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Mughals and the Rhythms of Overland Trade

By Aasim Khwaja
Jawaharlal Nehru University

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Mughals and the Rhythms of Overland Trade

Aasim Khwaja

Abstract- **The arrival of the European shipping in the Indian Ocean region is marked out as a momentous development that signalled the intensification of maritime trade at the expense of the overland trade. Against this context, the present paper, by focussing on the Mughal involvement in the overland trade, makes a case about looking at the two channels of trade delivery as mutually reinforcing that worked in tandem and secured best outcomes for all the concerned stakeholders.**

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I. Introduction

The upsurge in the volume of maritime trade following the European arrival in Asian waters was for a long time seen as harbinger of catastrophic contraction in the overland trade. The better economic terms that accompanied maritime shipment was considered as striking at the root of the viability of overland traffic. Further, the overland trade, according to Morris Rossabi, was more prone to the political disruptions and socio-religious changes.[1]Cumulatively, these factors sought to push back the viability of the overland trade channels in comparison to the maritime trade routes. However, a shattering blow to formulations overplaying the perceived collapse of the overland trade structures in the face of European-propelled maritime expansion was delivered by a slew of writings that effectively rattled the foundations of this strand of historiography. By focussing upon the resiliency and dynamism of overland commercial channels, succoured adequately by Asiatic political and mercantile agencies, these works served an effective purpose in putting to rest the notion of an untrammelled maritime commercial expansion accompanied by a proportionate decline in overland trade.

Among the major works that championed this corrective tendency, a mention may be made of the works of Stephen Dale[2] and Scott Levi[3]. Both of them have pointed out the nature and scope of mercantile networks operated by Indian merchants, and dispelled all erstwhile comparisons of Indian merchants with itinerant pedlars. This piece of information was further reinforced by the findings of Muzaffar Alam[4] and Jos Gommans[5]. While Alam mused over the threat posed by overland trade to maritime channels until the early eighteenth century, Gommans computed that as late as the second half of the eighteenth century the value of overland commerce in horses alone exceeded the combined trade of the European companies in Bengal. These new currents also overwhelmed Niels Steensgaard into modifying his position on the subject. The initial position held by Steensgaard talked of 'the ocean having triumphed over the mainland.'[6] However, the revised position acknowledged the continuity of caravan routes as 'a true alternative to the shipping route(s).'[7]

Taking cue from the aforementioned shift in scholarly consensus in favour of the continuity of overland trade, the present work is a modest effort to offer a more comprehensive picture of the role played by the Mughals in augmenting the vitality of overland commercial structures. For a purposeful analysis, the involvement of the state in giving boost to overland trade has been resolved into three components viz., engagement in the nature of policy pronouncements, investments in the setting up of commercial infrastructure, and the steering of course by means of personal involvement. So far as the policy pronouncements are concerned, they encompassed initiatives that served to assuage the apprehensions of mercantile elements and articulated the protocol to be observed by the state officials stationed along the trade routes across the empire. Investments in commercial infrastructure were also a crucial barometer for gauging the proclivities of the state authorities towards commerce. According to Rossabi, activities within the rubric of commercial infrastructure primarily consists of construction of caravanserais, fortified installations and postal stations.[8] Further, the nature and degree of involvement of the political elite in commercial ventures was still another indicator of their attitudes towards commerce and must have had a profound bearing on the confidence on a given mode of commercial

Author: Academic Qualification: Doctoral Candidate at Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.
e-mail: mail2kmaasim@gmail.com

[1] Morris Rossabi, 'The "decline" of the central Asian caravan trade', in *The Rise of Merchant Empires: Long Distance Trade in the Early Modern World, 1350-1750*, ed. James D. Tracy, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, pp. 351-370.
[2] Stephen F. Dale, *Indian Merchants and Eurasian Trade, c. 1500-1650*, Foundation Books, New Delhi, 1994.
[3] Scott C. Levi, *The Indian Diaspora in Central Asia and its Trade, c. 1550-1900*, Brill,Leiden, 2002.
[4] Muzaffar Alam, 'Trade, State Policy and Regional Change: Aspects of Mughal-Uzbeg Trade Relations', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 37, No. 3, 1994, pp. 202-227.
[5] Jos J.L. Gommans, *The Rise of Indo-Afghan Empire c. 1710-1780*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999.
[6] For a detailed discussion of this strand of argument, see Niels Steensgaard, *The Asian Trade Revolution of the Seventeenth Century: the East India Companies and the Decline of the Caravan Trade*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1973.
[7] For an exposition of the revised formulation, see Niels Steensgaard, 'The route through Quandahar: the significance of the overland trade from India to the West in the seventeenth century', in *Merchants, Companies and Trade*, eds. Sushil Chaudhury and Michel Morineau, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 55-73.
[8] Rossabi, 'The decline', p. 353.

