

Geo-Strategic Eminence of Routes of Ladakh: Travelogue's Account

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Abstract

History of Ladakh can be drawn by going through the roots of various roads to Ladakh and its neighboring countries. In this paper I would like to focus on the geo-strategic importance of routes of Ladakh on cross-road between British India and Central Asia during the nineteenth and twenty century. The focus is on perspective of different travelogues on the political importance of roads connecting British, Russia and China, and the Dogra ruler of Jammu and Kashmir and central position in the network of overland caravan route. Ladakh enjoyed a central position in the network of overland caravan route. It acted as an important gateway in the exchange of men, material and ideas through the ages. Leh was the meeting point for traders from South Asia and from Central Asia.

Key Words: *Routes; Ladakh; Central Asia; British; Trade; Travel Accounts.*

1. Routes

Lam is the Tibetan and Ladakhi term for roads and *Gya Lam* for Passable roads. Ladakh can be historicized through the historical *lams* and *Gya Lams*. As emphasized by Jacqueline Fewkes, the various routes crossing Ladakh provides a spectacle to gaze into the history of the region and its relation with its neighbors. Traders from Russia and Eastern Turkistan met in *Leh Bazaar* with the Indian traders.¹ In the year, 1897 *Leh Bazaar* was described by Resident in Kashmir for *Leh* in the following words:

"Bazaar is full of men of every varying nationality: The long coated Muhammad's from Central Asia, the Tibetans with their prayer wheels and the Hindus of India in their white clothes, all bargaining exchange in their wares. While the Indians return by the same road to India with the produce of Turkistan, the trader from North starts back on his route and trying their journey to Yarkand" (Saxena, 2006) .

Traders of Central Asia, Tibet and India gathered at *Leh* to exchange their merchandise. This commercial intercourse not only sustained the poor and backward economies of the semi-closed system in these remote and

¹ Foreign Deptt. Frontier A, March, 1897, Nos. 45-48. From Lie. Col. A.C. Talbot, to the Secy., Government of India, 1896.

high-altitude areas, but also provided the essential raw material for the flourishing shawl and carpet industry of Kashmir. It also lent strong support to the local trade passing between Leh and Skardu (Baltistan) which formed a *Tehsil* of the Ladakh Wazarat of the state of Jammu and Kashmir during the Dogra rule.² The commercial importance of the Ladakh routes that connected the British India and the Central Asian countries in the 19th and the 20th century is one side of a coin. The other equally important side was the political importance of these routes for various powers, including, China, Russia and Britain. Despite of its physical remoteness, Ladakh has not been isolated or in any sense cut off from its neighbors. Indeed, the problems of high altitude and mountainous terrain notwithstanding, it was, until 1947, the center of a network of trade routes whose immediate destinations included Skardu, Srinagar, Hoshiarpur, Kulu and through these the wide plains of India beyond, Lhasa, and Yarkand. There are still alive in Leh and Kargil men who have travelled from Yarkand in Sinkiang across the 5575-metre Karakoram Pass- the trail marked by the bones of men and animals who had died en route with caravans of horses, mules, and camels laden with Yarkand silk, namdas, and charas; or on the reverse journey with Indian spices and dyestuffs; or who have braved the three-months' trek to Lhasa its timing in the coldest part of winter dictated by the desire to take in the yearly September market at Gartok in western Tibet carrying coral and gold from Yarkand, and exquisite Yarkandi cups and dishes to grace the tables of the Lhasa nobility. To listen to the reminiscences of such men is to catch a glimpse of the last traces of an economic system that had lasted for centuries. Even more crucial, more fundamental to Ladakh's economy than this glamorous long-distance trade in luxury goods, was the local inter-regional trade (Rizvbi, 1985, pp.13-27).

