1 ROUTES FROM INDIA TO CENTRAL ASIA AND IRAN

Several routes functioned as conduits of communication between India and her neighbors to her west and north in pre-modern times. Over the centuries, traders, conquerors and men of religion have used them in order to travel to the sub-continent. This chapter discusses the important routes of the region with the focus being on their geographical and climatic aspects.

From the capital to the North-West

The route from Agra to Kabul was the most important of the Mughal roads. Conscious of its commercial importance the Mughals took several steps to ensure that travel on this route was without hassles. The main stages between Agra and Delhi were Fatehpur Sikri, Hodal, Palwal and Faridabad. Bernier had complained of the lack of good towns on this stretch. In his view, the journey between the two cities did offer much scope for sight seeing save for the idols of Mathura, some sarays and the line of trees planted along the road. He was pleased

\[1\] See chapter 4.
to find that wells had been dug along the road for the requirements of the traveler.²

Between Delhi and Lahore, the chief halts were Gannaur, Panipat, Karnal, Ambala, Sirhind and Phillaur.³ The Sutlej and the Beas, the two main rivers encountered in this route, were crossed by the means of ferries. The Portuguese traveler Fray Sebastian Manrique noted with satisfaction that several villages and cities lay on the road to Lahore and all of them had abundant supplies of food.⁴ A late eighteenth century traveler noted the presence of several wells and lofty trees along this road.⁵ According to Henry Bonford, the journey from Agra to Lahore was normally covered in about three weeks.⁶

Continuing from Lahore the route crossed the Ravi near Shahdara, the site where Emperor Jahangir was buried. It then reached the towns of Aminabad and Chima Gakhar. The Chenab was crossed near the town of Gujarat, so named after the Gujjars who had been settled there by Emperor Akbar in order to make them give up the practice of robbery.⁷ The road, which had been easy so far, became difficult from here. A road branched off to Kashmir from this place. The Jhelum


was crossed near the famous Rohtas fort, built by Sher shah to ensure compliance of the unruly Ghakkars. A Saray was built near the fort by Aurangzeb. Located parallel to the river was the Koh-I-Jud or the salt range. The route from the Jhelum to the town of Rawalpindi lay through a sandy plain intersected by ravines. Fifteen miles from Rawalpindi was the Margalla pass, where a paved road, six to seven yards broad was built by Aurangzeb. Next was a stone bridge built across a small stream. After crossing a low range, a plain was reached in which was situated a garden constructed by Akbar. Not very far was the town of Hassan Abdal, the tanks of which were famous for their fish. Several streams had to be crossed to reach the plain of Chach. One next reached the fortress of Attock, built near the banks of the Indus. A large saray was located close to the fort. Crossing the Indus River, which marked the boundary between Punjab and Afghan territory, was sometimes dangerous due to the strong flow of the water.

The town of Peshawar was the next important station on the route. About 10 miles west of Peshawar, the route entered into the famous Khyber Pass that extended in a north-west direction for about thirty miles. In winter traveling through the pass was difficult because of snowfall while unexpected heavy

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8 About the Pass, Mohan Lal remarked 'It was built by the late emperors of Delhi, and it gives an idea of the energy of the workmen who cut the range of hills, and made a passage through it, about two Hundred yards in length.' Travel in the Punjab, Afghanistan, and Turkistan to Balk, Bokhara and Herat And a Visit to Great Britain and Germany, Calcutta K.P. Bagchi and Company 1977, p 21.
showers during the rainy season could prove to be a major impediment.\textsuperscript{9} The road was extremely narrow near Ali Masjid where it was enclosed by high precipices. At Duka the pass entered into the Jalalabad plain. Travellers could skip the Khyber Pass by going to Muchni from Peshawar. This detour, which joined the main route at Duka was not easy to travel as the swift flowing Kabul river had to be crossed twice. The stretch between Peshawar and Jalalabad was hazardous due to a deadly hot wind known as ‘Simoom’ that blew in the summer. Two streams were crossed in Gandamak by means of stone bridges built during the time of Shah Jahan. A low range was next crossed at the Jagdalik pass and after another pass, the Kata Lang or Lata bund; the frontier city of Kabul was reached.\textsuperscript{10}