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transport for the traders with obvious implications for the volume of trade.

II. Mughals and the Heritage of Trade

The benevolent attitude of political class towards commercial affairs in the region was best encapsulated by Chardin, when he wrote: 'In the East, Traders are Sacred Persons, who are never molested even in time of War; and are allowed a free Passage, they and their effects, through the middle of Armies.'[9] So, it is not surprising that the Mughals from the very outset displayed an earnestness to encourage trade. But, in their case, it could also be argued that their Islamic moorings and Genghisid-Timurid heritage caused a cascading effect on their trade policy. It is important to recall that the rise of Islam occurred in a strong commercial milieu and therefore trade, rooted in ethical conduct, always found strong support at courts across the Islamic world. In fact, the Mughal emperor Jahangir during an interaction with Mutribi Samarqandi, a Central Asian traveller, referred to the respectability of trade as a profession in Islam.[10]As for the Genghisid-Timurid heritage, suffice it to say that the rise of the gigantic Mongolian and Timurid empires irretrievably altered the commercial landscape of the vast Eurasian landmass and it was impossible for any successor state, let alone the Mughals, to be not affected by it.

In fact, most of the notable features that later came to be associated with the commercial landscape of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries- be it dissemination of diaspora communities, the diversified commodity structure or the preventive measures to safeguard the lives and possessions of mercantile elements- were sharpened and perfected during the Mongol period. The policies implemented by the Mongols in the vast areas they controlled had far-reaching consequences for the hitherto distinct economic macro-regions that had been integrated into a single unified zone under their aegis so much so that by the time the Great Mongolian Empire underwent dismemberment the economic structures had been recast and commercial exchange carried to unprecedented levels.

It would be unfair to identify the trade policies pursued by the Mongols as causing routine surge in trade normally associated with political consolidation and stability because the cumulative implications of the policies constituted nothing less than the inauguration of a new epoch. So far as different elements of the Mongolian commercial programme are concerned, perhaps the one most far-reaching and expansive in its implications was the system of shares or *khubi*.[11] Formalised by Genghis Khan himself, this system entitled the members of royal family to appropriate some amount of wealth, largely in the form of goods, from each part of the empire. For instance, a Mongolian Prince based in Ilkhanid Persia had claims over goods manufactured in all the major zones that fell within the Mongolian galaxy, be it Yuan China, Chagatai Mogolistan or Golden Horde. The same was true of Princes of other regions as well. It is significant that political divergences within the ruling family did not obstruct the flow of shares across the volatile borders.[12] This aspect had momentous effect on the pattern of inter-regional commodity trade for the vastness of the empire ensured that there was a regular flow of goods between the far-flung zones that had for the first time become fused under a single authority. The introduction of goods in areas that previously had not known of them contributed to commercial expansion, since over a period of time these goods came to be internalised within the existing portfolio of tradable commodities leading thereby to cultivation of new tastes and creation of new markets. Thus, the contribution of the system of shares in leading to greater commodity diversification is unmistakable and the constant movement of goods did much to transform the war routes of the Mongols into commercial arteries.

Closely related to the flow of commodities was the status of mercantile elements in Mongolian world order. Since it was a gargantuan task for the state to transport and sell these vast quantities of wares, it co-opted the merchant class to do its bidding. In fact, it wouldn't be unfair to say that the rise in the status of merchants coincided with an upsurge in the political fortunes of the Mongols. The patronage of the merchant class by the Mongolian elite may be seen as a precursor to what transpired in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the state authorities wooed the diaspora communities into settling within their frontiers. Their benevolence towards the merchants became proverbial so much so that it was told of Ogodei that he would liberally give out sums to merchants to invest in trade.[13] This generosity was stretched to weird proportions by his son Guyuk, of whom it has been reported thus: 'He commanded that the goods of merchants who had come from all sides should be valued in the same way as had been done in his father's day and their dues paid to them.'[14] The Mongolian notables also relied on these

[9] John Chardin, *Travels in Persia*, ed. Edm. Lloyd, Cosimo, New York, 2010, Vol. II, p. 280.
[10] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History: Mughals and Franks*, Oxford University Press, London, 2004, p. 157.
[11] For a good description of various characteristics of *khubi*, see Jack Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, Three Rivers Press, New York, 2004, pp. 221-222.
[12] Ibid., p. 222.
[13] Rashīd al-DīnFadhl-allāh, *Jami'u't-Tawarikh: Compendium of Chronicles*, tr. Wheeler M. Thackston, I.B. Tauris, London, 2012, pp. 239-241.
[14] Rashīd al-Dīn Fadhl-allāh,*The Successors of Genghis Khan*, tr. John Andrew Boyle, Columbia University Press, New York, 1971, p. 184.

