Thematics Journal of Geography

ISSN: 2277-2995
Vol-8-Issue-12-December-2019

Revisiting Silk Route and Mongolia: A Historical Perspective

Sandhya Mishra

Abstract

The ancient Silk route is an important way to understand the dynamics of trade and ideas which proliferate into a different societies and cultures through multiple levels of exchanges. The constant communication fostered by trade also resulted in evolving of exchange of ideas, belief, culture and knowledge that had immense impact on the history of European civilization. The intellectual and cultural exchange that bloomed through this trade route has benefited different civilization as it fostered new avenues in language religion and culture.

Silk route has set an appropriate and apt example of connectivity and its impact on trade before the contemporary world. Silk Route was an initiative taken by Han Dynasty of China to connect the territories of East to West, with the purview to strengthen Chinese trade in the ancient times.[1] However this route not only became a potential liaison for trade between the East and the West but also served as a medium to exchange culture, religion and knowledge. This route was used extensively over the period of time to transmit the knowledge, tradition and promote scholarly exchanges.

This path led to many people to fulfill their goals of life; like fulfilling their aggressive political ambitions, getting the economic benefits through trade and commerce and seeking spiritual or religious guidance which was mainly through Buddhism.

In the above background, this paper would mostly focus on the history of Silk Route and its importance in the past, present and its future context. In the due process of researching and tracing the developmental phases of Silk Route, the paper would attempt to focus on the other nuances of Silk Route, role of Mongolia as one of the important countries of this route and the attempts to restore the legacy of Silk

ISSN: 2277-2995
Vol-8-Issue-12-December-2019

Route in the present.

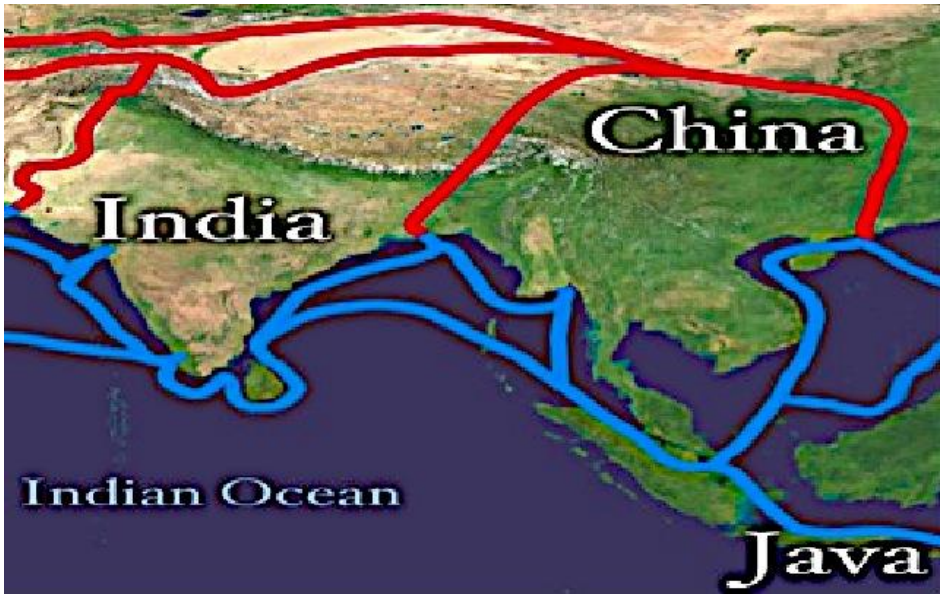
Keywords: Contemporary World, Silk Route, Potential Liaison, Religion and Knowledge, Scholarly Exchanges, Political Ambitions, Economic Benefits, Religious Guidance

1. Introduction

The Silk route and its glory have set an appropriate example of connectivity and congruence in transportation for the contemporary world. The initiative constructing the Silk Route and connecting the different continents was primarily done during Han Dynasty of China. Silk Route connected the territories of East to West, with the purview to strengthen Chinese trade in the ancient times. However this route not only became a potential liaison for trade between the East and the West but also served as a medium to exchange culture, religion and knowledge. The history has witnessed various episodes of human movement from place to place, with the purpose to create a platform that can support an exchange of good, skills, culture and knowledge. One can trace this quest of exchange in the practice of barter system that prevailed before an organized economy emerged in human civilization. Owing to the geographical location, Eurasia has been a potential seat of exchange that provided a suitable platform for communication between the tribes and communities. The Silk Route became a potent medium to connect the East and the West and a platform for change of culture along with trade. The goods that were mostly traded through this route were silk and ceramic unlike the water route that were mostly used for trading spices and thus was known as Spice route.

