to-grow-at-6-3-during-current-fiscal-ahead-of-china-us-european-union-says-un-report/#:~:text=1%3A49%20PM-.India%20continues%20to%20be%20fastest%20growing%20major%20economy%20in%202025,Union%2C%20a%20UN%20report%20said.>

<sup>2</sup> Chandra, M. (1977). Trade and trade routes in ancient India. Abhinav Publications.

<https://books.google.co.in/books?id=rDL4kA7SWkEC>

<sup>3</sup> Satapatha-brahmana, kanda 12. Adhya 4. brahmana 4 [1] <https://thevyasa.in/shatapatha12/>

beyond. Since the earliest days of Indian civilization, trade has been pivotal to the evolution of society, affecting economic growth and political alliances as well. The sea and land routes of trade, linking India to Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and even the Roman Empire, were active in shaping not just the economy of India but also its glorious position in the world for the coming centuries.

The earliest records of India's trade routes are mentioned in the Atharva Veda, where the term "*Anthas*"<sup>1</sup> describes the routes that linked far-off parts of the subcontinent. This source emphasizes the importance of trade as an economic process and as a dynamic aspect of India's existence in the Vedic period.

This study aims to explore the history of Indian trade routes and also seeks to answer questions such as how these historical routes were destroyed over time, especially during colonialism, and how the heritage of these old contacts is being restored in modern India, particularly under the current Prime Minister. Considering the historical importance of these routes, this research intends to emphasize their ongoing significance in shaping India's past, present, and future, as well as in fostering important connections with neighboring nations.

This paper uses a multidisciplinary and civilizational approach to study India's ancient trade networks. That means it looks at the topic from many angles—history, literature, archaeology, religion, geography, and modern politics. By using different types of sources, such as ancient texts, archaeological evidence, and recent government policies, the paper gives a more complete picture of how trade worked in India through the ages. At the same time, it follows a civilizational approach, meaning that it sees trade not just as a business activity but as a part of India's broader cultural and spiritual traditions. Trade in ancient India was guided by values like truth, fairness, and the idea that the whole world is one family (*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*). This approach helps us understand how Indian trade spread knowledge, religion, and culture across regions, not just goods. Secondary sources provide analytical frameworks and contextual depth. This research uses qualitative analysis to understand the evolution, disruption, and revival of trade routes, giving importance to the philosophical foundations and geopolitical consequences of India's civilizational commerce. The framework is rooted in a *Bhartiya* perspective, interpreting trade as a medium of ethical engagement, civilizational expression, and cultural diplomacy rather than mere economic activity.

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<sup>1</sup> Sanatan Dharma. (2019). Atharva Veda complete collection. Internet Archive.  
<https://archive.org/details/atharvavedaallparts/Atharava%20vediya%20brhat%20sarava%20anukramanika/>

## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Indian trade routes have a long history dating back thousands of years, as evidenced by archaeological findings and ancient literature. Long-distance trade with India predates the Silk Road's alleged inception. Since 2500 BCE, the Indus Valley Civilization maintained active commercial links with Persia and Mesopotamia and exported beads, textiles, and pearls<sup>1</sup>. These initial interactions laid the foundation for a culture of an interconnected civilization that would only get strengthened over the centuries. Due to its advantageous location at the intersection of the land and sea regions of Asia enabled it to communicate with Central Asia, China, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. India's contribution to the Silk Route was not just about goods—it was as much about ideas, religions, technologies, and civilizational values<sup>2</sup>.

### *Uttarapath*

As mentioned in ancient Indian writings as the Uttarapatha, this road served as the Indian subcontinent's civilizational lifeline and its link to Central Asia, Persia, and even the Far East long before the Silk Road was mentioned in Chinese history. The first written reference to this route comes from the Mahabharata, Shanti Parva, Chapter 207, Verse 43

उत्तरापथजन्तवाश्च कीर्तयिष्यामि तानपि। योनाः काम्बोजग्रामाणाः किराताः शबरैः सह॥<sup>3</sup>

This was well over three centuries before the Silk Route was officially established under the Han dynasty of China. *Kautilya's Arthashastra* also refers to its western portion as the *Haimavatha Path*, indicating its role to link *Taxila and Vahlika* (Balkh)<sup>4</sup>. *Megasthenes'* accounts of ancient Greece, *A. Foucher*, a French historian, and Indian scholars such as *Moti Chandra* have projected its vast reach — *the Caspian Sea through Herat and Bactra to Taxila, Pataliputra, and Tamralipti*.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Frenez, D. (2023, October 18). Indus Valley: Early Commercial Connections with Central and Western Asia. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History. <https://oxfordre.com/asianhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277727-e-595>.