There existed several other routes from the Indus River to Kabul apart from the Khyber route. Babur mentions three of them in his autobiography. These routes crossed the Indus at Nil-ab, Dinkot and Chaupara respectively.\textsuperscript{11} According to Abul Fazl there were seven roads for going to Kabul from Hindustan. The Khyber road was the most preferred one as it had been made suitable for wheeled

\textsuperscript{9} Edward Thornton, \textit{A Gazetteer of the countries adjacent to India on the North-West including Afghanistan, Belochistan, the Punjab and neighbouring States}, Delhi Asian Educational services 1994 Vol 1, p 387.

\textsuperscript{10} Descriptions of the route from Lahore to Kabul are provided by several sources like Alexander Burnes, \textit{Travels into Bokhara}, Vol 1, London John Murray 1834, p 39-132; Mohan Lal, Travel, p 11-40.

transport. Other routes went by the way of Bangash, Farnul, Karapah, and Naghr.

Located south of the above routes was another important track which followed the course of the Gomal River. Babar had noted that the route required crossing the river several times which could be dangerous when the water level was high. The route was used by the Afghan Powindas in their annual trading movement between India and Kabul. G.T. Vigne who traveled to Kabul in the company of the Lohani Kafilla in 1836 provides us with a detailed account of his journey. He noted that the Lohanis assembled in the village of Derabund, located at the edge of the Sulaiman range, after having traveled to different places of India in connection with their trade. From Derabund the route initially went in a northern direction and then turned in a north-west direction while crossing the Sulaiman Mountains. Between the villages of Koteghye and Kangur, the Gomal was crossed around fifty times. Just before Sir-i-koh, the highest part of the entire

12 Abul Fazl, *Ain-i- Akbari*, translated by H. Blochman, edited by D.C. Phillott, Delhi Crown Publications 1987, Vol 2, p 405. According to Burnes, there were five routes between Peshawar and Kabul, *Travels into Bokhara*, Vol 1, London John Murray 1834, p 113: Masson writes 'from Peshawar to the valley of Jelalabad there are three distinct Kafila routes, all of them leading through the great hill ranges separating the two countries, viz those of Khaibar, Abkhana and Karapa. The former is decidedly the preferable, from its level character and directness but the most dangerous owing to the lawless character of the predatory tribes inhabiting it. It is therefore seldom frequented and only by faqirs or large bodies of troops; Kafilas of traders and others, passing by the more difficult and tedious, but at the same time the more secure routes of Abkhana and Karapa'. *Narrative of various Journeys in Belochistan. Afghanistan and the Punjab including a residence in those parts from 1826 to 1838*, Karachi Oxford University Press, 1978, Vol 1, 147.


road, a path to Kandahar branched off. The climate and vegetation of this region reminded Vigne of Persia. The road then crossed the low Dzarah Mountains and entered a plain which extended till Ghazni. The stretch between Ghazni and Kabul was characterized by ‘flat and extended wastes’ and ‘barren mountains’, the only exception being the Chahar Deh plain near Kabul.

Afghanistan could also be reached by journeying across the Thar to Multan and then traveling in a northern direction to the town of Peshawar. The landscape from the Shekhawati region of Rajasthan to the desert town of Pugal was of hills and valleys of sand. Water was found only at great depth and was generally brackish. From Pugal to Bahawaiapur, one traveled across a flat clay bed. There were no settlements in this tract. The combined flow of Beas and Sutlej was crossed near Bahawaiapur. From Bahawaiapur to Multan was a journey of seventy miles. After crossing a barren stretch between Multan and the Indus, one came across fertile territory from the banks of the great river to the town of Dera Ismael Khan. The next part of the journey was across the Largi valley, inhabited by the Murwat tribe. The route approached the mountains at Karabagh. Several ridges and valleys had to be traversed before one reached the plain of Peshawar.15