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merchants for investing their vast riches in viable ventures so as to lead to capital multiplication.[15]

An important point to consider is that most of the merchants engaged by the state were non-Mongols, and their pervasive presence throughout the length and breadth of the empire may be seen as leading to an unprecedented penetration of diaspora networks. Of the group of merchants that were the recipients from Mongol largesse, the most important beneficiaries were probably the Muslims. In fact, the association between the Mongolian elite and Muslim merchants of Central Asia preceded the Mongol campaigns in Islamic lands[16], and it should come as no surprise that despite shaking the foundations of the political world of Islam they continued to appoint mercantile elements of Muslim population to high administrative posts and employed them to look after their commercial investments. Chagatai even had a Muslim from Otrar, the city whose rapacious governor through his hideous activities incurred the wrath of Genghis Khan and helped set off events that culminated in the inauguration of Mongolian invasion of Islamic lands, as his vizier.[17] That the state was solicitous of Muslim cooperation also comes out in the disparaging references made to the Chinese in relation to Muslims in the sourcebook of Mongolian body-politic. Rashīd al-Dīn Fadhl-allāh, the Ilkhanid vizier wrote: 'Genghis Khan's blessed Yasa is also in agreement, for the blood money for a Muslim is forty bars of gold while that of a Cathian is one donkey.'[18] Thus, the blossoming of a strong symbiosis between the state and merchants augured well for cross cultural trade and aided in the diffusion of mercantile networks.

Another significant legacy of the Mongols was the effort and resources they expended in setting up a robust commercial infrastructure. The disruptions that accompanied their violent emergence were soon made good by pursuit of a concerted programme aimed at reviving the caravan cities, trade routes and other elements of commercial infrastructure. The miraculous recovery of Khwarizm[19] within a century of being laid waste is a good example of commercial restoration. Likewise, the situation at Tabriz also underwent a reversal. Ghazan oversaw the constructions of 'a large caravansary, a crossroads market, and a bath, with workshops and places for animal...next to every of New Tabriz. Merchants who come from all directions enter by the gate in the direction from which they come and stop at that caravansary.'[20]

The investments in infrastructure were suitably complemented by efforts to dissolve the blockages that existed along the commercial arteries. Rashīd al-Dīn wrote of Ilkhanids having

> Ordered that patrolmen should be stationed on roads that were unsafe in any locale throughout the realm. As a toll they might take half an *aqcha* for every four donkeys carrying loads in caravans and half an *aqcha* for every two camels; under no circumstances might they take more. For animals that were not loaded and for those that carried foodstuffs and grain they should take nothing. If a robbery occurred, the patrolmen nearest to the location would have to capture the thief; otherwise he would be responsible for stolen amount.[21]

The comprehensiveness of the reforms ushered in by the Mongols may be gleaned from the fact that they also sought to address the difficulties arising from the nexus between the locals and the robbers. Dwelling upon this policy, Rashiduddin continued:

> In any locale, be it *khaylkhana* or village, in the vicinity of which an act of robbery took place, the responsibility for pursuing and apprehending the thieves would fall upon the inhabitants...next [it was] ordered that if it was discovered that anyone in a *khaylkhana*, village, or city had colluded with thieves, that person would be executed without remorse.[22]

The stupendous success of these initiatives of the Mongols gave them such an aura of legitimacy that following their decline the political upstarts in those areas, in order to partake of their impeccable legacy, were ready to go to any lengths in order to be seen as emulating the precedent set by their Mongolian predecessors. Given this scenario, it is hardly surprising that Timur, the most redoubtable of the claimants to that legacy, took care to further this legacy of the Mongols.

The meteoric rise of Timur as a political force across the lands that once formed part of the Mongol empire was occasioned by relentless warfare carried through much of the second half of the fourteenth century. So far as the region of our study is concerned, the implications on commerce of the rise of Timur were more significant as compared to that of the Mongols, for his rise not only shifted the centre of economic gravity to Central Asia from Karakoram, but also effected a reorientation of trade routes to the advantage of Central Asia and Iran since he diverted the northern trade routes towards south following his destruction of the Golden Horde.[23] In fact, most of the victories of the conqueror

[15] Thomas T. Allsen, 'Mongolian Princes and Their Merchant Partners, 1200-1260', *Asia Major*, THIRD SERIES, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1989, pp. 83-126.
[16] Ibid., p. 87.
[17] Rashīd al-Dīn, *The Successors*, p. 156.
[18] Rashīd al-Dīn, *Jami'u't*, p. 236.
[19] Bertold Spuler, *History of the Mongols: Based on Eastern and Western Accounts of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, tr. Helga & Stuart Drummond, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1972, p. 199.
[20] Rashīd al-Dīn, *Jami'u't*, p. 476.
[21] Ibid., p. 503.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Justin Marozzi, *Tamerlane*, Harper Perennial, London, 2004, p. 215.

