

INDIA AND CENTRAL ASIA: 16TH TO 21ST CENTURY
CONTACTS: AN APPRAISAL OF HISTORICAL
CONTACTS

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Abstract

India's relations with Central Asia dates back to the times immemorial. This relationship covers all aspects of human relationship – social, political, intellectual commercial etc. Caravans of men and stream of thought constantly shuffled across between India and Central Asia. It gave fillip to intimate cultural contacts between the two regions. The exchange thus played a significant role in developing both these societies. In this paper an overview of the nature of this relationship between the two regions will be discussed to the point of disintegration of Soviet Union in 1991, owing to which, five independent Central Asian republic - Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan - got birth. Since these republics are passing through transition and require a lot of infrastructure development and technical expertise in various fields. India is resourceful enough to extend the kinds of support and expertise needed by these republics. On the basis of historical legacy and the requirements of these states the paper will also focus on the role that India can play in the nation building process of these newly formed republics.

Historical and cultural contacts between India and Central Asia can be traced back to hoary past when these two major regions of the East were seats of original cultures and centres of earliest world civilizations. During certain phases of their history, when some areas of India and Central Asia became parts of same state formations, the cultural and economic ties between them grew particularly strong. The Taklimakan explorations have brought to light thousands of

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manuscripts written in different scripts and also a multitude of works of art, pictorial and plastic, which mark out India and Central Asia as the meeting ground of Hellenistic, Indian, Persian, and Chinese forms of civilization. Changes in political climate coming though, exchange of population – of scholars, religious preachers, traders, job-seekers, etc. – continued between India and Central Asia, the travel certainly facilitated by a good number of available entry points from Kashmir in the north to Sind on our north-western boundary^[1]. The Delhi Sultanate, established by Islamized Central Asian Turks in the 13th century, made these contacts long and regular and well deep got the relations; indeed, Delhi sultans' coins were found not only in Central Asia and Persia but even near the Volga: horses were – since the main force of Delhi state army was cavalry and horses could not be bred in India for absence of pastures – one major item of India's imports from Central Asia.

Mongol invasion temporarily disrupting these economic relations, it also threw a large number of Central Asians into India. Chengiz Khan tearing to pieces the social and political fabric of Central Asia and razing to the ground all its stately buildings, mosques, madrasas, khanakahs, etc., a large number of Central Asians belonging to various walks of life came to India. These migrants provided not just personnel to the nascent Delhi sultanate but also scientists and poets who established the traditions of Muslim scholarship in India. One important result was that these immigrants learned local languages and translated Sanskrit works into Persian, and that led to the adoption of Indian style of historical chronicles in Persian. Indeed, many distinguished families who played vital roles in the cultural history of India during the medieval period came from Central Asian towns like Bukhara, Samarkand, and Nakhshab.^[2] Balban, ever anxious to use the presence of these Central Asian scholars and princes to alleviate his own prestige in contemporary Asia, settled them in various muhalas (localities) that were duly named after their home places; so in fact came up Muhala-i-Khwarazam Shahi, Muhala-i-Samarkandi, Muhala-i-Atabeki, etc.^[3] It must be noted that these Central Asian elements very quickly assimilated themselves into the Indian social pattern, and a new culture – synthesis of the two cultures – was born and established. However, it was not a one way process but a reciprocal assimilation that worked both ways and influenced each other in a wide range including literature, art and architecture, poetry, music, socio-religious movements, besides trade relations⁽⁴⁾.

The socio-cultural links between India and Central Asia reached unparalleled heights during the first two centuries of India's Mughal period. The Mughals, ever mindful of their origins, tried to maintain contacts with Central Asia at all levels. The remarkable culture which they fostered in India owed a considerable debt to Central Asia.⁽⁵⁾ The period broke the existing chains of impregnability, Kabul 1585 came under direct control of Mughals, hence served as the main artery of communication with Central Asia⁽⁶⁾ and gave sprout to the caravan trade not only with that region but with Russia as well⁽⁷⁾.