<sup>2</sup> Law, R. (2006). Moving mountains: The trade and transport of rocks and minerals within the greater Indus Valley region. Space and spatial analysis in archaeology, 301-313. ISBN 0826340229 <https://books.google.co.in/books?id=vBnJ3rEvzLYC>

<sup>3</sup> Mahabharata, Shanti Parva, Chapter 207, Verse 43 [https://archive.org/details/zrne\\_mahabharata-vol.-8-shanti-parva-sanskrit-text-with-english-trans.-edited-by-dr.-/page/98/mode/2up?view=theater](https://archive.org/details/zrne_mahabharata-vol.-8-shanti-parva-sanskrit-text-with-english-trans.-edited-by-dr.-/page/98/mode/2up?view=theater)

<sup>4</sup> Olivelle, P. (2020). Long-distance trade in ancient India: Evidence from Kautilya's Arthaśāstra. The Indian Economic and Social History Review, 57(1), 31-47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0019464619892894> (Original work published 2020)

<sup>5</sup> Marshall, J., & Foucher, A. (1982). The Monuments of Sanchi (Vol. 1). Swati Publications. [The Monuments of Sanchi | INDIAN CULTURE](#)

The major north-south trading route was the Uttarapatha, which is the one that is most commonly referenced in ancient records. This powerful route connected *the Indus Valley to the Gangetic Plains* and went all the way to *Central Asia and China*<sup>1</sup>. It was the route by which commodities such as silk, spices, and metals were exchanged between India and other distant destinations during the classical ages. *Panini* (c. 500 BCE), the famous Sanskrit grammarian, refers to it as *Uttarapathena hyitam* (V. 3.77), literally "the northern road"<sup>2</sup>. He explains that the Uttarapatha, a route that passed through northern India, served as an essential link between the Indian subcontinent and the remaining Eurasian mainland.

### *Dakshinapatha*

The Mahabharata (Aranyaka Parvan 59.2) also mentions references to the *Dakshinapatha*,

दक्षिणापथजन्तवः सर्वे नराधमाः स्मृताः। गुहाः पुलिन्दाः शबराः पुण्ड्रका मद्रकैः सह॥<sup>3</sup>

The roads were constructed just like arteries originating from central India, indicating an intimate network of inland connectivity predating outside records. Pali texts also detail these routes more in the 5th century BCE, mentioning the journeys of monks, scholars, horse traders, and tumblers. North of these were the Indian southern trade routes, also known as the *Dakshinapatha*, which connected regions like *Tamil Nadu with Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and the Arabian Peninsula*<sup>4</sup>. These roads facilitated the export of goods like black pepper, cotton, ivory, and spices, which were highly sought by traders worldwide.

On the Indian southern coast, there were ports of *Muchiri and Kaveripattinam* that played a crucial role in trading spices, cloth, and other goods, facilitating economic, religious, and cultural exchanges. The *Tamil Sangam poetry* offers vivid descriptions of this prosperous maritime trade, in which descriptions of the alien ships sailing back and forth to bring gold to the harbors, and black pepper and other items traded in crowded markets. The coastal town of *Kaveripattinam* (Puhar), for instance, was an active city that connected India's maritime trade with the markets of *Rome, Persia, and Southeast Asia*. Malabar ports such as *Bharukachchha*

<sup>1</sup> Chandra, M. (1945). Geographical and economic studies in the Mahabharata: Upayana Parva [Geographical And Economic Studies In The Mahabharata Upayana Parva : Chandra, moti : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming: Internet Archive](#)

<sup>2</sup> Chandra, M. (1977). Trade and trade routes in ancient India. Abhinav Publications. <https://books.google.co.in/books?id=rDL4kA7SWkEC>

<sup>3</sup> Sukthankar, V. S. (Ed.). (1941). The Mahabharata - Aranyaka Parva. Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute. <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.486384/page/n69/mode/2up>

<sup>4</sup> Andaya, B. W. (2017). Seas, oceans and cosmologies in Southeast Asia. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 48(3), 349–371. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463417000534>

(modern-day Bharuch), *Tamralipti*, and *Muchiri* played a central role in the Indian Ocean network of commerce, which was essential to the Indian economy as well as foreign affairs<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, the evidences also depict India's growing maritime routes, which are imperative to study as a necessity of today, as well as seeking strong maritime connectivity in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), and these ancient civilizational connections facilitate today's international diplomatic linkages of India with neighbours, concerning the Act East Policy and SAGAR as well.