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were followed by deportation of commercial agents, workers, economic materials, etc., to the seat of his authority in modern-day Uzbekistan. Ibn Arabshah documented this selective exodus ordered by Timur:

> [Timur] took from Damascus learned men and craftsmen and all who excelled in any art, the most skilled weavers, tailors, gem-cutters, carpenters, makers of head-coverings, farriers, painters, bow-makers, falconers, in short craftsmen of every kind....And he divided these companies among the heads of the army and ordered them to lead them to Samarqand.[24]

The economic implications of this act are comparable though in a smaller order of magnitude to the movement of shares in the Mongoloid era.

Keeping in with the Mongol traditions, Timur applied himself towards addressing the twin objectives of encouraging commerce by providing infrastructural support to mercantile elements and sanitizing the commercial space off hideous elements. So far as the latter is concerned, we have reason to believe that he was quite successful in decimating the menace of highway-men. Khwandamir reports that once during his operations in Baghdad, Timur was approached by a delegation of merchants who expressed their anguish at the havoc wreaked on the passing caravans by a band of robbers holed up in a nearby fortress.[25] The complaint elicited a swift response that resulted in the storming of the hideout and extirpation of the robbers. In fact, Timur took pride in the security that prevailed along trade routes that ran across his territories, and would often boast that a child carrying a purse of gold could move from the western frontiers of his empire to the eastern reaches without the slightest fear of molestation.[26]

As regards his contributions towards the setting up of a robust commercial infrastructure it may be said that Timur did much to not only restore the decaying structures of an earlier era, but also augmented the same by newer initiatives. De Clavijo, while travelling across his vast empire, commented favourably on the magnitude of commerce and profusion of caravanserais. Speaking of the latter, Clavijo said: 'Some large buildings, which were erected by the roadside, for travellers, as no people live in the country, for a distance of two days journey, on account of great heat, and the want of water. The water in the buildings were brought from a great distance by pipes underground.'[27] Similar arrangements were also made within the walls of the cities for in several cities Clavijo found 'several large inns were merchants lodged.'[28] The utilitarian constructions of Timur were carried further by his son Shahrukh, who not only constructed the caravanserais but also expanded and beautified the bazaars by rebuilding them with fired bricks instead of mud bricks.[29]

That these initiatives were delivering returns comes out in the brisk trade attested to by contemporary observers at different nodes of commerce. Be it Tabriz, Sultanieh, Samarqand, Shakhrisabz, Merv, etc., all these places were major sites of commercial transactions. At Samarqand, Clavijo noted the arrival of 'a caravan of eight hundred camels bringing merchandise from China.'[30] Likewise, of Tabriz, he said that 'there are gateways leading to certain streets, where they sell many things, such as cloth, silk, cotton, taffeta, and other stuffs; and this city has a great trade.'[31] The greatest admiration, so far as the magnitude of commerce is concerned, was reserved by Clavijo for Soltaniyeh. Referring to the commercial character of the city, Clavijo wrote:

> This city has a great traffic, and yields a large revenue to the lord. Every year many merchants come here from India, with spices, such as cloves, nutmegs, cinnamon, manna, mace and other precious articles which do not go to Alexandria. All the silk which is made in Gheelan comes here...There also arrive in the city many silken cloths, cottons, taffetas, and other stuffs from a land called Shiraz, which is near India, and from Yesen and Serpi. Many precious stones also arrive in this city of Sultanieh.[32]

III. Mughals and the Overland Trade

The Mughals who were the direct descendants of Amir Timur and traced their lineage also to Genghis Khan displayed similar appetite for promoting trade related activities. The influence exerted by their illustrious pedigree in shaping their attitudes towards trade has been hinted at by Stephen Dale.[33]But, predictably enough, it was dictated by other reasons as well. For the Mughals, it was imperative that overland commercial arteries were kept in a state of running efficiency because these channels acted as conduits for the deliveries of strategic goods such as horses and bullion. It is important to remember that the domestic

[24] Ahmad Ibn Arabshah, *Tamerlane*, tr. J.H. Sanders, Progressive Publishers, Lahore, 1976, p. 161.
[25] Khwāndamīr, *Habibu's Siyar: The History of the Mongols and Genghis khan*, tr. Wheeler M. Thackston, I.B. Tauris, London, 2012, p. 252.
[26] Marozzi, *Tamerlane*, p. 216.
[27] Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo,*Narrative of the Embassy of Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo to the Court of Timour in Samarcand, AD 1403-06*, tr. Clements R. Markham, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 2001, p. 104.
[28] Ibid., p. 95.
[29] Felicia J. Hecker, 'A Fifteenth-Century Chinese Diplomat in Herat', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series, Vol. 3, No.1, (Apr., 1993), pp. 85-98.
[30] De Clavijo,*Narrative*, p. 131.
[31] Ibid., p. 89.
[32] Ibid., pp. 93-94.
[33] Dale,*Indian Merchants*, p. 33.

