Introduction

This is a study of India's economic relationship with Central Asia during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It aims to demonstrate that the two regions shared extensive commercial links during this period. The caravan trade was not sporadic and confined to luxury goods alone. On the contrary it was of regular nature and it involved several essential commodities. This trade was the means by which the two regions obtained commodities that were not available locally.

This work will study the role of various trading groups that were involved in this trade- the Afghan nomadic tribes, the Indian merchants, the Armenians, the Uzbeks, etc. Among these groups the Indian merchants were the most important from the standpoint of the volume of their business as well as their geographical spread. During this period, they had established colonies in several places in Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia.

Another aspect that will be looked into in this thesis is the relationship between the ruling classes and the caravan trade. Contrary to the earlier held impression that the political class was oblivious to the interests of traders, it is now being accepted that they displayed a positive attitude towards commercial
activities. It will be shown here that the Mughals, the Uzbek Khans and the Safavids were aware of the importance of the trade and undertook several measures to promote it. The occasional period of hostility between them did not affect the flow of commodities between their realms.

Another aspect that will be examined is the state of the caravan trade in the eighteenth century. Historians have moved away from portraying the eighteenth century as a period of decline. It is now being realized that while some regions of India experienced economic stagnation, there were other regions which either emerged as alternative centres of growth or kept up the economic momentum of the seventeenth century. The study tries to show that the trade links with Central Asia continued to be strong during this period in spite of political disruptions in India, Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Chapter one discusses the various routes between India and Central Asia with emphasis on their geographical and climatic aspects. Chapter two examines the commodity composition of the trade and the role of various merchant groups during the seventeenth century. The third chapter takes up the theme of Indian merchants' presence in Central Asia and their economic role. The fourth chapter looks at the measures taken by the rulers of the region to protect and promote the caravan trade. Chapter five examines the developments in the trade during the eighteenth century.
Historiography

For a long time the historiography of Medieval India’s external trade links was characterized by an over emphasis on the maritime trade and a neglect of the overland trade connections with Central Asia and Iran. A significant reason for this imbalance was the availability of rich source material on the former and the relative lack of information on the latter. The situation has improved in recent years due to the work of several scholars who have carefully used both Asian and European sources to highlight the significance of the overland trade.

It must be mentioned that while the caravan trade did not get much attention in earlier times, the topic of Indian merchant colonies in Russia and Central Asia and their business was the subject of much research by Soviet scholars. Two volumes Russko-Indiiske Otnosheniya v XVIII v. and Russko-Indiiske Otnosheniya v XIX v. published in 1958 and 1965 were compilations of writings and archival material on this topic. These volumes were used by Surendra Gopal in his articles published in the sixties which gave a succinct account of the establishment of the Indian merchants in Russia and their economic activities.1

Gopal’s work was followed by Stephen Dale’s *Indian Merchants and Eurasian Trade, 1600-1750*, (Cambridge University Press 1994) the first monograph, in English, on the topic. Dale established the strong presence of the Indian merchants, hailing mainly from Multan, in Safavid Iran, Uzbek Turan and Russia. According to Dale, the Indian mercantile Diaspora, representing an extension of the Indian regional ‘world-economy’, was engaged in the sale of Indian commodities and money lending. By its latter role, it performed the critical function of providing capital in relatively under developed economies. Dale also highlighted the role played by Afghan trading nomads (powindas) in the caravan trade. The Multani Diaspora based in Astrakhan and Iran began to decay from the early eighteenth century due to the simultaneous decline of the Safavid and the Mughal empires and the restrictions put on the Indian merchants by the Russian state.

In an article written in 1994, Muzaffar Alam focuses on the close economic relations between Mughal India and Central Asia which were uninterrupted even in times of political hostilities.² He notes that the Mughals and the Uzbek rulers promoted this trade as it provided them with much needed commodities. Alam also notes that the caravan trade with Iran and Central Asia was an important factor in the prosperity of the province of Punjab in the seventeenth century. He agrees with

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Dale that there was a disruption in the trade in the early eighteenth century due to political convulsions.