### *The Great Route*

One of Asia's oldest and most strategically significant channels of trade, culture, and migration is the Great Route, which originates in northern India and is far too frequently ignored in the dominant world narrative. Despite traversing difficult terrain, including the high mountain ranges that encircle Gilgit, the valleys of the trans-Indus River, and parched plateaus, the Great Route continued to serve as a route for traders, pilgrims, monks, and pastoral tribes<sup>2</sup>. Although the Silk Route depended heavily on Chinese statecraft and diplomacy, the Great Route was supported by Indians' śreṇīs (merchant group) social infrastructure, local rulers, and community-based security systems like atavīpālas (forest guards)<sup>3</sup>. Ancient Vedic texts, although not employing the term 'sārthavāha' (caravan leader), speak of sophisticated trade culture and warn against 'paripanthins' (robbers), which suggests that organized trade entailed sophisticated logistical and defence arrangements<sup>4</sup>.

The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, an ancient *Greco-Roman travelogue* written during the first century, presents lavish trade details between India and the Roman Empire. It affirms the *harbor of Barbaricum* (modern Karachi), a major hub of trade between India and regions

<sup>1</sup> Hassan, R. Coastal Ports and Commercial Towns of Ancient India. <https://jaljali.org/coastal-ports-and-commercial-towns-of-ancient-india/>

<sup>2</sup> Rtveldze, E. V. (2010). The Great Indian Road: India–Central Asia–Transcaucasia. *Anabasis. Studia Classica et Orientalia*, 1, 80-96. <https://journals.ur.edu.pl/anabasis/article/view/10126>

<sup>3</sup> Dicey, E. (1877). Our route to India. *The Nineteenth century and after: a monthly review*, 1(4), 665-685. [https://www.proquest.com/docview/2640858?pq-](https://www.proquest.com/docview/2640858?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true&sourcetype=Historical%20Periodicals)

[origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true&sourcetype=Historical%20Periodicals](https://www.proquest.com/docview/2640858?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true&sourcetype=Historical%20Periodicals)

Nagarkar, S. (2020, May 18). Ancient Indian economy part III – Guilds in ancient Bharata. *Indic Today*. <https://www.indica.today/long-reads/ancient-indian-economy-part-iii-guilds-in-ancient-bharata/>

Amarasimha. (1913). *The Nāmalingānusāsana (Amarakosha) of Amarasimha with the Commentary (Amarakoshodghātana) of Kshīrasvāmin* (K. G. Oka, Ed.). Government of India Press.

<https://archive.org/details/the-amarakosa/page/n79/mode/2up?view=theater>

<sup>4</sup> Salles, J. F. (1993). The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* and the Arab-Persian Gulf. *Topoi. Orient-Occident*, 3(2), 493-523. [https://www.persee.fr/doc/topoi\\_1161-9473\\_1993\\_num\\_3\\_2\\_1482](https://www.persee.fr/doc/topoi_1161-9473_1993_num_3_2_1482)

as far-off as Africa and Rome<sup>1</sup>. This period witnessed the peak of Indo-Roman trade when Indian traders brought products such as spices, pearls, and fabric across the oceans, and Romans exported wine, olive oil, and bronze goods to India<sup>2</sup>. These exchanges not only meant economic growth but also cultural exchange, and this cultural impression enriched people from both states and embraced it for centuries.

### *Kushan Dynasty and Buddhism*

The Kushan Empire (around 1st to 3rd century CE) has a remarkable imprint on history due to the degree to which they assisted in developing trade all over Central Asia and in the Roman Empire. The Kushanas were able to facilitate the flow of goods, ideas, and civilizations from China to India to the West by controlling the Silk Road.

Archaeological remains, such as ivory coffers in Begram in today's Afghanistan, demonstrate the influence of Mathura art on merchandise traded along these routes. The magnificence of Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, and Jagayyapeta Buddhist stupas also owes to the wealth generated by trade with the Roman Empire<sup>3</sup>. It follows that the Kushan Empire undoubtedly contributed to the impressive growth of robust trading ties between China, India, and the West.