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production of gold and silver was very limited in India at the time and therefore it was extremely critical for the state to work towards the promotion of trade so that India could avail its traditionally favourable position in the global commodity flows and consequently attract inflows of gold and silver against its robust portfolio of tradable goods. So, the monetisation of the agrarian surplus and trade-induced exchange economy came to effectively hinge on availing bullion flows on the back of robust trade.[34] Further, the vast constituents of the Mughal population relied on trade and looked to the state as its benefactor in facilitating the process. Consequently, from the very outset we come across stimulus emanating from the highest levels of Mughal administration directed at facilitating the overland commerce.

a) Policy Statement

So far as the policy set out by the political elite is concerned, suffice it to say that measures geared towards raising the volume of trade were initiated by successive emperors. A strong statement underscoring Akbar's favourable disposition towards trade was sent across by the holding of trading sessions at the capital.[35] The mercantile people eagerly look forward to attending this event and would 'lay out articles from all countries.'[36] These sessions were attended by the ladies of the harem as well as the emperor who would personally visit the kiosks set up in the pavilion and converse with the assembled traders. The latter made use of the occasion to 'lay their grievances before His Majesty, without being prevented by the mace-bearers, and may use the opportunity of laying out their stores, in order to explain their circumstances.'[37] During some of these audiences, it has been reported, the emperor promised to augment the scope of commercial activities by dealing with the bottlenecks that inhibited trade.[38] The translation of some of these promises into concrete action gets attested by the genuine remorse displayed by Banarasi Das, a Jainamerchant, upon coming to know of Akbar's death.[39] He was roused by apprehensions of what would follow to the stability imparted by Akbar.

Apart from catering to the concerns of the domestic mercantile constituents, Akbar also endeavoured to advertise his resoluteness towards encouraging commerce by making references to state of affairs along trade routes in his correspondences with foreign Muslim potentates. In one such correspondence with Abdullah Khan Uzbeg, Akbar conveyed the situation along trade routes passing by Kandahar. The correspondence went as follows: 'As the Persian authorities in Qandahar had been sending embassies with submissive aridas and had been mindful of maintaining security of road for merchants, they had been left alone.'[40] The importance of conveying his resolution to the Uzbeg leader was all the more important because of the reassuring effect it was supposed to have on the Uzbeg merchants who traded extensively in those regions. Referring to the activities of Uzbeg merchants in north-western regions of the Mughal empire, an English factor reported: 'Lahoare, the prime city of traffick in India; all commodities of the adjacent places being brought hither, and are bought by the Wousbecks [Uzbegs] or Tartarrs, and soe transported by Cabull into those parts, and by those of Casmeere, as also by the above named merchants.'[41]

Another major initiative of Akbar geared towards expanding commerce was the appointment of twenty-one new officials by Akbar to preside over an equal number of branches of commerce.[42] These officials were entrusted with the responsibility of setting the sale price of different goods. Akbar also abolished a number of vexatious taxes to add to the viability of commerce. Testifying to the success of these initiatives, Abu'lFazl commented: 'Merchants are therefore well treated and the articles of foreign countries are imported in large countries.'[43] The mercantile constituents also had the good fortune of being in the good books of Akbar so much so that Abu'lFazl referred to them having been present at the Mughal court both in morning as well as evening settings.[44]

His measures were further augmented by Jahangir, who was equally keen on promoting overland trade. One of his specific measures in this direction was the decision to repeal dues on several commodities in the region of Kabul at a great loss to the state exchequer.[45] A major motivation for this concession was probably a desire to expand trade with Iran and Turan. Continuing his father's engagement with the northwest, Shah Jahan also sanctioned a series measures along the Khyber route to promote commerce. As part of the

[34] Shireen Moosvi, 'The Silver Influx, Money Supply, Prices and Revenue Extraction in Mughal India', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 1987, pp. 47-94; Najaf Haider, "Precious Metal Flows and Currency Circulation in the Mughal Empire," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 39, No. 3, Money in the Orient, 1996, pp. 298-364.
[35] Abu'lFazl, *Āīn-iAkbarī*, tr. H. Blochmann, Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1977, Vol. I, pp. 286-287.
[36] Ibid., p. 287.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Audrey Burton,*The Bukharans: A Dynastic, Diplomatic and Commercial History, 1550-1702,* Palgrave Macmillan, Surrey, 2007, p. 445.
[39] Banarasi Das, *Ardhakathanak: A Half Story*, tr. Rohini Chowdhury, Penguin Classics, New Delhi, 2009, p. 105.
[40] Riazul Islam,*A Calendar of Documents on Indo Persian Relations, 1500-1750*, Iranian Culture Foundation, Tehran, 1982, Vol. II, p. 207.
[41] William Foster (ed.), *English Factories in India*, *1637-1641*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1912, p. 135.
[42] Burton, *Bukharans*, p. 445.
[43] Abu'lFazl, *Āīn-iAkbarī*, Vol. I, p.292.
[44] Dale, *Indian Merchants*, p. 33.
[45] Burton, *Bukharans*, pp. 445-446.