1.1 Nature of Routes

The emphasis is on the routes and the linkages for regions in and beyond India via Ladakh. The main roads to Ladakh have been discussed in detail for example the Kashmir-Yarkand road; Kullu-Yarkand road; Khalsi-Chorbat road; Tanktse- Lhasa road; Giah- Damchok Lhasa road. Apart from the these roads, the following three main routes have been described;

- 1) The Tibetan Route
- 2) The South Asian Route

1.1.1 The Tibetan Route connected Leh with the Tibetan City of Lhasa and passed either Tag-lang la or Chang-la³ (passes). In the 19th and the 20th C it was a common route for local traders as well as traders with permits from Kashmir. The primary mode of transportation in this route was usually *Dzo* (a mixed breed of cow and Yak), Yak or Donkey. The valued trade along this route was conveying Pashmina into South Asia. This route is very important in shaping the political linkages between Ladakh and Lhasa.

² 'Census of India, 1941', Vol. xxii, Jammu and Kashmir, p.481. 1943.

³ La is the Ladakhi or Tibetan term for a pass.

1.1.2 The South Asian Route connected Ladakh to Srinagar, Jammu, Rawalpindi, Manali and Amritsar. There were different routes to different destinations. For instance for the travel from Leh to Amritsar one had an eastern way to cross Upshi and Langcha-la- cha la and Bara-la cha-la, Manali, Hoshirapur and Amritsar or the western route via Srinagar towards west to Amritsar. The former route was very difficult and thus by the early 20th century traders took to the Western route. With the development of transport facilities in India, by the 1930s traders could send their goods by rail to Rawalpindi, have them transferred to trucks (before 1930s carts were used) to travel o Srinagar by Muree and the Jhelum valley, and then repack the goods for pony transport from Srinagar over Zoji-la pass, to Kargil. In Kargil local families from the surrounding areas could contribute to labor and livestock in the form of ponies, donkeys, or Dzo to transport the goods to Leh. In terms of political and religious significance this route takes us back to the 13th and 15th centuries when a political leader named Rinchen (originally a Buddhist who later converted to Islam) had won the throne of Kashmir in 1320 and there on leading to flow of Islamic trends through this route. Ladakh was one among the many other possible routes. The great ranges Hindu Kush, Pamir's, the Karakoram and the Great Himalaya made a continuous line, they and their subsidiaries overlap and divide the two but they never really cut off (Rizvi, 1994).

The trade route from Amritsar to Leh and remained in use till the third quarter of the 19th century, gradually fell into abandonment with the development of a network of communications over the North Indian plains that ultimately extended to Kashmir. Amritsar merchant could transmit his goods by rail to Rawalpindi during the period of 1880s, from where they could be laden into carts and sent on to Srinagar by way of Muree and the Jhelum valley past Domel, Muzzarafabad and Baramulla (Mason, 1929, pp. 26-29).. Trading goods were arranged at Srinagar for horse transport and carried to Leh over three passes; Zoji-la, at 3500 metres the Nmki-la and Fatu-la. The principal road via Ladakh connected south and Central Asia via the Karakoram pass. Moorcroft, a British East India Company official in his travelogue mentions the existence of a commercial line between India and Khotan (a city of Xinjiang) "which was frequented in the time of Shah Jahan and closed by the Chinese subsequently with their acquisition of Kashgar" (Moorcroft).. He rates the routes in relation to the contemporary importance of the routes to those who treated them or were reliant on the traffic on the route. According to him the next important road was the road to Lhasa, via Garo, and roads through Rukchu, Lahul, Kullu, to the cities of Nurpur, Amritsar, and Ludhiana. The road from India to the Niti Pass, through Garo and Rudok to Yarkand, is same as that from Lhasa to Yarkand, by the valley of the Indus. The two routes join at Garo, and follow the Indus to Kak-Jung, from where the traveller may continue either from the Indus to Leh, or across the mountains to the Shayok River.

