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Significance of Silk Road to Human Civilization: Its Cultural Dimension

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Roads are by definition channels of communication between one place and another, one region and another, one people and another, one civilization and another. Some roads are transitory, while others occupy permanent places in human history. Although Silk Road originated in a specific period of Eurasian history—the early centuries of the Christian era—for the specific purpose of trade in silk and other associated merchandise, it developed into a great source of contact between peoples of the East and those of the West. There were many ups and downs in this process of contact; many a time the roads were closed, or political and other hindrances stood in the way of communication, resulting in changes in the roads. Yet human desire for communication and contact continued to dominate men's minds as they discovered different channels for establishing links between peoples of different regions. Whatever was the channel of communication, the spirit of Silk Road never died.

There are various aspects to this study. Some throw light on simple geography and various routes that crossed over different lands. Others focus on mechanics of road building, vehicles of transport and differing climatic conditions and physical barriers. Still others take up regional studies of countries involved, their material resources, harnessing of these resources, techniques and technologies employed in their exploitation; various human societies, their languages, literature and many other aspects of cultural growth, folklores and folktales, myths and mythologies, hopes and aspirations and, above all, varying systems of social relations. Many are interested in movements of population—the great migrations under scores of factors that affected the whole complex of local population of one or another region—adventures of peoples, bands of men led by military lords or missionaries or merchants.

There also were lone seekers of knowledge who risked life just to gain more information from others, and who sought to spread that learning among their own people. Still others were professionals—artists, musicians, craftsmen and others specialized in other skills—who traveled abroad to earn a better living, to propagate their skill or to mix with other people for the sake of giving or gaining. It is just such love for adventure, desire to know more about strangers, nature's process of leveling different human societies, that broke the isolation of man from one region to another. That equalizer is the natural process continually inspiring the spirit of

man. It is, after all, these basic bonds of human co-existence that have created conditions of developing relationships that sustained man through peace and war, and made possible his emergence to his present stage. This paper will attempt to throw light on its cultural dimension.

At a time when long-distance trade was risky and inconvenient for lack of good transportation, Silk Road opened bright prospects of an overland route for the flow of silk technology as well as silk merchandise. These material possibilities were preceded by the formation of several states as results of tribal migrations and community developments. These states helped in the integration of peoples, exploited local resources and competed in the marketing of goods produced by others. This profit motive led to a brisk exchange of men and material. To continue such exchange, conditions of peace were gradually promoted. Men began to move from one region to another and participate in the social friendliness of others.

It is such a wide variety of peoples that Herodotus writes about in his History, painting a vivid picture of their social makeup, their vocations and pursuits of life and their close relationship with the Achaemenian State. It was a result of this mixing that the Aramaean merchants spread out in Central Asia and that Aramaic writing led to the evolution of other alphabetic writings, such as Sogdian and Kharoshthi. Iranian-speaking people moved eastward and their language exerted considerable influence on older languages of this region. Herodotus talks a lot about gold tribute, and narrates fantastic stories of gold-digging ants. Scythic people receive special attention. "Indians" are distinguished from Iranians in several ways.

It is not just the ritual capital of Persepolis that attracted people from various directions along the roads that were built for the first time by Darius, but also several other centers such as Balkh, Samarkand and Taxila that were interconnected by overland routes and that developed as meeting points of East and West. Between the sixth and fourth centuries B. C., Achaemenians for the first time made it possible for the meeting of the peoples of East and West, exchanges of ideas, techniques and technologies and, above all, transmission of the basic sciences, languages and literature from West to East and East to West. The enrichment of human civilization at this time was primarily due to the spirit of dialogue between peoples of East and West—the spirit that preceded formal establishment of Silk Road a few centuries later.

This inauguration of East-West contact was followed by a youthful spirit of cultural transmission facilitated by the conquests of Alexander the Great in the last quarter of the fourth century B. C. The advance of basic and analytical science made by the Greeks and the foundation of the sciences of observing nature contributed greatly to our knowledge of material objects, their properties and their ultimate use to the advantage of man. Man was not only inspired by a spirit of idealism in art, beauty was also sought in the naturalism of physical and human world. Man leapt to a great stride forward in his philosophical and metaphysical

concepts.

It is this rich knowledge that romanticized the achievements of Alexander the Great. This Greek legacy was transmitted throughout the known world. From West to East, flow of men and material, ideas and technologies, artistic trends and architectural formulae—besides drama, poetry, music, icons, religions and, above all, language and literature—traveled faster than before. However, it was not just one-way traffic.