The Central Asian exports to India included items like silk and half-silk textiles, carpets, bronze/copper utensils, fresh fruits such as apples and melons, dried fruits, paper of Samarkand, arms, etc. From Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khazakh regions, cattle, horses, and camels were the major items of export to India. Travellers like Bernier, Manucci, and Jenkinsen have acknowledged that the trade in horses was considerable in terms of both number and value throughout the 16th and 17th centuries. Sugar, cotton, and indigo were the main commodities exported from India to Central Asia. The growing economic ties, diplomatic relations between the two regions having existed long before⁽⁸⁾, necessitated the strengthening of political relations. True, despite a number of wars fought during Shah Jahan's period and Mughal forces ultimately retreating from the region, exchange of embassies with letters and gifts continued even up to the reign of Aurangzeb. Besides political contacts, frequent movement of people at commoners' level had left an everlasting impact upon the socio-cultural and religious spheres of the two regions⁽⁹⁾. In the religious sphere for instance the Shattari mystic order, which reached India in the 16th century, sought to bring about a synthesis of Hindu and Muslim mystic concepts. Earlier in the 15th century, the Islamic Naqashbandi order had reached India through one Khawja Baqi Billah – he lived in Samarkand for many years, came to Kashmir, wherefrom he reached Delhi. As it was, the leadership of Naqshbandiya thought had been transferred, within few decades, from Samarkand to Delhi and in course of time the most fundamental manuals of Naqshbandiya Order were in fact prepared in India.

The continuous exchange of ideas, technical skills, and artistry between India and Central Asia is visible also in other spheres like architecture and gardening. Central Asian invaders like Mahmood of Ghazna and Timur carrying with them architects, engineers, masons, carvers, sculptors, voluntarily fortune-seekers, and invitees emigrated from Iran and Central Asia, all of

them made significant contributions to, and left remarkable imprints on, Indian culture. With their coming, Indian architecture exhibited a remarkable fusion and harmonious synthesis of conceptual scheme, technique, ornamentation, and décor.⁽¹⁰⁾ This fusion bore the imprints of Iranian, Central Asian, and Turkish architectural features. True, many Central Asian architectural features – panjra, girikh, hundal, qimakar, khashikari, pestaq, guldast, gumbad, manara, jaimir, jal, taq, etc. – have been happily and extensively adopted in India. In fact, many buildings of the Mughal period were planned by a family of architects belonging to Khojend.

Another sphere which shows immense and continuous exchange of ideas and expertise is handicrafts. The origin and growth of carpet, shawl, and paper industries is attributed to Central Asian artisans. In accordance with his own record, Timur “spared all artisans and expert mechanics, and took them away to Samarkand” where he utilized their expertise in the construction of magnificent buildings⁽¹¹⁾.

The next important sphere of cultural life which owes its origin to Central Asia is horticulture. Babur the first Mughal emperor introduced a new idea of garden planning in India. Later on, under Akbar’s patronage, horticulturists of Iran and Turan settled in India which resulted in the cultivation of trees reaching a flourishing state. The techniques of grafting also were introduced by skilled persons from Turkestan and Persia. The use of tea in Kashmir is said to have been introduced by traders who came into the valley from across the Pamirs⁽¹²⁾.

These commercial and technical relations apart, literary contacts, both individual and at royal courts, played a significant role in the exchange and maintenance of ideas and influence. Regarding individual literary contacts, a person would oft write a line or two and send it to a friend who in response would write back in the same rhyme and meter⁽¹³⁾: mujavaba was the name of the form. Mailbags of caravans moving between Uzbek and Mughal lands were filled with this type of back and forth one-upmanship. As regards the literary contacts at royal courts, Abul Fazl records that “poets from Bukhara and Merve, besides a number of high ranking mansabdars, stayed at the royal court, contributed in literary activities, and received highest awards during Akbar’s period.”⁽¹⁴⁾

