CONCLUSION

This work has attempted to provide a comprehensive picture of the caravan trade between India and Central Asia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Throughout this long period, there was a regular exchange of several commodities between the two regions. The main export from India to Central Asia, Iran and Afghanistan was cotton textiles, for which there was a large demand due to the absence of cotton cultivation in these regions. Several varieties of textiles ranging from inexpensive coarse types to costly muslin and brocade were sent in large quantities every year. While the fact that there was export of significant quantities of cotton textiles has been well known, the endeavor here has been to demonstrate that the textiles did not come only from North India only. Other regions like Eastern and Central India and the Deccan too produced fabrics for the Central Asian market. There was also high demand for the indigo of Upper India. Other main commodities exported from India were spices, sugar and precious stones. Some part of the Indian commodities sent to Central Asia and Iran were further transported to Russia and Turkey respectively.
The external trade of medieval India has generally been perceived as having consisted of exports of textiles and imports of precious metals. While this is true, it ignores the reality that there was one commodity that was imported in great numbers— the horse, the main stray of the military. There was a natural preference for the horses bred in Central Asia and the Persian Gulf region as they were of better quality compared to the local breeds. During the seventeenth century, the Turki horse was imported in greater numbers compared to the Arabo-Persian breed. The reason for this was the suitability of the Turki horse for warfare and the ease of transporting horses from Central Asia to India through the overland routes. Thousands of Turki horses were imported every year to meet the requirements of the Mughal army. Apart from horses, other commodities imported from Central Asia and Iran were several types of fruits, carpets, raw silk, precious stones and expensive silk textiles.

The rulers of the region— the Mughals, the Uzbek khans, the Safavids displayed a keen interest in promoting the trade and made substantial investment in improving the commercial infrastructure in their respective kingdoms. The main step taken by them was the construction of sarays along trade routes. These establishments, while also catering to the needs of other sections of the population were primarily meant to provide safety and comfort to traders. Other initiatives taken by the rulers were construction of bridges, leveling of difficult passes, digging of wells, etc. The Mughals, however, could not succeed in subjugating the Afghan tribes who imposed their fiscal claims on traders. Their desire to make the
caravan traders free from payment of various types of tolls too could not be accomplished due to the non-co-operation of local officials.

Among the various communities that were involved in the caravan trade, the Indian merchants rank the foremost in view of the large size of their operations and their widespread dispersion. While they had been visiting the towns of Central Asia and Iran in the earlier era, it was during this period that they began to establish residence there. The Indian Diaspora comprised of Khatri merchants from Multan and adjoining areas. It also included Muslims and from the early eighteenth century onwards Marwari merchants. The Indian mercantile community performed two crucial functions in the regions inhabited by it, firstly, it supplied essential commodities like cotton textiles and indigo and secondly, it provided financial services to the local populations. The rulers were conscious of the vital role of the Indian merchants in the functioning of the economies of their realm and provided them security. It is noteworthy that the Indian community was also provided freedom in the religious and cultural spheres.

Apart from the Indian merchants, there were several other mercantile communities that were engaged in the caravan trade. The prominent ones among them were Afghan nomadic tribes, specialists in long distance commerce since many centuries. Unlike the Indian merchants who had established residence in Turan, the Afghan merchants followed a pattern of annual circulation between India and Central Asia. While they conducted trade on their own account they also rendered their services as carriers and conductors of caravans to others. The
Armenian participation in the caravan trade was also notable. They largely focused on the trade between Iran and India but also ventured into Central Asia, Tibet, Bhutan, etc.

In the early decades of the eighteenth century, the caravan trade experienced disruption as a result of political disorder in North India and the Afghan region. But there is evidence to show that the trade was soon re-established. However, the extent of trade with Iran was not as high as it was during the seventeenth century. The Indo-Central Asian trade, on the other hand was still brisk. As in the earlier period, thousands of horses were imported into India and in return vast amounts of cotton textiles, sugar and indigo were exported. Central Asia also emerged as a mediating point for the growing Indo-Russian trade.

While the caravan trade from North India had been mainly routed through the Punjab in the seventeenth century, it was now channelled across the Thar Desert or via Rohilkhand and Jammu due to insecurity in Punjab. The Rajput states, the Rohila principalities and the state of Jammu benefited due to this shift and took several initiatives to encourage the trade. By the end of the eighteenth century, conditions in Punjab had improved and agricultural and commodity production had recovered to a large extent. Its trade contacts with the regions west of the Indus too had re-emerged. The route to Central Asia via Ladakh was also very active in this period. It served as the outlet for the products of Kashmir and
Punjab. Apart from Central Asian commodities, goods from Russia, and China were imported through this channel.

The late eighteenth century marked the beginning of the end of the horse trade. The defeat of the local rulers at the hands of the British rule meant the end of the demand for the warhorse. Other Central Asian commodities like raw silk and fruits were still being imported. The Central Asian requirement of Indian commodities, however, did not show any reduction and they continued to be exported in large quantities.