It is noteworthy that Buddhist missionaries, Sanskritists, craftsmen, and medical experts passed through this route, bringing Indian knowledge systems to Gandhara, Bactria, and Central Asia, and laying the groundwork for Indo-Greek and Kushana syncretism<sup>4</sup>. Even under the unfavourable geographical situations, this route was always utilized from the Vedic period to Alexander's invasion; the Scythians, Kushans, and Huns, all of them, entered India through this corridor<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Gaur, A. S., Sundaresh, & Tripathi, S. (2005). Evidence for Indo-Roman trade from Bet Dwarka waters, west coast of India. *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology*, 34(1), 122-127. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1095-9270.2005.00080.x>

<sup>2</sup> Puri, B. N., Mukhamedjanov, A. R., Litvinsky, B. A., Harmatta, J., & Multiple Authors. (1994). *The Kushans*. Paris: UNESCO Publishing. Retrieved from <https://archive.org/details/kushans-1994-hcca>

<sup>3</sup> Høisæter, T. L. (2023). Trade, Buddhism, and the Kushan connection: exchange across the Pamir Knot and the making of the Silk Roads, 2nd century BCE to 5th century CE. In *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Asian History*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.013.598>

<sup>4</sup> Chandra, M. (1977). *Trade and trade routes in ancient India*. Abhinav Publications. <https://books.google.co.in/books?id=rDL4kA7SWkEC>

<sup>5</sup> Sen, T. (2015). *Buddhism, diplomacy, and trade: The realignment of India–China relations, 600–1400*. Rowman & Littlefield. ISBN 1442254734  
[https://books.google.co.in/books?id=gUt7CgAAQBAJ&dq=24.%09Sen,+T.+\(2015\).+Buddhism,+diplomacy,+and+trade:+The+realignment+of+India%E2%80%93China+relations,+600%E2%80%931400.+Rowman+%26+Littlefield&lr=&source=gbp\\_navlinks\\_s](https://books.google.co.in/books?id=gUt7CgAAQBAJ&dq=24.%09Sen,+T.+(2015).+Buddhism,+diplomacy,+and+trade:+The+realignment+of+India%E2%80%93China+relations,+600%E2%80%931400.+Rowman+%26+Littlefield&lr=&source=gbp_navlinks_s)



Particularly pertinent is the connection between Buddhism and Indian trade. Via establishing Buddhist monasteries and stupas at commerce hubs, Buddhist outreach via sea assisted in bridging the gap between remote regions of Asia.

During the period of Emperor Ashoka, his son Mahinda and daughter Sanghamitta went to Sri Lanka along *the Dakshinapatha Maritime Route*, from the port of *Tamralipti* to *Jambukola Pattana*. To promote the trade of products and the sacred Bodhi seedling, which symbolizes the civilizational link between India and Sri Lanka, merchant guilds travelled the same route. At the same time, the Uttarpatha brought Buddhism north from Gandhara to China's Dunhuang and Xi'an via Bactria, Khotan, and Kucha. With the help of local kings and businessmen, monasteries grew along these caravan routes. These establishments had two functions: they were places of worship and relaxation for traders, which allowed for the interchange of ideas and goods.

The *Mahachaityas* and *Viharas* found at sites such as *Bhaja, Karle, and Kanhari* along India's western seaboard are a reflection of the deep influence of commerce in shaping the religious and cultural learnings of ancient India<sup>1</sup>.

On the other hand, the Silk Route, though in praise of having connected China with the West, only gained popularity in the *2nd century BCE*, after *Chang Kien* had travelled to Bactria and witnessed *Chinese goods that had made it there via the Indian northeast*. This is proof of India's already established *trans-regional linkages*. Even now, the British fortified *Khyber and Attock* to protect this route from geopolitical threats, and Subhas Chandra Bose's INA attempted to enter India along this route in World War II<sup>2</sup>. It can be inferred from the above discussion that the Kushan Empire played a pivotal role in shaping transcontinental trade and cultural exchange. By integrating commerce with Buddhism, they facilitated the spread of Indian knowledge systems across Asia. Their legacy endures in the art, religion, and economic networks that once connected India with Central Asia, China, and the Roman world.

#### *India's Cultural Footprints along the Silk Route*

The Silk Route, often romanticized as a linear trail of Chinese silk reaching the Mediterranean, has historically been interpreted through predominantly Sinocentric or Eurocentric lenses.