The establishment of colonial rule in India and later in Central Asia, colonists trying to separate the peoples of these regions, artificially severed the traditional links between them. But the colonial efforts failed. It was that during the 20th century more than 8,000 Indians lived in Central Asia and as foreigners occupied a position second only to the Russian settlers. As regards their influence, Burnes comments that “The whole of the natives of Bukhara and Toorkistan were wearing turbans which were imported from the Punjab.”⁽¹⁵⁾ Vambery, visited Bukhara in 1860, also pointed out that “There was no market, no village, without a Hindu money-lender.” Indian merchants ran a sort of primitive banking system in Central Asia by making cash payments for hundis (drafts) drawn by their firms in India. ⁽¹⁶⁾ Mir Izzat Ullah’s travel account, Mohan Lal’s secret dairy, and William Moorcroft’s records also are replete with such type of information. The Indian merchants, to utter dislike of Tsarist administration, had monopolized the book trade throughout the period. The Soviet Union then, after the Bolshevik Revolution, established its powers and incorporated the Central Asian region into its administrative zone, made rapid social and economic changes, and these certainly impressed and influenced the Indian leaders. Meanwhile, the independence of India strengthened the relationship further, especially during Khrushchev’s period, who had decided to enlist the support of anti-colonial countries against the capitalist camp led by the United States. India was ranking at the top of the list of non-communist countries to be grouped as allies of the Soviet Union. These relations strengthened in the coming decades, though Indo-Central Asian relations developed as an offshoot of growing Indo-Soviet friendship at the governmental level. As a consequence of growing diplomatic, economic, and cultural cooperation, the plane service operating between Delhi and Moscow started taking a halt at Tashkent, and this revived the connections of India with that place. Radio Tashkent was chosen by Soviets to broadcast for India in Urdu, English, and Hindi, and members of Indian Communist Party were asked to work for the purpose. Other factors also strengthened Tashkent’s role as a centre for Indian studies. As an example, Babaja Gafurov⁽¹⁷⁾, Director of Institute of People of Asia and Africa (now, Institute of Oriental Studies), who belonged to Tajikistan, was keen to promote close traditional friendship between India and Soviet Central Asia, persuaded Central Asian Republics to accord a special place to oriental studies, and such promotion of Indian studies was approved by the Soviet government. Subsequently, Tashkent University launched a programme for teaching Hindi and Urdu and so Tashkent became, after Moscow and Leningrad, the third major centre of Indian studies ⁽¹⁸⁾.

Education certainly played a significant role in strengthening Indo-Soviet friendship. Initially, Soviets agreed to enrol Indian students for research courses in science, technology, humanities, and social sciences; and Indian students selected for higher studies were required to first study Russian language for six months. Gradually, Soviets extended this scheme to undergraduate level and institutions in Uzbekistan admitted Indian students to undergraduate courses conducted in other republics of Central Asia as well.

All these relations had depended on India's relations with the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union collapsing 1991, India received a tremendous jolt. Overnight, a good percentage of its aircraft and tanks were rendered inoperative because the spare parts were no more available⁽¹⁹⁾. India's trade declined; the political and diplomatic support which New Delhi had been enjoying over half a century disappeared without a warning. And India took long to acclimatize itself to the changed scenario. The newly independent states on the other hand were eagerly looking towards India for support and cooperation on the basis of historical legacy⁽. Ultimately, geopolitical compulsions, security needs of the country, and fast changing political scenario in the neighbourhood⁽²⁰⁾, all compelled India to realize what she was losing by standing on the fringe and just letting the opportunities slip by, and consequently exchange of embassies restarted at official level. India has many things to offer especially when these new Republics are shifting from state controlled economy to market economy and seeking integration with the new 'globalised' world economy. And accordingly, she decided to begin afresh by commencing her trade and joint ventures in Central Asia.

Mutual exchanges and interactions at the highest level restarted and culminated in a number of agreements⁽²¹⁾. In 1994 alone, six agreements were signed between India and Central Asian Republics in various areas including one on comprehensive economic cooperation and exchange of science and technology⁽²²⁾. Under International Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme number of candidates from Central Asian countries attended training programmes in various disciplines like diplomacy, banking, trade management, etc⁽²³⁾. India has been making determined efforts to promote Indian products in Uzbekistan⁽²⁴⁾. Trade profile between India and Uzbekistan from 1994 onwards reveals that it has been doubled from 48.32 to 99.9 corers⁽²⁵⁾ The

principal commodities being exported from India include items like tea, coffee, Basmati rice, drugs, pharmaceuticals, plastic products, transport equipments, electronic goods, handicrafts, and readymade garments. Despite lack of geographical contiguity with the region, shortest direct route via Pakistan and Afghanistan not usable due to disturbances in Afghanistan and adverse relations with Pakistan, cost of transportation consequently high, heavy tariffs at several points, India is having a lot of potential for future expansion. Information technology, tourism, energy sector and consultancy services are the areas, where Indian services are in high demand as transformation and modernisation of financial and other sectors is under process in newly independent Republics..