There seems to be no harm in ascribing relative importance to various routes. In fact it explains more the economy and society of the regions on this route. It is not to suggest that all the routes meant same for all, there were varying degrees of reliance on various routes which further determined the importance of routes for different

places or groups of people. In a nutshell no route was uniformly important or unimportant. Ladakh has ample stories of conquerors making their way into Ladakh either by using centuries' old paths and trails or by modifying the existing routes. This fact can be corroborated by conquerors act of building bridges. In 1600 AD, the Musalmans of Balti, under Ali Sher, invaded Ladakh on the west by the valley of the Indus. In 1686, the Sokpos invaded it on the east by the Rudok road; and in 1834, the Hindus of Jammu, under Zorawar Sing, invaded it on the south by the route from Kishtwar into Suru (Bray, 2011).. This story inescapably underlines the importance of routes in understanding Ladakh's relation with its neighbors. Rightly so, it is interesting to use roads as a prism to look into the past of a region. Jacqueline Fewkes discusses three main routes from Ladakh; South Asia, Central Asia and Tibet. However all these routes were a series of interconnected routes and also there were seasonal routes. Interestingly the routes they chose to travel were determined by the weather of course, the type of goods and the finance of particular expeditions. The following were the routes described by (Fewkes, 2009).. The British Joint Commissioner at Leh tried to improve the Trade-Routes existing in the region of Ladakh. There was an attempt to expand the trade connection between Central Asia and India and to overcome the physical difficulties of communication between Leh and Yarkand.

2. Travelogues Perspective and Travel Accounts

It is interesting to study the detail description of accounts of different travelogues including accounts of Hiuen Tsang, Jesuit Mission, Diogo d', who actually visited Central Asia, Ladakh, Kashmir and Western Himalayas

2.1. Early Travelers

2.1.1 Hiuen Tsang: The first Chinese traveler known as Hiuen Tsiang, who visited Kashmir in A.D. 631, left an account of his visit to different places of Western Himalayas. In his journey through the mountains, he mentions the craggy and steep paths, the dark and gloomy mountains - 'Karakoram' means literally 'black stone'. From his account we learned that Kanishka, King of Gandhara, held a council of five hundred sages in Kashmir at which they composed poetical works in explanation of the Buddhist scriptures. He left Kashmir to India in order to study Buddhism, whence after an absence of sixteen years, he reached China again with a caravan of Buddhist relics and writing. The second Chinese pilgrim, Ou-Kong, came to Kashmir in A.D. 759, stayed for four years. He stated that Buddhism had increased since Hiuen Tsiang's time. It is interesting to find Ou-Kong referring to the routes by which Kashmir maintained contact with the outside world. For many years, India still continued to attract Chinese pilgrims, anxious to learn more of Buddhism at first hand, and it is probable that many of them but no record exist of their visits (Ferguson, 1961, pp.132-135).. Hiuen Tsang mentioned in his account referring to the sincere faith in the religion of Buddha and practices among the people of Kashgar. He also reported the presence of several hundreds of sangharams that is monasteries, with some 10,000 devotees following the practice of Little Vehicle, Henyana sect of Buddhism (Tsang, 1981)..

2.2 Europeans

2.2.1 Jesuits Mission

The first European to visit Ladakh belonged to the Jesuit Mission sent to the Mughal Emperors. Father Andrada, organized a mission in 1625, with the Tsaparang as a base, visits different places.⁴ Father Azevedo and Father Oliver visited Leh in 1631. They arrived Leh on the 25th October, 1631, the first Europeans of whom we have record. The Father had interviews with the King of Ladakh, Senge nam Gyal, and both received and gave presents. It is uncertain that during this time the palace of nine stories had already built, the erection of which is credited to him by the Chronicles of Ladakh (Wessels, 1924, p.110).. Apart from describing Leh, he has given the specific boundaries of Ladakh; he illustrate the borders of Kingdom of Ladac (Ladakh) , Chaparangué or Guge on the southern part , and eastern part forms border on the kingdom of the three Moors, which he calls by the name Archande (Yarkand) , the capital of Cashgar (Kashgar) . And asserts that Kashgar distant from the kingdom of Ladakh by not more than six days journey. Baltistan makes the western side of the Ladakhi kingdom (Wessels,1924, p. 108).

2.2.2 Diogo d' Almeida

Portuguese merchant known as Diogo d' Almeida, was first westerner to encounter Ladakh during 1603 (Peteck, 1939, pp.172-175).. Subsequently, many westerners visited Ladakh, who gave their account of journey including the Jesuits travelers, but none remained in Ladakh for long. Therefore the only persistent traveler who stayed in Ladakh with his fellow attendant George Trebeck, was William Moorcroft (1767-1825), who stayed in and around Ladakh in1821-1822 (Alder, 1985).