The road to Iran

The main route to Iran was via the town of Qandahar. The Portuguese priest Fray Sebastain Manrique who traveled by this route in 1641 has left us a detailed report of his trip. He noted that the journey between Lahore and Multan was easy as food and other necessities were easily available on the way. Reaching Multan in ten days, he hired camels for the journey to Persia. From Multan the route went westward through a well cultivated region till the foothills of the Sulaiman ranges. After crossing the Indus the fort of Chatza was reached. The route now entered 'very lofty and rugged mountains all covered with snow'. Steel and Crowther, two Englishmen who had traveled on this route around twenty five years earlier, had noted that food and forage were difficult to find in the stretch between Lacca and Chatza. As a precaution their caravan had hired oxen at Lacca to carry barley for the horses. The next notable stop was the village of Duki. Manrique’s caravan lost its way in the Khojak range and had to come back to the village of Pishin from where it resumed the march. Steel and Crowther’s journey from Multan to Kandahar took one and a half month while Manrique took only eighteen days.

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18 Masson writes that ice made the Khojak Pass slippery, Narrative of Various Journeys. Vol 1, p 321.
19 Manrique, Travels, 1629-1643, Vol 2, p 258; Steel and Crowther, Purchas. Vol 4, p 266-80. Apart from the route mentioned by Manrique and Steel, there were several other routes between
the Indus and Khasab. In the 1830s, eleven routes were actively used. Malam Edr. Travel. p 249.
After a stay of a few months at Kandahar, Manrique left the town of Kandahar and reached Kalabisht in seven days. Here he was informed that all camels had been taken away by the Nawab of that place for carrying material for the repair of his fortifications. The next notable event in the journey was the crossing of the Arghandab River which took four days due to the large size of the caravan. After a few days the party reached the Persian fort of Girishk. From here the caravan traveled to the town of Farah, frequented by merchants for its silk. People from nearby villages brought food and other articles for sale. Beyond Farah the country became barren. The caravan traced its way with the help of pillars that had been erected by Shah Abbas to prevent travelers from getting lost in the desert. After passing through Biabanak and Tabas, two towns noted for silk production, the party reached Isfahan, the Safavid capital. Steel and Crowther mention the same places in their journal and also note that in Persia people used to travel in small groups rather than in a big caravan as was the case in India. The reason for this was that finding provisions was not so easy on the route.\(^{20}\)

Writing in the 1650s, Tavernier mentions that because of the scarcity of water on the Multan route merchants preferred to go to Kandahar via Kabul even though it took ten more days.\(^{21}\) Since the Multan route had been in regular use so far there been must have been some other reason for the shift other than the lack of water.

\(^{20}\) Steel and Crowther, Purchas, Vol 4, p 273.
\(^{21}\) Tavernier, Travels in India, Vol 1, p 5.
There was another route from Agra to Iran which bypassed Punjab and instead passed through the Thar Desert to reach the lower Sind towns of Sakkar and Bakkar. Joseph Salbancke mentions that this route passed through the indigo producing town of Bayana and the town of Merta in Central Rajasthan, where large quantities of raw cotton, cotton cloth and indigo were sold. From Sukkur the route went in a north-west direction crossing a desert known locally as Dasht Bedari and Dasht I Bedowlat. Near the village of Dadar it entered the Bolan Pass which stretched for a distance of around 55 miles. Masson, who journeyed through it, praises the easiness of the pass:

The magnificent pass of the Bolan may be said to be, throughout its extent, perfectly level, the gradual ascent of the upper portion of it, and the slight kotal, or pass, if deserving the name, by which the Dasht Bidowlat is gained, scarcely forming exceptions.

This level character of the pass was responsible for it being preferred over other passes that lay both to its north and the south. After passing through the town of Shall or Quetta the route joined the Multan-Kandahar route at the village of Pishin. This route was traversed by caravans going from lower Sind to Iran but it was blocked in winter due to severe cold in the Bolan Pass.