The popularity of this route and existing exoticism related to the East and its rich culture gave rise to multiple narratives and research related to various facets of Silk route. According to some historians and the scholars who have worked on the history of Silk Route, the term given to this route is relatively new. Despite the popularity and extensive usage of this route, there was no specific name assigned to the route which later came to be known as Silk Route. It is opined that the term 'Silk Route' was coined by the German geologist Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen. He named this trade network as *Die Seidenstrasse* in German. The literal translation of the phrase in English would stand as the 'Silk Route' in English.[2]

ISSN: 2277-2995
Vol-8-Issue-12-December-2019



(Image Source: www.wikipedia.org)

2. Historical Perspective of Silk Route

It is argued by many historians that China has played a major role in the development of Silk as a textile and its usage as a popular clothing and fabric material. It is also believed that the art of extracting Silk from the protein fibers of silkworm and its cocoon had evolved in ancient China in around 2,700 BC.[3] Silk in ancient China was considered as a pristine and valuable fabric that was mostly used by the royal court for making different types of clothing. Silk as a fabric material had a very high price in the Chinese market as its production process. The selling of Silk was mostly controlled by the royal families. For instance, the Tomb located in Hubei province would give a glimpse of elaborate process of producing Silk and other work related to festooning of the silk fabric that thrived in and around 4th and 3rd Century BC.[4] Although Silk was not affordable and available for common people in China, it was often presented as a gift to other kingdom in different countries especially with those who had good trade relation with China.

The tradition of gifting Silk played a potential role in popularizing Silk as an exquisite textile material in other countries.[5] With the rising popularity of Silk in other countries, it became a chief product that was exported to countries in Asia and also in the West. Thus Silk brought in major revenue to China with the subsequent growth in the popularity of Silk outside China. The major buyers of Silk during the ancient times were Egypt, Mongolia (Central Asia), Roman Empire and the kingdom around these regions.[6]

ISSN: 2277-2995
Vol-8-Issue-12-December-2019

There are various historical evidences that potentially prove the extensive use of Silk as a valuable textile that was mostly used by royalty and for festooning places of worship. In the Roman Empire, for instance, Silk was extensively in demand as it was considered as an exquisitely exotic fabric and had a major popularity in the upper echelon of the society. A similar trend has been observed regarding the use of Silk in the Middle Age especially in the Byzantine Empire.[7] The rising popularity and demand of Silk in the Middle East and Europe further initiated a need to strengthen connectivity for trade which eventually led to the fostering of what is recognized as Silk Route. Although the techniques of Silk production was mostly kept secretive by Chinese royalty with the purpose to hold patented rights on its production, the extensive trade of Silk eventually resulted in confiding the production process of Silk. This mostly happened in Indian and Persian kingdoms, who were the major buyers of Silk from China.[8]

3. 'Silk Route' in Ancient Sources

One can find the references of popularity of China, for its silk in the classical texts of India like *Mahabharta* and *Arthashastra*. China was mostly referred as '*Tsin*' in these ancient texts. The route taken for exporting Silk to the West was mostly through Indian subcontinent due to which silk and its route was well renowned in India.[9] This route also connected Central Asia and Middle East. The route was later recognized by historians as the oldest highway and an important corridor that connected different continents together for the purpose of trade. This route was not only used to export silk but other valuable goods like ivory, ceramic, precious and semi-precious stones and so on.[10] The route crossed over the region of *Hindukush* range which includes present day Kashmir and North West India. It also connected the valleys of Kabul and further connected Middle East and the West. There are references in the ancient texts of India like *Abhigyanam Shakuntalam* and *Manusmriti* which has described Silk as a valuable royal gift that has its origin in China. The historical records documented in Gupta period also provide references to China and its Silk production that paved its way to India through Silk route. Some of the historical evidences would give elaborate details of how cultivation of silk and its production process started in the *Bramhaputra* valley and later reached to the West through India.[11]