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<sup>1</sup> Chandra, M. (1977). Trade and trade routes in ancient India. Abhinav Publications. <https://books.google.co.in/books?id=rDL4kA7SWkEC>

<sup>2</sup> Khan, N. R. (2005). India's connection with the Silk Route. *India Quarterly*, 61(1), 79-117. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097492840506100102>



Such narratives tend to marginalize the Indian subcontinent's pivotal role in shaping and sustaining these expansive trans-regional trade networks. Far from being merely a consumer base or a transit zone, India functioned as a dynamic civilizational and economic hub within the Silk Route system. From the Harappan civilization to the Mughal era, the subcontinent consistently served as a vital axis of intercontinental exchange, where economic vitality merged with cultural transmission.

In his paper, "India's Connection with the Silk Route," Nasir Raza Khan provides a comprehensive overview of the intricate web of maritime and overland trade corridors that historically linked India with Central Asia, Persia, and China. He convincingly argues that India's involvement in the Silk Route was not limited to geographic proximity but extended deeply into the cultural, economic, and civilizational dimensions of the network. Rather than a singular route, the Silk Route comprised a vast, decentralized system of interconnected land and sea paths—many of which originated, converged, or culminated on Indian soil<sup>1</sup>.

India was historically linked to Central Asia through several prominent overland routes. From *Leh and Kashmir*, Indian traders followed the route through *Karakoram to Yarkand* and *Kashgar*. Punjab merchants, especially from Lahore, used *the Kabul-Balkh* route to travel to Bukhara. A second principal road extended from *Multan to Kandahar and Herat into Bukhara and Isfahan*, connecting *India to Iranian and Central Asian* commercial centers. Paths from the eastern Himalayas, like *the Hindustan-Tibet route and the Simla-Kulu-Leh route*, facilitated easy access to Lhasa and beyond. Even *the Nathu La Pass in Sikkim* acted as a critical link between India and the Tibetan plateau<sup>2</sup>.

India's maritime links to the Silk Road were less prominent, yet ports like Bharuch, Sopara, Tamralipta, and later Surat and Masulipatnam played a crucial role in connecting the subcontinent with East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and Southeast Asia<sup>3</sup>. Maritime trade streams tended to be calibrated to the overland systems and permitted an intercontinental exchange of goods, persons, and culture. Indian ships carrying textiles, spices, and jewels sailed

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<sup>1</sup> Dolma, R. (2017). Ladakh at the Cross-road During 19th and 20th Century. *Journal of Central Asian Studies*, 24, 185-195.

<https://ccas.uok.edu.in/Files/93269b6c-7f53-4439-ae9a-3bdf55a4c649/Journal/db7fa2bf-d556-49a7-9822-e891286dbabb.pdf#page=195>

<sup>2</sup> Tripathi, S., & Rao, S. R. (1994). Tamralipta: The ancient port of India. *Stud Hist Cult*. <http://drs.nio.org/drs/handle/2264/7445>

<sup>3</sup> Khan, N. R. (2005). India's connection with the Silk Route. *India Quarterly*, 61(1), 79-117. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097492840506100102>

westwards, and religious pilgrims and foreign ambassadors travelled eastwards to see India's temples and universities.

India's economic and cultural contributions to the Silk Route were enormous. It exported cotton and silk fabrics, indigo, pepper, cardamom spices, copperware, ivory, and jewels. It imported horses, wool, precious metals, and highland products from Central Asia. But aside from the trade of material items, India was a cultural center. Buddhism spread widely up to Central Asia and China from India along these routes due to Indian monks who transported scriptures, arts, and architectural styles across borders. Equally, Indian astronomy, mathematics, and medicine found appreciative ears in foreign kingdoms. Indian commercial communities like Multanis, Lohanis, and Shikarpuris established successful commercial enclaves in *urban centers like Samarkand, Bukhara, and Isfahan*, facilitating business as well as cultural continuity<sup>1</sup>.

India's ancient trade system was different from other big empires like China and Rome. While China controlled trade through its central government, and Rome protected trade through its army and taxes, India followed a different path. Indian trade was mostly managed by local merchant groups called *śreṇīs*, and supported by kings, religious centres, and community guards. It was less about strict control and more about trust, values, and cooperation.

In India, trade was not only about making money—it was also about spreading culture, religion, and knowledge. Indian traders followed moral principles like honesty and non-violence, and helped share ideas like Buddhism and Hinduism across Asia. This shows that India saw trade as a part of its larger civilizational role, not just an economic activity.