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22 Salbancke, 'The voyage of M Joseph Salbancke through India, Persia, Part of Turkie, the Persian Gulf and Arabia,' Samuel Purchas. Purchas his piligrimes, Vol 3, p 83-86.
23 Masson, Narrative of Travels, Vol 1, p 338.
dates given by Salbancke it appears that this route was longer than the Multan-Kandahar route.26

From Kabul to Bukhara

The routes from Kabul to Central Asia crossed the formidable Hindu kush Mountains. According to Babar, seven different passes were used for this purpose; all of them, with the exception of the Shibr Tu pass, were closed in the winter season. The best time to cross them was during autumn when snow was less and water level was low.27 Lahori, Shah Jahan’s historian mentions that there were five routes between Kabul and Balkh by way of the pass of Tul, Khwaja Zaid, Abdarrah, Khinjan, and Maidan.28 He says that only one of them was usable for most of the year. This was the route via Abdarrah. Prince Aurangzeb chose this route during his expedition to Balkh in 1647.29 Crossing the rivers that lay on this route was an arduous task during the rainy season. An important halt on this route was the fort of Kahmurd where tolls were collected. This route was difficult between Balkh and Ruy due to the lack of water and the narrowness of the passes.

27 Babar, Babarnama, p 205-6. Three passes Khawak, Tul, and Bazarak were located in the Panjshir region. Of these Tul was the longest while Barazak was the most direct. The road through Parwan, had seven minor passes between Parwan and the main pass. The Yangi Yul, Shibr Tu and Qip chak passes were part of the Ghorband system.

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The route through Maidan was slightly shorter than the Kahmard route. Less amount of snow was encountered on this route.

The Khawak pass route seems to have been the most preferred one. The first stage on this route was the Pass of Mama Khatoon. From here the route went to Istalif and Charikar. The next stage was Parwan, located on the banks of the Panjhir River. The Hindu Kush was crossed through the Khawak Pass. Andarab, Baghlan, Saminjan or Haybak and Tashkurghan or Khulum were the subsequent stages. The journey from Khulum to Balkh was tough as the land was barren. The Mughal army on its way back from Balkh in 1647 had to face several difficulties on this route. Between Shahburghan and CharChashma several animals went off the path and tumbled down the slope causing injury to many men. Many men and animals died due to heavy snowfall while crossing the Hindu Kush Mountains.  

The route via the village of Khwaja Zaid was shorter than the above track but it opened up a month later and it involved crossing higher mountains. Similarly the road through Khinjan was short but very difficult due to narrow paths and steep ascents. In spite of these difficulties, the route was regularly used by caravans. The journey from Kabul to Balkh took around three weeks.  

There was another route to Central Asia that went through Bamiyan. It was used by the English veterinary doctor William Moorcroft and the East India

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30 Inayat Khan, Shah Jahan Nama, in *The History of India as told by its own Historians*, edited by H.M. Elliot and J. Dawson, New Delhi Low Price Publications, Vol 7, p 80-83.
Company official Alexander Burnes in their famous journeys to Bokhara in 1824 and 1836. The route went up the valley of the Kabul River to the district of Maidan, well known for cultivation of clover, used as horse feed. After crossing the Helmand River, it ascended up the Koh-i-Baba range. The Hajigak pass, 12000 feet above sea level was infamous for its cold winds. Burnes noted that the temperature at the Pass was four degrees below freezing point. Snow hindered his progress to the pass of Kaloo which was 1000 feet higher than the Hajigak pass. His party took an alternative route to reach Bamiyan where they admired the colossal Buddhist images. From Bamiyan they crossed the high Pass of Akrobat to reach the town of Syghan, the Uzbek chief of which was noted for his raids into Hazara territory to capture slaves that were sold in Bukhara. Another article of commerce of Syghan was assafoetida that grew wild upon the mountains. After crossing the difficult Dundan Shikun pass, the village of Kahmurd was reached. The route descended to the town of Hybek, well known for its apricots. At Tash Qurghan or Kholoom, the route left dry and rocky region to reach the plains of Tartary. The town of Kholoom was adorned by several beautiful gardens and was famous for its fruits. From here, a journey of thirty miles through barren territory