The Chinese Dynasty that was ruled by Wu-ti in around 13 B.C had undertaken major steps to popularize Silk outside China. He had sent an envoy named Chiang Kien to the West with the purpose to strengthen trade with the West. Chiang Kein was proved to be successful in his

ISSN: 2277-2995
Vol-8-Issue-12-December-2019

mission as consequently after his return to Han Kingdom, the trade relations between the China and the West prospered like never before. His visit in countries like India also contributed in strengthening trade relations between Han dynasty of China and India. The sudden bloom in trade with different countries from India to Far East to the West eventually resulted in the evolution of Silk Route both through roadways and Maritime, under the banner of Han Dynasty.[12]

4. 'Silk Route' and Its Global Reception

Considering the historical records and the ancient map that was developed by Ptolemy, there was a prosperous trade route that connected China to Roman Empire through South-East Asia, North frontiers of India, Middle East and East of Africa that including Egypt and Asia Minor.[13]

One of the major significance of the evolution of Silk Route was to bring this trade route even closer. The Silk Route started from the snowcapped mountain and crossed over on the cold dessert of Central Asia to the lofty Hindukush range and Indian Subcontinent to the valleys of Kabul, touched the Arabian Gulf and the vast expanses of desert in Middle East and Northern Africa. Thus the evolution and development of the Silk Route was one of the first initiatives by mankind to bridge the gap between continents, by developing a strong connectivity through land trade routes and maritime.[14]

5. Silk Route: The Benefits and Disputes

There has been diverse opinion about the pros and cons about the silk route. The route has never been fixed and has seen many deviations through out the times. The route was not only beneficial for China but for all those countries that were connected through this route. The Silk Road connected all those regions of the world that was a home to various religious practices and the birth place of different religion like: Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism.[15] With the constant and close connectivity shared amongst these countries, there was an exchange of knowledge, religious teachings and philosophy as well as cultural and tradition. Along with the trade and exchange of spices, there was also an evolution and development of food culture including some of the food items in the present day world. For instance, Sugar extracts were taken to China by a Chinese traveller from India. The procedure of refining sugar was done in China and it was further carried out in Egypt. Apart from Silk, the route was extensive used for trading spices,

ISSN: 2277-2995
Vol-8-Issue-12-December-2019

ceramic, and porcelain and so on. There was other potent infrastructural and architectural development in the countries that were connected through Silk Route, through maritime and land routes. For instance, the ports and harbors were developed in the region around Persian Gulf and Indian Subcontinent, with the purpose to foster trade in the countries that were connected through Silk Route. There were many monastery and other religious constructions that were built in mainland across different continents.[16]

The route also served as a potent platform for the expansion of Buddhism in Central Asia and China. Buddhism is believed to enter from the Silk Route through Taklamakan desert in China and later extended to further East of Asia. Some historians argue that Buddhism was taken to China by Xuan-Zang, a Chinese traveller who took the teachings of both the sects of Buddhism-Hinayana and Mahayana, to the Tang Empire of China. Xuan-Zang had a major contribution in preaching Buddhism in China where he constructed a temporary monastery of sun dried bricks. The walls had elaborating paintings of the teachings of Buddha and the philosophy of Buddhism. He also had an immense contribution in collecting images of Buddha from Gaochang which were reconstructed in various parts of Central Asia in the form of painting and sculptures. The sculptures, painting and the teachings and philosophy of Buddha travelled all through silk route, inspiring soldiers, rulers, traders and caravan leaders.[17]

Although the Silk Route had a major contribution in flourishing trade between various countries, evolution of new products, exchange of valuable items, culture and religious teachings and philosophy(which resulted in overall development in all the countries associated with the trade and its benefits), it also became a reason for dispute. For instance, there were threats of loot and plunder posed by various barbaric tribes who were present across Central Asia. There were also disputes related to the benefits and high revenue that Chinese royalty used to get through the trade. The Chinese royalty thus had to combat not only the external forces that included the barbaric tribes but also insurgence from the tribes who were present in Chinese territory.[18] The Chinese rulers attempted to keep their patented rights over the valuable goods that were exported from China and also tried to control the trade of goods that were exported both through the maritime and land route. Despite the genuine attempts of Chinese royalty of controlling as well as safeguarding the trade route, the episodes of plunder and threat from the Tibetan and Central Asian tribes affected the trade and traders, caravan leaders and the revenue generated from the trade.