### *Kalinga Route and its legacy*

Benudhar Patra narrates in “Trade, Trade Routes, and Urbanisation,” foregrounds Odisha's pivotal role in ancient global trade from a civilizational Indian perspective. Strategically situated along India's eastern coastline, Odisha emerged as a major maritime center in antiquity. Historical ports such as Tamralipti, Palur, Manikpatna, and Khalkattapatna anchored Odisha's integration into robust coastal (*kulapatha*) and international (*samudrapatha*) trade networks. These maritime routes connected the region to Southeast Asia, China, and even the Roman Empire, embedding Odisha within expansive trans-Asian commercial circuits.

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<sup>1</sup> Patra, B. (2018, January). Trade, trade routes, and urbanisation. In Proceedings of the Indian History Congress (Vol. 79, pp. 117-125). Indian History Congress. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26906237>

Classical sources—including Greco-Roman writers like Pliny and Ptolemy, as well as Chinese pilgrims such as Hiuen Tsang, Fa-Hien, and I-Tsing—attest to Odisha's prominence in long-distance trade. The region exported a variety of commodities, including textiles, spices, elephants, and Buddhist cultural elements. Far from being a marginal player, Odisha functioned as a vital civilizational hub, significantly contributing to urban development, economic prosperity, and cross-cultural interaction within the Indian Ocean world<sup>1</sup>.

#### *The Mughal Empire: The Grand Trunk Road*

The Mughal Empire played a pivotal role in formalizing India's integration into the Silk Route network. Emperors such as Akbar recognized the strategic and economic advantages of maintaining accessible and safeguarded trade routes. Substantial resources were allocated to building infrastructure, including the Grand Trunk Road, caravanserais, and security outposts. Akbar's initiatives to clear the Khyber Pass and establish rest stations significantly enhanced trader safety. Additionally, Shah Jahan's architectural patronage extended to thriving trade cities, while the empire's political stability created a favourable environment for commercial activity and long-distance exchange<sup>2</sup>.

Thus, the Mughal Empire's strategic investments in infrastructure, security, and urban development strengthened India's role in transcontinental trade. By fostering a stable and prosperous environment, the Mughals not only promoted domestic commerce but also embedded India deeper into the Silk Route system, influencing global economic and cultural exchanges for centuries.

#### *Great Game & Trade Route*

India's pivotal role in transcontinental trade began to diminish with the advent of colonialism. The British-Russian rivalry in Central Asia—famously known as the Great Game—reshaped the Silk Route into a zone of strategic contestation. Historic overland ties between India and Central Asia were disrupted, often militarized or severed entirely. British imperial policy redirected India's trade towards maritime channels under its control, while Russian territorial ambitions increasingly isolated Central Asia. These developments led to a swift decline in

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<sup>1</sup> Sharan, A. M., St, J. S., Das, B. L., & Council, B. L. (2014). Ancient Uttarpath and Modern Grand Trunk Road Are Two Different Highways.

<https://www.engr.mun.ca/~asharan/UTTARPATH/UTTARPATHV3.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Khan, S. (2021). Power Games on The Silk Route: A Journey from Historical to Modern Era. Eurasian Research Journal, 3(2), 33-56. <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/erj/issue/64308/976388>

Indo-Central Asian commerce and the disintegration of land-based trade corridors that had prospered for centuries<sup>1</sup>.

Consequently, Indo-Central Asian trade experienced a steep decline, and the ancient pathways that once sustained civilizational dialogue collapsed. Despite this erosion, traces of India's presence endured. Even in the 19th century, British explorers such as Alexander Burnes documented Indian merchant activity in cities like Bukhara and Astrakhan. The Shikarpuris remained influential in regional banking and the silk trade, demonstrating the flexibility of India's mercantile networks despite imperial disruptions. These enduring traces affirm that India was not a peripheral player but a civilizational core in the Silk Route's grand narrative<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, the colonial geopolitics disrupted India's centuries-old linkages with Central Asia, undermining its historic trade networks and cultural presence. However, remnants of India's influence persisted through merchant communities and recorded encounters. These echoes of the past continue to inform contemporary diplomatic and cultural efforts to revive regional connectivity and historical civilizational ties. Restoring India to the center of the Silk Route is essential, as it reclaims the rightful place of Indian civilization in world history and underscores that, long before the era of globalization, India was already a vibrant hub of transcontinental exchange.