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plan to invigorate commerce along that route, a bridges and caravanserais were constructed.[46] About Aurangzeb there is a dearth of specific evidence linking his policies with promotion of trans-continental overland trade. The information at hand is more of a general nature and seems to be concerned more with localised rectifications. For instance, we have the testimony of Khafi Khan on the taxes abolished by the emperor for encouraging mercantile operations.[47] Although the same source also points out that 'the royal prohibition had no effect, and faujdars and jagirdars in remote places did not withhold their hands from these exactions.'[48] The paucity of evidence, however, must not be taken as an indication of his ignorance about the significance of overland routes for Mughal political economy. That Aurangzeb found it necessary to convey the information pertaining to the steps taken by him to improve conditions of trade in a letter sent to the Shah of Iran underscores his alertness to the desirability of state support for commercial operations.[49]

b) Commercial Infrastructure

The term commercial infrastructure is a highly loaded one in that it subsumes within itself references to a whole range of activities with decisive consequences for the viability or otherwise of a commercial venture. In fact, given the vastness of the landscape that had to be traversed by convoys of merchants as caravans in order to earn on their investments, the state authorities came to realise their potential for revenue generation. Of the measures rolled out to cater to the needs of an ever-increasing number of traders tagging themselves to these caravans, the most important one was the setting up of caravanserais at regular intervals to provide shade, rest, and much needed space and time for inquiring about the local commercial conditions. According to Rossabi, the emergence of caravanserais as major institutions for promoting commerce took place in Islamic world[50], and the effortless ease with which they came to be diffused throughout the Islamic lands speaks volumes about their implications on the commercial character of a particular place. Apart from them, the other significant measures included the stationing of troops to root out banditry, construction of newer roads, etc.

So as far as the Mughals are concerned, it may be said that their response consisted of a package of initiatives that had elements of all these strands. Not only did they construct a series of caravanserais at regular intervals between major cities, but also provided newer and wider roads in order to facilitate caravan travel. Jahangir, for instance, ordered the construction of caravanserais provided with wells and mosques in places where robbery had been reported.[51] A host of shops also began to mushroom within these caravanserais.[52] Speaking of Jahangir's efforts to moderate the hardships faced by commercial agents, Thevenot said:

> The Road betwixt these two Towns is very pleasant; it is that famous Alley or Walk one hundred and fifty leagues in length, which king Gehangir planted with Trees, and which reaches not only from Agra to Dehly, but even as far as Lahore. Each half league is marked with a kind of Turret: There are threescore and nine or threescore and ten of them betwixt the two Capital cities, and besides there are little Serraglio's or caravanseras, from stage to stage for lodging travellers.[53]

The conditions prevailing along this route between Agra and Lahore has also been favourably commented upon by Richard Steel and John Crowther.[54]The reasons for greater emphasis on this particular stretch may be explained by the dense commercial traffic that it attracted. This could be gauged by the report of a Dutch official that every year goods laden on camels numbering between 20,000 and 25,000 reached Isfahan from Lahore.[55] Further, it was estimated that the costs incurred on transporting goods overland from Agra to Constantinople were lower than what had to be spent on Agra-Surat-Mocha-Constantinople route.[56]

The commercial constructions were also undertaken by other members of the royal family. Bernier spoke highly of a caravanserai constructed under the auspices of Jahan Ara. So impressed was he with its contribution to the local economy that he exultantly wrote:

> The karuansara is in the form of a large square with arcades, like our Place Royale, except that the arches are separated from each other by partitions, and have small chambers at their inner extremities. Above the arcade runs a gallery all round the