ISSN: 2277-2995
Vol-8-Issue-12-December-2019

In the contemporary world order, Chinese Government has started a similar project namely 'The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI or B&R)' since 2013 which is, to some extent, in line with the ancient Silk Route. This ambitious project by the Chinese Government aims at investing in infrastructure development by involving nearly seventy countries. However many countries like India has objected to this initiative and expressed its reservations due to its ambiguous objectives, China centric policies, and its aggressive political ambitions to dominate the region has caused uncomfortable power dynamics in the whole Asian regions. Due to this expansionist nature of China, it is feared by majority of these Asian countries that such a massive project will further cause tension in the region rather than propagating peace and harmony. In contrast to the 'Silk Route' of ancient times, which served as a major route for mutual benefits and prosperity of many countries, through which Buddhism as religion made its way to several countries, the present day geo-political scenario rather restricts this freedom and has somehow created disharmony across borders. .

6. Administration of Mongolia over Silk Route

In contrast to the powerful neighbor China, Mongolia's role was very complex. Mongolia had an important participation in the trade that was carried out through the Silk Route. Not only they were major buyers of some of the Chinese valuable goods but also tried to control the route through their organized and experienced sanding military that was known for their fierce battle skills. Some historians argue that Genghis Khan (1155-1227) had elaborate plans of conquering the regions that were connected through this route and also wanted to administer the flow of trade that generated enormous revenue. However he later realized that it was not feasible for him and his army to control the entire route and the regions that were connected through the thread of trade. Through his expertise in administrative skills and military skills, he managed to established huge empire and conquered different regions that were spread over miles far from Central Asia. After successfully conquering route of northern frontiers, he strategically started plundering and destroying different kingdoms that were located in Arab world. He also attacked some of the Turkish cities that were strategically important for its location in the southern trade route. By gauging control over some of the regions located in the Northern and Southern part of this trade route, he attempted to control the enormous flow of trade and revenue which benefitted many kingdoms. In and around 13^{th} and 15^{th} century, the territories located in Central Asia, Persia, Eurasia and Asia Minor, the trade route was mostly under the control of the successors of

ISSN: 2277-2995
Vol-8-Issue-12-December-2019

Genghis Khan. The flow of trade and revenue intensified between the East and the West under the control of the successors of Genghis khan. One of the successors of Genghis Khan, Berke successfully managed to administer the northern region of the route that included the territories of present day Siberia and Eastern Europe. He also controlled the route that extensively connected the continents of Asia and Europe which included the territories of China, Volga region and Eastern Europe. The trade between China and the Mediterranean region had extensively intensified under the control of Golden Horde and the enormous revenue generated from this trade solely benefited the Golden Horde. Some of the major centers of trade under Golden Horde were Khoresm in the Southern region and Urgench.[19]

7. Conclusion

As discussed above, it can be said that the Silk Route was not merely a trade route limited to the 'silk' but it had attained far reaching goals. Over the period of times, it went through many changes. A detailed study of history of Silk Route suggests that in nineteenth century, the Silk Road regained its popularity not for trade but for archeological and geographical study and exploration. Most of these researchers carried Eurocentric study on the region of Western China as they mostly belonged to England, France and Germany. Their extensive research on the Silk Roads resulted in significant archeological discoveries that became a plinth for the modern day research on history of the Silk Route and its importance in the past and present.[20] One can trace the remains and existence of many historical monuments, religious buildings, caravansaries, and cities dotted along the stretch of Silk Route which has intrigued many scholars both in Europe and Asia.[21] The role of Genghis Khan, as one of the prominent political figure, who played a pivot role in promoting trade and commerce in the silk route, can not be ignored. Mongols under his leadership implemented and carried out several policies and helped in developing as well as reviving the trade through out silk route over times.

Many international organizations like UNESCO has carried out several research in order to understand the history of Silk route, its importance in the past and its relevance in the modern world. Potential attempts were made to restore the stretch of Silk Route by different countries, in order to cherish the marvelous initiative taken by rulers of the past; to develop a strong and successful trade route that significantly became a liaison to bridge the gap between regions. It also became a potent platform that supported the exchange of knowledge, culture, ideas and philosophy.