## THE COLONIAL IMPACT ON HISTORIC TRADE ROUTES

In 1919, the Central Asian Society in London featured a notable paper titled *"An Old Route to India"* by Frederick D. Harford. While framed within a British colonial viewpoint, the paper remains highly relevant to an Indian civilizational understanding of historic global trade routes connecting Bharat with Persia, Mesopotamia, and the Arabian Peninsula. This Indian perspective not only seeks to honour the ancient pathways but also emphasizes trade as a cultural and civilizational endeavour, transcending mere economic transactions.<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>Levi, S. (1999). The Indian merchant diaspora in early modern central Asia and Iran. *Iranian Studies*, 32(4), 483-512. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00210869908701966>

<sup>2</sup>Harford, F. D. (1919). An old route to India. *Journal of the Central Asian Society*, 6(3-4), 99-118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068371908724764>

<sup>3</sup>*The London gathering of the Central Asian Society in 1919 witnessed the reading of an impressive paper, "An Old Route to India" by Frederick D. Harford. Though read in a British colonial context, the paper is very relevant for an Indian civilizational perspective of viewing global trade networks of the past that linked Bharat to Persia, Mesopotamia, the Arabian Peninsula, and further afield. This perspective tries not only to adhere to the ancient path laid out but also to align our sight with an Indian vision where trade was seen as a cultural and civilizational pursuit, not an economic objective.*

*The Aleppo-Basra Corridor: A Civilizational Artery*

Harford's discussion about land routes indicates that it is a vast transcontinental corridor connecting the Indian subcontinent with West Asian region's metropolises like Aleppo, Basra, Petra, and Gaza, and further into Egypt, Syria, and even North Africa. It was a vast network that existed as a key conduit of commercial, cultural, and diplomatic exchange long before the colonial sea routes dominated international commerce. The circuits were not geographical but civilizational circuits along which India exported not only commodities like spices, cloth, pearls, and medicines but also systems of knowledge, religious practices, and cultural imprints.

The civilizational significance of these routes was realized by the early geographers like Ptolemy, who charted connections running from North China via Bactria and Media to the Euphrates, which was a route linked with the Indic realm via Central Asia.

*Harappan and Early Indian Maritime Gateways*

Ancient trade with the West is not only known to Ptolemy, but Harappans also traded with Mesopotamia via the Persian Gulf, a trend that was carried on through Harford's routes subsequently. The Indian Sea gateways were sites such as Lothal, Barygaza (modern Bharuch), and Sopara, which connected with Charax (Mahammerah) and Basra. India was not just a participant but quite frequently the center of culture that attracted demand from the likes of Rome, Persia, and the Arab Caliphates.

*Colonial Disruptions: Portuguese and British Interference*

The British and Portuguese upheavals in these trading networks were also pivotal. The Portuguese sought to disintegrate the established Arab and Indian sea networks, which successfully downgraded ancient Indian-West Asian trade networks, channelling trade into their colonial ports. The British East India Company subsequently adopted this destructive heritage, using the Aleppo-Basra trade circuit and the Persian Gulf not to honour traditional routes but to monopolize and manage them, disrupting centuries of shared civilizational exchange.

*European Accounts of Ancient Routes*

The article also mentions the immense cartographic and archival effort of Harford and Douglas Carruthers. Their rediscovered historic maps and diaries—those of Edward Ives's and John

Henry Grose's, for example—give a richly layered vision of the Aleppo-Basra route. The trip was taken by a few European travellers, including Pedro Teixeira in 1604, Gaspar de Bernardino in 1606, and Jean-Baptiste Tavernier in 1638. From the point of view of an Indian, these travels are important both for what they report and what they suggest—India's positioning at the centre of the global economy, even in reports that were not written from within India. John Newberry's 1580 voyage, which resulted in the formation of the Levant Company, was an English attempt to tap into a network that had long been cultivated by Indian, Arab, and Persian merchants. The East India Company then travelled the same path to convey mail and despatches between India and London, an explicit recognition of the value of this pre-existing channel<sup>1</sup>.

#### *Arab Contributions and Civilizational Parallels*

Arab merchants' contribution is another area of civilizational complementarity. Harford refers to tribal protection systems during transit by agents called "Aban" that mimic the Indian tradition of neighbourhood protection and merchant guilds. Desert expanses between Baghdad and Damascus were found to be cattle-grazing lands and temporary sources of water, thereby perpetuating the caravans. Such information, over the years, is proof of the competence of early traders in leveraging natural ecology to support economic mechanisms.