[46] Dale, *Indian Merchants*, p. 37.
[47] H.M. Elliot and J. Dowson (ed. & tr.),*The History Of India As Told By Its Own Historians*, Low Price Publications, New Delhi, 1867-1877, Vol. VII, p. 283.
[48] Ibid., pp. 247-248.
[49] Islam, *A Calendar*, Vol. I, p. 453.
[50] Rossabi, 'The decline', p. 354.
[51] Burton, *Bukharans*, p. 445.
[52] Iqtidar Alam Khan, 'The Kārwānsarāys of Mughal India: A Study of Surviving Structures', *The Indian Historical Review*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 1987, pp. 111-137.
[53] S. Sen (ed.), *Indian Travels of Thevenot and Careri*, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 2011, p. 57.
[54] Richard Steel and John Crowther, 'A Journall of the Journey of Richard Steel and John Crowther, from Azmere in India, the place of the Great Mogol's residence, to Spahan the Royall Seat of the King of Persia, in the Affaires of the East-Indian Society' in *Purchas His Pilgrimes*, John MacLehose& Sons, Glasgow, 1965, Vol. IV, pp. 266-278.
[55] H.W. van Santen, 'Trade between Mughal India and the Middle East, and Mughal Monetary Policy, c. 1600-1660', in *Asian Trade Routes*, ed. Karl R. Haellquist, Curzon Press, London, 1991, pp. 87-95.
[56] Ibid., p. 90.

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> building, into which open the same number of chambers as there are below. This place is the rendezvous of the rich Persian, Usbek, and other foreign merchants, who in general may be accommodated within empty chambers, in which they remain with perfect security, the gate being close at night. If in Paris we had a score of similar structures, distributed in different parts of the city, strangers on their first arrival would be less embarrassed than at present to find a safe reasonable lodging.[57]

The nobles were also expected to furnish funds for the establishment of caravanserais.[58]Abu'lFazl refers to Akbar raising contributions from amongst his nobles to set-up caravanserais along the trade routes.[59] Asaf Khan, the father-in-law of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, founded a caravanserai between Agra and Lahore.[60] That these utilitarian constructions were not the sole preserve of the royalty is brought out by Edward Terry who underscored the investments made by non-regal affluent people in the setting up of 'Sarraas, or make wells or tankesneere to high-wayes that are much travelled' out of charitable considerations.[61]

The Mughal caravanserais have been favourably commented upon by contemporary observers. The responsibility for running the affairs was entrusted to an official who saw to it that possessions of the lodged traders were properly looked after. This official was assisted by a staff in attending to minor chores.[62] Peter Mundy refers to the regular employment of women in Mughal caravanserais. Describing the tasks performed by them, he said:

Metrannes or Betearees are certen Woemen in all Saraes that looke to the litle rooms there and dresse the Servants meate, accomodateinge them with Cottesetts. needful to bee had; of these some have 2, some 3 or 4 roomes a peece, for which in the morning, wee pay 1 pice or 2 pice each.[63]

The financial costs of running these set-ups were met largely by the grants made by the royalty and other charitable individuals.[64]

To sum up, it may be noted that the commercial infrastructure prevailing under the Mughals was sufficiently robust to endure the needs and stresses of the passing caravans without any inordinate difficulty. In fact, it is not unfair to admit that had it not been for state's encouragement, it wouldn't have been feasible for Thomas Coryat, Richard Steel, etc., to travel in caravans laden with precious goods across regions infested by the unruly Afghans and Balochis.[65]

c) Direct Involvement

As far as the nature of involvement of the Mughal empire in trade in general is concerned, there is copious information that testify to participation of the Mughal emperors, princes and high officials on their own account conducted through informed intermediaries.[66] So, there is information about the ships engaged by them to partake in trade in regions as far as Southeast Asia and the Persian Gulf and Red Sea. Tavernier commented on the massive amounts of capital invested in trading ventures by the nobles in overseas trade ventures.[67] In most of these endeavours, the primary motive was profit and procurement of exotic goods that could act as purveyors of the might and splendour of their owners.[68] Therefore, mostly the services of men with proven track record in trade related matters was availed to direct the investments.[69] Sometimes the recourse was also made to unfair measures such as preventing the departure of ships going to the same port as to royal ships so that the latter could get there earlier and make good profit before the prices could come down by the deliveries of other ships. Thus, it is quite clear that the utilisation of trade for profit and acquisition of strategic goods such as horses and exotic goods was known intimately to the Mughal ruling class.

However, most of the action in this respect is observed in the case of maritime trade. When we move over to the overland trade, the information that we have is few and far between. Much of this probably stems from the precariousness that enveloped the overland routes branching towards the west and northwest because of the on-and-off volatile relations that the Mughals endured with the Safavid Iran and Uzbeg Turan respectively for much of the seventeenth century. This remained a potent factor that prevented the nature of