33 An alternative route to Bamiyan is described by Masson. It led through several passes and valleys. One of the pass, known as Kotal Siah Regh or Black Sand was said to be difficult not due to its elevation but because of snow which made animals likely to slip. Many rivulets were also encountered in this route. Narrative, Vol 2, p 324-380.
brought the traveler to the small town of Mazar, located close to the city of Balkh.\(^{34}\)

The journey from Balkh to Bokhara took eight to ten days. There were two notable landmarks on this path. The first was a narrow gorge between two high mountains where iron gates had been installed to regulate access. Several travelers have provided descriptions of the gates which were unfortunately no longer in existence by the early fifteenth century. The second was the Amu Darya which was generally crossed either at Termez or Kelif.\(^{35}\) Burnes and Moorcroft record the use of a unique method to cross the river. A boat was attached, by means of a rope, to a couple of horses who swam across to the other side. No oars were used in the exercise. This strategy was used when the wind was too strong to allow boats to cross in the normal manner.\(^{36}\)

The arid country between Balkh and Bokhara posed many difficulties for travelers. They had to travel at night to avoid the oppressive day time heat. Horses had to be substituted by camels due to the latter’s superior ability in coping with the arid climate. This however had the effect of making travel slower.\(^{37}\)

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\(^{34}\) Burnes, *Travels into Bokhara*, Vol I, p 171-236. Bamiyan could also be reached through other routes; one of them was via Ghorband and Zohak while the other was via Shibr Tu Pass, Verma, *Medieval Routes*, p 91-92.


difficult to find on some stretches of the route.\textsuperscript{38} Moorcroft had recorded the presence of a large water reservoir, which was built in the sixteenth century, on this route.\textsuperscript{39} The only settlement on the way was the town of Karshee, situated on the banks of a river.

There was another route to Bokhara from India via Kandahar, Herat and the Persian city of Mashhad. From Kandahar to the town of Ghurmow, this route was the same as the road to Kandahar. Between the two was the Persian fort town of Girishk, where provisions were brought for the journey through the barren territory lying ahead. The main obstacle on this route was the presence of few streams that could be difficult to cross in spring when the snow started to melt.\textsuperscript{40} Unlike the routes through the Hindu Kush, this passage had the advantage of being open throughout the year. Describing the landscape of the region between Kandahar and Herat, Forster had noted, 'the country is generally open, and interspersed with barren rocky hills of moderate height. The soil is light and sandy, producing naturally little else than the aromatic weed before noted. He was glad to reach Herat where he saw several springs of running water.'\textsuperscript{41}


\textsuperscript{39} Moorcroft, \textit{Travels}, Vol 2, p 496-7.

\textsuperscript{40} Thornton, \textit{A Gazetteer}, Vol 1, p 293-304; Mohan Lal mentions that the Adraskan River was difficult to cross in spring and many people frequently died while trying to do so. \textit{Travel in the Punjab, Afghanistan, and Turkistan}, p 170.