. Keeping into the consideration the vital cultural, economic and strategic interests in the region, India should take serious measures for strengthening the existing ties and widen the areas of cooperation with all Central Asian Republics. She must understand thoroughly and accept fully that unity of Central Asia is of paramount importance for the security of the entire region. And it must here be particularly noted that Central Asia is emerging as one important source of oil and natural gas, hence of energy too, world powers are trying to divide and keep its Republics opposed to each other, are so and otherwise too contending to secure a foothold in the region, in order to easily exploit the region's huge reserves. The top preference in Indian foreign policy therefore must be to evolve measures to safeguard the integrity and stability of Central Asian Republics and prevent them from pro-West countries. Certainly, India, Russia and China owing a commanding geo political position can contribute towards that great aim.

References:

- India was connected with this region by two routes: first, the Gomal Pass which led to Dera Ismail Khan and thence to upper Sind; and second, the Kashmir route. After crossing the Karakorum, the trade caravans reached Yarkand where the routes from Ladakh, Tibet, China, Khotan, and India were joined by the leading route to Kashghar. From Kashghar the merchants could proceed to Samarkand and Bukhara, the first cities of Transoxiana. For details of Silk Route see: Mansura Haider, “Silk Route and the Surrounding Regions,” Central Asia: Introspection, 2006, Srinagar, pp. 29-46, editors: Mushtaq A Kaw and Aijaz A Bandy.
- A K Nizami believes tribal pressure, love of learning, mystic wanderjahre (German: literally, wandering years), commercial considerations, prospects of employment, and unsettled conditions were the determining factors for frequent movement of men in Central Asia. See Central Asia: Movement of People and Ideas from Times Prehistoric to Modern, p. 161; editor: Amalendu Gha, Indian Council for Cultural Research, Vikas Publishers (Delhi).
- Briggs, Tarikhi Firishta, vol.1, p. 75, 1981, Delhi. More than a century later when Timur prepared a plan to make the first city of the world, he followed a similar practice and built, around Samarkand, a series of villages bearing the names of the chief towns of Baghdad, viz. Damascus, Misr, Shiraz, and Sultaniya. See V V Barthold, Four Studies on the History of Central Asia, vol. 1, p. 60, 1956.
- For details see B G Gafurove, “India’s Influence on the Development of Social Thought Among the Peoples of Central Asia,” pp. 151-156. See also K A Nizami, “India’s Cultural Relations With Central Asia During the Medieval Period,” Central Asia; Movement of People and Ideas from Times Prehistoric to Modern, pp. 157-166, editor: Amalendu Gha, Indian Council for Cultural Research, Vikas Publishers, Delhi.
- Babur, driven out of his paternal kingdom by the Shaibanids, settled down in Kabul and succeeded in establishing his dynasty in India in AD 1526. He and his successors were always nostalgic about their homeland. For details see Darakhshan, “Reappraisal of Mughal Policy

Towards Central Asia,” Journal of Central Asian Studies, vol. 9, pp. 55-66, University of Kashmir, Srinagar, 1998.

- For details see Beveridge, The Emperor Akber, pp. 128-131; Darakhshan, “Reappraisal of Mughal Policy Towards Central Asia,” Journal of Central Asian Studies, vol. 9, pp. 55-66, University of Kashmir, Srinagar, 1998.
- The capture of Kazan (1552) and Asterkhan by Russia significantly increased the possibilities of Indo-Russian trade through Central Asian mediators.
- For details see Darakhshan, “Reappraisal of Mughal Policy Towards Central Asia,” Journal of Central Asian Studies, vol. 9, pp. 55-66, University of Kashmir, Srinagar, 1998.
- For details see Darakhshan, “Reappraisal of Mughal Policy Towards Central Asia,” Journal of Central Asian Studies, vol. 9, pp. 55-66, University of Kashmir, Srinagar, 1998.
- Mansura Haider, “Exchanges and Interactions in the Field of Fine Arts, Handicrafts and Technology,” Culture Society and Politics in Central Asia and India, pp. 80-97, editor: N N Vohra, India, 1999.
- The best example of the Indiana artistic skill is the mausoleum of Gur-Emire and other architectural treasure in Samarkand and Bukhara
- Mirza Haider Dughlat is credited for having introduced tea in Kashmir Valley, but its use was limited till 1887. Mansura Haider, “Exchange and Interactions in the Field of Fine Arts, Handicrafts and Technology,” Culture Society and Politics in Central Asia and India, pp. 80-97, editor: N N Vohra, India, 1999.
- For details see Richard Foltza, “Cultural Contacts Between Central Asia and Mughal India,” Central Asiatic Journal, p. 47, vol. 15, No 1, 1971, OTTO, Harrassowitz.