[57] Bernier, *Travels*, pp. 280-281.
[58] Wayne E. Begley, 'Four Mughal Caravanserais built during the Reigns of Jahāngīr and ShāhJahān', *Muqarnas*, Vol. I, 1983, pp. 167-179.
[59] Khan, 'The Karwansarays', p. 115.
[60] W.E. Begley and Z.A. Desai (ed.), *The Shah Jahan Nama of Inayat Khan*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1990, p. 282.
[61] William Foster (ed.), *Early Travels in India, 1583-1619*, Oxford University Press, London, 1921, p. 313.
[62] Sebastian Manrique, *Travels of Fray Sebastian Manrique, 1629-1643*, tr. Col. H.E. Luard, Hakluyt Society, Oxford, 1927, Vol. II, pp. 100-101.
[63] Peter Mundy, *The Travels of Peter Mundy, in Europe and Asia, 1608-1667*, ed. Sir Richard C. Temple, Hakluyt Society, London, 1914, Vol. II, p. 121.
[64] Ravindra Kumar, 'Administration of the Serais in Mughal India', *PIHC*, 39th Session, Hyderabad, 1978, pp. 464-478.
[65] For a brief account of Akbar's efforts to neutralize the Afghan threat, see Dale, *Indian Merchants*, p. 36. Also see Steel and Crowther, 'A Journall', pp. 270,272.
[66] Shireen Moosvi, 'Mughal Shipping at Surat in the First Half of the Seventeenth Century',*PIHC*, 51st Session, Calcutta, 1990, pp.308-320.
[66] Pedro Teixiera ,*The Travels of Pedro Teixiera*, tr. William Sinclair, Bedford Press, London, 1902, p. 122.
[67] Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *The Six Voyages of John Baptista Tavernier*, London, 1678, Book I, Part II, p. 27.
[68] Chardin, *Travels*, Vol. I, p. 66.
[69] Elizabeth Lambourn, 'Of Jewels and Horses: The Career and Patronage of an Iranian Merchant under Shah Jahan', *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 2003, pp. 213-258.

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direct involvement of the Mughals in overland trade that we find with respect to the maritime trade.

But we must remain alert to extrapolating from the localised episodes of uncertainty generalised remarks about the entire period. In fact, starting from the time of Akbar itself, the agents acting in the interests of the emperors were sent on missions to procure choicest of exotic commodities for their patrons. For instance, in 1613, Jahangir sent one Muhammad Husain Chalabi to Constantinople in order to make purchases on his behalf.[70] The sending of agents was continued by Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb, and it is reported that both of them regularly sent agents to make purchases on their behalf in the Khanate.[71]Also, it has come down to us that some of the high ranking officials also transported vast quantities of goods overland to Iran and further beyond.[72] A corroborative evidence for the conveyance of immense quantities of goods through these channels comes out in the addition of the prefix 'Lahori' to indigo reaching the European markets via Lahore-Kandahar-Isfahan-Aleppo route.[73]

So, while the magnitude of the investments of the royal family in overland commercial ventures remains a moot question, there was no commensurate disregard of the overland channels. If anything, the state worked to harness the opportunities as and when they arose to utilise the trade for the nourishment of the dynastic foundations of the empire.

IV. Conclusion

Most of the time during the seventeenth century when Mughal empire was basking in the sunshine of splendour the trade was conducted through both overland and maritime channels. But any disturbance on any specific channel did not necessarily translate into reduction in the volume of trade. Instead, there was a seamless transfer of commodity flow to the more vigorous channel. For instance, throughout the seventeenth century the Mughals and the Safavids sparred over Kandahar. During these crises, the Safavids sought to curtail the supplies of superior breed of locally available horses from being transported to the Mughal domains.[74] But even their best efforts failed because they were effective only in curbing supplies via overland routes and much of the supplies during these periods came to be routed through maritime channels. So, the pull of profit at the Mughal ports triumphed over fear of Safavid reprisals for the agents involved in undermining the Safavid war efforts. Similarly, when the maritime routes came under strain at the turn of the eighteenth century, we once again find realignment in supplies with overland deliveries gaining an upper hand.[75]There are several other instances as well that testify to this resiliency of trade against machinations to distort its fairness and Mughals deserve credit for their efforts in making it happen.[76]

[70] Riazul Islam, *Indo-Persian Relations: A Study of the Political and Diplomatic Relations between the Mughal Empire and Iran*, Iranian Culture Foundation, Tehran, 1993, p. 71.
[71] Burton, *Bukharans*, p. 448.
[72]William Foster (ed.), *English Factories in India*, *1634-1636*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1911, p. 72.
[73] Francisco Pelsaert, *Jahangir's India*, tr. W.H. Moreland, W. Heffer& Sons Ltd., Cambridge, 1925, p. 30.
[74] William Foster (ed.), *English Factories in India, 1637-1641*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1912, p. 301.
[75] Jos J. L. Gommans, 'The Horse Trade in the Eighteenth Century South Asia', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 37, No. 3, 1994, pp. 228-250.
[76] For an assessment of the Mughal efforts to rescue the maritime trade from European subversion see Aasim Khwaja, 'Mughals and the "maritime dynamic" along the maritime frontier in Gujarat, c. 1572-1759', *International Journal of Maritime History*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2019, pp. 402-415.

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