2.2.3 William Moorcroft

He was in service in East India Company and there was an official reason of his visit to Ladakh. His main aim was to explore various routes towards Central Asia through Ladakh basically for the exporting higher breed of horses from Central Asia, as he was veterinarian in East India Company. There was a major interest of Moorcroft regarding Ladakh and his accounts are the primary sources for early nineteen century Ladakh. He was the earliest British official to draw attention of the Russian expansion and to warn the British East India Company for the containment policy towards this Russian expansionism. He even tried to persuade the king of Ladakh to form an alliance with the East India Company to save Ladakh from Russia as well as Ranjit Singh Sikh Empire Trebeck, 1989).. Though British and Ladakh never had any agreement upon this issue and later on British authorities repudiated his proposal on the illegal ground (Bray, 2011). According to his accounts, Ladakh is bounded by the Karakoram Mountains and Yarkand to the north, to the north-east by the mountains which separates Ladakh with Khoten, on the south from the Bisahar, Kulu and Chamba which comes under the authority of British Empire. And west and north-west of Ladakh extent up to Kashmir and Baltistan Trebeck, 1989, p. 258).. The principal river

⁴ Andrada, Father Antonio de." A Letter of Father A. de Andrada, Translated by the Rev. H. Hosten, S.J.J.A.S.B. New Series, Vol. 21. 1925.

Shayok which which rise from the foot of the Karakoram Mountain, joins another important river of Ladakh, Indus on the north. 262 He also mentioned about the trade link of Ladakh with Yarkand, along with Tibet, Kashmir, Baltistan and other Indian States. The chief imports from Yarkand includes felts from lambswool, out of camel hair a kind of fabric, sheepskin for cloaks , a less of shawl wool , tea, yambo silver , chakmaks steel, boots, Russian leather and brocades , velvets , horses, drugs etc (Trebeck, 1989). .

2.2.4 Francois Bernier

Bernier was a French traveller who came to Mughal court in 1656 and refer the invasion of Ladakh under Shahjahan Petech, 1977, pp. 48-51).. He gives an account that Mughal had threatened the King of Ladakh with war, but gradually sent an ambassador to Kashmir. Thus on behave of the Mughal King Aurangzeb , ambassodor would promise to built a mosque in Leh and King of Ladakh would sent an annual tribute to Mughal Emperor (Petech, 1977, p. 63).. Bernier also mentioned about the routes between Kashmir and Yarkand via Ladakh,though he considered it as the shortest route, but he travel to Yarkand via Baltistan. He also reported the importance of Ladakh on these trade route and describe some of the trade goods such as that of musk, crystal, jade and wool of Ladakh. He was amazed with the fine wool of sheep and *touz (toosh: wool from Tibetan antelope)* of Ladakh (Rizvi, 1999, pp. 297-299). Nevertheless, he pointed out that trade was now closed and no longer function and this had disastrous impact of the economy of Ladakh (Petech, 1977, pp. 64-65). Bernier published his memoirs in several parts. The description of Aurangzeb's journey to Kashmir is contained in a series of nine letters to M.de Merveilles. Bernier also mentions some details about the route followed by merchants from Srinagar to Kashgar. This was by way of Gurais, Skardu and Shigar, from which it was a month's journey to Kashgar. The road is described as being ' extremely bad' (Bernier, 1934). . He discovered that *Kacheguer* (Kashgar) lies to the east of Kachemire (Kashmir) towards the north.

2.3 The Mughal Emperors

Under the Emperor Akbar, Kashmir was conquered and became part of the Mughal Empire. To Abul-I-Fazl, we are indebted for the Akbarnamah, containing a history of the reign of Akbar and his ancestors, and an account of the imperial house-hold and system of government. We learned from Bernier that Jahangir, Akbar's son and successor visited the valley six times and would have preferred to lose every province of his mighty empire rather than give up Kashmir. Aurangzeb, the last of the great Mughal emperors, paid only one visit to Kashmir (Ferguson, 1961, pp. 135-136)..