Neel Steensgaard notes that the Indian caravan trade with Persia and Turkey was brisk in the early decades of the seventeenth century. Cotton textiles were the main commodity sent from India while bullion was imported into it. The Kandahar route continued to be in use after the Anglo Portuguese capture of Hormuz in 1622 but there was a gradual decline in the trade, especially in the second half of the century. The likely reason for this was declining demand for Indian textiles in Persia and Turkey. Giles Veinstein notes that there was a large demand in Ottoman markets for Indian textiles which arrived by maritime and overland routes. The import of Indian textiles stimulated local cloth production, especially of the coarser varieties as a result of which Indian imports began to comprise high-quality varieties.

While most of the above mentioned works deal with the seventeenth century caravan trade, the eighteenth century caravan trade forms the backdrop of Jos Gomman’s *The Rise of the Indo-Afghan Empire, c. 1710-1780* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press 1999). Gomman argues that India’s trade links with Central Asia were active during this period. India’s considerable demand for war

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4 Gilles Veinstein, ‘Commercial Relations between India and the Ottoman Empire (late fifteenth to late eighteenth centuries): a few notes and hypotheses’ in Chaudhury and Morineau, eds, *Merchants. Companies and Trade*, p 195-112
horses was met by the breeding grounds of Central Asia. The decline of the Mughal Empire did not affect the trade as the new rulers like the Nawabs of Awadh, the Marathas, etc emerged as substantial buyers. The horse trade was in the hands of Afghans trading pastoral nomads and individual traders who could use their stock to set up independent political power as was done by the founders of the Rohilla state. Gommans also looks at the impact of the rise of the Durrani Empire and increasing Russian role in Central Asia on the overland trade.

Claude Markovit’s The Global World of Indian Merchants 1750-1947: Traders of Sind from Bukhara to Panama (Cambridge Cambridge University Press 1999) studies the emergence and activities of two merchant networks based in the Sind towns of Shikarpur and Hyderabad. He relates the rise of the Shikarpuri network to the emergence of the Durrani Empire in the second half of the eighteenth century. The merchants of Shikarpur, who were migrants from other areas of Sind and from Punjab, Rajasthan, Gujarat, etc financed Ahmad Shah’s military campaigns into North India and benefited from them. Shikarpur’s nearness to the Kandahar, Ahmad Shah’s capital helped in its emergence as the financial capital of the Durrani Empire. The Shikarpuris functioned as financiers of the caravan trade to Central Asia.

Scott Levi’s The Indian Diaspora in Central Asia and its Trade, 1550-1900 (Leiden Brill 2002) is the latest work on our topic. In comparison to Dale, Levi takes a longer chronological span from the establishment of the Indian Diaspora in the sixteenth century to its decay in the late nineteenth century as a
result of Russian restrictions on its business. While he agrees with Dale on the view that the Indo-central Asian caravan trade was flourishing in the seventeenth century he denies any rupture in the trade in the eighteenth century. He points that the newly emergent state of Khokand in the Farghana valley became an intermediary in the trade between Russia, China and India. Using nineteenth century travelogues and Russian official documents Levi provides a wealth of details on the commercial activities of the Indian merchants, who formed the most important element in the Indo-central Asian economic relationship. He shows that the Indians were mainly engaged in money lending. The reason for their success in this business was their control over large amounts of capital. Levi also discusses various aspects of the social life of the Indian Diaspora.

Mansura Haider’s Indo-Central Asian Contacts: From Early Times to Medieval Period (Manohar Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi 2004) looks at the political, cultural, and economic dimensions of the relationship between the two regions. She shows that while lively trade relations existed between Central Asia and its neighbors like Russia, China and India, ‘lawlessness and civil wars’ were responsible for frequent interruptions in the commerce.

The Sources

As mentioned earlier, a major limitation in the study of the caravan trade is the paucity of contemporary sources. Persian court chronicles focus on political events and do not yield much information on economic matters. Abul Fazl’s Ain-i-
Akbari, gives some information on the trade with Iran and Central Asia. Sujan Rai Bhandari’s *Khulasat-i-Tawarikh*, modeled on the Ain is rich in details on the manufactures of Punjab many of which were exported to the neighbouring countries on the north and west. The autobiographies of Babar and Jahangir, the *Babarnama* and the *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* are strewn with allusions to the commodities involved in the trade. Among the eighteenth century sources Dargah Quli Khan’s *Muraqqa-i-Delhi* and Shah Nawaz Khan’s *Maasir-ul-umara* gives us some references to the state of Delhi’s markets. Hafiz Mohammad Fazil Khan’s *Tarikh-i-Manazil-i-Bukhara* and Mir Izzat Ullah’s travelogue of his travels in Central Asia, both written in 1812-13, are full of information on the trade with Turan and the role of Indian merchants.