#### *The End of the Overland Trade and Civilizational Rupture*

Slow rundown of Aleppo-Basra overland trade by Turkish intervention, tribal conflicts, and resulting infrastructural redundancy was not only the demise of a physical route but a disconnection of a link of civilization. Harford's camel caravans, lumbering two and a half miles per hour for twenty-five to forty-five days, capture the long-suffering, unending procession of civilizational India along the deserts and valleys of Arabia and Persia.

#### *The Colonial Impact on Indian Trade Networks*

The arrival of the British Empire caused a gargantuan shift in the history of trade in India, breaking the country's political hierarchy and the delicate web of trade. The British sought to monopolize India's wealth, particularly its spices, cotton, and cloth, which were much sought after in Europe. They placed regulations to focus control of trade and convert India into a raw

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid

material provider, shutting out its ability to participate in world trade. Seaports and trade routes were also controlled by the British, interfering with local economies significantly. The British also applied economic measures to exploit Indian resources, channelling sea trade routes to ports held by Britain, interfering with traditional maritime commerce. The Silk Route and land trade routes through Central Asia and Persia were also affected by British domination. The establishment of colonial monopolies in major industries like salt, textiles, and opium transformed India's conventional trade routes, forcing Indian traders to operate in a situation where colonizers' interests became a greater priority than traditional trade customs. The colonial influence on India's trade network and the global economy had far-reaching consequences, which in turn shaped India's contemporary trade policies and infrastructure.

#### *Reclaiming Bharat's Trade Legacy in the 21st Century*

In present-day India, when the country wishes to recreate its earlier connectivity through modern infrastructural projects and bilateral trade agreements under its vision for "Viksit Bharat," remembering and re-tracing these ancient routes assumes importance. Harford's paper, being in British imperialist interests, automatically develops a latent mapmaking of India's lost geography of civilization. Aleppo-Basra route, the Persian Gulf channel, the Petra-Gaza axis—all were not simply alien routes but an extension of Bharat's civilization horizon.

### **REVIVAL OF LEGACY**

India's geography and civilization values have, since ancient times, laid the foundation for a vast and interconnected network of trade routes, both land and sea. The routes were not only commercial highways but conduits of culture, knowledge, religion, and diplomacy. From the seacoast cities of the Harappan civilization, including Lothal, to the dynamic exchange along *Uttarapatha* and *Dakshinapatha*, ancient India was the focal point of international trade.

Trade was an activity that was Dharmic, regulated by not just material gain but by moral principles too. Indian merchants were said to deal in honest trade, and commercial cities tended to become intellectual and religious centers.

In the *Atharva Veda's Prithvi Sukta*, our notice has been attracted to the *panthas* or paths of our great nation.



येते पन्थानो बहवो जनायना रथस्य वर्त्मानसश्च यातवे ।  
 यैः संचरन्त्युभये भद्रपापास्तं पन्थानं जयेमानमित्रमतस्करं यच्छिवं तेन नो मृड ॥<sup>1</sup>

A.V. XII. 1. 47

This hymn seems to have been the keynote of the caravan leaders. It draws our attention to that; This land had many routes and their arteries. These routes were the principal means of communication for the people. On these routes, the chariots plied. They were the main mode of communication for bullock carts to carry commodities. Good or bad, anyone could use those routes. But protecting the people on those routes from the ravages of the wild beasts and the robbers had to be ensured. Those highly protected and safe routes represented the bliss of the earth.

#### *Disruption of Trade Routes: The Colonial Era*

Such a legacy was disrupted by external interventions, chiefly by the British colonial state. The British colonial state in India systematically dismantled India's native trade networks, replacing them with railways and ports for raw material extraction and British goods importation. This led to a location shift, with the original routes connecting Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Africa being replaced with routes connecting the Indian interiors to port cities for British shipping lines.

This de-industrialization resulted in economic drain and dependence on British financial systems, shipping, and maritime insurance, transforming India into a peripheral colony providing British industrial growth. Post-World War II, there was this new world power represented by the United States, which controlled world maritime routes via the Bretton Woods institutions. This created Cold War Infrastructure, dollar hegemony, and US-led developments in logistics, containerisation, and air freight that further harmonised international routes with Western supply chains.

#### *Independent India's Challenges & Nehruvian Approach*

Nehruvian vision rested on economic independence and judicious exposure to the world trade regime, largely due to the geopolitical tensions of the Cold War and ideological predisposition

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<sup>1</sup> Nair, R. (2021, July 23). How Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh rescued India in 1991 and made history. ThePrint. <https://theprint.in/economy/how-narasimha-rao-and-manmohan-singh-rescued-india-in-1991-and-made-history/700893/>