2.4 Central Asian

2.4.1 Mirza Haider Dughlat

Relative of Mughal Emperor Babur, Mirza Haider , was son of governor of Tashkent . His father was assassinated by Uzbek leader , thereafter he enter the service of Sultan Said Khan, the ruler of Kashgar. During his service in 1514, coupled with the military expedition across the Karakoram , entering Nubra and gradually to the rest of Ladakh and then towards Tibet. Ladakh was then considered as the part of Tibet. Mirza also described the

geographical features of Ladakh, its culture, religion, and economy and noted the value of passes for both trade and military and also talked about the problem of altitude sickness in Ladakh due to its high altitude location. This sort of disease was mainly faced by the non-Ladakhi and non-Tibetans. Native doctors did not know the remedy of disease as local did not suffer from it. He mentioned that even animals faces this problem, in fact horses were more prone to "*dam-giri (breath-seizing disease)*" than men (Dughlat, 1895, pp. 412-414). Mirza had special interest in the religious life of Ladakh, where upon he calls the *lamas* of Ladakh as the men of learning (*ulema*), and communicate with them by means of interpreter. According to him the teaching of lamas was to enlighten people of existing God in everything. And make all aware of the preception of Shakia Muni Buddha who tells about concept of heaven and hell dependent on their deeds (*Karma*) and transmigration of soul (Dughlat, 1895). After invasion of Ladakh, he turned to Tibet and then briefly to Baltistan. His conquest of Tibet was unsuccessful but with the help of Bahram Cho, the cheif of Baltistan captured the fort of Shigar (Dughlat, 1895, p.422). Mirza Haider, in 1533, while in service of the Khan of Kashgar, had invaded Ladakh from Turkestan and attacked Kashmir and Tibet. His invasion, however, was unsuccessful and by 1536 he had to retreat into Badakhshan (Ferguson, 1961).. Afterwards left Ladakh for Badakhshan (Afghanistan), and consequently conquest Kashmir and establish control from 1540. Again in 1545 and 1548, Mirza Haidar initiated incursion into Ladakh and Baltistan, with the appointment of governor for both these area. Nonetheless, in 1551, invasion descended altogether with the death of Mirza Haidar (Bray, 2011, p. 153)..

2.5 Ladakhi Travelers

2.5.1 Rassul Galwan

Many local Ladakhi people during the nineteenth and early twentieth century's act as an interpreters, guides, porters and caravan leaders. Among the local population, Argons were the notable adventurers and enterpriser and many accompanied European expeditions to Central Asia and Tibet (Osmaston, n.d).. An Argon, started his service as a coolie and pony-man and later on appointed as an *Aksakal* (Trade Officer) for Central Asia at Leh. Galwan travelled with European and American explorers and travelled in Tibet, Central Asia, China, the Pamirs, Aksia Chin, and the Siachen Glacier. He was employed by Younghusband in 1890 for his Central Asian expedition (Sheik, n.d). While introducing Ghulam Rassul Galwan's travelogue Francia Younghusband asserted that the book is written by a Mohamedan of Ladakh, who was in service to the English travellers along the Himalaya, Tibet and Central Asia. Captain Younghusband had been commissioned to explore the Pamirs by the Government of India in 1890. The journey was with Gulam Rassul from Leh to Eastern Turkistan, where Chinese had re-established their authorities (Galwan, 2005, pp. 30-31).

2.6 Russian Travelers in Ladakh

2.6.1 Philip Efremov

During the late eighteen and early twenty century only few Russian and non-Russian visited Ladakh. Earliest traveler was probably Philip Efremov (1750-after 1811), who was stationed at Orenburg as a part of Russian army until the 1774. Later he was in the service of feudal lord of ruler of Bokhara and escaped after two years. He followed the road to return his homeland which was long via the Central Asian khanates Samarkand and Kokand , Kashgar, Kashmir, then to India , and to London via sea ; thus reaching St Petersburg. He gave a detailed account of "Tibet or Tevet" an appellation to Ladakh, which he crossed on the way from Yarkand to Kashmir along with the merchant caravan (Kemp, 1959). His travelogue in original version is preserved in the manuscript written from his own pen, in two short section: "Description of Tevet" and "Funeral custom of Tevet" (Pushkinsky Dom). .