Alexander founded several new cities in Asia and promoted exchanges of ideas with local men of talent and philosophy. All these ideas were carried back to Greece along with material tribute of gold, cattle and other objects of daily use that enriched the classical world of the West. Alexander was Macedonian by birth. After his conquest of Greece, he was saturated with Greek culture. After his conquest of the Achaemenian empire, he became an oriental monarch with the idealism of the East that had by then captured his mind. His men intermarried in Asia and, while they were introducing Hellenism to Asians, they were becoming thoroughly Asian as they settled into the new environments and integrated into the local populations.

It was a big shake-up for the ancient world. India woke up to a new phase of empire-building when the Great Mauryans built up a mighty subcontinental empire and linked her treasure and philosophy with the Greek legacy left behind in Asia by Alexander. The Mauryan emperor Asoka inaugurated a new era of Buddhist missionary activity that was to revolutionize the religious base throughout Central Asia and farther east. Whether Asoka had Greek blood in his veins is not known, but Greek envoys continued to pour into his empire and his ambassadors trekked in all directions on both humanitarian and evangelical missions. Mauryans thus inherited both Achaemenian and Greek legacy. While Darius boasted of his vast Empire in his royal rescripts, Asoka's Rock Edicts proclaimed peace.

So much cultural flow began to over-flood the riverine valleys in Mesopotamia, Central Asia and India, however. Art and architectural activity of the time imbibed a wide variety of traditions, as can be witnessed in archaeological excavations at Taxila on the Indus, and at Ai-Khanum on the Oxus. Great empires disintegrated into smaller formations that re-united such as Bactrian Greeks, Sogdians, Parthians, and later Sasanians and Scythians. Fragmentation of the empire did not stop the incursions of men and material. In fact, widening of geographical knowledge led to intense commercial activity. Missionary zeal of Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Manichaeans and Christians sped forth along with the ideas of men of learning. Actually it is these religious centers and monastic establishments that provide clues to the routes along which such men moved. Another significant leap at this time was the discovery of the periodicity of the monsoon, which enabled ocean vessels to go safely across the Indian Ocean. Between monsoons, the Indian Ocean became a lake for ships traveling between the Roman world and the West, to the Indian coastline and the eastern coasts of China. Geographers, such as Ptolemy and Pliny, presented a wide spectrum of the

then-world. For the first time an anonymous author of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* could give a detailed description of countries around the coastline of what we now know as the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf, and speak of their people, trade and commerce, imports and exports, climate and currency.

The spirit of Silk Road spread beyond overland routes and encompassed all maritime routes, which extended earlier coastal shipping that had linked the ancient world from Egypt through Dilmun, Magana to Meluhha in the east. Whether Meluhha is Indus-land or not, other names—such as Malaybar in south India, Malaysia and Malacca in Southeast Asia—all speak of lands in the East that had maritime connections with the West in the most ancient period. Archaeological excavations in Sri Lanka and at Arikamedu in south India have produced materials that speak of intense human contact between East and West.

While these brisk cultural activities shaped the world before and after the time of Christ, several tribes settled along the western border of China, clashed against one another and moved westward. It was against the eruptions of these tribal movements that the Great Wall of China was built by the Chin dynasty. Later, Han rulers kept strict watch over these tribal migrations. Chinese sources preserve accounts of these tribes that spread down the Oxus (Amu Darya) Valley and penetrated south of the Kunlun, Karakoram and Hindu Kush mountains. Although Han rulers protected their western borders, they also opened the western routes for the first time and made close contact with the Great Kushan emperors who had built a mighty empire spread over the Oxus, Indus and Ganges valleys. Kushanas were at war against Sasanians, whose vast empire up to the Caspian Sea on the north and the Arabian Sea on the south enabled them to establish close contacts with the Roman Empire to the west and the Han Empire to the east.

It is this great opportunity for intense and close collaboration between East and West that led to the origin of the famous Silk Road that linked China and India on the east with the Roman world on the west. The link was established both by overland routes and by maritime routes. Overland routes depended upon the political situation of the time and periodically diversified widely between one region and another. All the same, Silk Roads led to unparalleled cultural activity. Whether one moves along one route or another, one stumbles upon the ruins of ancient cities that present a complex of remains of different countries. If one stops and looks at the rock surface, one may wonder at rock carvings and inscriptions that speak of different peoples and different languages. Artists portray human faces of different tribes in varying costumes, depict animals in various styles and show equipment and furniture that speak of different origins. Along the route one may observe rock sculptures of Buddha and bodhisattvas, and at a nook of hill ranges one may rest near a spring to witness at a distance the beauty of nature or imagine humans rambling over deserted ruins.