\textsuperscript{41} George Forster, \textit{A journey from Bengal to England through the Northern Parts of India, Kashmir, Afghanistan and Persia}, New Delhi Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Reprint, Vol 2, p 115. Forster's view regarding the productive capacity of the region was not correct since Mohan Lal mentions corn production in some places on the route. \textit{Travel}, p 171-2.
There was a route between Kabul and Herat that went through the country of the Hazaras and required only around Eight to Ten days of travel but it was not an easy road to travel on. Most traders sojourning between Herat and Kabul went via Kandahar even though this took more time. Mohanlal observed several sarays, mostly in ruined condition, on the road from Herat to Mashhad. The land between Mashhad and Bokhara was generally barren with the exception of the regions located near the Oxus and the Marv rivers. The small town of Charju, on the banks of the former river was an important halt on this road where provisions could be brought. This route also passed by Merv, a flourishing city in earlier times. George Thompson, an Englishman who traveled between Bokhara and Mashhad around the mid eighteenth century found that most of the villages on the route were deserted. His caravan had great difficulty in finding water for some days during the journey. It took around fifteen days to reach Mashhad from Bokhara and around thirty days to reach Kandahar from Mashhad. Thus this was a longer route in comparison to the routes that went north from Kabul across the Hindu Kush.

Routes to Kashgar

Kashgar was accessible from both Kabul and Kashmir. In 1602 the Jesuit Bento De Goes travelled from Kabul to Kashgar by a route that crossed the Hindu Kush.

13 Mohan Lal, Travel, p 86-98.
Kush by the difficult Parwan Pass. After a journey of 35 days his caravan reached the territory inhabited by the ‘Calcias’ who were in revolt against the ruler of Bokhara. The members of the caravan were forced to spend one month in Talikhan and then had to pay a tribute to save themselves from plunder. The party then reached Badakshan by a difficult road. From here the route wound its way up the Pamirs. Severe cold and lack of fuel caused the death of several men and horses. The harsh journey finally culminated when the party reached Yarkand.\(^{44}\) There was another route to Yarkand via Chitral and Badakshan. One first went from Kabul or Peshawar to Chitral. From here the routes crossed the snow bound Tiraj Mir range to reach Badakshan.\(^{45}\)

As for the route from Kashmir to Kashgar, Finch mentions that it was regularly used in spite of being very difficult.\(^{46}\) A traveler of the nineteenth century noted that one had to carry all provisions on this route as the barren territory through which the route passed did not yield anything.\(^{47}\) The route first went from Srinagar to Ladakh. From here it passed through the valley of the Shayuk, a branch of the Indus and then it crossed the Karakoram Range through either of two available roads. One of them was usable only in summer while the other was open during the winter too.


\(^{46}\) Foster, *Early Travels in India*, p 169-70:

\(^{47}\) Ahmad Shah Nukshbundee, ‘Travels of Khwaja Ahmad Shah Nukshbundee Syed who started from Cashmere on the 28th October 1852 and went through Yarkand, Kokan, Bokhara and Kabul in search of Mr Wyburd’ *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1856, Vol 25, p 345.
Trade Routes between India and Central Asia.
Travellers intending to cross the Karakoram Mountains had to be wary of the Sootuk, a cold wind that could cause the death of horses. From here a journey of three days was required to reach the Akhtab Mountains. After crossing the range it took three marches to reach Yarkand. Three more days were required to reach Kashgar. This part of the journey was not difficult as the route lay through well cultivated country. The Russian traveler Rafail Danibegov mentions that Forty days were required to reach Yarkand from Leh. About his experience, he says:

This journey was very tedious for me; for the barrenness of the road I traveled, the huge precipices and lofty mountains among which there are some icy ones, engendered in my spirit an unbearable sense of melancholy; this feeling became all the strongest because all these places were uninhabited. 48

There was another route from Kashmir to Kashgar via Skardu and over the Mustak range. This was a shorter route but it was open only for six months while the Ladakh route was traversable for most of the year. 49

**Conclusion**

The main road during Mughal times, from North India to Kabul was the one via Lahore, Khyber Pass and Peshawar. From Kabul, there existed several routes to Central Asia. Most of these routes were closed during winter. Even


otherwise, traveling on these routes was not an easy task. One had to be prepared for hardships like crossing high mountains and swift flowing streams, traversing treeless deserts, etc. Travellers also had to deal with climatic extremes ranging from bone chilling temperatures and snow fall to scorching hot winds. The road to Iran was also not easy. But these difficulties did not hinder traders and other travellers from using the routes regularly.