- Among the highest award recipients was Maulana Qasim, student of Maulana Jami, a talented person who excelled as poet, musician, and philologist. He was awarded 10,000 tangas for one of his poems. The highest award of 20,000 tangas ever given to a poet was to Khawja Hasan of Merve. For details see Mansura Haider, “Exchanges and Interactions in the Field of Fine Arts, Handicrafts and Technology,” Culture Society and Politics in Central Asia and India, pp. 80-97, editor: N N Vohra, India, 1999.
- Alexander Burnes was a British agent who traveled from India to Cabool, Tartary and ,Persia; Travels into Bukhara, a voyage on the Indus from the Sea to Lahore, , vol. ii, London ; Mohan Lal, Travels in the Punjab, Afghanistan, and Turkestan to Bhalkh, Bokhara and Herat and a visit to Great Britain And Germany,London,1846.
- Vambery, History of Bokhara, London, 1875.
- Baba Jan Gafurov was President of International Association on Analyses of Cultures of Central Asia (UNESCO), Vice-President of International Union on Eastern and Asian Research, and also worked as Vice Chairman of Soviet Solidarity Committee of Asia and Africa. He is reported to have visited India repeatedly.
- Gradually, Indian history emerged as a subject of study and research in Tashkent both at the university and other institutions run by the Academy of Sciences of the Uzbekistan Soviet Socialist Republic. See Surender Gopal, “India And Central Asia 1947-1991,” India And Central Asia; Classical to Contemporary Periods, p. 85, editors: J N Roy and B B Kumar, Astha Bharati, Delhi, 2007.
- About 70% of India’s armaments were exported from Soviet Union and several joint venture industries were working in Soviet Union and India. See Surender Gopal, “India And Central Asia 1947-1991”; India And Central Asia; Classical to Contemporary Periods, pp. 172-189, editors: J N Roy and B B Kumar, Astha Bharati, Delhi, 2007.

- Since the newly independent States were viewed by the power seekers in the region and outside as a soft ground for moving in, and to establish their spheres of interest, the theory of “great game” was revived by power contenders, who now were registering their claims on the Central Asian countries’ regions rich in oil and natural gas.
- Indian Commerce Minister Salman Khurshid, a multi-disciplinary delegation including businessmen accompanying, visited Central Asian countries and announced credits of 10 million US dollars each to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, and 5 million US dollars each to Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. See Shri Prakash, “India-Uzbekistan Relations During the 1990s and Future Prospects,” Central Asia Since Independence, pp. 178-79, editors: K Warikoo and M Singh, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institution of Asian Studies, Kolkata, 2004. For details of these visits see, S.D Muni “India and Central Asia; Towards a co-operative future”, Central Asia, The Great Game Replayed, editor: Nirmala Joshi New Delhi publication 2003
- Fatih-Teshabaer, “Uzbek-India Relations,” Central Asia Since Independence, pp. 178-79, editors: Warikoo and M Singh, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institution of Asian Studies, Kolkata, 2004.
- Gulshan Sachdeva, “Economic Change in central Asia and Indian Response” india and central Asia,p,271,J N Roy and B B Kumar, Astha Publications,2007
- Leading Indian companies like TATA Export Ltd, Maruti Udyog, AVON cycles, Kirloskar Bros Ltd, etc., have been accredited and are involved in many joint Indo-Uzbek enterprises and projects. See Shri Prakash, “India-Uzbekistan Relations During the 1990s and Future Prospects,” Central Asia Since Independence, p. 175, editors: K Warikoo and M Sing, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institution of Asian Studies, Kolkota, 2004.
- Shri prakash, “Indo Uzbek relations during the 1990’s and future prospects”, p.no 187, Central Asia since independence. editors: K Warikoo and M Sing, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institution of Asian Studies, Kolkota, 2004.