Along these routes, learned scholars, missionaries, artists and craftsmen moved on their donkeys, laden with fresh ideas, books and materials they wanted to distribute among others. One may pass from ancient Gandhara to Gilgit en route

to Kashgar, and beyond to the great treasures of Turfan. Farther ahead lies the great ancient capital of Changan (modern Xian) where Buddhist monks from Japan and Korea met the Pandits from Sri Lanka, India and Central Asia. On the other hand, at Kapisa (near modern Charikar), in the heart of Afghanistan, one may witness the heterogeneous material relics of many countries. At the famous caves of Bamian one wonders at the colossal Buddha before entering the dark cloisters to witness the paintings on the ceilings and walls. Such paintings are traceable to several grottoes in Xinjiang (Sinkiang). These rich cultural exchanges are the greatest fruits of the peaceful activity along Silk Roads.

While the Han ruled supreme in China, the Hun spread from the western borderland of China and Mongolia to the heart of Asia and Europe and down to India. Huns were heterogenous bands of people who built a great Central Asian empire, a sort of confederacy, sprawling over an extensive area between China and Persia and the Amu Darya or Oxus and the Arabian Sea. Many Chinese and western travelers have portrayed a vivid picture of their life. Their horsemanship, game of polo, weaponry, costumes and fashions and ideas of dignity and decorum spread like wildfire throughout Eurasia. They were quickly followed by Turkic tribes who established several states in Central Asia. These petty states stood as stumbling blocks to established Silk Roads. Yet T'ang emperors of China established contact with them, and managed to send their goods and men west. They were able to develop a noble breed of T'ang horse that became famous at that time.

The period was marked by the rise of Islam in Arabia, bringing a great socio-religious revolution among Arabs. Inspired by this new religion, Arabs quickly spread over Asia, Africa and Europe. Overland routes as well as maritime routes are described by several Arabic geographers of the time. The science of cartography received new impetus, and this widening of geographical knowledge led to opening new vistas of science and philosophy. Arabs began to fathom the vast ocean of knowledge contained in Greek works and had them translated into Arabic. On the other hand, their contact with India and China enabled them to learn new developments in science, mathematics, medicine and astronomy, and to pick up technologies of paper, gunpowder, various ceramics and silk and muslin cloths. While Chinese ceramics were becoming popular in the medieval European world, Venetian glassware was catching wide fancy.

Silk Road dialogues thus extended from China to Venice and even westward to France, Spain and Portugal. Arabs became real "middlemen" in transmission of knowledge between East and West, carrying forward the spirit of Silk Roads. While they passed Greek science and philosophy on to the newly developing world of the time, they propagated through al-Hindsa, or Indian mathematics, new symbols for a number and decimal system that became the foundation of modern science. At the same time, al-chemia or the property of metals, knowledge of new Chinese technologies and above all the dissemination of medical information opened wide prospects of human and biological sciences. Their great interest in

astronomy introduced new concepts of universe and cosmogony. In art and architecture, they applied inherited traditions of the past with new scientific and mathematical precision to produce new forms in building and new tastes in decoration with calligraphy and arabesque. Caravans marched along Silk Roads from one end of the known world to the other, and several stories of their adventure became world classics. *Sindbad the Sailor* even now appeals to popular fancy.

The Silk Road from Khotan, Yarkand, Kashgar through Fergana, Samarkand, Bukhara and Mary and across the Caspian to the markets of Western world, or downward through Balkh, Hamadan, Mosul and Damascus to Aleppo and coastal towns of the Mediterranean world, or from China across the Great Wall of Mongolia and westward through Kazakhstan to the Caucasus and over to the Transcaspian countries and onward to Istanbul and Venice— all these overland routes kept up the spirit of the eternal Silk Road to promote continuity of dialogues between the peoples of East and West. It is this mutual contact and cooperation that facilitated peaceful growth of a civilization of humanity in which all peoples of the world— urban and rural, nomad and settled, lettered and unlettered, white, black or brown— joined hands to contribute to, and share in, the fruits that humans produce.

Silk Road has generated a spirit of closest collaboration between men and women of different climes, between strangers, friends and enemies, in times of peace as well as war, so that humanity survives and attains greater heights in the progress of the final goal of Man, which we term as human civilization. The step-by-step advance is reflected in the different cultural creations. A summation of all these little achievements is what makes up Civilization of Mankind.