Accounts written by Europeans who either visited Upper India or traveled on the overland routes to Iran and Central Asia are our main sources of information. The most informative of these, for the seventeenth century are the travelogues of Manrique, William Finch, Tavernier, Bernier, Bento De goes and Manucci. The accounts of William Francklin, Comte Du Modave and George Forster are valuable for the information provided for the eighteenth century caravan trade. European visitors to Iran like Jean Chardin, Thomas Herbert, Tavernier, Cornelius Le Bruyn, and Joseph Hanway made valuable observations on the importance of Iran’s trade with India. The letters of the employees of the English East India Company, in William Foster’s *English Factories in India, 1618-67* (Oxford Clarendon Press 1906-27) are primarily concerned with maritime
Tenth century Hindu merchants had a separate quarter for themselves in the city along with the Muslims and the Jews.

The caravan trade was an important feature of the economic life of the Delhi Sultanate. In the thirteenth century Khurasani merchants used to come to India for selling horses and buying slaves. There was a large demand in the Islamic region for the latter and even Sufis engaged in this trade. Raw Silk was imported from Iran and Afghanistan. Merchants and travelers also used to bring camels to India. Weapons were obtained from Khorasan and Iraq. The Multani merchants used to bring expensive cloth from the Islamic region for sale in Delhi. Conversely, Indian cotton textiles were popular outside the sub-continent. Indigo was an important export from India. Swords made in India were sent to Turan. The historian Minhaj us Siraj records that most of the inhabitants of Lahore were traders who used to travel to Khorasan and Turkistan frequently with passes obtained from the Mongols that guaranteed safety. According to the fourteenth century traveler Ibn Batutah, Silk fabrics of Nishapur were imported

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10 K. A. Nizami, "India's cultural Relations with Central Asia during the Medieval Period" in Nizami, *State and Culture in Medieval India*, p 250
trade but also contain frequent references to the overland trade of the Armenian and other merchants.

A large number of accounts were written in the early nineteenth century by European and Indian travelers to Punjab, Afghanistan and Central Asia like Mir Izzat Ullah, Mountstuart Elphinstone, Henry Pottinger, William Moorcroft, etc. They provide detailed information on various aspects of the contemporary caravan trade much of which is also relevant for our period.

The Overland trade in the pre Mughal period

Trade relations between India and West Asia and Central Asia have existed since antiquity. During the early medieval period Multan served as the focal point for the trade with the Islamic regions. Caravans from Khorasan used to come to Multan regularly. Arab geographers of the period describe it as a large and prosperous city. Kabul was another important centre for the trade between India and the Islamic countries. In the ninth century Kabul was visited by merchants who purchased Indian dried fruits and kernels that were used in the making of medicines. Several precious commodities of India and China were available here. The indigo trade alone amounted to one million gold dinars a year. During the

into India. He also mentions dried melons of Khwarizm and dried plums of Waknaba, a place near Bukhara being transported to India. Royal Couriers were used to ensure that the fruits arrived fresh for the Sultan. The Sultans took steps to ensure that trade was not hindered. Iltutmish and Balban suppressed groups that were engaged in robbery on the routes. During the reign of Ghiyas ud-din Tughlaq, caravans travelling to Iran and Central Asia were provided protection.

In the early fifteenth century a visitor to Timur’s capital Samarkand noted that it received commodities from several places including India. He also mentions that ‘lesser spices’ like cloves, nutmeg, mace, cinnamon were imported from India. The tax levied on Indian merchants was an important source of revenue for Timur’s state.

The caravan trade was to receive a spurt with the establishment of the Mughal Empire. There was a substantial increase in the volume of imports from Central Asia in consequence of the Mughal demand for them. The impetus given by Mughal rule to Indian agriculture and manufacturing implied a rise in exports to several regions including Central Asia. This work will study the different aspects

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of the Indo-Central Asian caravan trade with the intention of bringing out its relevance to the two regions.