ISSN: 2277-2995
Vol-8-Issue-12-December-2019

In the changing fast paced world order, there has been stiff competition among the major economic powers like China in Asian context. In present context, for example, China has been trying to push its massive economic plans namely BRI which is claimed to be similar to the ancient Silk Route. In the emerging geo-political and economic situation in the Asian region, this travel of idea or commencement of trade (like was done through Silk Route) through People's Republic of China (PRC)'s BRI, seems rather difficult to be accepted by countries like India. India, on the other hand, has identified Gwadar Port in Balochistan to develop it as a major port in the Arabian Sea involving many countries to carry out smooth trade in the region. As far as Mongolia is concerned, it has huge reservoir of natural resources (as mentioned in the previous sections) which can be beneficial for India. 'Mongolia' being a land locked country, the potential has not been optimally explored mainly due to its geographical distance and logistics problem from India. However, if a proper transportation route is worked out, Mongolia and India can mutually help each other in a more efficient way. In this context too, it is hoped that all countries, irrespective of their geographical locations, economic conditions and demographical size, must take inspiration from the ancient Silk Route and devise a route/path that takes all the stakeholder together and thereby promotes mutual prosperity and tranquility in the region. It is apt to say that there is a need to create many routes which can enable free flow of ideas and facilitate a meaningful dialogue among the countries which can bring change in the society and serve to the humanity.

References

1. "Silk Roads: Dialogue, Diversity & Development" Web: https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/about-silk-road accessed on 10 Nov.2019.
2. "Silk Roads: Dialogue, Diversity & Development" https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/about-silk-road.
3. Lalitha, V. "The Silk Route" Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, vol. 52, 1991, pp. 894–902. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/44142723. Accessed 11 Nov. 2019.
4. Ibid.
5. https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/world-history/ancient-medieval/silk-road/a/the-silk-road.
6. Ibid.
7. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Silk-Road-trade-route.
8. Ibid.

ISSN: 2277-2995
Vol-8-Issue-12-December-2019

9. Lalitha, V. "The Silk Route." Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, vol. 52, 1991, pp. 894–902. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/44142723. Accessed 11 Nov. 2019.
10. https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-middle-east/silk-road.
11. Lalitha, V. "The Silk Route" Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, vol. 52, 1991, pp. 894-902. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/44142723. Accessed 11 Nov. 2019.
12. Ibid.
13. Lalitha, V. "The Silk Route" Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, vol. 52, 1991, pp. 894–902. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/44142723. Accessed 11 Nov. 2019.
14. Ibid.
15. https://www.ancient.eu/Silk_Road/.
16. ibid.
17. Wriggins, Sally. "A Buddhist Pilgrimage along the Silk Route."Archaeology, vol. 40, no. 5, 1987, pp. 34–41. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/41731938. Accessed 13 Nov. 2019.
18. "Silk Roads: Dialogue, Diversity & Development" Web: https://en.unesco.org/ silkroad/about-silk-road.
19. https://www.advantour.com/silkroad/history-mongolian-period.htm.
20. "Silk Roads: Dialogue, Diversity & Development" Web: https://en.unesco. org/silkroad/about-silk-road.
21. Ibid.
22. Lalitha, V. "The Silk Route" *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 52, 1991, pp. 894–902.
23. Peter Frankopan. *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*, 2016, Bloomsbury Paperbacks.
24. Raoul McLaughlin. *Roman Empire and the Silk Routes*, 2016, Pen & Sword Books Ltd.
25. Susan Whitfield, Ursula Sims-Williams (eds.). *The Silk Route: Trade, Travel, War and Faith*", 2004, British Library.
26. Whitfield, Susan. *Life along the Silk Road*, 1999, Berkeley: University of California Press.
27. Wriggins, Sally. "A Buddhist Pilgrimage along the Silk Route."*Archaeology*, vol. 40, no. 5, 1987, pp. 34-41.
28. https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-middle-east/silk-road.
29. https://www.advantour.com/silkroad/history-mongolian-period.htm.
30. https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/about-silk-road.

ISSN: 2277-2995
Vol-8-Issue-12-December-2019

31. https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/world-history/ancient-medieval/silk-road/a/ the- silk-road.
32. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Silk-Road-trade-route.
33. CACI Analyst, Central Asian-Caucasian Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, http://www. silkroadstudies. org/new I docs/publications/.