2.6.2 Rafail Danibegov

He made two journey towards India, during 1795-1798 and in 1799-1813. He reached Kashmir via Lahore and further crossed "a city of Tibet", which must be Leh. It took around 40 days from Yarkand to reached Leh, where he finds the practice of polyandry. His journey finished in 1813 when he reached Russian outpost in Central Asia(Semipalatinst), which was the base for Russian access to outside world including Turkistan and northern India. Tsarist Russian from the starting of the nineteen century under Alexander 1, generated a keen interest to create a close economic and political relation with India and its independent Himalayan region, Ladakh and Kashmir (Andreyev, 200, pp. 26-27).

2.6.3 Agha Mehti Rafailov

He was the best known Russian-connected caravan traders. In 1807, he delivered a several bales of Kashmir shawl to St. Petersburg. Rafailov was encouraged to proceed to India with the goods from Russia and provided "for free travel both ways" and a financial assistance. Thus in 1808, Agha Mehti Rafailov was ready for journey, keeping Kashmir as the final destination. It was in 1811, when he returned from his journey to Semipalatinsk, military commander of the Siberian frontier, General Glazenap, interviewed him and came up with an account of Rafailov's trade mission. Hence Rafailov reached Leh in early 1815 and was welcomed by the king of Ladakh. He was permitted to conduct his trade operations unrestricted and free of duty. Also king sent a letter to Glazenap written in Persian with Kabul trader, expressing to open trade links with Russia and willingness to dispatch his envoy in Russia. Rafailov on his return again presented a new *zapiska* (memorandum) to the government of Russia through Glazenap. Again in 1819 when he was in Russian civil service, holding a high rank of *nadvornyi sovetnik* (aulic councilor), was sent to India. This time he was assigned with the important mission to delivered several confidential letters from Nesselrode (Russia's new foreign minister) to the sovereign rulers of Punjab, Kashmir and Ladakh. According to the letter, the emperor, Alexander 1 was acquainted with the "glory, splendor and power "of these rulers, and also the hospitality in favor of visiting Russian merchants. Hence he was to enter into friendly intercourse with these regions to promote both Russian and Indian merchants to travel freely to their reciprocal regions. Moreover, Rafailov was commissioned with the task of procuring pashm-yeilding sheep of Ladakh for breeding purposes to Siberia. Rafailov was then set out from Semipalatinsk with his caravan after the

plan was approved. But he could not make a victorious journey as he died on the way (Andreyev, 2009, pp. 27-29). Nevertheless, his journey was noteworthy and scholar like Alexander Cosma de Koros, who travelled in these regions during that time, claimed the murdered of Rafailov by his followers in the Karakoram Mountains. All his property was plundered and "by some means" Nesselrode's letter to Ranjit Singh fell into the hands of the William Moorcroft the British traveler (Warikoo, 1989).. Hence Rafailov's journey in 1820 to Ladakh was actually Russia's last attempt to deal with independent Himalayan principedom.

Conclusion

The season and weather decides the movement of the traders and normally they preferred to move with their goods in the bitter cold of winter, as to avoid the glaciated passes. The distance between Leh- Yarkand was a march between 726 and 829 kilometers, and it was a month journey. One had to cross Khardung-la and the Thulanbuti-la (known as the Karawal Dawan or Frontier Pass by Central Asian merchants) to get into Nubra valley and over to Saser Spur which is before upper Shayok. From Saser Spur to Depsang plain it was to cross Saser-la which is one of the tuff routes, on to the Karakoram Pass, which remains open all the way through. Reaching the northmost arm of the Kun Lun Range easy pass was Suget Dawan and further arm was crossed by either Sanju Diwan or Kilian Dawan. Sometime due to overload of water in Sanju River, one had to take a diversion over the 3810meter Chuchu Pass. Down there was an easy way towards the region of Central Asia called Karghalik, and futher towards the Yarkand (Mason, 1929, pp. 181-190). Despite seemingly insuperable mountains and other uneasy factors, the travelogues of various explorers highlight the significance of existing routes between Central Asia and Ladakh and tremendous exchange of ideas and commerce.

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